

## EUROFILE

**ADRIAN BURNHAM**  
tours an exhibition  
dedicated to drawings  
and is blown  
away by what  
he finds on  
display



Forget the Tate, the National, and all the rest for the time being... If you want to be blown away by a vividly expansive art exhibition you need to head to an industrial estate in

Bermundsey, Pronto. Two hundred and forty artists across the globe were sent a sheet of A4 paper and the result on display now at Drawing Room, London SE1 5SF, is phenomenal. This Drawing Biennial – an exhibition and on-line auction – has become a staple on the art calendar and why many, many more people don't know about this organisation and their work is a mystery.

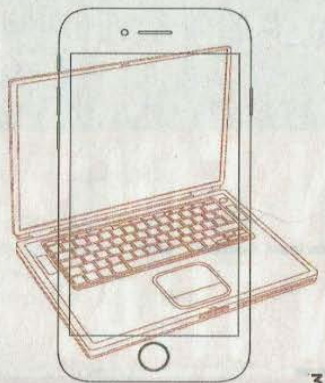
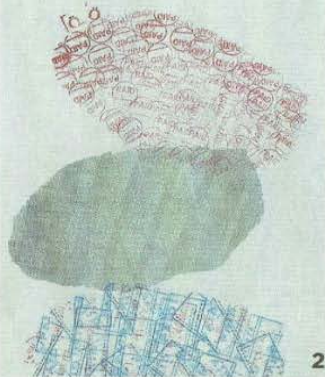
Artists, curators, academics and aficionados are, of course, aware that co-founders and directors of Drawing Room – Mary Doyle, Kate Macfarlane and Katherine Stout – make a significant and inspired contribution to visual culture in the UK. Drawing Room's exhibitions, publications, events and outreach work exemplify an energy, erudition and sensibility that continually illuminates and challenges our conception of drawing, that most fundamental means of expression.

If I sound a bit gushy it's because I'm just back from seeing the show for a third time and can here only begin to describe the extraordinarily exciting range of work on show. From figurative to conceptual, abstract to comical, text, cut 'n' paste...

Let's start with an exquisite, utterly disturbing pencil portrait by George Shaw. Shaw is renowned for elevating the mundane – scraps of council estate greenery, vacant shop fronts, defiled woodland – into transcendent paintings. His contribution to the show chimes with a post Brexit atmosphere that recently saw 'real Brummy' Saffiyah Khan calmly, bravely, smilingly face down an EDL bigot. As Tom Morton has written in the Drawing Biennial 2017 catalogue, 'Looking at George Shaw's portrait of an adolescent neo-Nazi, it would be comforting to think of him as a figure from the past, belonging to a lost world of football firms, racist sitcoms, and National Front marches. But then we read Shaw's title, *The Making of the British Landscape* (2017), and we can't help but glimpse something contemporary in this youth's dull eyes, and his horribly sensuous sneer.' But do we also almost pity Shaw's surly, strangely beatific youth with the swastika scratched into his forehead, as if he's a victim of circumstances and knows not what he does? Drawing Biennial 2017 prompts questions aplenty.

Another artist seeking to examine the complexities of everyday life is Ciprian Muresan. His *Untitled* (2017) drawing of Lenin lying in state surrounded by Snow White's seven dwarves is humorous and haunting. Bashful, Doc, Dopey, Happy, Sleepy, Sneezzy and Grumpy are all having a good cry and well they might. It apparently costs more than 13 million roubles a year to keep the first Soviet leader looking freshish. Muresan's black humour expresses a profound dissatisfaction at his country, Romania's post-Communist transition to capitalism. As if there's still a tendency to gaze mournfully back at icons of 'simpler' times, Muresan wittily lances any propensity towards nostalgia.

Amalia Pica's work begins to cross the line of what might generally be considered drawing. I know this artist's work a little. An early sculpture, a megaphone carved in stone, always struck me as an uncanny metaphor for muted protest or any enforced silence. For the Drawing Biennial she has submitted *Colour in Paperwork #1* (2016). It consists of piled up blue, grey and red 'boulder' shapes. Along the top of the sheet, running off the page, there's a 'skyline' made up of the stamped word PAID. The red and blue forms are also rubber-stamped: PAID, PAID, PAID... Does the word allude to what a Sisyphian struggle it can be to 'pay your dues', to receive a 'stamp of approval'? And why does the red form have unlaugh '0's for eyes? Again Morton's text again offers some elucidation, 'This piece has elements of personal biography (not so long ago, the artist completed the arduous process of



# ART FROM THE TOP DRAWER

(1) George Shaw *The Making of the British Landscape* (2017)  
(2) Amalia Pica *Colour in Paperwork #1* (2016)  
(3) Michael Craig-Martin *Screen History* (2003-17) (4) Grayson Perry *Studio Afternoon* (2017)

applying for UK citizenship), but it also hints at broader issues of freedom and belonging, and we might think of the global millions whose fate turns on a piece of paper, and a few square centimetres of ink.'

