

Picking, poking, prodding, probing: drawing as investigation

The investigatory potential of drawing is widely acknowledged and reflected in the language that artists use to describe their work. Verbs such as ‘explore’, ‘excavate’, ‘interrogate’, ‘examine’ and ‘find’ reflect the role of drawing not just in documenting the world, but in processing and understanding it. This year’s *Drawing Biennial* comes at an unsettled time. War, political uncertainty, social division, the climate emergency, censorship, police oppression and the cost-of-living crisis are all themes that are addressed in the contributions, while a wider sense of anxiety pervades much of the work. Whether investigating an idea, a particular material, the physical world, personal experiences and emotions, or a more universal theme, there is a sense across this year’s drawings that artists are experiencing a need to gather information, to pull apart and reassemble, to question and analyse, and to present their findings with the aim of reaching some conclusions.

The last *Drawing Biennial* took place in 2021, when we were yet to emerge from the COVID-19 pandemic. Inevitably, many of the drawings from that year reflected the extraordinary circumstances in which they were made. Even then, it was clear that drawing had played an important role in helping people to process the experience and understand its wider implications. Stuck at home, often without access to studios or materials, many artists focused on drawing as their primary art form, while non-artists were also driven to put pencil to paper.¹ Although undoubtedly an anxious-making time, the pandemic enforced a slowing down for many, often resulting in drawings that were introspective and contemplative in tone. In her introductory essay to *Drawing Biennial 2021*, Isabel Seligman proposed a ‘carry-bag theory of drawing’, whereby drawings serve as receptacles into which things - thoughts, ideas and experiences - can be gathered together and held in relation to each other and their makers.² If the pandemic

¹ The influence of the COVID-19 pandemic on contemporary drawing is acknowledged and discussed in Isabel Seligman, *A Carrier bag theory of drawing*, commissioned by Drawing Room for the occasion of *Drawing Biennial 2021* and published in the accompanying exhibition catalogue; Claire Gilman and Roger Malbert, *Drawing in the Present Tense* (London and New York: Thames & Hudson, 2023), p. 7 and Anna Lovatt, ‘Introduction’, in Louisa Elderton and Rebecca Morrill (eds), *Vitamin D3: Today’s Best in Contemporary Drawing* (London: Phaidon Press, 2021), pp. 10-17, at p. 10.

² Seligman.

encouraged a gathering and holding, drawing as a ‘handy receptacle for a moment as yet not fully defined’, the years since seem to have elicited an agitating, an inability to stay still, a need not only to collect, document and reflect, but to pick and poke, prod and probe. This essay will consider the investigatory nature of this year’s drawings, identifying common lines of inquiry, methods for gathering and presenting information and ideas, and the role of the viewer in drawing conclusions.

Assessing the scene

The drawings in this year’s *Biennial* range in theme from the personal to the political, the micro to the macro and the intangible to the clearly defined. World events, particularly conflict and division, provide one prominent line of inquiry. For *Drawing Biennial 2021*, Sonia Boyce submitted a carbon transfer drawing titled *And breathe...*, a reference both to the COVID-19 pandemic and the dying words of George Floyd. The title indicated a cautious optimism, a deep, measured breath taken in the hope that ‘we can find a gentler way forward’.³ But Boyce’s drawing for this year’s *Biennial* signifies a shift in mood. Titled *High Anxiety*, it depicts a scene of empty placards held aloft by disembodied hands above an invisible crowd, a seemingly impotent protest. Made in response to the ‘high anxiety and polarisation’ of our current times, Boyce’s new drawing asks how we can ‘contribute to a progressive and productive situation through the arts?’. Her tentative hope of 2021 has been replaced by an urgent need to find an answer.⁴ David Austen’s drawing in oil and pencil, *Fires 12.12.23*, also embodies a general angst. Drawing on depictions of apocalyptic flames in Medieval manuscripts, images engendered by fear and anxiety in the past, his bright red fires burn strong, their finger-like flames taut and high, whitening with heat as areas of paper show through the mottled surface of the paint. Investigating their appearance in his work, Austen reflects that ‘2023 was a broken year of strife and fire’, adding the worrying after-thought ‘still ongoing’.

³ Sonia Boyce’s supporting statement for her drawing in *Drawing Biennial 2021*.

⁴ All quotations that relate to this year’s drawings are taken from the supporting statements for *Drawing Biennial 2024*.

