

The Indefinable Art of Drawing

Shirley Daborn April 2010

What is drawing? *The Australian Oxford Dictionary* defines drawing as ‘the art of representing by line; delineation without colour or with a single colour; the art of representing with pencils, pens, crayons, etc., rather than paint; a picture produced in this way.’¹ *The Oxford Companion to Art* clearly articulates, ‘as has been pointed out since classical antiquity, drawing forms the basis of all the arts – architecture, sculpture, painting, and many of the crafts.’²

In keeping with these definitions, the drawings of Renaissance artists such as Botticelli, Leonardo, Michelangelo and Raphael have been proffered as evidence that drawing is the ‘fundamental element in all great picture making, just as grammar is the root of all good writing.’³ Such clear directives have underpinned the history of Western art and, in turn, the standards of early art school teaching in Australia. An appreciation of the process that underpinned artistic expression, however, developed during the twentieth century and challenged established perceptions. An increased valuing of process introduced a point of view that observed:

As a means of art making, drawing is both intimate and direct. More than any other technique, drawing has the capacity to reveal the link between the mind and the hand of the artist, the immediacy of its processes enabling the finished work of art to reflect its creator’s thoughts and gestures.⁴

The resulting focus on technique as well as process means that a definitive definition of drawing within contemporary art practice has been hard to classify.⁵

The ideological disruption to a singular definition of drawing has been both liberating and restrictive. Despite the core value of drawing being acknowledged, the art of drawing is generally excluded from the numerous volumes that proclaim to present the ‘history of art’. It is, perhaps, the very positioning of drawing as the foundational act of all the arts that has seen it largely ignored as a medium in its own right; mark making buried beneath the ‘real’ art.

Problematically, how does one write about drawing when nobody can agree on how it is to be defined? Whether accurate representation or carefree doodles, drawing is a shared form of visual imagery of which everyone has experience and to which everyone can relate. With an injection of conceptual reflection, Paul Klee famously defined drawing as ‘taking a line for a walk’ and in doing so presents an apposite manner in which to approach the diversity of drawing practice.

Situated at Emu Plains, and the original home of modernist artists Gerald and Margo Lewers, the Penrith Regional Gallery & The Lewers Bequest is committed to supporting artistic practice within western Sydney. Stemming from that commitment, the curatorial team agreed that an investigation into the medium of drawing would provide a fascinating insight into contemporary art practice. The direction that this exhibition took, therefore, did not grow from a specific conceptual idea that would thematically tie all works together. Rather, it is the art of drawing that is the primary element that binds together the works created by artists who have quite diverse practices. Consequently, *No Right Turn* presents a diverse array of drawings from fourteen contemporary artists who were either born or studied in the western suburbs of Sydney or currently live there now.

Emerging from this curatorial approach has been the fabulous confirmation that drawing exists firmly, and competently, within the practices of contemporary artists with ties to western Sydney. Subsequently, *No Right Turn* brings together a dynamic mix of technically and conceptually diverse drawings that celebrate the role that drawing plays in art beyond that of 'process' or 'study'.

A penchant for realism in drawing provides the viewer with an opportunity to be amazed at skill and artful execution. Realistic depictions, however, can provide much more than simplistic representations as they are selected moments brimming with interpretation. For Luis Martinez, drawing suburban homes is a means of revisiting emotive memories. The sepia tones of Martinez's realistic portrayals evoke a sense of nostalgia and the low shrubs and lengthy shadows soften the familiar brick and fibro domestic dwellings. Although devoid of people, the inclusion of nature strips, streets and parked cars suggest the presence of mobility while the telegraph poles in *Railway Square* 2009 and television aerials reference a connection between the realms of public and private space.

Catherine O'Donnell creates charcoal drawings with a strong emphasis on buildings and geometric form; resulting in sophisticated renditions of the everyday environment. O'Donnell's highly refined drawings craft an exquisite *mise-en-scene* in which everyday buildings are architecturally valorised. Accordingly, 'as the impact of the drawings begins to acculturate into the viewer's sensibility, allegorical references suggest themselves.'⁶ In *Deliverance* 2010, for example, an aerial suggestive of a crucifix tops the delivery entrance of a retail warehouse and, subsequently, the realm of retail

becomes venerated on a level of everyday practice. In the works of both Martinez and O'Donnell, the everyday-ness of the suburban environment is portrayed as a site of refuge and isolation, connection and disconnection, sameness and difference; in short, suburban living is revealed as a site of complexity.

