

# One line and you're in a different universe

Including over 200 brand new works by key practitioners from the UK and abroad, the Drawing Biennial exhibition is a feast for the eye and mind. Each artist has been specially chosen for inclusion whilst their contribution is unfettered by a prescribed theme or concept. The drawings have been made in the past few months by a wide range of artists - from established to those just beginning to make a name for themselves - some working close at hand, in the building we share with Tannery Arts, and others as far afield as Colombia. Some of the artists are intimately associated with the medium of drawing and others not at all. The one thing these works share is a relative modesty in size - the artist is requested to make a work on an A4 sized sheet of paper and any deviation from this format tends to be slight. This fairly standard sketch book size is not too onerous or disconcerting. The works are hung alphabetically; this is a level playing field that emphasises that drawing is a democratic medium.

Public conversations with artists form an important part of our programme and a conversation between three artists included in the Biennial - David Batchelor, Tania Kovats and David Musgrave - exposed not only a wide range of concerns with the medium of drawing, but also the complexity of finding appropriate language to talk about a medium that is so ubiquitous and yet performs very particular roles for artists. We invited the three artists to bring a couple of examples of drawings of relevance or inspiration to their practice to trigger the discussion. This essay intertwines a discussion of selected works and some of the issues that this conversation raised.

David Musgrave introduced three images: the first being the Mason Dixon line; the second Albrecht Durer's 'Great Piece of Turf' of 1503 (Musgrave pointed out a grid, formed through crossing blades of grass in the central section of the drawing, which he suggested could indicate that the drawing was made with the same level of consciousness about picture making as Durer's formal, perspective drawings made contemporaneously); and thirdly, a label designed to signify danger to the environment.

Musgrave's examples are succinct, if stylistically diverse, images, each created in order to convey a very particular message or idea. Musgrave's drawing for the Biennial - 'Small grey-green paper golem', is an image of a rudimentary figure fashioned out of paper scraps. The 'figure' is rendered through careful shading, as are the pin holes and scuffed paper edges, with the occasional stray hair and colourful circles functioning to both anthropomorphise the paper scraps and confirm the shallow picture plane. Musgrave said: 'For me drawing is not a direct or immediately expressive

or even a descriptive process - for me a drawing necessarily marks the separation from things ... if you're really joined up with your world there is no need to represent it ... drawings that I make are trying to get hold of things that divide you ... they are always drawings of the method of making drawing - the nuts and bolts of representation in drawing ... I think I've inherited this critical and reflexive, conceptual attitude to what I do but I also want to look at pictures and make images'.<sup>1</sup>

A significant number of works in the Biennial are representative of a practice in which the medium of drawing performs a primary and crucial role in the production of 'pictures' or images. These would include Paul Chiappe's mysterious 'Untitled', one of a series that uses a formal class portrait photograph as a source. Chiappe subtly alters the source image, using pen and acrylic and a photo-realist technique, obliterating figures, or changing their expressions, in a bid to represent the 'dark moment of adolescence'. Also using photographs as a source, David Haines' 'Beautiful and Emotional' is based on images, found on the web, of youths engaging in violent and malevolent activities. Haines uses models to restage selected scenes in his studio; these are photographed and then rendered using pencil and a slow, photo-realist technique.

Whilst George Shaw is best known for his paintings of English suburbia, drawing forms an important part of his practice and 'You Take my Place in the Showdown', a portrait of Leonard Rossiter, the star of the British sitcom 'The Fall and Rise of Reginald Perrin' is typical of his oeuvre. He has said: 'I'm a child of the classic pop song and classic sitcom... I explore within a painterly tradition what usually gets explored through TV drama or music. I've thought about this a lot and, like most things in Britain, it's to do with class'<sup>2</sup> Georgina Starr's 'Two Bubbles' is linked to her 'The Joyful Mysteries of Junior', a body of work comprising watercolours, a small stage, sculptures, a theatre curtain, videos and photos of vintage performers.

Whilst artist in residence at the National Gallery, Michael Landy has been making a series of drawings inspired by paintings of saints. 'Poverty, Chastity and Obedience', is typical of his treatment of the subject which exaggerates the characteristics of the saints; the series will culminate in a number of kinetic sculptures that perform self-flagellation and other saintly pursuits. Marcel van Eeden's 'Untitled' is typical of his on-going series of heavily worked, film-noirish drawings that are part of a continuous yet inherently unstable narrative in constant flux. The artist sets himself a number of rules, the most rigorous being that image and textual sources must predate his birth date of November 22, 1965.

Another rule is that he fill the picture diagonally, starting from the upper-left-hand corner.

Despite drawing's inherent abstraction, it is nonetheless invaluable to the conception of 'pictures'. Recalling Ernst Gombrich's suggestion that a line drawn across a blank sheet of paper is immediately read as an horizon, David Batchelor suggested: 'you can't choose whether you do or not - it's a fundamental transcription on a piece of paper that generates something that's not there, which is space, and that generates a virtual world - one line and you're in a different universe. I think it's fundamental to human perception and drawing can't help but exploit that - that capacity for self-delusion'.