Other artists are more direct in their probing of world events. Alevtina Kakhidze's diaristic drawings document her experiences of living through war in Ukraine. Through cartoon-like images and hand-written annotations, Kakhidze offers an immediate and first-hand insight into life in a war zone. With a similar deadpan humour, Vanessa Baird also reacts to war. Her two drawings depict a doll-like girl with her hands raised and eyes and mouth round with shock and horror. In each, the girl's actions and expressions are mirrored by surrounding anthropomorphised plants. Made in 2021 and 2022, both drawings are titled *Ceasefire now*. 'One title fits all / this days [sic] / Ceasefire Now', she explains. In response to the Israel-Gaza war, Chandraguptha Thenuwara, who has experienced conflict in his own country, Sri Lanka, shows solidarity with the people of Gaza through an ink drawing depicting a semi-abstract entanglement of jagged plank-like shapes representing 'Dead bodies and rubble of the destroyed city and dwellings'. Meanwhile, in her drawing *Vigil(ance)*, Avril Corroon bears witness to the international repercussions of the conflict, depicting the breaking up by police of a public vigil in Berlin for the Palestinian dead. Aggressively protected riot police stamp out candles while onlookers with phones capture the scene.

The situation in America is also explored. Miriam de Búrca's *Rust, Mold and Parasites*, an ink drawing of Donald Trump-supporting militia men 'protecting' a set of ornate gates during the storming of the Capitol on 6 January 2021, links the events of that day with a health and safety inspection of Trump's Mar-a-Lago golf resort. Taking the title from an article reporting on the findings of the inspection, De Búrca seeks to undercut the perceived strength of Trump and his allies: 'I find this to be an apt metaphor for the sociopathic 'strongmen' so destructive in the world today; their veneer of power, grandeur and respectability merely gilding a rotting system beneath'. Joy Gerrard also responds to the rise of populism in the United States. In *Signs of Distress. Stars and Stripes (1) and (2)*, an American flag is flown upside down, a nautical sign for an SOS. In each image, the flag flutters in the wind, pulling away from its straining pole. Devoid of colour and context, in Japanese ink against blank white paper, the image serves as a tense and sombre warning of 'the precarious nature of American politics'.

Physical evidence

The natural world is a recurring line of inquiry in this year's *Biennial*. Kelly Chorpening is one of numerous artists investigating the effects of contemporary life on the landscape. In her pencil drawing *Composition with plastic*, decaying tree stumps have become snarled up with discarded plastic sheets or bags. The wood, rendered in monochrome, appears powerless and weak against the bright red and orange parasite within. Giulia Ricci explores the effects of development on the rural landscape of Emilia Romagna in Italy, including the severe flooding that occurred in the area in 2023. For *Order / Disruption no. 76*, she translated her observations of the landscape's changes into a repeated geometric pattern that rapidly loses its uniformity as its shapes mutate, swell and diverge. Lilah Fowler also considers the consequences of development, in her case on the desert landscape, a space, she notes 'that embodies many of the raw conceptions of both untouched nature and hidden technologies – such as solar, wind and data farms'. In *Drawings For Land Use #56*, which like Ricci's drawing, is part of a wider investigation, Fowler uses plastic and paper collage to highlight features of a built-up environment with brightly coloured transparent shapes. Questions of consumption and the exploitation of the natural world also form part of Pedram Sazesh and Charmaine Watkiss' investigations into the complex histories of specific plants, namely madder root and indigo, both of which have been highly valued for their use as pigments. Emphasising the social, economic and political weight that plants and minerals can embody, Sazesh and Watkiss both use organic materials in the making of their drawings. For *Sacred Guardian of the Eternal II*, Watkiss used coffee, which like indigo was grown on plantations on which enslaved people were forced to work, and 22ct gold leaf, representing the luxury metal which at its height indigo surpassed in value. For his drawing, Sazesh used dye from madder root itself to create a loose rendering of the reddish-brown plant, which, in his image, remains firmly rooted in the ground.

