

Drawing: Interpretation/Translation

Introducing the work

This exhibition had its roots in exchange visits between The Chinese University of Hong Kong and the University of Arts London between 2008-9. Dr Frank Vigneron visited London, while at a later date I was guest at the Chinese University in Hong Kong. In both instances it was an opportunity to not only learn more about our respective cultures and institutions but also to form close friendships.

Drawing seems a very natural way of extending and building upon these exchanges. Drawings pass easily across borders, materially they are physically light, easy to transport and can function like the *carte de visite*, to announce the artist or stand in his or her stead. To extend the metaphor, the card is presented, received with two hands, scrutinised and acknowledged as part of the ritual of introduction.

In selecting this exhibition, (along with Professor Stephen Farthing), we have endeavoured to present a wide range of personalities and propositions. Personalities in terms of a broad representation of those engaged within fine art teaching and research at CCW (Camberwell, Chelsea & Wimbledon) and propositions, the radically differing approach to the act of drawing, from Jordan Basemen's denial of the practice as having any meaning for his own practice through to Mark Fairnington whose delicate drawings comfortably sit within a long tradition of observation and application.

Fairnington's work is a good starting point since the historical precedents that he draws upon are so rich and mainstream. It is significant that his work has been included in exhibitions that place the artist as a gatherer of visual information, such as *A Duck for Mr Darwin*, a major exhibition in which artists were invited to respond to the evolutionary ideas of Charles Darwin. In the drawing *Goat*, Fairnington approaches each part of the goat's head as separate studies, each ear or horn like a trophy separate from the whole but then reassembled. In this reconfiguration only a single eye is depicted, the goat stares back from the page like a quizzical Cyclopes. Fairnington delights in the act of making a visual equivalent to an observed reality, but through his drawings a more speculative, almost humorous quality is allowed to surface than in his more finished paintings. Through drawing he leaves the door open to alternative readings, a position shared with Rebecca Fortnum.

Fortnum is a painter and curator, balancing the word and the image within her practice. In this pair of drawings *L'inconnue de la Seine* she explores both the act of drawing as an original statement and the idea of the drawing as a copy. She takes as the subject for these drawings, the enigmatic plaster cast of *L'inconnue de la Seine*, the unknown woman who was found drowned in the river Seine in Paris in the 1880's. The death mask is of course in itself a copy, the impression of the face captured in plaster, but in this particular example, the feeling is more enigmatic due to the cast's 'Mona Lisa' smile, a stark contrast to the young woman's tragic watery end. Fortnum draws the image from this mask, not once but twice. The eyes are closed so there is no impediment to our scrutiny. We can take our time without embarrassment. We are invited to explore and dwell upon the face, caught as it is in death or is it sleep? And then, faced as we are with two almost identical images, we flick from one to the other to look for clues of difference or authenticity. Is one the original and the other a

copy and if so what does this mean? The drawings are bound together by the conceptual proposition that Fortnum invites us to engage with.

Paul Ryan is similarly involved in the double image, for him, his practice revolves around the sketchbook, the open page double spread is his canvas. For Ryan, rather than the sketchbook being the preliminary stage in the framing of an idea, the sketchbook becomes the work in itself. In *See Saw Again* Ryan imitates the spontaneity that is normally associated with the idea of the sketch and particularly the direct unedited nature of sketchbook drawings. In this work Ryan, deviates from his normal practice of the sketchbook being a sequential record much like a diary, each page following the next chronologically. Here he has used two empty sketchbooks open to a double page upon which he has copied a previously made double spread taken from earlier sketchbook. Furthermore he has repeated the action so we are presented with two almost identical copies. This is a perverse practice, challenging preconceptions of originality, spontaneity and even the function of what is often seen as the most intimate expression of the artist's thoughts, un-edited, raw and incomplete.

Stephen Farthing has long been fascinated by the various functions of drawing as a means of communication, from the informal note, the casual diagram through to the finished drawing of a renaissance master. Farthing's work is charged with an irreverence and humour. As an artist, drawing is the means through which he filters influences, re-structures hierarchies and creates an environment where everything is possible. Through drawing he brings heroes down to earth with a gentle puncturing of the rhetoric and posturing that can so often serve to merely distance the viewer. Hence for all the theory and acres of contextualisation, Farthing reminds us that, for example Malevich's iconic *Black Square* is indeed black, is square and measures 106 cm x 106 cm. Presented with these factual accounts, we are invited to re-approach these works of art to discover what indeed they mean for us personally. Other drawings of Farthing's treat art history like a diagram of the underground system, a series of lines and intersections, artists becoming stations on imaginary journeys. But unlike the maps we are so familiar with which exist as fixed systems, Farthing's nervous line suggests a fluidity where the inference is that tomorrow might bring a totally new configuration. Nothing is actually fixed, there is always everything to gain, the game is not up and there is everything to play for.

