

Charcoal in Context

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As this is a talk related to an exhibition of charcoal drawings, what I would like to do within the next forty-five minutes is try and establish some context for David Bomberg's work, his teaching and how it was interpreted by his students, in order to then relate that to the contemporary art practice. To do this, I will focus on three artists known for their use of charcoal: William Kentridge and Kara Walker and Robert Longo. Beyond their work being made in the same medium, the relationship between the technical and material aspects of their work is intertwined with ideas in ways that establish an interesting link between the historic works in this exhibition and contemporary drawing practice.

I have resisted a full art historical account of Bomberg's history and tried to stick to motivations: as an artist, a teacher, and citizen. I would like to establish the relationship between the material and technical to the conceptual within these different historical contexts, leading to questions such as: are there qualities particular to the medium of charcoal that all artists are particularly drawn to? How can artists today relate to the ideas of Bomberg, especially in regard to expression and the spiritual qualities in art? And finally, in terms of motivations, what does this comparison yield?

But first I would like to begin with two personal anecdotes.

Firstly, as a student I was introduced to the work of Frank Auerbach in 1990. For those who may not know, Auerbach was a student of David Bomberg at Borough Polytechnic. Anyway, 1990 was also the year the Robert Hughes monograph came out on Auerbach, which contained time lapsed documentation of the evolution of one charcoal portrait. This had a substantial impact on my work at the time, and as I embarked on a semester of study in the Pacific Northwest, the landscape and weather patterns completely suited an exploration of a sort of physical and emotional atmosphere I was trying to achieve in charcoal. I have never included these images in a talk so they might be surprising to people with knowledge of my work today, but nonetheless this experience has remained with me, providing insights into the discussion here today.

Secondly, in the spring of 2007, the first year I was Course Leader of BA Drawing at Camberwell College of Arts, my friend and colleague Rebecca Fortnum and I organized a drawing conference that brought the college's past and present together. John Berger and his son Yves came over from France and they invited Bomberg student and friend Miles Richmond to join us. We decided to begin the day – not by talking – but by drawing together. Though there was a discussion that followed, the lasting impression of the day was the intensity of that morning, the room filled with the immensity of the occasion: who we were in the presence with and the sounds of around 45 people concentrated on drawing.

Miles Richmond was eighty-five years old at the time and looking very frail, yet without a doubt he approached his drawing that day with the greatest intensity of anyone in the room.

Instead of working at a table or easel, he got on all fours with his paper on the floor, never really taking a break. It was truly extraordinary to witness.

What followed in the afternoon, by comparison, was more difficult. We were there to discuss the merits of teaching drawing in today's art school, and I can remember feeling increasingly uncomfortable with the direction our discussion took. From what I recall, Miles Richmond did almost all of the talking, dwelling on the spiritual, and almost moral motivations behind work, in an effort to define what an artist should try and achieve in their work. For Richmond, a debate was re-ignited, something I can only now appreciate as a reflection of David Bomberg's ideas concerning 'The Spirit in the Mass'. The conversation felt utterly foreign within the contemporary art school, and to me, an attempt to define (or even dictate) how an artist should go about making work, seemed pointless. However over time, I have found this disjunction increasingly intriguing for what it might mean in our appraisal of how drawing used to be, and currently is, both taught and interpreted. This is something I will return to later, but anyhow, this was my first direct insight into Bomberg's influence and my starting point for relating the drawings in this exhibition to work being made today in charcoal. So I would say I am an empathetic non-expert on David Bomberg, as an artist and teacher myself, with drawing at the heart of everything I do.

So, a little background key to this discussion.

Through a set of fortunate circumstances David Bomberg was offered a place at The Slade in 1911, renowned for its teaching of drawing. Henry Tonks was the drawing master and he and his peers held on tightly to some very fixed ideas about 'pure drawing' and what art should be. There were prolonged and heated debates amongst staff and students.

