

## The Drawing Room, London, UK

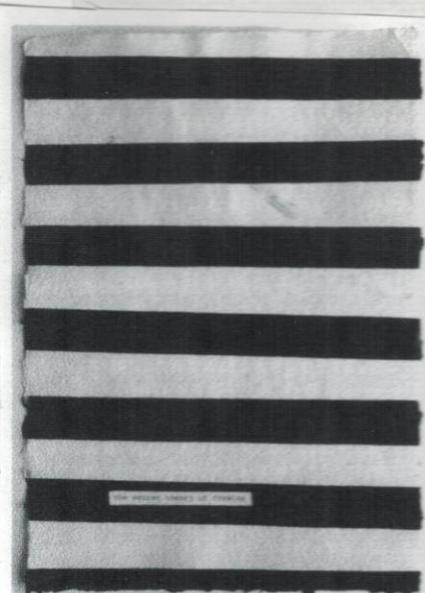
Curated by Caoimhín Mac Giolla Léith, 'The Secret Theory of Drawing' took its title from a sentence that appears on a small, 2003 black and white striped abstract gouache by David Austen, with which the show began. For all these words' apparent intentionality - their hints at hidden knowledge, at some hushed-up organizing principle - they're in fact the product of a mishearing, of Austen's brain processing an everyday conversational snippet into a phrase that suggests graphic apocrypha, an arcane lore of line. There is, then, really no 'secret theory of drawing' at all, but this is perhaps appropriate to an exhibition in which, as the curator writes in its accompanying pamphlet, 'the specific notion of drawing ... evoke[ed] is one of displacement, indirection and obliquity as opposed to the more currently popular conception of the medium as gestural, expressive, more or less instantly communicative, and complete in and of itself'. It followed that there were relatively few drawings *per se* on display here, but each of the participating artists - Trisha Donnelly, Olafur Eliasson, Ceal Floyer, Ellen Gallagher, Dominique Gonzalez-Foerster, Douglas Gordon, Patrick Ireland, Alan Johnston, John Latham, Mark Manders, Matt Mullican, Anri Sala, Bojan Sarcevic, Joëlle Tuerlinckx and Cathy Wilkes - contributed works that, in their often hermetic way, engaged with the stuff of graph, line and pulse.

If Mac Giolla Léith's title suggested an unwillingness to disclose, the seven sealed envelopes of Gordon's *A Drawing a Day* (2006) stated it in no uncertain terms. Each envelope - which contains evidence, we're told, of the artist's 'daily practice

of drawing' - was printed with the words 'the most beautiful drawing ever unmade'. What is Gordon claiming here? Has he made images of increasingly greater beauty, then 'unmade' them by hiding them from view? Is it possible that this unmaking involves material destruction, either of his own work, or in the manner of Robert Rauschenberg's *Erased De Kooning Drawing* (1953)? The more one pondered the artist's sentence, the more questions - regarding vision, aesthetic value judgments, struggles for and against a Hegelian model of history - accrued.

The notion of drawing as a serial activity thrummed through several other works in the show. It was there in Latham's series of six spray-painted *One Second Drawings* (1970), in Eliasson's nine untitled drawings from 1998, produced by the tossing and tumbling of his father's fishing boat, and Sala's eight untitled, black and white photographs from 2004, in which moths group and regroup in the corner of a white-washed room, their bodies resembling an unreadable calligraphy, a shadow alphabet. Most intriguingly, perhaps, it was there in Donnelly's *The Passenger* (2003), a suite of eleven drawings that obliquely referenced Michelangelo Antonioni's eponymous 1975 film, in which Jack Nicholson adopts a dead man's identity, and ends up fleeing from who he has become. Donnelly instructed the gallery staff to rotate this set of works - which depict an anthropomorphic form subject to subtle shifts in shape - according to an eleven-day cycle, with one drawing displayed each day, so that the series perpetually chased its own, incrementally mutating tail, and perpetually transformed into itself.

