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OC Drawing

curated by Ross Hansen

with: Nelleke Beltjens, Tobias Collier, Johan De Wilde, Ross Hansen, Claude Heath, Reece Jones, Johan Nobell, Julian Wakelin

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In an age in which artists can legitimately do anything, it frequently occurs to me that it is the work that *has* to be made, that which is born of obsession and compulsion that has the most lasting value. The hypothesis, tested by this show, is that there is something about drawing, the original means of expression, that naturally aligns itself with this *need* to do and make things a certain way, and that as such, drawing has become a particularly apt medium for our times.

In what is undoubtedly an increasingly plural art world there has nonetheless, in recent years, been a marked resurgence of interest in drawing as a medium for serious consideration. The revival of fortunes for this most ancient, direct and inclusive means of artistic expression has, perhaps surprisingly, grown out of a context in the 1990s in which art became for many observers analogous with big business. The prevailing taste seemed to be for big, slick, mechanised output and the production of artworks was routinely outsourced to third parties and teams of assistants.

A subsequent generation of artists have sought to re-connect with the act of making, to embrace and value the visceral, tactile and hand-made properties of the artwork. This direct (re-) engagement of the artist with their materials is at its most humble, pared-down and fundamental in the arena of drawing. If the re-appraisal of the potential of drawing was in part a rejection of the disengaged, de-personalised 'business-model' of artistic practice that preceded it; it makes sense that much of the drawing work to follow has been highly personal and singular in nature, exemplified by meticulous attention to detail and labour-intensive mark-making. This is the artist as maker in the purest possible sense.

This exhibition is necessarily a presentation of artistic practices that already exist, rather than a theme to which people have responded. This is not an attitude that can be adopted with any sincerity for the occasion, but a genuine way of being. I think everyone in this show would be making their work 'in any case', regardless of the vagaries of the art market. As such these are fellow artists whom I recognise as the real-deal, who make-work because they feel compelled to do so. This can manifest itself in a need to produce *per se*, or in rigid adherence to a pre-defined system of production. In the former instance drawing provides the most direct way to fulfil an ever-present urge to create.

The position that drawing occupies in **Julian Wakelin's** practice initially appears to be a conventional one, as a development activity that feeds into the production of his paintings. In reality, the drawings are never directly translated into paintings but form part of a continuum of production- an outlet through which he can continue to output imagery even when not physically in the studio, or when supplies of oil paint and linen are running low! To leave Wakelin in the company of a scrap of paper and the means to make a mark on it is to return to a drawing.

It could be argued that there is an existential anxiety underpinning a need to produce- an anxiety (obsession) answered by the ritual (compulsion) of drawing. I draw therefore I exist. **Tobias Collier's** inductive dot drawings include dots so tiny that they are only visible under magnification. It may seem perverse to make work that extends beyond the senses of the audience but this actually reveals an essential characteristic of the work, namely that the work 'is what it is', not just what it appears to be. It is a physical object but also a record of time, the hours spent on each drawing recorded in the works' titles.

The tangibility of time and labour is also a fundamental property of my own (re-) recordings of pre-existing images. In this show I am presenting a series of 4 pairs of drawings made on a light-box in much the same way that an animator constructs hand-drawn frames from a sequence of photographic models. Here there is no sequence however, just a single image, a constant motif against which the individuality of each drawn 'pass' across the image becomes visible. The changes and shifts from one drawing to the next are created by interference or 'noise' resulting from the manual process of transcription, and from subtle variations in the composition of the hot-pressed sheets of watercolour paper on which they are drawn, which filter the backlit model-image down to a grainy apparition.

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The recording or foregrounding of process is a common thread running through much of the work in this exhibition. To acknowledge the process within the form of the work can be seen as revealing the rules of the game. To follow such a process through to a point of resolution, or saturation becomes in this instance almost like a test of the artist's belief in that process. The directness of the medium ensures that the commitment of the artist to their task is evident for all to see. The link between the mindset of the artist and the productive act is closer in drawing than in any other medium, the way the work is made is what the viewer sees.

The need to do things a certain way, to go the long way around, is here exemplified in the procedural work of **Claude Heath**. Heath's previous projects have included making drawings of objects whilst blindfolded, a literal demonstration of having 'blind faith' in a process. Here he continues to negotiate the depiction of 3-dimensional space on a 2-dimensional surface via the use of digital technologies. Advanced 3D computer software has been used to construct a kind of 'key' to an object, a figurine of an acrobat, which he has then translated into a flat drawing via a process of erasure.

At first glance **Nelleke Beltjens'** drawings appear to belong to a tradition of work that has its roots in Abstract Expressionism. Closer scrutiny reveals the use of a distinctive counter-intuitive system of mark making however that negates any reading of direct expressive intent. The drawings almost seem to complicate themselves, what *might* have been interpreted as expressive intent, becomes a convoluted attempt to apprehend the indefinable, that which is destined to remain illusively just out of reach.

In a 21st Century society that appears to be increasingly defined by fragmentation and uncertainty the definitive, manufactured statements prevalent in the 90's seem increasingly at odds. The fact that drawing, the most immediate and spontaneous of mediums, has been taken-up by artists seeking to interpret and reflect an increasingly complex and uncertain world should come as no surprise.

It is perhaps no coincidence that much of the drawing practice to emerge in recent years is also environmental in nature. **Johan Nobell's** drawings make sense of the world through the construction of highly personal, alternative worlds that echo or parallel our own. Nobell's dislocated landscapes populated by mutant creatures conjure up an image of a world teetering on the brink of collapse, of circumstances veering or slipping beyond our control.

Concocted partly from his imagination and partly from a multitude of references sampled from art history and contemporary culture, the cinematic landscape drawings of **Reece Jones** are also fundamentally hybrid constructions. Floating through each of his most recent works is a kind of blank rectilinear shape, a negative space or 'control' element, that can be variously, and sometimes simultaneously, seen as both an illuminated screen located within a landscape, and as an opening into a space beyond the (flattened) screen of the image. There is a contradiction at the heart of Jones' production process too. The repeated application and systematic removal of charcoal by abrading the surface of the drawing has the dual impact of both removing any overt traces of 'the artist's hand', and of building up a rich patina of striations that fix the object firmly in the realm of the hand-made.

A similar dichotomy can be identified in the work of **Johan De Wilde**. His production process is an accumulative one whereby the image is gradually built-up line by line with the aid of a ruler. Despite the systematic, mechanical approach to the work, the surfaces of these drawings have a seductive, sensual quality to them that reveals a very human sensibility. They resonate, or 'hum' with the intensity of the hand made gesture.

The artists in O C Drawing are all engaged in sustained and repeated investigations into the possibilities afforded by the medium of drawing. Each is also to my mind, making work 'about drawing' in that the use of direct or indirect mark making is either a fundamental property, or overtly played with and challenged within the works. Whether the forms of the drawings are revealed through the very process of their manufacture, or made to fulfil a projected, preconceived end, they are all sustained by their relationship to the primal creativity of the drawing act. This exhibition therefore serves as a reminder of the enduring vitality and lasting value of drawing and of the rich possibilities that continue to be afforded by the medium.

Ross Hansen, 2012