Award winning poet and artist Heather Phillipson's drawing depicts a daisy chain of bear bitches helping themselves to each other's nuts. It's baffling but subtly expressive. Each bear's face, despite being so economically rendered, conveys expressions ranging from mild discomfort to a sort of quizzical, 'Why are we doing this again?' A red slash across the page and handwritten script make the piece more emphatic. Scrawled in uppercase across the monkey nut masturbating chorus line: IT

WOULD BE WEIRDER NOT TO BE HAVING NIGHTMARES RIGHT NOW. Sounds about right given the parlous state of the world.

Layla Curtis' *World Political (Europe)* (2017) transplants the Falkland Islands into the Mediterranean and sees Middle Eastern flashpoint countries – Syria, Lebanon, Iraq, Turkey, Israel – migrate uncomfortably closer to the UK. Curtis' art practice is interrogative, thoughtful, with an enduring focus on place, landscape and mapping. She examines the attempts we make to chart the earth and how we represent terrain. Her A4 submission for the Drawing Biennial identifies countries of a similar size and swaps their place names. That's how Sicily's

become the Falklands and Algeria is now Germany. Obviously challenging the supposed geographical fixity of nation states is a politically charged act. But it's odd quite how unsettling Curtis' cartographic sleight of hand is: a few sparse lines and misattributed terrains is enough to raise goose bumps.

Laura Eldrat's *Untitled* (2017) pencil and marker pen homily 'Don't Let Lies Lie' isn't as simple as it may first appear. Is she calling for historic governmental subterfuge to be disinterred? It made me think of Iain Sinclair's book reassessing the anti-war march of February 2003. Generally panned as an abject failure that achieved nothing, through 200 oral testimonials and cross-



YOUR CHANCE TO OWN LIMITED EDITION ARTWORK

- (5) Ciprian Muresan Untitled (2017) (6) Mark Dion Shark Barr (2017) (7) Markus Vater Untitled (2016) (8) Laura Eldret Untitled (2017) (9) Michael Landy Bin Landy (2016) (10) Julian Opie Beard, headphones (2016)

Photos: Contributed

the swirling foodstuff along with the mixer's hands, utensil and bowl. But looking at Meyer's *Untitled* (2016), so deft and animated is the process of whipping up the mixing bowl's graphite contents before our very eyes.

Blessed as they are with many column inches elsewhere, I've mostly steered clear of mentioning the better known artists but they're present in spades: William Kentridge, Lisa Milroy, Grayson Perry, Mark Wallinger, Julian Opie, Mark Dion, Michael Craig-Martin, Bob and Roberta Smith... The list goes on. Michael Landy (an artist known for destroying all his worldly possessions in an installation called *Break Down* (2001) and later for staging a more specific act of destruction in 2010 called *Art Bin*) has submitted *Bin Landy* (2016) a marvelously self-deprecating cartoon comment on his own practice. And there's material wit also. I'm referring to Julie Verhoeven's... How to describe? It's a sort of rococo Pop vagina, with the tips of manicured fingernails attending to a pearl clitoris. And it's not until you see the work 'in the flesh' that you realise the ejaculate is a piece of collaged tissue paper, how very thoughtful.

So many artists, so many ideas, such a visual feast... When I spoke with co-director Mary Doyle she was concerned to point out it's the generous support of artists submitting work to the Drawing Biennial that

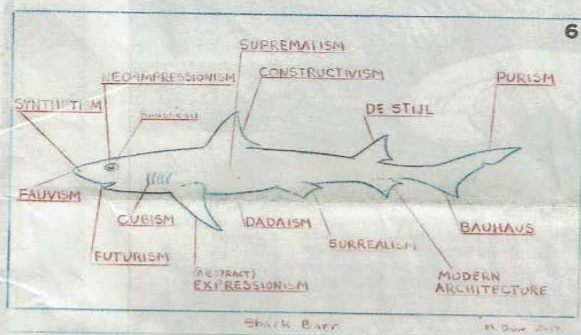
enables them to deliver their ambitious and varied programme. The organisation does receive Arts Council funding but without monies raised by the auction - subsequently amplified by donations, a membership scheme and occasional sales - Drawing Room wouldn't exist in its current form.