The sense of play that Farthing proposes is echoed in the work of James Faure Walker. His games are through layers, building up one upon the other, each subsequent layer both obscuring what is below while asserting new information. Faure Walker has been one of the leading advocates of the computer as a tool within fine art, recognized in his inclusion in the exhibition *Digital Pioneers* at the V&A Museum, London in 2009. He brings together a practice predicated on painting where the computer is one of a variety of means that he uses to construct images through layering. His work is rare in the manner in which it attempts to integrate a wide range of languages from the photographic through to the gestural within a single image. All elements appear malleable, made subordinate to the whole and in keeping with his position as a painter, there is an overriding sense of the brush and the calligraphic which permeates and organizes these works, irrespective of whether that brush is real or computer generated,

If the brush as a drawing tool characterizes Faure-Walker, the simple torchlight does for Chris Wainwright. In a clear reminder that photography can be seen in essence as drawing with light, Wainwright begins with darkness and through gesture and movement both

illuminates and leaves the trace of his action. Referencing Etienne-Jules Marey's early experiments in recording motion through light in the 1880's, Wainwright also shares that ground between art and science. Much of his recent work has focused on issues around climate change and how the environment is affected by the action of man. Here Wainwright's action merely leaves a trace on the camera's memory as a record of the event. The photograph is then this memory given form to enable it to become memorable in the mind of the viewer. By using himself in these actions he comes close to the manner in which calligraphy can be seen to reflect the physiology of the artist, the movement of the arm, the ensuing arc, each particular to the body connected to the brush.

In Wainwright's practice, the production of his work often involves collaboration and teamwork. Many artists have moved away from the model of the solitary practitioner, seeing the need to involve and engage with wider groups. This sense of collaborative practice is essential within a mode of inquiry that crosses disciplines, but while for Wainwright these groups would be an ever changing palimpsest depending on need and circumstance, for the artists Tamiko O'Brien and Mark Dunhill they have closed down these possibilities and pledged to work together as a joint collaborative partnership. From that moment in 1998, they exchanged the individual 'I' for the joint 'we' and decisions that they had previously made based on their own intuition, now had to be negotiated.

In their work in this exhibition they present material around a singular project made in response to the monumental sculpture *Thunder Rock*, by Isamu Noguchi. While Noguchi's sculpture places esthetic sensibility as its all-consuming *raison d'être*, for Dunhill and O'Brien their take is predominantly practical. Their work is disarming; the grand gesture has been replaced by pragmatic questioning. They approach Noguchi's sculpture, not from the art historian's perspective or indeed from the position of the artist trying to fathom its meaning, but from the humble position of addressing the logistical problem of moving this gigantic piece of rock. This led me to recall when, as a student, I saw a vast open truck transporting a Henry Moore sculpture through London in the early hours of a frosty winter's morning, complete with police escort, like a cross between a state visit and the secret movement of nuclear waste. Dunhill and O'Brien remind us that much of what is regarded as lofty ideas and vaulting ambition can come down to the mundane reality of problem solving on a tight budget with limited resources.

What is life affirming about this work is that they are not overawed by the immensity of the problem. It is through their creative dialogue that a solution is found and the objective fulfilled, be it through an alchemical change from solid matter to skein. Drawings, photographs and models demonstrate and lead us through this process of transformation and problem solving, the camera acting as a tool alongside the pencil and other media. As a sculptor and printmaker I find it easy to engage in their practice; in both disciplines the question of how to do something and how to think through material and process is always at the forefront.

In the drawings that I am presenting, each starts from the same starting point. I drew a number of everyday objects, none of any consequence on their own, but together having the potential to say something about the things we take with us through a life being led. These drawings begin like games, the players or the objects have their starting place, and then the action commences according to set rules. Not only are the rules different in each drawing but also importantly, the materials, pencil and ruler, freehand pencil, pen and ink, each asserting

their own character. I would hope that they also point towards an idea of the interconnectivity of experience, how in assessing a life it is the way things join and connect that is finally measured. It's the little things that interest me.

It seems fitting to end with Jordan Baseman for whom drawing holds little promise "I never draw. Ever. I can't draw". This is not an exhibition in praise of drawing but one that seeks to demonstrate the place of drawing within practice. What function does it serve for these artists and also intuitively, (all the artists are engaged in teaching) what might be the collective voice, the overall impression? It is important in this context to represent an artist whose practice denies the importance of drawing. Without that as a question it is easy to slip into an academic self-congratulatory warmth of shared values. Baseman's position, puts a spanner in the works and in the context of this exhibition, my hope is that all the works are revisited with a sceptical eye. Dramatically differing positions begin to emerge, what might have begun by seeming to be harmony becomes confrontational. Baseman's concession to drawing is in the potential concealed within the can of film stock. One begins to image the thousands of frames, each itself a picture and each vulnerable to change and deterioration. Maybe it is this sense of potential that connects all these drawings, and in Baseman's sealed containers, a metaphor of ideas waiting to be released.

Paul Coldwell