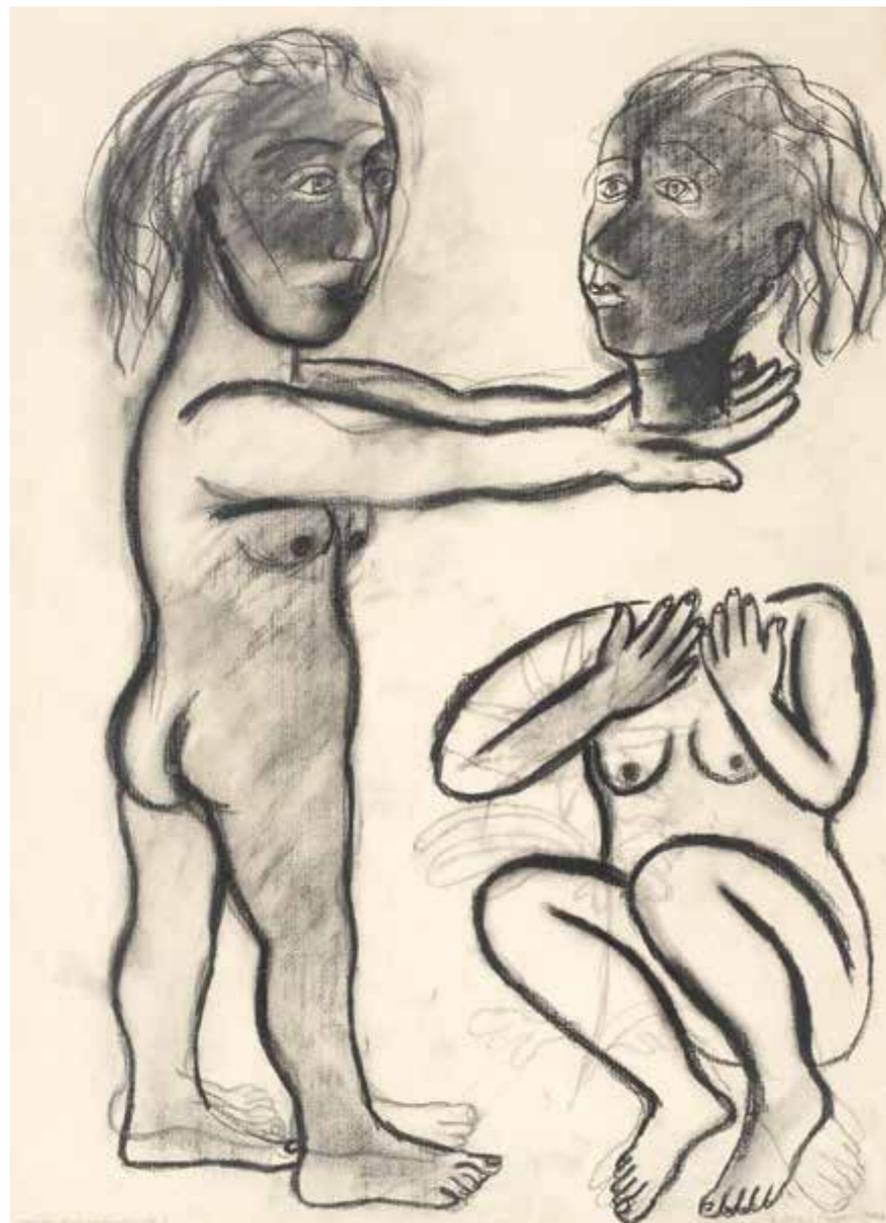




Hide and Seek

Drawings by Eileen Cooper RA

RA Royal
Academy
of Arts



Woman Rebuilding Herself I, 1991
Charcoal
Private collection

Eileen Cooper: (Re-/De-)Constructing an Identity

Anna McNay

Introduction

Eileen Cooper is a woman, an artist, a mother, a wife. All these statements are true, though in random order. All of them are also, no doubt, key to Cooper's identity and sense of self: overlapping and merging, difficult to categorise. In the real world, such indefiniteness, undefinedness, is the status quo. And in Cooper's works, her predominantly female figures can be seen to float, dance, fly and juggle in a dreamlike, atemporal space in which, quite literally, they are being rebuilt (for example, *Woman Rebuilding Herself I*, 1991).