There were many aspects to these debates but the one I would like to focus on is drawing's relationship to photography, as I will pick up on this again later. Henry Tonks had once told a student "Photos don't express anything, and your drawing is too much of a photograph." (Cork: 1987, pp. 28-29) Just over one hundred years ago, a debate hung over the Slade over the best kind of academic drawing, a crisis that very much reflected the increasing ease at which photographs could be taken, printed and reproduced. What was drawing's relationship to the growing proliferation of photographic images? Outside the Slade, Clive Bell of the Bloomsbury group once said "...we have ceased to ask "what does this picture represent?" and ask instead. "What does it make us feel?" We expect a work of plastic art to have more in common with a piece of music than with a coloured photograph." (Cork: 1987, p. 34)

This reveals the relative conservatism of the British art establishment at the time, debating the merits of academic drawing in comparison to photography, whilst French avant-garde artists were breaking every convention in the book. Here I will demonstrate this point with just two slides. The first is a drawing by Tonks of 1908 for which he won a Slade drawing prize. The second is from the year before: 'Les Demoiselles d'Avignon' by Pablo Picasso. Anyone studying at the Slade would have been acutely aware of this gap and many students, including Bomberg, were rebelling against their teaching.

However for Bomberg the student, though certainly critical of his education, more generally, he really seemed to thrive on the exposure to such conflicting views. They set him up with the confidence to respond to the many external influences of the time, most of all Post-Impressionism and the French avant-garde, Vorticism, the Bloomsbury group and de Stijl. He was a 'good student' in the respect that he made it his business to fully understand these different artistic approaches as the means to develop his own position as an artist. He once said: "Art must proceed by evolution. We must build our new art life of today upon the ruins of the dead art life of yesterday." (Cork: 1987, p. 76)

One influence upon Bomberg seems clear, an essay by J. R. Fothergill (1876–1957), entitled 'The principles of teaching drawing at The Slade School', published in the Slade magazine 1910-11 edition, which emphasized that:

"A masterly outline of a figure or a landscape does not pretend to be an illusion. If then the draughtsman does not, and cannot hope to imitate nature, he is compelled to state only his ideas of it, ideas of three-dimensional form...Sight is only the means by which our ideas of touch are stimulated, and it is through our ideas of touch that we understand form... Drawings are the artist's 'ideas of touch.'" (Morris: 1985, p. 34)

For Fothergill, this tactile element had a fleeting definition. He believed art should contain "three elements: colour, form and the spiritual element [and] the spiritual element is dictated by the artist's character." (Morris: 1985, p. 33) Surely the seeds of Bomberg's 'Spirit in the Mass' were sown here.

But for Bomberg, the 'spiritual element' was also political, and this undoubtedly took Fothergill's ideas in a new direction. Bomberg's beliefs in Socialism, and an interest in the revolutionary power of art were likely the product of early poverty and he carried an outsider's identity of having grown up in the Jewish East End of London. I think it is fair to say that the spiritual element for Bomberg was intertwined with a sense of personal integrity as a citizen. He tended to be contrarian, even bombastic, but also, unashamed to insert personal experience and identity into his early work, even when the work began to resemble modernism in Britain at the time. This is evident during the period when he explored formal innovations of Cubism and Vorticism: 'Study for Vision of Ezekiel' of 1912, an allusion to Bomberg's interest in the Zionist movement, 'The Mud Bath' of 1914 that depicts a melee of figures in an East End Jewish bath house and 'Study of Dancers for the Ghetto Theatre' the Jewish theatre, circa 1919/20.

However the traumatic experiences of serving in World War I completely altered Bomberg's course. "After the Armistice, he could never return to the naïve optimism about the Machine and the robotic Cubist body that had infused his early work." (Hughes: 1990, p.26) Whilst Bomberg never really 'fit in' at the Slade, the experience of the war drove him much further away from 'belonging' to anything. Bomberg jettisoned modernist trends and moved towards the landscape, and this close study of nature felt conservative compared to the avant-garde at the time. The distrust he felt for any established school of thought or fashion meant that throughout his artistic life he "upset traditionalists and was unfashionable

amongst avant-garde circles" (Cork: 1987, p. 3) at nearly every stage. His behavior was courageous, but it cost him in terms of commissions and opportunities.

