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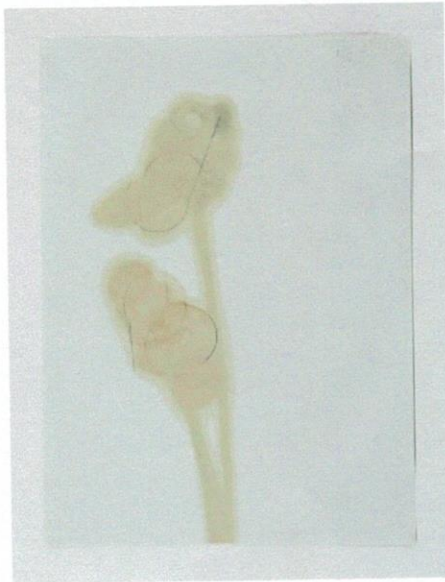
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19 September 2011

# Drawing Fever

Written by Luke Elwes

Drawing is the perfect vehicle for the postmodern artist. It slips between styles, schools and 'isms'; it can be diagrammatic, conceptual, referential, whimsical, or all these things at once. Freed from the hierarchies that once subordinated it to weightier mediums, it is now openly available to all, from multimedia practitioners in video and installation to painters and sculptors. It has come to assume centre stage in artistic practice, as an unmediated record of ideas and dreams that appear to offer an endless beginning to future possibilities. No critical preconceptions attach to it, which is good for artists but a problem for institutions: how to package and present it and on what criteria to build up collections that signal its belated arrival as a medium in its own right?



Thomas Gosebruch, *Untitled 1*, 2011, Oli, pigment, pencil, 91 cm x 76.3 cm

The Graphic Art department of the Pompidou Centre, established just 30 years ago, now has 18,000 pieces and is currently adding to this mountain at the rate of two a week. Justifying this, they state: 'more than ever in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, it represents an approach apart that artists are constantly amplifying. Works on paper have acquired a status today that they never had before'. And it's not just about paper either. MoMA's survey earlier this year aimed to show how artists have carried mark making beyond its traditional support into 'real space'. As if to echo this, Jerwood Prize judge Iwona Blazwick wonders whether, 'with hindsight we may regard this heterogeneity as symptomatic of chaos or

superficiality'. For Tim Marlow, a fellow judge, 'drawing has assumed a convulsive aspect'.

The urge to make marks is matched only by the urge to archive, as what was once a private dimension of the working process (and one often lost or subsumed within it) has come to attain independent value and collectable status.

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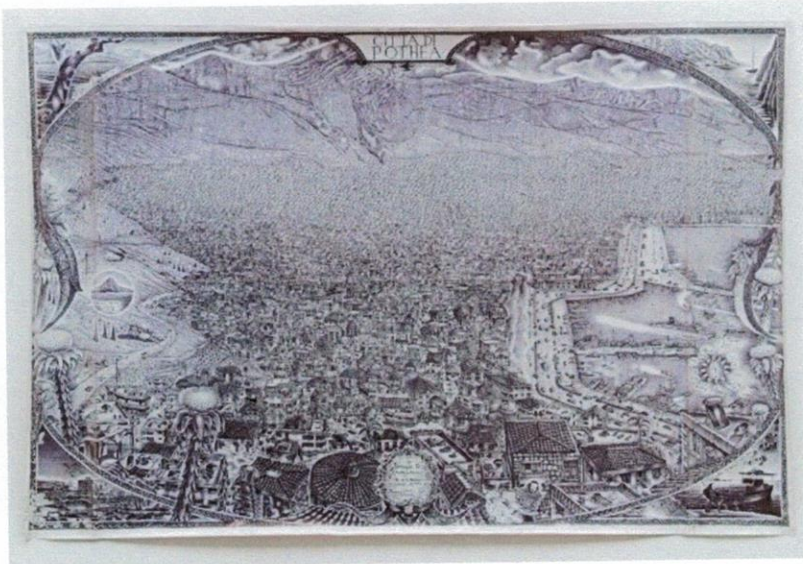
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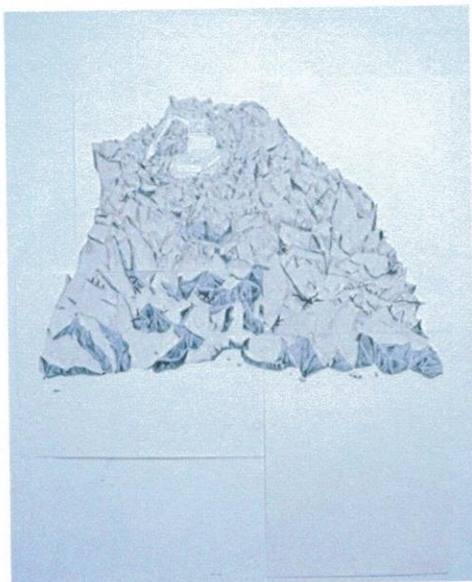
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*Jerwood Drawing Prize Winner, Gary Lawrence, Homage to Anonymous, 2011, Ballpoint pen on paper, 115 cm x 175 cm*

