

Drawing as a flexible tool in a post-digital age

Whilst it is no longer contested that drawing is a primary medium for artists rather than playing a supporting role to painting and sculpture, it continues to elude any fixed classification – which for many artists is its most positive attribute. For some it is more aptly described as an activity than as a medium, consistently the most economic and immediate way for anyone wishing to express themselves visually. For many artists, drawing is their foremost means of expression. For others it coexists within their practice alongside other art forms, each informing and challenging the others. An exceptionally flexible tool for those seeking to develop a new visual language, drawing allows for the myriad of styles, techniques, and intellectual concerns that defines contemporary art today.

First launched in 2003, the format of our Drawing Biennial has remained the same: the selected artists are invited to make an original drawing in any medium, on an A4 sheet of paper. Each drawing is exhibited in the gallery in alphabetic order, offering a democratic hang

that gives individual artists equal prominence, and serves to highlight the diversity of the contributions. For its seventh episode, *Drawing Biennial 2015* exemplifies the extraordinary range of work being produced by emerging and established artists based in the UK and across the world. Many of this year's selection of over 250 drawings reveal new perspectives on traditional categories such as landscape, portraiture, and still life, whilst others reinvigorate the genres of abstraction and realism. Ideas exploring political, philosophical and personal concerns alongside more formal or empirical enquiries can be found. Using pencil, ink or paint, artists deploy the expressive line or ruled line, the written word, frottage, collage or a combination of any of these. Yet within such pluralism, connections between the works can be made.

Having just celebrated its twenty-fifth anniversary, the World Wide Web influences every aspect of life and art. The digital is no longer a realm separate to the material world, but each influences the other. The so-called

post-digital generation, those who have grown up with the internet as an integral part of their lives, instinctively use it as a primary vehicle for acquiring knowledge, goods and to communicate. However, there is also a perceptible shift back towards engaging with the more physical experience of making objects, the charge of the live performance or act, and indeed the mechanical process of making a drawing. David Haines is fascinated with how the internet, via Google search results, digital image banks and social media feeds, has given new meaning to the photographic image and its context. In his drawing *Meatboy and Alien*, an image taken from a gay fetish site is juxtaposed with a unique image photographed by the artist. As Haines meticulously makes these images concrete and 'fixed' through the indexical process of drawing in graphite, so the viewer is compelled to scrutinise the drawing at length, seeking to understand what these seemingly playful figures signify.

Ann Hirsch is known as a video and performance artist, whose work often looks at the ways technology has influenced popular culture and gender. Her deliberately naive portrait drawing of a young female can be read as a comment on how in the 21st century, women in particular are still primarily judged on their appearance – perhaps increasingly so via social media, reality tv shows, and technological advances in beauty products. Georgie Hopton starts her bright, vibrant collages by downloading images of flowers – in particular the species *Auriculas* – which become a central element of a mixed media composition. The source images are deliberately poor quality, allowing Hopton the freedom to reinvent the image from the 'real' to something more imaginative and abstract. David Blandy's drawing is of a tweet he sent on 7 January 2015, having seen a promotional video for an HD screen being sold with the specific intention to display art. Retracing the words in pencil from the printed text, a fleeting statement is captured, and presented static on

the wall becomes something more poignant: 'High definition lifestyle. Live in short depth of field. Speak pervasively in awe at the world. Don't walk, glide, caressing your devices.'

Since the 1960s, language has been widely used as a tool and content source for many artists. Closely associated with the development of conceptual art, language – or the written word – is also aligned to the authorship of drawing. Richard Grayson's *Boredom Is Always Counter Revolutionary*, proposed as a design for a cross-stitch tapestry, is reminiscent of the way many artists of the '60s generation sought to make political statements through their art practice – albeit Grayson's statement has a more contemporary sardonic stance. Karl Holmqvist's characteristic deadpan humour is revealed in '*D R*', creating a drawing that embodies its own context and motivation. Susan Hefuna's scrawled 'ever ever', written repeatedly across the page *ad infinitum*, has the sense of both an intimate and a universal mantra. Kate Davis and David Moore explore the relationship between poetry and collage, using text as a formal visual device to bridge meaning across languages, in particular between the analytic and intuitive mind – a recurring theme of their collaborative practice.

Artists such as Alice Channer, Aleana Egan, Alex Frost and Becky Beasley look to the materiality of the everyday for their work. In her non-figurative drawings and sculptures, Channer harnesses the way in which the textures and patterns of the natural world are appropriated to decorate and clothe the human body. In *Niagara Falls* she has printed a snakeskin pattern to create a sense of skin covering the surface of a newspaper page. Egan also looks to the domestic world for her drawings and collages, which sit alongside and influence her three-dimensional pieces. In recent work, she has started to include clothes in sculptural arrangements, commissioning garments from a dressmaker. The photograph was taken nearly ten years ago in a vintage shop in Berlin, a

reminder of a past era evoking the film noir of 1930s Hollywood. Egan uses her drawings and sketches as visual notes, a composite of thoughts and inspirations that serve as a plan of sorts – in this case combining the clothes with her fascination for the architectural details of balconies. Beasley's succinct appropriation of a domestic piece of fabric brings to mind two dominant influences of the 20th century within art history – the grid and the ready-made. Frost's drawing is a rubbing of a polymer printing plate he made, produced by exposing the plate with a film transparency of an image using UV light. The image is of a screen-capture taken from an online version of solitaire, so that what appears to convey the presence of an object is in fact derived from a virtual encounter – as much an everyday experience as any other.