In what form did his move towards nature take? It was certainly not in the tradition of the landscape genre per se. Instead, it attempted to go beyond just 'the view', towards a more instinctive interpretation of form. In other words, capturing the landscape had very little to do with the literal appearance of things. There was something that occurred between artist and subject that was full of energy and emotion and the artist's job was to try and express that.

According to Roy Oxlade, artist, former Borough Polytechnic student and scholar on Bomberg, Bomberg believed artists should seek "a symbiotic relationship with nature in which the artist participates as 'being' in the world as poet rather than as one who measures and quantifies, [and] gives emphasis to tactile values and the body, [this] because...society was becoming overwhelmingly dependent on rationality." (Reichert: 2008, p. 44) Bomberg had witnessed machines rationally designed to kill on a mass scale, and as he emerged from the Front, he had "an exacerbated sense of moral responsibility about what an artist might, and might not, affirm." (Hughes: 1990, p. 26)

Quotations abound throughout Oxlade's writing that might help us understand further the meaning of Bomberg's famous phrase 'The Spirit in the Mass'. "Mass is nothing, unless it is the poetry in mankind in contemplation of nature." (Oxlade: 1990, p. 154) "In drawing one is "responding rather than thinking." (Oxlade: 1990, p. 155) According to Oxlade, Bomberg "had an urgent sense he was at work in a spiritual desert." (Oxlade: 1990, p. 157) Understanding the sense of urgency in his approach to drawing, we can then begin to imagine what he would have been like as a teacher. These were instructions as much for drawing as they were for living. Here again is Oxlade's description:

"The radical shift demanded requires recognition of the absolute gulf between real drawing – drawing as metaphor – and what is universally known as good draughtsmanship. Particularly if art's essentially expressive role is to be emphasized, we might think of real drawing as a phenomenology of drawing where the artist attempts to grasp intuitively at an objects visual essence without artifice, without preconceptions." (Reichert: 2008, p. 18)

If art schools were asking for 'good draughtsmanship' as it is described above, then we can appreciate more fully why artists joining Bomberg's classes at Borough Polytechnic were so fortunate. Frank Auerbach has said what a huge impression it made on him as a student to "find a teacher who encouraged [students] to take risks...There was a feeling that in the rest of the art schools something presentable had to be presented, but in those classes there was an atmosphere of research and of radicalism which was extremely stimulating." (Cork, p. 285) As a teacher, Bomberg encouraged students to be more questioning of artistic trends and discouraged the 'unfeeling technique' that seemed to be encouraged elsewhere.

What for Bomberg would constitute a feeling technique? Firstly, students were discouraged from using tools of precision such as the pencil and encouraged to use charcoal and chalk in order to searchingly react to what was before them, striving for something where "image,

the materials and a deep emotional response are drawn together.” (Moorhouse: 1996, p. 12) The beauty of what emerged from this process was how it laid bare an accumulation of the many decisions and revisions that occurred over time. The method was as much a drawing technique as a philosophical approach; that instead of viewing a product we view a process, where finding resolution was beside the point.

This approach explains why so many of the circle of artists worked in series. In the words of Robert Hughes:

“...one realizes that there is...no reason why an artist should not draw the same head a hundred times. It is the variety that can be extracted from constancy, one image at a time, that counts, not some parade of made-up differences. But the significance of drawing as a process lies in the fact that in the course of drawing the motif or nominal subject, another subject of drawing appears. This is the actual subject...The ‘second subject’ of drawing is drawing itself.” (Hughes p. 196)

Drawings here are, as Michael Newman has pointed out in his writing both “events” and “things,” given the materiality of charcoal on surface. It is easy, especially today, to leap into analysis of details outside the frame to find meaning, failing to recognize that the meaning of the drawn gesture in the first place is “something that has been left for us...as the trace of the other,” (Newman: 2003, pp.104-5) in other words, in viewing marks on surface we are confronted by marks left by an individual, using a particular material, at a particular moment in time, and these factors are significant in and of themselves.