This exhibition, which stems from her gift of ten drawings to the Royal Academy of Arts, focuses solely on Cooper's works on paper – her drawings in various different media. Its title, *Hide and Seek*, captures the playful aspects of childhood games, so often foregrounded in Cooper's works, but also might refer to the backgrounding (or hiding) of certain aspects of the self in order to take on new roles (such as mother, wife, artist . . .) – something seemingly specifically relevant to women artists – and the seeking to retrieve buried aspects and to rebuild one's identity, to reunite one's character traits into a whole: repeatedly asking 'Who or what is seen?' and 'Who or what must remain hidden?'.

Cooper's themes of sexuality, fertility and creativity¹ directly address her womanhood and have often taken precedence in discussions of her work over its formal characteristics.² In an attempt to redress this balance, we look first at the role of drawing in Cooper's work and then consider, through the themes of the rooms (the gift, motherhood and identity) how Cooper uses them – and her pencil or chalk and paper – as a means of exploring and asserting her own sense of self: juggling, balancing, hiding, revealing and rebuilding, in the continual game of life.

Drawn from the imagination

Until we can insert a USB into our ear and download our thoughts, drawing remains the best way of getting visual information on to the page.

Grayson Perry³

Drawing is, in effect, the basis of all visual arts. Formally, it offers the widest scope for the expression of artistic intentions: objects, space, depth and even motion can all be captured through drawing. Furthermore, the immediacy of the medium gives it a certain intimacy, a direct link to the artist's imagination, rendering it a spontaneous exposition of thought and personality – of identity.

Historically, drawing has generally formed a key part of an artist's work, providing a means to understanding the world. An imposed hierarchy, however, has often placed drawing below painting and sculpture, as something secondary, or, perhaps, preliminary: a medium for studies and preparatory sketches. Cooper's drawings, however, are by no means either secondary or preliminary – they are very much finished works in their own right. Their large scale – *Tree House II* (1990) measures 284 x 176 cm; *Tree House I*, at nearly 300 cm high, would not fit into the gallery – reflects the importance Cooper accords these works, in which she experiments with a variety of papers and materials, collages together multiple sheets of paper, and works with strong and energetic lines, no doubt influenced by her printmaking experience: 'Line dominates the practice, and I think in that sense I am really a graphic artist', she says. Cooper also speaks of being 'stimulated by the paper' and of the 'sheer pleasure' of working with it.

Her works often play with the relationship of outline colour to body colour and the colour of the paper showing through from behind. Moreover, the way she crops the composition to fill the sheet or frame has an undeniable element of the sublime.⁴ Her earliest drawings from the late 1970s and early 80s depict figures ascending and descending a ladder (e.g. *Climbing the Ladder*, 1977) and on a swing (*Higher and Higher IV*, 1982), both themes to which she has frequently returned, with the motif taking on new meaning as the series develop. Cooper draws from her imagination. 'It is a release for me not having to engage with a model', she admits; in fact, 'It was only when I stopped drawing from life that I could work imaginatively' and by 'instinct not intellect'.⁵ 'Ideally I use my own hands or feet for feeling how a body is when crouched, but I have drawn

a lot in the past', Cooper said back in 1985.⁶ 'Sometimes I will see things happening in the process of drawing that I had not been able to think were going to happen. I will exploit them quite consciously then and work with them.' So it is clear that for Cooper, drawing really is a direct channel to the imagination.

The gift

Every child is an artist. The problem is how to remain an artist once we grow up.

Attributed to Pablo Picasso

Cooper's gift to the Royal Academy comprises ten works in mixed media on Japanese paper, all dating from around 2000. These contemplative female figures capture some of the key aspects of all Cooper's works on paper: her exploration of and engagement with the media (both the mark-making media and the paper itself), her 'twisted, acrobatic and crowded-to-the-edge figures',⁷ her dedication to the figurative and her earthy, almost primitive choice of colours.