In addition to the natural world, artists continue to investigate the built environment and tangible objects, often exploring personal connections, experiences and memories as they do so. Noor Ali Chagani's *Brick Wall* draws on the red-bricked buildings that surrounded him in Pakistan, where he was born and raised. Printed in water-based inks

from handmade miniature terracotta bricks, the drawing investigates both the physical and symbolic qualities of the structure in relation to the artist's personal associations with family, safety and protection, as well as the role of walls in wider society. The built environment is also an influence for Rana Begum, whose abstract compositions exploring space, light and colour draw on urban landscapes and Islamic art and architecture. In her two drawings, *WP632* and *WP633*, Begum layers spray-painted circles in a variety of colours, ranging from black and blue-grey to neon pink and orange. She achieves a sense of light and depth by varying the opacity and luminosity of the circles, some of which are clearly delineated while others blur and fizz with grainy, spattered edges. Meanwhile, in *Monument*, Nathaniel Rackowe takes inspiration from the temporary structures that frequently appear in our ever-changing cities in the form of steel scaffolding and netting. The title hints at a questioning of the ephemeral nature of such structures in relation to other more permanent features in our cities. Everyday objects also provide a line of inquiry. Rose Wylie's *Teapot*, drawn from memory, includes annotations recording colour, damage, and the teapot's relationship to its accompanying sugar bowl and cup, while Lisa Milroy presents a still life of *Eye Shadow No. 5*, which, presented open against a white background, resembles an illustration for a museum catalogue. In *Dishcloth Drawing*, Leo Fitzmaurice continues an ongoing investigation into the designs of everyday cloths, which, he suggests, could be reconsidered as three-dimensional drawings. Deborah Lerner also takes the quotidian - 'places so mundane they are often ignored' - as a starting point for her 'formal enquiry' first into paint and painting and from there into wider truths about human life. In *Lamp Post*, the familiar shape of a streetlight is stripped back to its simplest linear expression, set in red against an orange-brown textured ground.

Human testimony

Seeking to capture something less tangible, many artists in this year's *Biennial* use drawing to investigate aspects of the human experience. In *Headache Caused by Jet Lag*, Korean artist Jione Choi explores her experience of jet lag following a flight from Seoul back to her home in London. Using graphite, she fragments, overlays and fuses together depictions of her face from different perspectives to articulate not just the

unsettling and physically draining sensation of travelling between time zones, but also the experience of living between two continents and the consequent questioning of her 'real identity'. The Iraq-born artist Sadik Kwaish Alfraji also considers questions of identity and migration in his untitled drawing in Indian ink, part of his *Books of Passage* series, an ongoing investigation into three generations of migration in his family. While in *Children of Faith series (olive brand printed shirt)*, Ali Kazim continues his inquiries into 'how beliefs shape our identity and how we choose to make these legible and understood'. A number of artists investigate the experience of parenthood including Sarah Macdonald whose drawing *Dry* reflects on the repetitive nature of hanging washing, one of the many mundane tasks required of a new parent. Ryan Orme's depiction of watching others watching a firework display investigates the life changes involved in having a family: 'This seems to happen a lot now; we sit at the sidelines...watching from the middle of somewhere new'. Drawing can help to express and explore feelings and experiences that artists are unable or unready to put into words. Robert McNally's *Boxed In*, a graphite drawing of the head from an antique-style sculpture packed tightly into a box, its nose and eyes pressed up against one side, was, he notes, made during 'a period of worry, anxiety and loneliness', and for her statement about the drawing *G (for grief)*, Yelena Popova simply writes 'I find it hard to talk about it'.

Investigatory methods

Despite the imposed format, the A4 sheet, this *Biennial* comprises a wide range of materials and approaches, demonstrating the expanded nature of the field and continual investigations into new ways of working and creating. For some artists, process remains the focus and primary tool of these investigations. One hundred years after the *Manifeste du surréalisme* in which André Breton advocated the use of automatism, artists continue to mine the subconscious and use chance to generate and develop ideas. Samira Abbassy floods her paper with water-based paints and then wipes into the surface to find 'suggested marks'. She describes this process as a method of 'excavation', which allows her to 'access surprising images and ideas'. Alice Anderson and Juliana Cerqueira Leite both use the body to create spontaneous images. Anderson spreads paint onto technological objects, such as a remote control, and

dances with them, making gestural marks on canvas resulting in chance compositions. Cerqueira Leite examines the movements of everyday actions such as opening a door or folding a sheet of paper, first by noticing them, then by recording their sequences in the form of coloured-in line drawings collectively titled *Repetitive Movements that Make and Unmake the World*. Her process begins with a surrendering, as she allows her body to lead before her mind and hand ‘return these movements to conscious attention’.