And this brings me to the work of Dennis Creffield. He is an artist still at work today, who is brilliantly represented in this exhibition, especially the French cathedral drawings. The background to these was an Arts Council commission in 1987 to draw all the English cathedrals, and this led to the creation in 1990, of eleven more, drawing from northern French cathedrals

I was fortunate to speak with Dennis Creffield at the opening of this exhibition last month where we discussed Turner’s influence upon the Borough Group. They were admirers of Turner’s move away from resemblance into more atmospheric conditions, but where Creffield was critical of Turner is how the artist regularly included tiny figures in the foreground to create a greater sense of scale in his pictures, a device that Creffield said that he feels does not work very well in pictures.

Creffield spoke of the importance of creating a sense of “being in it” and pictorially this is achieved by not giving the viewer ground to stand on, and this is a key feature in the cathedral series on view here today. Instead of the tiny figure dwarfed by the landscape, the viewer’s own body is put in relation to the drawing. We are presented with a storm of marks that collectively begin to define a space and the towering presence of a great building, with a thrilling, disconcerting lack of definition.

A drawing in the Frank Auerbach exhibition currently on view at Tate Britain, ‘David Landau Seated’ of 2010-11, works in a similar way. The reproduction does little justice to this

drawing. In person, the subject appears to expand out of the paper's surface; the sitter's body lacks distance away, and I feel what Auerbach has done here is captured what is actually seen when one is a little bit too close, or has looked at something for a very long time. The subject loses definition, goes out of focus, and the nameable features become unfamiliar. Instead of a depiction of the subject, what the network of marks and erasures seem to make visible is the space between artist and subject that possesses an energy all its own, an activated space between creator and subject that exists only during the act of drawing.

Creffield's cathedral drawings achieve a similar sense of atmospheric perspective, resulting from out of focus smudges, erasures, and soft lines forming a backdrop to bolder, sharper marks that appear nearer. My favourite of the series in the exhibition is 'Rouen Cathedral (West Front II)' of 1990. The drawing repertoire is extended so that the final marks on the page are wet ones. At first I thought he might have used ink, but then realized they are the result of raindrops attracting charcoal dust and drying in upward splashes. The storm of marks matches the actual outdoor conditions that then conjure in the imagination Creffield working on site in a race against the weather. In this instance, rain was a welcome collaborator, as these inadvertent marks serve to increase the depth of field within the drawing. It is evident the work has been made outdoors. Every drawing, measuring almost a metre square, was a commissioned work, made publicly, so the task for Creffield was much more pressurized, and I think this added energy to the series overall.

What T J Clark recently said about Auerbach, applies to Creffield too, describing the need to have an instantaneous relationship with nature, so it "leaps out of the void," seeking to not so much capture "the 'character' of a scene, or even its atmosphere, but rather, its simply being there for once." (Clark: 2015)

This process-led approach leads me to discuss the work of contemporary South African artist William Kentridge. Specifically I am going to concentrate on his 'Drawings for Projection', a series of charcoal drawn animations made around fifteen years ago. My research relies heavily on Rosalind Krauss's 2000 essay 'The Rock' which examined William Kentridge's methodology, using interviews with the artist himself to produce insights into his work.

All the animated charcoal 'Drawings for Projection' addressed the legacy of apartheid in South Africa in one way or another. The title of Krauss's essay comes from Kentridge's own description of "the immovable rock of apartheid" in South Africa, and how "to escape this rock is the job of the artist." The artist's conviction that "you can't face the rock head-on; the rock always wins" goes some distance towards explaining his drawing process.

Kentridge is an artist who discusses his process with exceptional eloquence. For the Drawings for Projection series, in the studio, paper is pinned to the wall with a Bolex camera on a tripod just opposite. He would begin each drawing with a vague idea of its content, but not use a storyboard. At regular intervals, he would step back and document the image. In that time of back and forth, quick decision-making would take place, very much in the process of making. Over time, though the traces of most recent developments might still be

visible, in Krauss's words: "The drawing on which he works is at all times complete and at all times in flux since once he has recorded it from his station at the Bolex, he moves across the floor to make an infinitesimal modification in its surface, only then to retreat once more to the camera." (Krauss: 2000, p. 5) It's a process where he must remain in the moment, his task always the next tiny step forward, yet also be moving towards the development of a narrative.

