Lines and lines and lines

Opening event 31 January 2026

Jon McCormack and Gary Warner
Grace Cossington Smith Gallery

Before I begin, I would like to acknowledge the Darug people, the traditional custodians of the land on which we gather, and to pay my respects to Elders past and present. I acknowledge the ongoing connection between culture, knowledge, and Country, and the ways in which practices like drawing continue to be shaped by place, environment, and lived histories.

It's a real pleasure to open *lines and lines and lines*, and to be speaking about two artists whose work has quietly but significantly shaped the way many of us think about drawing, technology, and the relationship between human intention and autonomous systems.

Jon McCormack and Gary Warner have been friends, colleagues, and collaborators since the 1980s, when both were early adopters of computers as artistic tools. At a time when digital media was still largely associated with engineering, industry, or novelty, they were already asking deeper questions about what computation might offer as a creative language — not simply as a means of representation, but as a way of thinking, organising, and generating form.

What connects their practices, and what this exhibition makes clear, is an ongoing interest in what might be called *drawing as process* rather than drawing as depiction. This is not drawing *of* the world — not images of things we recognise — but drawing *as* an activity: as a register of action, behaviour, time, and system.

In other words, drawing becomes a way of recording how something unfolds, rather than what something looks like.

Jon's work sits at the intersection of art, science, and computation. He trained in applied maths, computer science, and filmmaking, and for over thirty years has been at the forefront of generative and evolutionary art practices. He is currently a Professor at Monash University and the founder and director of SensiLab, a transdisciplinary research space dedicated to experimental creative technologies.

Internationally, Jon's work has been exhibited at institutions such as MoMA in New York, Tate Liverpool, Ars Electronica in Austria, ACM SIGGRAPH, and ACMI in Melbourne, and he has received numerous awards for both artistic and scientific innovation. His early work *Turbulence* from 1994 remains one of the most significant and widely recognised pieces of interactive digital media art.

But what I think is especially interesting about Jon's practice is his sustained interest in artificial life — in systems that behave, adapt, evolve, and sometimes even fail. His drawings are not designed in the traditional sense; they are grown, simulated, or evolved through coded rules.

In a work like *Niche Constructions*, we see autonomous agents moving through virtual environments, responding to density, proximity, collision, and constraint. Lines appear not because an artist places them, but because a system is allowed to operate within certain parameters. The drawing emerges as the residue of behaviour.

Even when these works are translated into physical form — through pen plotters or embroidery — what we are really seeing is the trace of an invisible process: a choreography of instructions, decisions, and micro-events unfolding over time.

Gary Warner's practice comes from a different but deeply complementary lineage. Gary is an 'autodidact' who began experimenting with early computers in the 1980s, generating sound, image, and print works long before digital tools were widely accessible. He worked at the Australian Film Commission in the late 80s and early 90s, where he established some of the first national funding programs for electronic media art in Australia.

Since 2015, Gary has been a lecturer in experimental drawing at the National Art School, and many of us — staff and students alike — have been shaped by his expanded understanding of what drawing might be: not simply pencil on paper, but machines, performances, sound, robotics, and time-based systems.

Gary's work is often tactile, improvised, and deliberately precarious. He builds drawing machines from turntables, fans, pendulums, spinning tops, strings, stones, and found materials. These devices generate marks through motion, gravity, vibration, and decay of energy.

In works like *a 3-pendulum harmonograph* or *a chance calligrapher*, the artist initiates a process — setting something in motion — and then steps back. The drawing completes itself. The question becomes not "How do I make this look right?" but "When do I stop? When is it done? When has it gone too far?"

In this sense, authorship becomes distributed. The artist designs conditions, but the outcome is shaped by physics, chance, friction, and entropy. Each drawing is a record of energy transfers: of time passing, systems slowing, materials resisting.

One of the things I find most interesting about this exhibition is how clearly it shows the dialogue between these two practices. There are moments where Gary's physical machines and Jon's digital systems feel almost interchangeable: robots drawing alongside spinning tops; code behaving like gravity; algorithms leaving traces like dust or ink.

The collaborative works, such as *mindless drawing* and *stone-garden drawbots*, make this especially visible. Here, robotic agents navigate physical space, avoiding stones, responding to obstacles, exhausting their batteries, and eventually coming to rest. The drawing is the afterimage of their wandering — a quiet, contemplative archive of motion and encounter.

These works draw on references ranging from Zen stone gardens to John Cage's chance operations, but they also speak very directly to contemporary concerns: about automation, artificial intelligence, ecological systems, and the limits of human control.

What both artists share is a deep scepticism about mastery. There is no heroic hand here, no expressive gesture in the romantic sense. Instead, there is an ethics of attention to systems — to how things behave when we let go of certainty, authorship, and outcome.

In an era increasingly dominated by optimisation, efficiency, and predictive algorithms, this feels quietly radical. These works do not aim to solve problems or produce perfect results. They linger in uncertainty. They allow for failure, noise, mess, repetition, and excess.

They remind us that drawing can still be a space for not knowing — for watching something unfold rather than deciding in advance what it should become.

lines and lines and lines is not a spectacle of technology. It is a meditation on process, time, and agency. It invites us to slow down, to notice small variations, to attend to the subtle differences between one line and the next, one system and another.

And perhaps most importantly, it reminds us that drawing is not just a skill or a medium — it is a way of thinking. A way of testing ideas, building worlds, and asking what might happen if we simply keep at it.

I would like to congratulate Jon McCormack and Gary Warner on a beautiful, generous, and deeply thoughtful exhibition, and to thank Grace Cossington Smith Gallery for hosting it.

Dr Chelsea Lehmann

Head of Drawing