

DRAWING MATTERS:
AN EXHIBITION OF WORKS BY
NOLA FARMAN, ANGELA STEWART AND MARIE HAASS.

The spirit of drawing asserts its pre-eminent staple of 'art' as something of a stronghold. At a fundamental level, the art of drawing is synonymous with the 'drawing' of art. But drawing as *art* suffers at times for its very genre. Often, we situate drawing as preliminary to the creation of 'art' – which is to suggest a tendency toward regarding drawing as the 'practice run' for the earnest execution of, usually, painting or sculpture¹.

The art of drawing may chronicle a conference of what is ordinary about the world whilst, covertly, making it less so by engendering intrigue. The mundane, the everyday, the prepossessing, passionate and prosaic: all inform the spell of an ilk that is hewn by the marks and the making of drawings. For all their prowling and contemplative range, they are often tacit icons of our very intellect and imagination. To the art historical markers that have gone before, the perceptual paradox of drawing as precursory to the making of 'real' work as well as the working of 'real' art, the artists represented in *Drawing Matters* revel in the very framework of 'drawn art'.

Musing on a pivotal passage from *The Hermit*, by Eugene Ionesco², Nola Farman tenders a non-figurative examination of the 'stains' and traits of the social world. Taken as her focal point, *The Hermit's Tablecloth* provides the artist with the impetus for images that exist as reflections and impressions both of the text and of the world. Fragments and seepage punctuate the spread of works as well as the human experience of abstraction, and in both word and image, we are privy to the signifying 'stains' of thoughts and of actions.

In every age, we create the nomenclature to ascribe meaning to notions of alienation, solitude and otherness. The hermit: the loner, the outsider, the pitiable 'other' - history seems littered with configurations of the genre and illustrative renderings of inhabitants of the 'fringe'. Both Farman and Ionesco interpret and represent an unshakeable ambivalence to the notion of the hermit who may well be eccentric, but who also holds a mirror to many an experience of the mainstream social world. Almost simulating the nature of contemporary social networking media, the hermit is posited here, supposedly in a 'social' setting, with tacit markers of social interaction and communication. But he is, for all intents and purposes, alone. Farman, somewhat paradoxically, 'solidifies' the cited musings of the hermit with her 'fluid' drawings - each with a nod toward a projective test of association, and apparently intent on eluding fixed meaning. Installed as a coherent series, her cluster of drawings tangentially ushers narrative reading that creates a trope for the questioning of the stains of existence and the fluidity of communications.

In a sense, a Brechtian impulse of 'making strange'³, imbues both these works and the words of the author. The hermit, in fact, elucidates this very notion through the postulated attempt to engage so intently with an image that it ultimately loses its form and familiarity. Ionesco has granted his character the shape-shifting faculty of imagination and an inclination toward enigma. With a poetic eye, the artist draws on this conundrum, setting up a rhythm of images and a verse

¹ Anecdotally, conversations among theorists, art historians, curators, lay people and most critically, artists, have a tendency to privilege painting and sculpture as defining genres of 'art'. This is often lamented as the partial view that it indeed is.

² Ionesco, Eugene, (1987). *The Hermit*. Trans., Seaver, Richard, New York & Co.: New York.

³ Attributed to Bertolt Brecht, the device of 'making strange', (translated from the original terminology, 'verfremdungseffekt'), encourages readings of events and texts that are unexpected and therefore evoke a more spontaneous and meaningful reading. Brecht used this device in his work to alienate the audience from the action on stage so that they might be jolted into active participation. This is opposed to the repetitive expectation of formulae so endemic to the cinema, theatre and pop culture in general.

of artworks. But the distinction between word and image does not assume to divide the world into a dichotomous 'either/or' state. Indeed, the hermit disarmingly vanquishes such efforts to polarise or solidify meaning with the 'bleeding' of the wine stain into the tablecloth, the melting of the tablecloth into 'white space' and the substrate itself evaporating into veritable ephemera. Images and words have dispatched their indexical tasks to collude and melt each with the other.