One could say that this process replaces the pressure of working from life, with the difficulties of remembering where the drawing has come from or knowing where it will lead. The individual images, and how they are interconnected "in the end [are] 'the plot'." (Krauss: 2000, p. 6) Would artists at the Slade in Bomberg's time have appreciated the importance of the relationship between the regular tempo of documentation to the work's meaning, or would they have dismissed it as terribly mechanical and 'unfeeling'? Certainly the "suspension between the thematics of outrage and the choreography of process" (Krauss: 2000, p. 9) is integral and important to how Kentridge resisted clichés and enabled him to address the immensity of Apartheid anew.

It is quite likely Slade artists circa 1910 would not have recognized the work as art, and indeed many today have questioned why Kentridge's work is in the art gallery and not a cinema. The rationale is completely to do with the medium of charcoal. It is:

"...a type of drawing that is extremely reflexive about its own condition, that savors the graininess of the clouds of charcoal or pastel as they are blown onto paper, that luxuriates in the luminous tracks of the eraser that open onto Turner-esque fogs, that examines the particular form of the palimpsest as a graphically specific signifier, that delimits the frame within which the drawing's marks will appear... It is this very density and weight of the drawing, this way it has of producing the hiccups of momentary stillness and thus dragging against the flow of the film, that opens up the gap between Kentridge's medium and that of film itself, a divide which produces the specificity of the thing that... he is 'inventing'..." (Krauss 2000: p. 10)

The work is about the conceptual link between the range and qualities of charcoal drawing, and how when projected onto a screen or backlit on a monitor, they breathe new life into this ancient medium. The work sits both in relation to the ancient and the contemporary. The static charcoal drawing is also temporal in the way marks and amendments are evident to the viewer in its final form. What Kentridge manages to exploit is their dramatic effect when seen in sequence over time. As Krauss has noted, the medium "hovers above the luminous ground...like a dense cover of black fog, sometimes greasily opaque, sometimes brokenly grainy, at other times a radiant mist." (Krauss: 2000, p. 21)

It is interesting to note here the relationship Kentridge has with the medium of film. In contrast to the debate at The Slade about drawing's relationship to photography one hundred years ago, there is instead a willing exploration of film as a means to dramatize the very conditions of drawing. Earlier phrases I have used in relation to Bomberg, Auerbach and Creffield apply to Kentridge's work too. The artist's process is very much about 'being

in it', allowing the drawing "to be both 'event' and 'thing'," and at each stage of its creation, embracing the "phenomenology of drawing" by "responding rather than thinking."

In "stalking the drawing" the gap in time that is dictated by Kentridge's process, between the drawing and its documentation, effectively brings the relationship between content and form closer. As Krauss makes clear "... this gap is not opened for the purpose of choosing, say, formal over the political, but rather seeing how the formal might indeed be invested by the political and how this in turn might reorganize one's sense of the political field itself." (Krauss 2000: p. 23)

Anyone who saw William Kentridge's exhibition at Marian Goodman this past autumn would have experienced how his more recent work has entered more theatrical territory combining the projection of animated drawing with filmed documentation of performers in an all-encompassing display. This has brought his work closer to how the American artist Kara Walker has worked for more than twenty years.

Kara Walker deals with equally difficult subject matter – the history and legacy of slavery in the USA – but she, unlike Kentridge, addresses it very much head on. An artist with drawing at the heart of her practice, she is best known for large-scale, scenographic views of figures in silhouette. An admirer of the storytelling tradition of 19C painting, artists such as George Caleb Bingham, she has digested these sentimental views of American life, people singing and dancing whilst rafting down the Mississippi, to instead tell stories much harder to reckon with. Bingham's luminous, slightly out of focus pastel colours are replaced by graphic (in both definitions of the word) vignettes scattered across the wall for the viewer to try and make sense of. The pretence is to grand historical narrative, but elements are depicted in a fragmented presentation, that are at the same time, done with absolute specificity. To understand the rationale for the scale, one has to think of the work within a gallery inhabited by viewers, where the scale of figures depicted matches those present. Formally this functions as Dennis Creffield's cathedral drawings do: the foreground is not in the picture so by default, it is the ground the viewer stands upon. Therefore, being in the world Kara Walker conjures places the viewer against a backdrop where the 'bigness' is not only the scale, but the subject. The viewer is involved, even implicated by this pictorial device. Here, in Darby English's words we are confronted by: "slavery not as a fact but as an aspect of lived history." (English: 2007, p. 77)

If anyone saw Walker's show at the Camden Art Centre in 2013, or her exhibition this autumn at Victoria Miro will know that she also makes large-scale charcoal drawings. Compared to the silhouettes, these feel more experimental, revealing more in terms of her decision-making and process. In terms of their emotional power, they have more in common with Goya's 'Disasters of War' than 19C American history painting, and the sheer power of these drawings is intrinsically linked to charcoal as a drawing medium.