The problem is that beyond the shared act, there is no common territory. The many recent drawing shows display only its bewildering diversity. If the Jerwood Prize, coming from a background of art school practice, suggests that technical 'excellence' with a pencil is still central to drawing (and the prizewinning work underlines this), it nevertheless includes video and computer art. And quite often the effort to narrow it down can seem arbitrary; 'Drawn Together' at the Siena Art Institute, for example, claims to 'bring artists from all over the world together to celebrate the act of drawing' but they are only connected by the show's postcard format.

Perhaps more useful are shows that concentrate on nationality and identity within certain geographical confines. Although unspoken, it is interesting to note that most of the Jerwood Prize artists went to UK art schools and are now based in London. While the Pompidou exhibit includes a number of pieces by Latin American artists, another highly collectable area of the contemporary art market, they lack the kind of context and cumulative resonance of the new show at Drawing Room, 'The Peripatetic School: Itinerant drawing from Latin America', which also dwells on the portability of drawing and its use in exploring the landscape and culture beyond the studio.



*Untitled, by ANDRÉ KOMATSU from 'The Peripatetic School' at Drawing Room*

The most rewarding experience though is to see artists' drawings in the context of their own work, in the first moves as well as the subsequent iterations that reveal how desire is expressed and thought transfigured. I'm thinking of Tony Cragg's and Ingrid Calame's drawings, both recently shown in Edinburgh alongside their sculpture and painting. Similarly, the visual feedback produced by Callum Innes' new work on paper is lost when divorced from his painting, as is the case with the pieces by him chosen for the Pompidou and for Tate

Britain's recent watercolour survey.



Julie Mehretu. *Rising Down*. 2008. Ink and acrylic, 96 x 144". Collection Jeanne Greenberg Rohatyn, New York. Photo by Tim Thayer. © 2010 Julie Mehretu

While drawing continues more than ever to represent a kind of universal beginning, particularly as a tactile, playful spring board into a multimedia world, (as appears to be the case with the Drawing Room show, where all the artists pursue their work into the paperless fields of installation & video), what is still unusual is to regard it as the end point or defining characteristic of an artist's work. Another Latin American artist, Lucia Nogueira, who died young, may be best remembered for her astonishing drawings of 'trapped power'. Likewise with two US-based artists – Vija Celmins for her delicate meditations in pencil on waves, stars and spider webs, and Julie Mehretu for her gyrating forms drawn from city life. Over in Paris, Thomas Müller's small spare configurations stand out, their self sufficiency captured in the words used to describe his untitled piece in the Jerwood catalogue by fellow German artist Thomas Gosebruch, when he sums up the action if not the direction of the medium: 'Hand and head along one tight string'.

- 'The Peripatetic School: Itinerant drawing from Latin America', Drawing Room, London, 22 September – 13 November 2011, and Middlesbrough Institute of Modern Art (mima), 24 November – 4 March 2012
- 'Jerwood Drawing Prize', Jerwood Space, London, 14 September – 30 October 2011
- 'Recent Drawings', Pompidou Centre, Paris, June – Sept 2011
- 'On Line', MoMA Psi, November – February 2011
- 'Lucia Nogueira', Kettles Yard, Cambridge, Jan – March 2011

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