Ostensibly moving away somewhat from the sustained introspection of Farman and Lonesco's deliberations, Angela Stewart has worked a composite image of a monumental portrait. A giant of a man looks askance to return and see through our gaze. The drawn image here captures a moment within a fleeting many - an attitudinal stance that is at one and the same time disarming and solemn. In her depiction, Stewart brings her distinctive reading and style to the project of portraying Tony Jones - an artist, an educator and a philanthropist. Apparently working at close range, Stewart roves the figurative bearing of Jones with a vein of familiarity. In discussion with the artist, Stewart recounts her respect and esteem for Jones as both a stalwart and an altruist in the community of art makers in Western Australia. She describes the immediacy of committing his portrait to a large gestural drawing and the conversations that unfolded during the sitting in an affiliation she likens to a 'portrait dynamic'⁴. Key to this work is a palpable and spontaneous bonhomie between artist and sitter but - importantly - the format is something of a leveler. Worked over a multiple array of sheets of various dimensions, the artist entertains no dissimulation in making the work appear physically seamless - instead she fully embraces the composite nature of the support with all its structural tension and candour.

Portraits necessarily entail a negotiation between the artist as 'creator', the sitter as the subject and an implied viewer who will make an interpretation to which they will invariably bring their own history. There exists a decidedly specific form of interaction. But can the portrait itself determine the nature of the gaze? Stewarts' portrait shares a poignant mettle with American artist, John Singer Sargent's modality with its' indubitable gestural sweeps trading on their confident arc. It is the optimistic rendering of an accomplished artist, whose observational eye and sensibility bring a powerful bearing to her subjects. Critically, the implicit relationship in both the creation and the province of the portrait is intensely social - it is simultaneously a mode of representation and a mechanism of cultural practice. In this instance, Jones' gaze is decidedly self-possessed, but it still places us at the centre of an interpretive and culturally conditioned kind of practice.

The tradition of two-dimensional portraiture has an enduring legacy that has come to us via quite circuitous art historical lines. What we accept and expect of portraiture, though, has been transmuted over centuries to the extent that the very nature of the portrait and what defines it is, in some ways, at variance. At this time, perhaps more than any other, the portrait is a multi-faceted entity able to be executed in any number of formats and media. What constitutes the contemporary portrait is fluid - capricious even - and the question of its conventions becomes a confounding dilemma. A key author in the genre, Richard Brilliant, asserts that portraiture in the Western canon is a reflection of the perceived nature of the individual in culture⁵, and a compelling vestige of the art historical genre endures graciously in this highly personal and key work of Stewarts'.

In a prodigiously coherent range of works, Marie Haass' drawings call on the semiotic notion of meaning itself. Beginning with a word, a series of words and the patterns that emerge from their sounds and visual form, Haass makes work that ultimately half hides a collective heart to make its beating the more profound. Her drawings 'grow out' of their support with a keen instinct and more than a little coalescent energy. This fascinating originating premise for the making of art engenders compelling drawings that clearly belong together whilst concurrently manifesting a maverick impulse.

⁴ Personal communication with the artist, 29/12/13.

⁵ Brilliant, R. (1991). *Portraiture*. Reaktion Books Ltd: London.

Touched by the sight and experience of witnessing the aftermath of a wild dog cull in regional Hyden, Haass took to drawing the curled and lifeless canine forms piled as if scheduled for a funeral pyre. Dumped almost unceremoniously, the dog stack bore a stain of vague despair and the artists' first foray into memorialising the fate of these resilient but ultimately trespassing feral animals created the momentum for a profoundly tender series of works that summon a bittersweet melancholy. Exquisitely rendered, these drawings put to task the evocation of mysteries alongside the flinty currencies of life and death. From this keenly articulated pathos, the artist writes, draws and inscribes a word or a meaningful cluster of words to begin a process of immersion that hinges on sequential addition and erasure. The words are themselves soon obscured, going the way of transient form and elusive embodiment.

Not quite pure semiotics, nor pure structuralism, the artist evokes complex ground for interpretation using the originating words as a point of entry as well as departure. They are, essentially, an anchorage to the heart of the work, and in the process of generating permeable coda they prompt the fascinating ambiguity of the final outcomes. Haass has no interest in fixing meaning for the viewer. Hers is a symbolic lexicon that courts the arcane in a tableau of divergent interpretive possibilities. Read in succession, the images radiate and enclose, liberate and ensconce - and hover finally at a juncture that just might suggest nature and lifecycles, fragmentation and solidification. Somewhat reminiscent of the drawings and pendulous sculptures of Louise Bourgeois, these works accrue metaphoric weight and dimensionality in their making, and it is indeed a testimony to so judicious an artistic touch that it can generate a palpable sense of simultaneous magnitude and dynamism.

The drawing represented here is consequential both in its ambition and its execution, and it is, in the final outcome, a resonant articulation of ideas and observations. These artists bear witness to the centrality of drawing to art and drawing as art. What they show is an engaging and quietly dignified suite of works that definitively demonstrate the dynamic faculty of the drawn artwork.

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