David Batchelor and Tania Kovats are perhaps best known as sculptors whose works is inspired by the world around us. Batchelor's is a quintessentially urban art whilst Kovats' explores the natural world. For each, drawing is a tool for exploration and experimentation. During the conversation Batchelor shared two drawings that are abstract and in many respects highly insubstantial - a sheet of Suprematist drawings by Kazimir Malevich of c.1913/15 and an Eva Hesse drawing on graph paper of c.1967/8. He suggested: 'there is a universe to reflect on and perhaps that is the case for all drawing that's worth its salt - it may not consist of very much physically or materially but somehow there is a universe in a grain of sand that is the drawing'. These examples also demonstrate that Batchelor's practice is a response to the 'traditions of abstraction ... not about making pictures of the world but about making equivalents - I don't make abstract works - I make figures of abstraction'. Batchelor sees his drawings as 'fantasies about sculptures that I will never make'. He can make them in quantity - and throw away those deemed failures.

During the conversation Kovats revealed how she employs a range of drawing modes to explore the natural world, and the sea and trees in particular. She used a simple line drawing to plot her massive commission for the Natural History ceiling. For Kovats, tracing over the lines that exist in the natural world - the markings on the bark of silver birches or the rings in a tree trunk - is a mesmeric, automatic procedure that marks the passage of time and brings her closer to the natural world. She has also replicated (both the imagery and signs of wear and tear) in pencil on paper the covers of guides to South America where she travelled recently. It is a different way into an understanding of landscape that acknowledges the role of culture, of acquired knowledge. Kovats said: 'part of my decision to root my practice in sculpture was to do with the real,

not a relationship with the represented'. Talking about a page from Darwin's notebook which begins 'I think' and is covered with a tree-like diagram, she expressed her interest in the drawings of scientists and engineers, in: 'drawings that are evidence of thought for the first time'.

Batchelor and Kovats suggest that drawing continues to provide a rich testing ground for artists who predominantly make work in three dimensions, as drawings by other sculptors in the Biennial demonstrate. Antony Gormley's 'Surf' indicates the important role that drawing can play in capturing observed movement in an instant. Monika Gryzmala's 'Roter Knoten' reveals the two-dimensional cogitations of an artist who typically manipulates line – in the form of tape and other materials – within architectural spaces. Franz Erhard Walther says of his drawing, 'Milkspouter 1958': 'It was a pleasure for me to perform this drawing for the Drawing Room. The motif refers to a series of sculpture manifestations I did in fall 1958'. His use of drawing to record 'sculptural' actions and remarkable events in his life is fundamental to his entire oeuvre, as Drawing Room's exhibition of 2012 demonstrated.<sup>3</sup>

Kovats is a member of the European Space Team, which will launch an observatory in space in autumn 2013 to map the Milky Way for the first time. She has been asked to visualise it and by way of an equivalent she used the geographer Marie Tharp's maps of the ocean floor, which were made in the 1950s. These drawings were based on sonar readings but Tharp had to improvise to fill inevitable gaps in the data. It was in the 1960s in particular that artists started to employ architectural drawing, diagrams, cartography and instructional drawings - applied forms that expanded more constricted definitions of drawing and that were more appropriate for the realisation of conceptual works. Drawing remains key to conceptual practices as examples in the Biennial demonstrate. James Brooks' 'Spaces of Cerebral Exchange' uses an architectural plan (in this case of Drawing Room) to explore the manner in which information is mediated and received, and the role of an audience within this process. The work of the Colombian artist Mateo Lopez, a sheet of yellow paper, the penmanship lines drawn in by hand, is typical of the artist's oeuvre: 'His principal concern is drawing which he positions within a deliberately tautological framework, a post-Duchampian 'Boite-en-Valise' or work within a work, that reflects on the practice, instruments and poetics of the medium.'<sup>4</sup> Brian O'Doherty's 'Vowels talking on a magic square' continues his transcriptions of the Ogham alphabet.<sup>5</sup> Moving away from direct graphic transcription, Susan Morris's triptych is a 3D print drawn from data recorded from her body, along with concurrent ambient light levels, for a single day in January 2012.

A number of works in the Biennial are typical of an archival impetus in contemporary art in which drawing, along with photography, print and other graphic forms, plays a crucial role. Andrea Bowers 'Study for May Day drawing' clearly demonstrates her belief in the importance of a partnership between politics and the arts. Like Bowers, Kate Davis is concerned with the manner in which earlier feminist movements are of relevance today. Her image shows pencils piercing the glass of a pair of spectacles to propose: 'drawing as – at least potentially – a disruption of our usual ways of seeing; as a tactile as well as a visual medium; as a translation of the act of one subject touching another (in every sense); or even as a kind of 'extramission' in which the pencil embodies those rays once thought to be sent out from the eye in the act of looking. Might drawing open a space where senses, subjects, and bodies touch, however indirectly?'<sup>6</sup>

Whilst Bob and Roberta Smith is better known for his colourful placards and posters, 'Save Old Flo', is typical of the campaigns that form an integral part of his practice. The drawing shows Henry Moore's 'Draped Seated Women' adorned with a 'not for sale' sign. The sculpture was gifted to the East End of London and spent 35 years on Stifford Estate in Stepney Green where it became known affectionately as Old Flo. This important work of art may now be sold in lieu of cuts to council funding.