Publishing during the 1950s, E. H. Gombrich ruminated on the conundrum of art as a means of representation; outlining clearly why the skill of representing what is seen is more than making something look 'real'. He states that a degree of sketchiness is not generally disliked, however a degree of distortion that results in a work that appears to be 'incorrectly drawn' is considered the most problematic and divisive.⁷ The interpretation of seeing is shown to be more complex than a simplistic rendering of appearance. Seeing beyond a mere visual likeness can entail a deliberate playing with notions of accuracy. The increasing bent towards creating 'distorted' drawing is linked to the values of modern art. Gombrich confidently states that there is no doubt that modern artists had the ability to draw 'correctly' and, rather, the desire to distort became a means of injecting a particular sensibility.⁸

Locust Jones' work, *Mountain of Dawn* 2010, is large and gestural in style, brimming with political and environmental statements; foraged from the relentless inundation of news media, moments of disaster are re-presented as geo-political sound bites. The immediacy of the gestural line mirrors the urgency in which headlines are boldly brandished before becoming superseded. The mark of the individual, however, extends the snap shot of catastrophe into a dialogue to become a weighty reminder of the personal costs invested in these momentary sound bites. While in residency at Penrith Regional Gallery & The Lewers Bequest, Jones enjoyed the large space of the Sonia Farley Studio, which in turn facilitated a shift in style. Images drawn onto large scrolls of paper have been cut out and layered onto the gallery wall, creating a work that is 'less static creating a sense of animation in the drawing'.⁹

Art has historically played a major role in socio-political commentary, while illustration was relied upon as a tool of visual clarification. In *FRENZY* (2008) Drew Bickford presents vivid, visual commentary as he transforms the grotesque into fantastical illustrations. Bickford's fascination with the dark side of humanity results in malignant personas becoming transformed into visual conglomerations of animalistic obsession, pain and despair. A sense of monstrosity and deformity are morphed together with the

all too real atrocities of true crime in the creation of malevolent entities rendered with a Renaissance like quality of draughtsmanship.

In addition, the cartoon has long existed as a mode of political satire and, as with the Situationists for example, cartoons, comic strips and the creation of 'psychogeographic maps' saw a visual language being drawn from forms of everyday communication.¹⁰ The often uncomplicated imagery of cartoons and illustration has seen the graphic art forms embraced for the resulting essence of childlike simplicity and immediacy. Matthew Hopkins employs a small-scale graphic style to portray domestic settings inhabited by beastlike forms. Within the finely drawn lines of *Imaginary Figure Studies of Chance Demons* 2010, questions of agency are raised as daily rituals are performed by translucent life forces existing within domestic spaces dotted with surrealist references. 'Trifidesque' plants, spheres and suggestions of Salvador Dali's famed melting objects set the scene in which the indefinable grotesque forms nonchalantly inhabit the spaces of everyday living.

Favouring collage work because of its 'schizophrenic quality', David Capra often gathers material from where ever he finds something of interest. Capra exalts the value of process, which taps into a love of the freedom associated with childhood creativity, 'when things were simple, playful, manageable and safe'.¹¹ There is a certain value within the untethered creativity of childhood, as keenly observed by acclaimed animation film director Tim Burton, who stated

I think best when I'm drawing. I always loved drawing, but that's true of all kids. When children draw, they all draw the same. There's a certain kind of passion that all kids share. And then it gets beaten out of them.¹²

Extolling a trust in process, *Drinking it in* 2010 began as an exploration of the image of a wheel within a wheel as described by the Jewish prophet Ezekiel. However, the process of making has given rise to the imaginary wanderings often experienced when looking at clouds. Incorporating the flow of narrative into delicate drawings, Capra has presented as a 3-dimensional landscape reminiscent of a futuristic settlement, warranting an apt association with the comment, 'pencils and childhood go hand in hand. Drawing is magic.'¹³

The field of technical drawing is explored by Joyce Hinterding who, in *Aura (C)* 2009-10, creates graphite fractal drawings wired as antennae that produce sound. With a fascination of exploring where art meets science, Hinterding utilises computer programming alongside hand drawing in the creation of aesthetically enticing

mathematical fractal formations. Functioning as receptors, drawings that are connected to speakers conduct electronic signals that are generated by both internal kinetic energy and environmental interaction. Quite notably, the electric charge of the human body varies substantially between individuals as they interact with Hinterding's intriguing antennae.