I asked Doyle about the origins and ethos behind it all, 'When we first set out we deliberately chose not to be prescriptive about drawing, about what it was. What we do is informed by how artists use drawing themselves and through that broadening the idea of drawing and what it means.' And how did the Drawing Biennial itself evolve? 'In 2003 we opened the Drawing Room gallery (an affiliate of Tannery Arts) by inviting artists to donate A4 size artworks, the sale of which would kick start core funding. That first time it was called Drawing 100 but went on to become the Drawing Biennial, now in its eighth incarnation. We didn't know what the initial response would be but it proved quite overwhelming. And from then until now it's a huge endorsement of the idea to establish Drawing Room with which the biennial has now become synonymous.'

I came up with a few words that characterise drawing: investigation, representation, imagination, proclamation... erm, meditation? Doyle referred me to a quote by Drawing Biennial 2017 participant Michael Craig-Martin (latterly Sir MC-M). His list was a bit more expansive: 'Spontaneity, creative speculation, experimentation, directness, simplicity, abbreviation, technical diversity, modesty of means, rawness, fragmentation, discontinuity, unfinishedness and openness. These have always been the characteristics of drawing.' That told me. Doyle continued: 'Drawing underpins creativity in all spheres of production and this exhibition is testament to its importance to artists today.'

I could write about Drawing Room's excellent publications: always so much more than illustrated catalogues. They extend the exhibitions into 'research papers', examining drawing through the lens of other disciplines to arrive at fresh perspectives as well as investigating the links between drawing and other media. I wanted to expand on Drawing Room's outreach work, which I am lucky to have first hand knowledge of. Over the course of nearly a decade Macfarlane and Doyle nominated artists to run week-long workshops for an Art Foundation course I led. And then they came to offer individualised, in-depth critiques of the students' work. The experience of which broadened understanding, widened horizons and were instrumental in building students' confidence in pursuit of studying and making their own art. I also wanted to say more about Drawing Room as a study resource, its educational events, regular symposia...

But the more I write the less room to illustrate this piece on the Drawing Biennial 2017. And seeing the work is what's important. So, put the paper down and go to the show: Unit 8 Rich Estate, 46 Willow Walk, London SE1 5SR. Then log into the auction by visiting [drawingbiennial2017.org.uk](http://drawingbiennial2017.org.uk) and get bidding.



referencing what was reportedly going on in Labour cabinet meetings at the time, Sinclair shows how there was perhaps a month when the establishment was genuinely rattled by the anti-war movement. Has Eldret, whose work revolves around the investigation and representation of social engagement, sketched an obvious tautology: lies lie? Or is she re-visiting Vic and Bob's oft repeated unheinged comedic bluster; '... You wouldn't let it lie?' Probably all of these and more.

Markus Vater's witty, visually punning graphic imagery often coupled with poetic or fanciful quips remind me of Edward Lear. First thoughts on seeing his contribution to Drawing Biennial, *Untitled*

(2016) tend towards the myth of Leda and the Swan. But I'm pretty sure the figure riding high in the sky transfixed by his mobile device is a boy. It could almost be a youthful self-portrait. The bird cranes its neck round to observe the neglectful passenger while far below the landscape skitters past. Are we to suppose that the fable of our own marvellous digital age has supplanted all interest in ancient myths? Maybe the avian creature will tire of screen boy's self-absorption, teach him lesson, roll off the ungrateful scamp and let him plummet to the ground.

Drawing styles denote meaning, the myriad approaches to image making on show can either confound or compliment

the content of works. And on occasion it's hard to draw a line between the means by which a drawing is made and its subject. Ralf Ziervogal's *Stalker* (2016) looks from a distance like a slew of small coins, round forms tumbling over each other in a sticky arc. Closer inspection reveals the marks to be fingerprints, a forensic look affirms the existence of tiny annotations, 'CALL JO', 'CALL JO', 'CALL', 'CALL'... It dawns on the viewer that these gouache and ink marks match those left on a phone screen: a trace of obsessive pursuit.

Brit Meyer's drawing of a scribble being whisked up fascinates in a different way. The viewer is caught between the knowledge that the artist must have drawn