The works employ a mixture of ink, pastel, charcoal and Conté crayons, and the colours are secondary and tertiary, calling to mind cave paintings. One critic has described Cooper's figures (albeit in a different series of works) as 'set in a hallucinatory non-space; the space of dreams, of extreme psychic states, of fantasy, of memory – in short, with everything which is not to do with the concrete and the everyday'.⁸ To some extent this is true, but, at the same time, there is an absolute sense of reality to the figures, both male and female, tenderly entwined, somersaulting and leaping, playing games, dancing. They seem to be happy in their unclothed bodies and 'in a state of harmony with the world'.⁹

Much has been made of the unclothed aspect of Cooper's figures. Another critic described her in 1989 as 'Britain's new young nudist superstar',¹⁰ but Cooper is keen to protest that she doesn't see her figures as naked, just 'beautifully free of clothes', 'primal' and 'clothed in colour'.¹¹ 'Without clothes they are timeless, more universal. I am not concerned with fashion and all the trappings that people hide behind. Birthday suits don't lie.'¹² One commentator has suggested that Cooper's figures possess 'a larger than life boldness due not so much to childlike innocence but to

the kind of confidence we imagine Eve and Adam had before the Fall'.¹³ I would suggest, however, that they enjoy both an innocence and a certain knowledge, a privileged duality. While another writer notes that 'most histories of childhood are the product of adult (re)constructions',¹⁴ Cooper, it seems, has the ability to present a history of adulthood through the eyes of a child.

Motherhood

When the good Lord was creating mothers, He was into His sixth day of overtime when the angel appeared and said: 'You're doing a lot of fiddling around on this one.'

Erma Bombeck¹⁵

With the arrival of her two sons, Sam and Will, in the mid-1980s, Cooper found herself drawing about the experience of motherhood. 'I didn't intend to use the experience at all', she says. 'When I was pregnant I never imagined myself doing mother and child pictures, not in my wildest dreams, and it is very surprising that it has come through in a very straightforward way. I think that they are the most straightforward pieces I have ever done.'¹⁶

The mother-and-child is one of the oldest continually treated subjects in the history of art. Even in the last couple of centuries, since the motif began to shed some of its previous religious and historical associations, it has remained a theme burdened by convention. Certainly women artists such as Berthe Morisot (1841–95), Mary Cassatt (1844–1926), Paula Modersohn-Becker (1876–1907) and Käthe Kollwitz (1867–1945) have injected reflections on the social mores of their times, yet they still all represent the mother as mother and the child as child, capturing an intimate mother-child relationship.¹⁷ Cooper, however, is less interested in this interpersonal dynamic, instead presenting the world as observed and discovered from the eyes of a child – both those of her children, shown with birds to represent their independent spirits, but also her own eyes, those of a woman seeking to rediscover the world from a new position. Cooper's children are mini-adults, while her mother figure is also shown to be a child – a timeless, eternal child, piecing together her changing identity as she takes on ever more new roles.

The works are tender and perceptive, honest and playful. They document motherhood from all angles – again, offering a duality of perception.¹⁸ Nurture and creativity are brought together, as Cooper presents the mother as artist, literally imagining her own character and future on the canvas or paper in front of her (e.g. *The Idealist*, 2011).

Identity: Piecing it all (back) together

Who in the world am I? Ah, that's the great puzzle.

Lewis Carroll¹⁹

As Cooper's work progresses, so does her life. Or ought that to be the other way round? The mother and artist portrayed on paper struggles to clamber and balance, contort and resurface, perpetually recreating herself. In one of her most metaphorical works, *The Sad Tree* (1983), Cooper represents the woman as a tree, budding, growing, reaching beyond the frame for the sky. But why is she sad? What can she not attain? According to Cooper, a lot of her work is about trying to find space for an adult love relationship as well as a mother-child relationship. As one commentator has said: 'She records triumph and tenderness, loneliness and that impulsive desire for independence, all of which must help motivate the development of her art that continues despite the demands of motherhood.'²⁰

Cooper's works are both a figurative and a literal piecing together, reassembling, of the self. Their large scale not only shows her seriousness about and dedication to the medium of drawing, but the collaging together of multiple pages, as the image grows and continues to defy the restrictions of the paper's edge, make it clear that the artist will not be stunted or held back. It is no exaggeration to assert that 'paradoxically these works gain in subtlety of gesture and meaning as they gain in size'.²¹