Kurt Schranzer's series, *Phantastisches Stilleben* (Fantastic Still-Life) 2008, evokes the technical skill of the draftsman as he combines a controlled, yet somewhat whimsical line, with the mechanical precision of industrial drawing. These constructed sets of disparate objects create phallic nautical scenes interspersed with industrial implements. The juxtapositioning of known and unknown elements encourages a quest for understanding; an understanding that is teasingly promised if only we look a little harder and ponder a little longer. Schranzer's *Pages from 'The Book of Veils'* 2002 is a part of a series focused on the pursuit of visual truth, 'which drew upon and blurred the line between drawing, painting, artists' books, and sculpture'.¹⁴

The study of nature has long been identified as a key objective for drawing. In 1859, the renowned theoretician John Ruskin penned *The Elements of Drawing* in which he declared, principally, that drawing provided an avenue by which one could truly see and appreciate the value of nature and the work of great masters such as Titian and Leonardo.¹⁵ For Ruskin, what made good art great was the employment of skill in the pursuit of seeing a divine truth concealed within nature. Drawing was a tool of enlightenment available to all who would commit themselves to the task of learning how to draw and, in return, learn how to see 'truly'. For the likes of Ruskin, writing at a time when truth was to be found if only we could locate it, prescriptive ideas about drawing were still possible.

Regina Walter exhibits luminous drawings of the moon that are steeped in centuries of human fascination with the cosmos. Conjuring a mood of awe and contemplation, Walter's depictions of the moon remind us of how humanity's desire to understand the dynamics of life has been intensely connected with a mapping of the moon's physicality and cycles. The particularities of the moon's crater-filled surface generate a sense of otherness to that of the earth and yet the moon and earth are understood to be intrinsically connected, from the earth's tidal flow, female menstruation and the sowing of seeds.

The sensitive application and finely honed erasure of pencil creates subtle tones of presence and absence in Anne Edmonds' drawings. Passionate about the properties of light, Edmond's representation of refracted light, in *Light Waves over the Pilbara* 2009 and *Living on the Light of the Pilbara* 2009, tempers the principles of light with the outback landscape of the Pilbara, Western Australia. Layering a relentless study of light and remote topography with emotive interpretation conjures reconciliation between physical matter and contemplative deliberation.

The twentieth century saw a marked shift away from a rhetoric of discovering a single truth inherent within nature to one of individual interpretation. As proclaimed by Robert Hughes the nineteenth century industrial revolution altered the horizon as culture increasingly replaced nature.¹⁶ Hughes states

From television, film, and photography we receive a stream of images every day. There is no way of paying equal attention to all that surplus, so we skim. The image we remember is the one that most resembles a sign: simple, clear, repetitious. Everything the camera gives us is slightly interesting. Not for long; just for now. The extension, on the human level, of this glut of images is celebrity, which replaces the Renaissance idea of fame.¹⁷

Life on the street, advertising and modern media saw everyday perceptions of culture infiltrate the cannon of high art. Contemporary times demanded a commentary on contemporary culture and the influx of imagery provided by the world-wide-web has laid before us a resource on a previously unimaginable scale.

Sourced from a search on Google, Charles Dennington's large graphite drawing depicts a microscopic view of a worm's head that 'explores the sculptural ability of drawing to describe a form as it might appear at an angle in space and in light'.¹⁸ Crisp angles and soft palpable folds captured in graphite magnify the minute details, transforming the microscopic into an animalistic surreal landscape. Floating untethered within an uncharted void, *Worm's Head* 2010 evokes a sense of intergalactic venture from the visual intrigue inherent within the basic, earthy life form of a worm.

Using web imagery to pursue the intrepid trail of feminism, Carla Wherby creates socio-historic pen drawings depicting people and events in her series titled *Women's Work*. Web-based imagery positions famous celebrities and feminist activists along side anonymous figures of everyday lives in a panoramic montage of womanhood. 'Shadow hands' intermittently reach upward into the picture plain amid figures resisting the culturally prescribed ignominious identity of the unheard. As Hughes suggests, the

selected images act as signs; signs that Wherby has drawn out of a multifarious history and re-presented for our reconsideration.

Kenzie Patterson creates intimate drawings of everyday objects with a touch of wry humour. Patterson states, 'sitting on stark white backgrounds, the objects appear isolated and disconnected from the world they were sourced from'.¹⁹ Floating in isolation, for example, *Nails* 2007 presents fingernails spaced upon the page, suggesting the presence of touch despite the absence of the sensory fingertips. The series, titled *Bowerbird Drawings* 2007 on-going, however, suggests that these objects are in deed part of a broader story and imaginative associations are encouraged between Patterson's poetic renditions and the often perceived banality of our everyday environment. Furthermore, Patterson's *The Coal Sack* 2008, takes the purity of coal as a drawing medium and re-presents it as a conceptual nebula imbued with interpretation.