In relation to Walker's charcoal drawings, it is interesting to think again about Michael Newman's observation of drawn marks as both 'events' and 'things', and as well the tactile relationship in drawing, defined by J. R. Fothergill, between touching and seeing. With such catastrophic human suffering on display, identifying the imprint of the artist's own hand

creates a heightened awareness of not only the victims at the hands of their oppressors, and the criminal connotations of the finger print, but also the artist's own responsibility in expressing these stories in such vivid and disturbing detail.

As part of Walker's exhibition at Victoria Miro gallery, she included a series of sketches that revealed how her ideas incubate following the impact of real events. It is important to note how she never quotes directly from one source, but instead draws from a whole range of material; ideas that are then consolidated into plausible, yet disjointed narratives.

But what happens when the artist lays aside invention to devote full attention to simply copying a photographic image in charcoal? With the echo of Tonks's comment "Photos don't express anything, and your drawing is too much of a photograph," ringing in our ears, this is the question to ask of many drawings being made today.

It is here I would like to discuss Robert Longo, an American artist who has drawn from photographs his entire career. He is most well-known for his 'Men in the Cities' series, where over a period between 1979-1983 he created sixty drawings of men and women in business attire caught in a moment of ambiguity as to whether they were flinching, falling or had just been shot. Since this series, his subject matter has ranged from animals of prey, sites of worship, ocean waves and atomic clouds; all of Longo's work consistently large-scale and made using a labour-intensive method. The artist himself has described his technique in this way:

"Drawings are executed on heavyweight paper mounted onto honeycomb aluminum. First, a heavy layer of charcoal is rubbed into the paper by hand creating a dense velvet-like surface. I use charcoals that range in density, tonal value and color of blacks. Then I apply charcoal powders with brushes. Various types of erasers play an integral role in carving out and sculpting the image. The white in the drawing is always the untouched surface of the paper." (Bell: 2012, p.7)

In terms of the drawing's formal structure, Longo goes for high-contrast dramatic effect, very much with photography and cinema in mind. Hal Foster has noted how important it is to Longo that it is not only "the labor involved in the process but the vision that deepens during it." In the process of making the drawing, Longo's engagement with the photograph is prolonged, and consequently this becomes the case for the viewer too. When looking at the drawings, we would never perceive them as photographs, with their increased scale, the way charcoal has been densely layered to achieve rich velvety blacks, and the high contrast of whites that are simply the paper left bare. In his translation of the photograph into charcoal drawing Foster points out how "Longo intimates that the world has become photogenic – not only informed by photography and film, but also somehow adjusted to them, almost designed to be imaged in these ways. As in film, the light in these drawings appears to be projected, and the surfaces possess the liquidity of a photograph." (Bell: 2012, p. 23) Longo's drawings say something about photography, photography cannot say about itself.

Through the combination of this technique and his choice of images there is often a feeling that a dark will looms over the world Longo depicts. He “is very interested in [the] disputed notion of a shared reservoir of universal images,” (Bell: 2012, p.27) and whether images form a key part of our collective unconscious. Certainly today with 24-hour news and social media, certain images today become so iconic, they can be remembered much like first-hand experience.