Another, more enraged existential slippage →



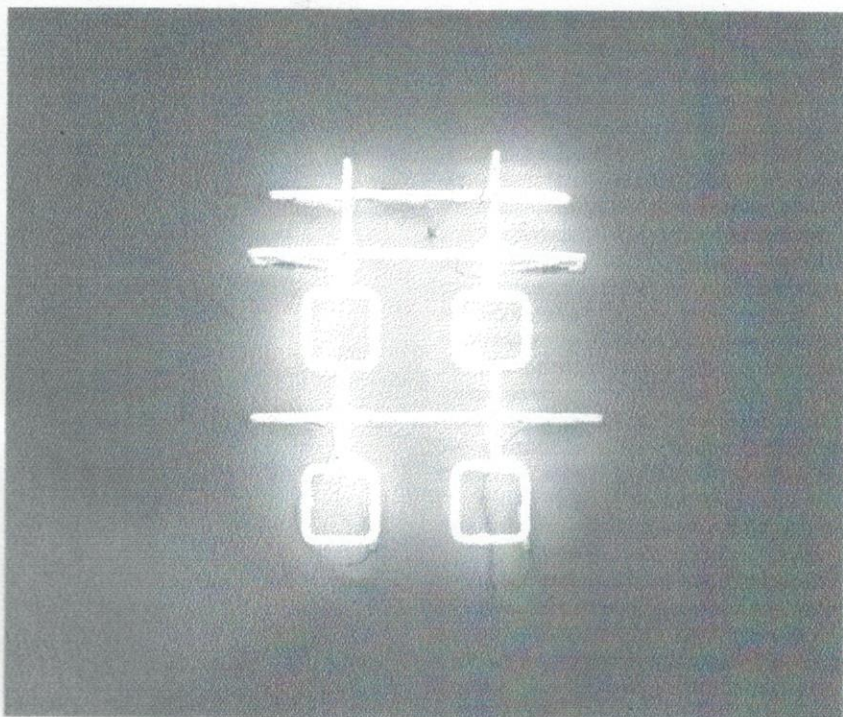
David Austen  
*The Secret Theory of Drawing*  
2003  
Gouache on paper  
42x33 cm

was enacted in the attribution and placement of Ireland's *Portrait of Marcel Duchamp* (1966) - an ensemble of works based on cardiographs of Duchamp's heartbeat - at Edinburgh's Sleeper Gallery rather than at London's Drawing Room. Ireland, of course, is the heteronym adopted by Brian Doherty in 1972 in response to the events of Bloody Sunday, which prompted the artist to cease exhibiting on English soil until the British withdraw from Northern Ireland.

Six Lathams, seven Gordons, eight Salas, nine Eliassons, eleven Donnellys - it was at times tempting to conclude that the show was underpinned by an esoteric numerology ('Who can crack the Mac Giolla Léith Code?'). Then again, even the most seemingly mystical of things may have prosaic roots, as Floyer's & (2005) proved. A decorative vinyl frieze running the length of a single gallery wall, the piece resembled a passage of script from an exotic temple wall, but in fact was composed entirely of tessellated ampersands. A latitudinal endless column, the piece swapped the proscriptions of holy writ for a process of amaranthine addition: this, and this, and this, until kingdom come.

As an exercise in showcasing an expanded notion of drawing, the show was an adroit success, but I'm not sure that was what it was really all about. Rather, it seemed deeply concerned with the twin pleasures of mystery and demystification, of both smoke and mirrors and peeking behind the curtain. Gonzalez-Foerster's blue neon Chinese ideogram from 2001 underlined this reading. To the non-Mandarin speaker, it signaled an alien elsewhere. To the Mandarin speaker, it betokened its title, *Double Bonheur* (Double Happiness). Gonzalez-Foerster's point - and by extension Mac Giolla Léith's - is that there's a joy in the unfamiliar, but this is only increased when one becomes familiarized.

Tom Morton



Dominique  
Gonzalez-Foerster  
*Double Bonheur*  
1999  
neon on painted wall  
50x45 cm

# Secret Theory of Drawing