Tom Polo's text based works are insights into the power of rejection and self-doubt. When the works included in *Continuous One Liners* 2009-10 are viewed individually, the separate observations captured in this series of work rest as a somewhat benign statement. When viewed as a conglomeration, however, all-invasive perceptions of failure and success are condensed into throw-away one-liners and the weight of benign remarks becomes transformed into a moment of referential analysis. A ray of optimism exists, however, as *Maybe One Day*, floats like a speech bubble atop the negativity. Also tapping into notions of success or failure, Polo's *Night Drawings* 2009-10, question the definition of drawing as representation, rather supporting the notion that 'taking a line for a walk' need not be a prescriptive journey.

So, what is drawing? Generally valued for its pedagogical usefulness, drawing has attracted limited academic attention while retaining its historical classification as the foundation of all art practice. The immediacy of the drawn line undoubtedly emphasises the communicative status of drawing. Also, and perhaps due to the presence of diverse drawing practices, it is key to remember Hendrik Kolenberg's observation that 'drawing is best defined within the practice of individual artists.'²⁰ Regardless of concurrent blurred definitions, drawing can be understood as a fundamental means of seeing; not necessarily in the manner of producing a skilful reproduction but rather one of individual interpretation. Consequently, drawing can be understood as an elementary means of intense seeing that informs our sense of perception, both as an individual and as a community.

As a result, the diverse range of drawings in *No Right Turn* indeed testifies to the broadness of vision inherent in contemporary art practice. The versatility of style showcased in this exhibition illustrates how many artists identify the art of drawing as an important part of their practice and, consequently, the value of drawing within contemporary arts practice is reasserted.

¹ *The Australian Oxford Dictionary* (Fourth Edition), Oxford University Press, Melbourne, 2006.

² Harold Osborne (ed), *The Oxford Companion to Art*, Oxford at the Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1970, p. 328.

³ Sachs, *ibid.*, p. 2.

⁴ 'This & Other Worlds', *Contemporary Australian Drawing*, The Ian Potter Centre: National Gallery of Victoria, 2 August – 6 November 2005, <http://www.ngv.vic.gov.au/thisandotherworlds/> accessed March 2010.

⁵ As a strong proponent for the value of drawing as a fundamental skill, the National Art School is often pitted against the 'less structured' principles practiced at the College of Fine Arts, Sydney. This divide fuelled a debate that recently attracted attention when the government threatened to end funding for the National Art School, Sydney. See, John McDonald, 'To Draw or Not to Draw: that is the Question', *The Sydney Morning Herald*, 30 September, 2006, <http://www.smh.com.au/news/arts/to-draw-or-not-to-draw-that-is-the-question/2006/09/28/1159337269>, accessed 18.08.2009 and Andrew Frost, 'In the Name of Art, Rub Out the Drawing Board', *The Sydney Morning Herald*, 12 May, 2009, <http://www.brisbanetimes.com.au/opinion/in-the-name-of-art-rub-out-the-drawing-board-20090511-b0iq.html>, accessed August 2009.

⁶ Naomi McCarthy, 'Twin Infatuations', *Light & Shadow, drawings by Catherine O'Donnell*, Blacktown Arts Centre, 14 April - 13 June 2009.

⁷ E. H. Gombrich, *The Story of Art*, (1950) Phaidon Press, London, 1972, pp. 7-10.

⁸ Gombrich., *ibid.*, pp.7-10.

⁹ Locust Jones, artist's statement, April 2010.

¹⁰ Matthew Collings, *This is Modern Art*, Weidenfeld & Nicolson, London, 1999, p. 188-192.

¹¹ David Capra, <http://www.davidcapra.com/> accessed February 2010.

¹² Tim Burton, quoted by Lynn Hirschberg in 'Drawn to Narrative', *New York Times Magazine*, 9 November, 2003, p. 51.

¹³ Evelyn Juers, 'On Drawing: The Grey Voice', *The Grey Voice, Contemporary Australian Drawing*, 2005, http://faculty.arch.usyd.edu.au/art_workshop/thegreyvoice/essay.html, accessed August 2009.

¹⁴ Kurt Schranzer, artist's statement, April 2010.

¹⁵ John Ruskin, *The Elements of Drawing, in Three Letters to Beginners*, Smith, Elder & Co., London, 1859, pp. xi-xii.

¹⁶ Robert Hughes, *The Shock of the New, Art and the Century of Change*, British Broadcasting Company, London, 1980, p. 342.

¹⁷ Hughes, *ibid.*, p. 346.

¹⁸ Charles Dennington, artist's statement, April 2010.

¹⁹ Kenzee Patterson, artist's statement, April 2010.

²⁰ Hendrik Kolenberg, 'Introduction', *Australian Drawings, from the Gallery's Collection*, The Art Gallery of New South Wales, 1997, pp. 9-13.