And this brings me to a recent work of Longo’s made from a mass media image. ‘Untitled (Ferguson Police August 13, 2014)’, is a drawing measuring ten feet wide and made with matte-black charcoal. It depicts “a faceless Ferguson police force, its riot gear backlit in a smoky haze.” In making this drawing, Longo wanted “to evoke the tradition of epic historical battlefield paintings” (Avin: 2014) in both its scale and composition. As the critic Jonathan Jones noted when discussing this image: “When an artist takes a photographic image and redraws, repaints or otherwise transforms it, that photograph is lifted out of the remorseless stream of information that bombards us and given heightened significance.” (Jones: 2014) The instantaneity of the photograph is profoundly transformed. By drawing this moment, the artist chooses to witness the event in an extended way, albeit vicariously through the photograph, and this in turn commands “viewers to pay attention to their current moment and place in society.” (Avin: 2014) Photographs make important and legitimate subject matter for artists working today.

Here I feel it is relevant to consider why, for example, David Bomberg’s drawings made during the Second World War are some of his most enduring work. It is probably true that contemporary eyes are drawn to more headline-making imagery, over say, views of the Spanish landscape. We are, after all, products of media-driven times. But there is also undeniable interest in important historical moments. Those charcoal drawings of the area surrounding St. Paul’s cathedral after the Blitz – using burnt wood to depict destroyed buildings – will always be powerful for the way the visible hand of the artist lends proof to the event, that this took place and the artist was there to record it.

Through the discussion of Kentridge, Walker and Longo, all acting as witnesses in one way or another to important historical events and legacies, I have established how artists’ relationship to photography has moved on considerably in the last one hundred years. Photography and film are a vital part of artists’ ideas and processes. Our comparison today acknowledges, as Ed Krcma noted in his 2010 essay ‘Cinematic Drawing in a Digital Age’, “Because the field of available technologies is constantly shifting, ...the relational definition of drawing...need(s) to be acknowledged as historically contingent.” (Krcma:2010, p.1)

By moving past the resistant position in relation to other available technologies, one can then appreciate how they can in fact renew and invigorate drawing with new possibilities and purpose. Both Ed Krcma and Michael Newman have discussed the distinctive capacity of drawing to be both archaic and right up to date, and this point is relevant in this discussion today about how artists are using drawing:

“The meaning of the apparent ahistoricity of drawing is determined by the other technologies of representation that co-exist with it at any given moment. This effect itself is a

historical construct. Drawing becomes 'archaic' in the age of mechanical reproduction, yet this archaism makes contact with the tactility of the most up to date mediums." (Newman: 2003, p.105)

Now, I would like to return to the question of what really motivates the artist.

Looking back, I feel it's important we do not romanticize Bomberg's artistic vision too much. We might long for the intensity of emotion that was behind his work, and that inspired so many of his students, but must acknowledge the unenviable poverty, discrimination, trauma and neglect that shaped it. At the same time, the events and experiences of his lifetime really do explain the repeated use of words such as: 'urgency', 'despair', 'appetite', 'passion', and 'discovering the artist's essential nature'. How do we grapple with such emotional intensity in today's times?

To be as brief as possible, the discourse within the art school today reflects contemporary art following the Conceptual art movement of the 1960s. The conversation has moved away from emotion and technique, into the intellectual and immaterial labour that directs making. As a result, students rarely mention the spiritual or emotional in their work. This is simply the result of their training, and the way art is routinely discussed.

Roy Oxlade's interpretations of Bomberg's work and teaching, published in 2008, attempted to imagine them more in relation to current conditions. According to Oxlade, Bomberg believed:

"the history of art could be seen as having an unfolding symbolic warning system reflecting the gradual erosion of a balanced relationship between mankind and the planet. His prescience and alarm that our growing enslavement to technology and reliance on reason, at the expense of feeling, risked disaster was not unique. He was convinced that mankind was on course for calamity. It is significant that through his work and teaching of drawing Bomberg found a way both to point to the problem and to offer a solution." (Reichert, p. 45)

This was echoed by Miles Richmond: "Bomberg believed that only with patient dedication both to nature and to the craft of painting, could the goal be achieved: to restore humanism from its degradation by a cynical and materialistic age." (Richmond: 2006, p. 15)

It is surprising to read so many accounts of Bomberg's resistance to the ways materialism in the world was corrupting art school training, considering he died in 1957. What on earth would he think today, a time when decision-making of governments in regard to education, the removal of state support for the arts, and the high cost of property particularly in the capital, place serious strain on the sustainability, not only of the art school, but the production of art, full stop.

