

THE SECRET THEORY OF DRAWING

THE DRAWING ROOM, LONDON
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The physical act of drawing is by definition so minimal that it's too easy to impose an idea of what it's supposed to be for. For example, drawing images of things is commonplace at the moment, and much drawing is currently happy playing the role of painting's kid brother. There is an obvious limit to this, and *The Secret Theory of Drawing*, curated by Caoimhín Mac Giolla Léith, is a timely reminder that image-making is an all-too-narrow function for drawing to carry.

Instead, *Secret Theory* gathers a range of works in which the conceptual relationship between representation and what an

image might be is put into question, and looks at how works which in most cases barely contain figural elements might be infected by an intuition of other, more representational genres: landscape, portraiture or still life.

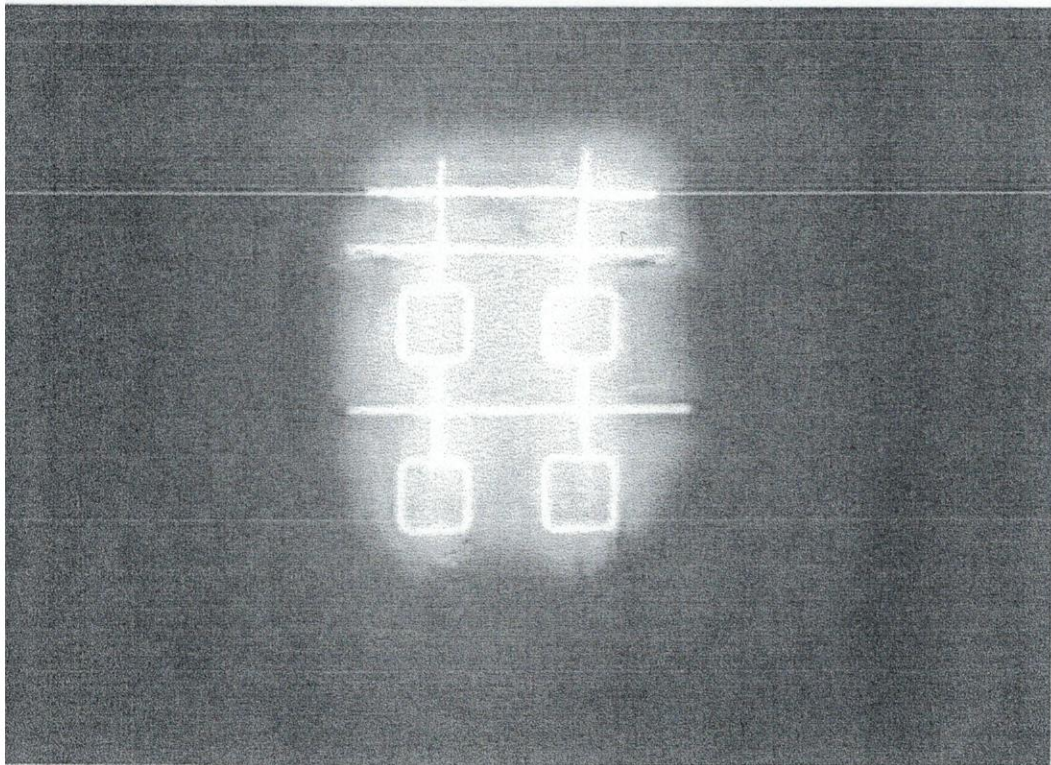
The drawn mark as index of reality is at work in Olafur Eliasson's nine *Untitled* drawings (1998), in which fat yellow marks slide around squares of paper. Only reading the exhibition notes will help; these slow traces were produced by a drawing machine, apparently registering 'the pitch and sway of a boat on fishing trips with [Eliasson's] father'. Indexical trace and portraiture commingle in the 'displaced' inclusion of Patrick Ireland's *Portrait of Marcel Duchamp, lead 1, slow heartbeat* (1966), an electrocardiograph chart made of Duchamp's heart; an ironic, readymade celebration of artistic presence, passively produced by the great sceptic of originality. (We have to take this on trust, because the work isn't even here - Ireland won't show in England, due to his Irish republican, anti-British politics - but is instead exhibited simultaneously at Sleeper gallery, in Edinburgh.)

There are limits to the index as a representation of reality, then. Douglas Gordon's sealed envelopes, cheekily purporting to contain such things as 'The most beautiful drawing ever made', push credulity to the limit. Trisha Donnelly's *The Passenger* (2003), a suite of drawings to be shown on consecutive days, are supposed to be frames in an 11-day animation sequence: only visible to an impossibly sleepless viewer.

Such paradoxes allow *Secret Theory* out into a more playful space, in which absences and fictions cross-reference each other, and in which conventional genres begin to appear in the unlikeliest places. So portraiture is at stake in Matt Mullican's complex, fictionalising *Untitled (bulletin board)* (1971-86/2006), collecting fragments of drawing and photograph indicating the marginal presence of 'Glen'. Even Ellen Gallagher's canvas, *Untitled* (1998), composed of sheets of lined penmanship paper, whose pinkish flesh tones are disturbed by the bruised or blackish sheet in the middle, presages the racial politics of the body of her later work.

Alternatively, calligraphy, ideogram and decoration infect Ceal Floyer's double-infinite ampersand frieze, & (2005), as they do Dominique Gonzalez-Foerster's neon *Double Bonheur* (1999), an unreadable, perhaps invented Japanese-styled character. And the possibility that drawing - or writing - might become spatial connects other works: in Anri Sala's *Untitled* (2004), monochrome photographs of moths congregating in the white corners of a room are both meaningless Morse code and a delicate inscription in three-dimensions; Cathy Wilkes's *Precision* (2002) presents found objects framed by 'abstract' linear elements; and Bojan Sarcevic's desperately fragile little brass and thread sculpture *O fatigue de ce monde* (2006).

Dominique Gonzalez-Foerster,
Double Bonheur, 1999,
neon on painted wall,
45 x 50 cm. Courtesy Didier
Rizantowski



The 'secret theory', then, seems to be that there is no one theory for the fragile event that is a mark or a line. *Secret Theory*, unlike more orthodox assertions of the multiplicity of contemporary drawing, such as Michael Craig-Martin's landmark curation of *Drawing the Line* in 1995, points beyond the attempt to demarcate 'drawing', towards drawing as the minimum requirement for the realisation of any possible artistic intention. In that sense John Latham's *Six Noits - One Second Drawings* (1970) - second-long diffusions of black spraypaint on panel which record the 'least event' in his famously wayward cosmology - suggest that drawing's enduring interest dwells in the fact that we make such metaphysical investments in something which is, in reality, hardly there. J.J. Charlesworth