In more recent works, Cooper's figures have acquired clothing, a feature that appears to coincide with the removal of her earlier filled and busy backgrounds.²² These newer works are, accordingly, calmer, with less primal passion. Animals appear more frequently. The figures are seen to be creating and performing, fully absorbed, sometimes with boats representative of the journey of life (e.g. *Challenge*, 2008). Cooper lost her mother in 2003: might one reflect that such a key event finally forced

the artist to become the adult, no longer a child herself, and accordingly to discover shame, as when Eve ate the apple, thus provoking her to cover both her figures and herself? Of course one might, for one is free to interpret. 'My work is rooted in the real world but full of imaginative possibilities', says Cooper. 'To some extent it is personal, but it's not autobiographical.' Narrative elements are suggested, but they are left for viewers to interpret and develop, thus absorbing them into the work, allowing them to take on that role, to steer that journey, finish that drawing, to reach dry land or stumble, to hide or to seek. Following Michel Foucault, the process of subjectification is understood as a dialectic of freedom and constraint:²³ hence the ladders, swings and trapeze. The situations are unlikely, precarious, yet somehow still balanced and serene. Unity has been deconstructed, subjectivity is free-floating, and identity may repeatedly be rebuilt.

It has been suggested that the simplifying of the backgrounds reflects a fusion of figure and attributes²⁴ – but does this equate to becoming whole? Can such wholeness ever be achieved? In the feminist critique of the mind/body split and its counterparts – male/female, culture/nature, public/private, human/animal – there is an ambition to counterbalance and transgress the dualistic thinking that is apparent in both scientific conclusions and disciplinary boundaries.²⁵ Bodies – or figures – are at the heart of this discussion, seen as the locus where nature and culture meet. Cooper unites nature and culture through nurture and creativity, but in her works, bodies are seen from different points of view, often upside down, moving fast, grasping and holding tight.

In the end we are left with a series of dualities in Cooper's work, not least the self and the other, the adult and the child. Another of her critics perhaps sums this up most succinctly when he writes: '[It] is impossible not to read the naked female figure who inhabits her works as an alter-ego ... The figure is pared to essentials ... It has become shorthand, the quickest way to write "woman"; "I!"'²⁶

In Cooper's works, it is not so much a case of 'mother and child' as 'mother as child'. Eileen Cooper is perennially a child, a blank page. With every work, she recreates herself anew. If her drawings are preparatory sketches for anything, it is her evolving identity and, indeed, her life.