Perhaps the sentiments expressed above by Bomberg and Richmond are not so alien after all? Art students and artists today feel utterly powerless to express their dismay. Could Bomberg's teaching of drawing really both point to the problem and offer a solution for

today? I do sense that artists are sharpening their thinking about having, as Robert Hughes defined, “an exacerbated sense of moral responsibility about what an artist might, and might not, affirm.” The three contemporary artists discussed here today certainly offer expressive approaches.

Fothergill’s ideas point in other possible directions. The relationship he made between touch and sight in drawing resembles the more recent scholarship of Michael Newman, particularly his 2004 essay ‘Sticking to the World – Drawing as Contact.’ This essay defined a particular interpretation of drawing:

“Rather than the work acting as a substitute for something absent, like an image conceived as a replacement for the lost object, the artwork comes into being by touching something already there or intervening in a process already at work. This involves a particular conception of drawing, which would not be the sketch of an idea or a representation of the object, but rather, in the very event of its generation, a moment of contact.”

Both writers place emphasis on tactility, on the sense of touch in relation to sight. For Fothergill, one could describe his observations motivated by a need to invigorate academic drawing with something more ‘feeling’, whilst Newman’s essay sits within contemporary debates that recognize, in drawing’s more expanded definition, its close relationship to the sculptural method of casting. I am sure this association would have been inconceivable to the scholars on drawing at the Slade in 1910, but it does show a line of enquiry that fundamentally questions what can actually be represented in a drawing, moving beyond depiction into harder to define aspects related to touch, and these are important to explore.

I would also interpret Newman’s essay as outlining, in another way, an approach to making that is intrinsically dependent upon first-hand knowledge of the subject. This for me is a crucial point within our current context. For young artists today, the ease at which we can view photographs means many have become satisfied with viewing artworks on a screen and not in person. Yes, the world has become more photogenic, but in terms of the impact on making, it has begun to spoil the encounter. Go around any art school studio, any art gallery or museum for that matter, and you begin to notice how a lot of work has become materially deprived. It is as though the artist has forgotten the need to engage the first-hand viewer in favour of a photogenic ‘view’; mediocre art that is good documentation. In this context, I believe the slowed-down experience of drawing, the extended engagement with something for both artist and viewer, can only have increasing power to move.

Almost all the drawings in this exhibition were made from life, that is, in front of the model or in the landscape. The Drawings therefore were more pressured by time, so the artists had to be more concentrated in an effort to create something that moved beyond appearance to encompass weight, mass, light, atmosphere, mood, etc. Under these more pressured circumstances, charcoal has its own very special qualities; its ability to be smudged, erased, layered into intense blacks. For all its strengths, until it is fixed, it’s a vulnerable material and there are many examples of drawings in this exhibition that demonstrate the medium’s metaphorical qualities. For example, ‘Bent Figure’ by Edna Mann shows how sharp lines and splashes of charcoal dust over the residue of earlier decision-making can create a sense

of weight and volume with real economy of means. Another work from the collection I was able to view prior to this exhibition, is Cliff Holden's 'Woman in the Shower' of 1958. In it, the charcoal appeared to have lost the battle to stick to paper, leaving a trace of the drawn activity, and this technical failure works beautifully to convey the steamy conditions of the shower. Or finally Dennis Creffield's 'Oxen Ploughing' of 1953, where form seems to be born out of the dazzling swirl of marks, rather than imposed upon the surface of the paper by the artist.

I would hope that exhibitions like this one here might renew more focus on the magical, material qualities of drawing. In terms of charcoal, it is powdery, hard to control, easy to smudge and erase, yet when built up, can create an infinite black void. The material can have great emotional range that goes beyond mere resemblance into a technical and material translation of the world around us, something that puts more faith in the harder to define mystique behind what marks and smudges on surface can say about the world we inhabit.

Could the admiration for the work and motivations of David Bomberg and his circle restore belief in the artist's role within society today? I can certainly imagine how more first-hand engagement with subject matter could lead to an increased sense of personal responsibility. Artists in the world, drawing to both visualise and shape a future they would much rather be a part of.

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