In some cases, the element of chance comes from found materials. Erica Eyres uses found images and stories, including school yearbooks, to investigate the reliability of autobiography, particularly in relation to the artist, while Paul Chiappe’s haunting image of a semi-blacked-out portrait of a smiling boy in a striped t-shirt uses a found classroom photograph. Jeff McMillan makes drawings on found paper and also takes ideas for form and composition from found objects. *Velocity (study)* derives its form from an empty box found near his studio, which has been splayed and its shape memorialised with spray paint. This record of a physical object has a relationship with frottage, a technique used by Jane Dixon for *Mutation Unit*, and other techniques that involve capturing elements of the physical world through touch, such as Anne Tallentire’s process of drawing with adhesive tape around found objects, capturing chance particles of dust along the way. For her diagrammatic drawings, Susan Morris picks at and plunders a variety of sources including overheard conversations, information gathered from the news and recordings of ambient sound. Her transfer drawing, *The Map and the Territory*, derives from a photograph published in the UK press of a whiteboard documenting a government planning session for dealing with the COVID-19 pandemic. Rather than reproducing the image in full, however, Morris edits this chanced-upon image, taking a section that foregrounds the sentence: ‘Who do we not save?’.

For others, the process of gathering evidence, of producing the image, can come from dismantling elements of the world and reordering or reimagining them. For *Nocturnal tone of the London Evening Standard (with adverts)*, James Scott Brooks studied the *Evening Standard* newspaper on a single day in January 2024 and calculated the median colour and tone of the various news stories in the London newspaper. He then

converted this information into monochrome blocks set within a geometric grid replicating the scrolling layout of an online news site. Part of a series, the drawing furthers the artist's investigations into the daily 'tones' of newspapers around the world. Ann-Marie James also takes existing information, which she reconfigures and re-presents in an altered form. In the series *Musée Imaginaire*, James seeks to rework every page of André Malraux's famous illustrated essay of 1947, in which he proposes a 'museum without walls' through photographs of works of art. *Musée Imaginaire, Plate 653*, her contribution to this year's *Biennial*, presents a page depicting a sixteenth-century statue of St John by Alonso Berruguete from the Valladolid Museum in Spain. In James' reimagined version, the head of the statue is obscured by a blot resembling a Rorschach test, suggesting, perhaps, that we might all see something different in the image. James is not alone in looking to works of art from the past to investigate the present. Fiza Khatri responds to an 1865 painting by Degas in the graphite drawing *Beside the Flowers (after Degas)*, replacing the woman in the original image with a contemporary male figure, while Neil Gall's *On the Beach* contains references to the work of Hans Bellmer and Pablo Picasso, the title suggesting a relationship between his anthropomorphic form and a 'Marie-Therese type bather basking in the sunshine'. Jane Bustin's drawing *Sleep, sing*, meanwhile, draws on Virginia Woolf's *The Waves*. Made using Genoa sail cloth, crushed Oyster shell, tea, saffron, dyed burnt silk and pencil on paper, materials that 'convey the aesthetic language of the life and work of Virginia', the abstract drawing has a poetic quality informed by the artist's investigations into Woolf's 'stream of consciousness with its flow of sensory impressions, unformed emotions and memories'.

Drawing conclusions

To some degree all artists, in their investigations, dismantle and draw upon existing information. Antony Gormley has acknowledged this in discussing his own drawing practice: 'Drawing is analytical but it's also expressive in its own right, it has a duty to bear witness, not simply by making a representation of something, but taking things

apart and reassembling them in a way that makes new connections.⁵ New connections can come from the interaction between the artist and viewer. Whatever the intention of the artist, exhibited drawings inevitably become part of a wider discourse. Many of the drawings discussed in this essay seem to invite a conversation. At this unsettled time, as artists strive to make sense of a world in flux, the collaborative relationship between artist and viewer seems particularly important. The desire, in some artists, to connect is seemingly expressed by Anna Barriball in her drawing *Touch*, a ghostly image of her hand captured in pastel dust reaching out from the sheet. In her introduction to *Vitamin D3: Today's Best in Contemporary Drawing*, 2021's survey of the field, Anna Lovatt argued that the vast possibilities of drawing, its flexibility as an art form, makes it particularly 'responsive to the volatile temporalities of contemporary life'.⁶ As this *Biennial* demonstrates, artists not only respond to contemporary life, but they investigate it, making visible what might not otherwise be seen.

⁵ Anna Moszynska, 'Inside matter: the drawings of Antony Gormley in Antony Gormley and Anna Moszynska, *Drawing* (London: British Museum, 2002), pp. 5-18, at p. 6.

⁶ Anna Lovatt, 'Introduction', in Louisa Elderton and Rebecca Morrill (eds), *Vitamin D3: Today's Best in Contemporary Drawing* (London: Phaidon Press, 2021), pp. 10-17, at p. 16.