Given the numerous new and innovative treatments by many artists in this year's Drawing Biennial, it is refreshing to encounter seemingly traditional art categories, in particular figuration and landscape. Rose Wylie's double portrait is inspired by seeing a character by chance on television during the Scottish referendum and accompanied by the written description, 'with bony face and eyes sunken like an American Banker'. It immediately evokes all the emotions of recent crises concerning world finance, and more local issues of nationalism. It is also a stark portrayal of a man 'on the edge'. Bob and Roberta Smith offers a more blatant political message – *Vote Bob 4 More Art* - part of his wider campaign to ensure adequate art education within UK schools.

Painters such as Clive Hodgson, who are celebrated for their non-figurative work, reveal their commitment to figure studies. Hodgson offers a reflective self portrait. Rachel Howard is also known for her large abstract paintings, yet her drawing is part of a long series of studies made over the last decade depicting her younger sister. She comments: 'To my mind the study of proportion of the human figure is essential to all painting.' Gary Hume's drawing

suggests a distinctly anthropomorphic flower, in keeping with his unique ability to constantly reinvent how the figure is depicted. In his paintings or drawings, a subject might start as one thing and morph into another, creating an image that is visually arresting.

There is an abundance of the sexual and the sensual. Bumps, genitals, and 'bits' are seen in the works of David Austen, Marco Chiandetti, Laure Prouvost and Emma Talbot. In different ways these drawings all celebrate the intimacy of the naked body and the sexual act. An artist who lives and works in London and Buenos Aires, Stewart Helm creates delicate angular pencil drawings of Argentinian transvestites that are tender and celebratory. Tracey Emin offers a romantic, poignant drawing '*I never saw you because you are so different from me*'.

Other artists use the figure to convey stories and drama. Mark Fairnington depicts objects from the Wellcome Collection that were acquired during the late 19th and early 20th centuries to understand and study the human body. Though much of Wellcome's vast holdings were deaccessioned, the remainder of the Collection is kept at Blythe House, where in closed cabinets can be found wax heads next to anatomical models and real skulls next to medieval sculptures. Fairnington's eclectic cast of characters betray Wellcome's interest in the figure as specimen. Rachel Goodyear's depiction of two distinctly Surrealist bodies conveys a sense of an 'uncanny', dreamlike scene. Raqib Shaw's exquisitely decorated and finely wrought drawing of a decomposing figure offers an allegorical comment on the dangers of financial greed.

Melanie Jackson's drawing, *Giving Suck*, is a sketch from a new graphic novel and animation, *Journeys of Lactic Abstraction*, that explores the production and promotion of milk consumption in relation to notions of female power. At its heart is the story of Marie Antoinette commissioning the Sèvres porcelain factory to produce breast shaped milk cups for her rural

themed architectural follies. This drawing is based on the painting of Marie Antoinette as Hebe by François-Hubert Drouais; Jackson's Antoinette is surrounded by more contemporary mascots and cartoon characters that are used in the promotion of milk. John Kindness also redeploys the skilled draftsmanship of early cartoonists in an effort to break down remaining cultural prejudices towards commercial or 'low' art forms. His drawing reinterprets two frames from a cartoon strip, 'Minnie the Minx', created by Leo Baxendale.

Landscape also features as a consistent theme of this Biennial, rendered in new and varied ways. In his current series of works, Nick Goss seeks to create a depiction of space as both a physical and psychological phenomenon. More usually inspired by photographs and memories of his local area in North East London, Goss comments: 'This piece represents a departure. I used as a starting point a 1973 photograph of two women drinking in a coastal café by Luigi Ghirri. It depicts a couple whiling away the time in a cafe. The cafe has an exotic mural on the back wall of some windsurfers and large waves. It was the sense of time passing and distorted reality that drew me to the photograph'. Marcel van Eeden's drawing also depicts a past moment, a street in Den Haag, his birthplace, taken from a photo in the 1930s. This scene is part of a larger series in which he explores a narrative in which spiritists and spiritualists inhabited these streets.

Ben Deakin is interested in landscape as a cultural, rather than natural, environment. Exploring the way value is ascribed to different types of places according to their aesthetic 'rating', he depicts imaginary or constructed spaces that combine references to different periods of landscape painting or its depiction in film or advertising. In his drawing for the Biennial, Deakin places what appears to be a polygon from Albrecht Dürer's famous etching *Melancholia* within an imaginary mountain landscape – alluding to the way depictions of mountainous landscapes have

historically evoked philosophical notions of individualism. Julião Sarmento's drawing is part of a series of works titled *Terra Incognita*, which propose images of stars that have not yet been discovered. The title of each work refers to the name of one of these imagined stars. Emma Stibborn offers a convincing rendering of a beautiful icy landscape, one of the last wildernesses, which is now in danger of being sacrificed to the relentless human drive to exploit the Earth's natural resources. Narelle Jubelin offers a more conceptual way of representing landscape. In her diptych drawing she depicts in ink the name of the Drawing Room on one piece of paper, and reproduces the details of a bookshop called the Drawing Room in Kings Cross, Sydney – evoking two places in opposite hemispheres connected via a name. The Drawing Room is what connects all of these artists and the extraordinary works they have donated to *Drawing Biennial 2015*, only a fraction of which I have been able to address in this text.

Katharine Stout, 2015

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