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Notes

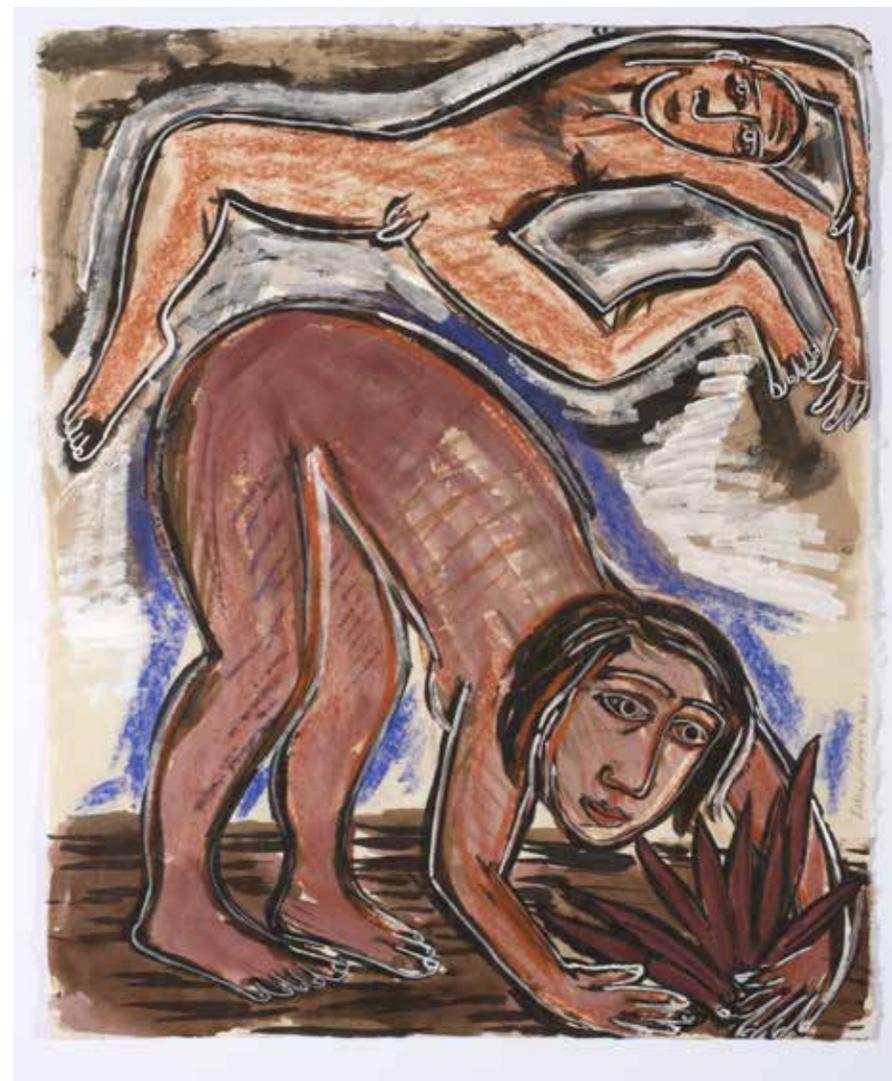
- ¹ Hirst 2011, p. 37.
- ² As Tony Godfrey notes: 'Because her work bears witness to her experience as a woman, attention has been diverted away from the formal strengths of her work.' Godfrey 1988, p. 310.
- ³ www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2009/sep/19/grayson-perry-on-drawing [accessed 1 May 2015].
- ⁴ 'I've always been obsessed with the rectangle and squashing things into it' Clarke 2004, p. 6. See also Derrida's discourse on the frame, or 'parergon': Derrida 2010.
- ⁵ Saunders 1990.
- ⁶ von Joel 1985, p. 11.
- ⁷ Hill 1983, p. 20.
- ⁸ Hill 1983, p. 20.
- ⁹ Hill 1983, p. 22.
- ¹⁰ Beckett 1989, p. 40.
- ¹¹ As described by the artist to the author, January 2015.
- ¹² Beckett 1989, p. 40.
- ¹³ Greenan 1992, p. 25.
- ¹⁴ Yarrington 1993, p. 9.
- ¹⁵ Bombeck, E., *When God Created Mothers*, Kansas City: Andrews McMeel Publishing, 2005.
- ¹⁶ von Joel 1985, p. 11.
- ¹⁷ Buettner 1986–7, p. 14.
- ¹⁸ Cooper, it might be noted, is a Gemini.
- ¹⁹ Carroll, L., *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*, London: Macmillan, 1865, ch. 2.
- ²⁰ Greenan 1992, p. 25.
- ²¹ Greenan 1992, p. 25.
- ²² McCrickard 2011, pp. 8–10.
- ²³ McNay 2000, p. 2.
- ²⁴ McCrickard 2011, p. 10.
- ²⁵ GenNa (Centre for Gender Research), 'The body/ Embodiment group'.
- ²⁶ Currah 1988.



Tree House II, 1990
Charcoal
Collection of the artist



Climbing the Ladder, 1977
Charcoal and pastel
Collection of the artist



Jump, 2001
Ink, pastel, conté, gouache on natural Japanese paper
Promised gift from the artist to the RA Collections