Moving away from more direct reference to lived reality, a number of artists employ drawing and collage to create their own very particular style, much as Aubrey Beardsley did at the end of the 19th century and Andy Warhol in the 1950s. These artists, inspired by a wide range of stimuli, including literature, film, fine and applied art, create fictions and alternative worlds. In addition to drawings and paintings, David Austen makes films in which he is the script writer, prop maker and costumier. Stylised bunches of flowers appear in his latest film and his work 'Orange and Pink Rose' pursues the capacity of coloured pencil to deal with their clichéd subject matter. Geoffrey Farmer's collage is part of his major work, 'The Surgeon and the Photographer' currently on view at Barbican. Inspired by Aby Warburg's Memory Atlas, this ambitious project uses the conceptual framework of a calendar in which to arrange and display 365 paper and cloth figures. Using a collage technique, cutting photographs from books, Farmer engages the viewer in a fluid non-hierarchical, non-historical, cross-cultural consideration of images and ideas.

Recourse to myriad, constantly evolving materials and media - the archaic and outmoded alongside new commercial technologies - challenges artists to experiment and to mix and match, with the different characteristics of each informing their approach to

the other. As Paul Sietsema, the subject of a solo exhibition in 2012 describes: 'what I learn from one process helps me to rethink and see the other in a new light...'.<sup>7</sup> It is surprising how many artists, working with the newest media, also use a range of drawing modes. Ed Atkins, best known for his employment of high definition video, has made an ink drawing that zooms in on a figure. Atkin's interest in 'matter, becoming matter' is played out in such works and in his collaged boards which form an important antidote to his videos that explore 'ether, or non-matter'.<sup>8</sup>

Many artists included in the Biennial employ a wide range of media and it is only through an exhibition such as this that their drawings see the light of day. One such example is Tobias Rehberger, whose sculptures, environments and installations principally revolve around the concept of transformation. He has made a portrait of the Futurist Herman Kahn using pencil on paper. Perhaps it could be argued that drawing, in its many guises, and for a number of reasons, is the medium most equipped for acts of transformation.

Whilst I have mentioned but a fraction of the works in Drawing Biennial 2013 the images in this modest publication speak largely for themselves. So I will finish by considering if the manner in which today's practitioners employ drawing is radically different to that of their forebears.

David Musgrave suggested that 'Drawing acts on the world – it's not a medium – it's an activity'. He was referring to the capacity of drawing to effect – to act, and he demonstrated this idea with an image of the Mason Dixon line which he described as 'an example of severe abstraction around which human and social issues agglutinate'. Historically drawing has been fine arts salvation – the road - through design, engineering, fashion, caricature, comics and so on - to new forms of expression. The Biennial exhibitions demonstrate that drawing is a porous medium, one capable of infinite transformations and manifestations, entirely suited to the production of truly innovative responses to our world. As the examples demonstrate, there is an underlying consistency in the role that drawing plays within artistic practice throughout history; but drawing is a wheel capable of infinite reinvention.

### Kate Macfarlane

1. This and other quotes by David Batchelor, Tania Kovats and David Musgrave are taken from the conversation event, 27 March 2013, Drawing Room - [www.drawingroom.org.uk/events/biennial-in-conversation](http://www.drawingroom.org.uk/events/biennial-in-conversation)

2. [www.guardian.co.uk/artanddesign/2011/feb/13/george-shaw-tile-hill-baltic-interview](http://www.guardian.co.uk/artanddesign/2011/feb/13/george-shaw-tile-hill-baltic-interview)

3. [www.drawingroom.org.uk/exhibitions/franz-erhard-walther-drawings-frame-line-action-drawn-novel](http://www.drawingroom.org.uk/exhibitions/franz-erhard-walther-drawings-frame-line-action-drawn-novel)

4. Tanya Barson, 'The Peripatetic School – Itinerant Drawing from Latin America', (London: Ridinghouse/Drawing Room) p.21.

5. [www.drawingroom.org.uk/events/brian-odoherty-in-conversation-with-professor-margaret-iversen](http://www.drawingroom.org.uk/events/brian-odoherty-in-conversation-with-professor-margaret-iversen)

6. Dominic Paterson [www.drawingroom.org.uk/exhibitions/kate-davis-not-just-the-perfect-moments](http://www.drawingroom.org.uk/exhibitions/kate-davis-not-just-the-perfect-moments)

7. Paul Sietsema, in 'Skeleton Key: A Conversation with Paul Sietsema', Bruce Hainley, Figure 3 Paul Sietsema, (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 2009), p.43 [www.drawingroom.org.uk/exhibitions/paul-sietsema-solo-exhibition](http://www.drawingroom.org.uk/exhibitions/paul-sietsema-solo-exhibition)

8. Ed Atkins [www.chisenhale.org.uk/archive/exhibitions/index.php?id=125](http://www.chisenhale.org.uk/archive/exhibitions/index.php?id=125)