Bathing, 1987
Charcoal and pastel
Private collection



The Sad Tree, 1983
Charcoal
Private collection



Moving a Picture, 2002
Charcoal and pastel
Private Collection

Checklist of works in the exhibition

In chronological order

Climbing the Ladder, 1977

Charcoal and pastel
Collection of the artist

Figure with Ladder, 1979

Charcoal and pastel
Collection of the artist

Woman with Yo-Yo, 1982

Charcoal, pastel and conté
Collection of the artist

Higher and Higher I, 1982

Charcoal
Courtesy of Ian Taylor

Higher and Higher IV, 1982

Charcoal
Collection of the artist

The Sad Tree, 1983

Charcoal
Private collection

Little Man, 1984/5

Charcoal
Private collection

Late Night Feed, 1985

Charcoal
Private collection

Bathing, 1987

Charcoal and pastel
Private collection

The New Baby, 1988

Charcoal
Private collection

Woman with Red Cheeks, 1989

Charcoal and pastel
Private collection

Tree House II, 1990

Charcoal
Collection of the artist

Woman Rebuilding Herself I, 1991

Charcoal
Private collection

Stargazing, 1991

Charcoal and pastel
Private collection

Haunted, 1991

Charcoal and pastel
Collection of the artist

Sisters, 1992

Charcoal
Private collection

Boy with a Grass Snake, 1992

Charcoal and pastel
Collection of the artist

Boy with Bird, 1992

Charcoal and pastel
Private collection

Giant, 1993

Conté and Chalk
Mary Moore

Guardian IV, 2000

Pastel
Collection of the artist

Promised gift of ten drawings from Eileen Cooper to the RA Collections

Dance, 2001

Ink, pastel, conté, watercolour on white
Japanese paper

Hold, 2001

Ink, pastel, gouache on white Japanese
paper

Kick, 2001

Ink, conté, pastel on white
Japanese paper

Potter, 2001

Ink, conté, pastel on white
Japanese paper

Wake, 2001

Ink, pastel, gouache on
natural Japanese paper

Jig, 2001

Ink, pastel, conté on natural Japanese
paper

Twins, 2001

Ink, pastel, conté, gouache
on natural Japanese paper

Jump, 2001

Ink, pastel, conté, gouache
on natural Japanese paper

Child, 2001

Ink, pastel, conté, gouache on natural
Japanese paper

Red Sun, 2001

Ink, pastel, conté, gouache on natural
Japanese paper

Moving a Picture, 2002

Charcoal and pastel
Private Collection

Woman with Boots and Dog, 2002

Pastel and charcoal
Collection of the artist

The Visit, 2002

Charcoal
Private collection

Journey, 2003

Charcoal and pastel
Collection of the artist

Another Journey, 2003

Charcoal and pastel
Jeremy Levison

Challenge, 2008

Charcoal and pastel
Christopher & Alex Courage

Leap of Faith, 2008

Charcoal
Collection of the artist

Designer, 2011

Pencil
Collection of the artist

Narrative, 2011

Pencil
Collection of the artist

The Idealist, 2011

Pencil
Collection of the artist

Trapeze II, 2012

Charcoal
Collection of the artist

Girl in Blue Dress, 2013

Ink, gouache and pastel
Marcelle Joseph Collection

Woman with Cats, 2013

Charcoal
Collection of the artist

Hart, 2014

Charcoal
Collection of the artist

Fawn, 2014

Charcoal and pastel
Collection of the artist

Archer, 2015

Charcoal and pastel
Collection of the artist

Film at exhibition entrance

Archer, 2015, by Eileen Cooper RA

Time-based art

Filmed by Charlie Paul @ Itch Film

If you would like more information
on the works in this exhibition,
please contact Morgan Feely on
020 7300 5764 or email
morgan.feely@royalacademy.org.uk



The Idealist, 2011
Pencil
Collection of the artist

Acknowledgements

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Hide and Seek Drawings by Eileen Cooper RA

The John Madejski Fine Rooms
29 May – 23 August 2015

Opening times
Wednesday–Friday, 10am–4pm
Saturday and Sunday, 10am–6pm
Closed Monday and Tuesday

Publication

Eileen Cooper: Between the Lines by Martin Gayford and Sara Lee, published by the Royal Academy of Arts, is available online at shop.royalacademy.org.uk and from the RA shop in hardcover priced at £30 (£27 to readers of RA Magazine).

Events

To book, visit royalacademy.org.uk or call 020 7300 5839

Free Lunchtime Lecture

Eileen Cooper RA: Drawn from the Imagination
Monday 8 June

Eileen Cooper RA discusses with art writer Anna McNay the role of drawing in her practice, and why she considers it to be neither just a preliminary or secondary art form. The event will be followed by a book signing of *Eileen Cooper: Between the Lines*.
Reynolds Room, 1–2pm. Free (seats must be reserved online or by telephone; unclaimed seats will be released at 1pm that day)

Meet the Artist: Tour and Discussion with Eileen Cooper RA
Monday 15 June

Join printmaker and painter Eileen Cooper RA for a guided tour of her exhibition, and a unique opportunity to discuss her richly diverse practice in an intimate setting over coffee and conversation. Pre-booking essential.
Reynolds Room, 1–2.30pm; £12/£6

Cover: *Bathing*, 1987 (detail)
Charcoal and pastel
Private collection

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