

Jerwood Drawing Prize 2015

Five responses
by five writers

a-n Writer Development Programme

Written by Lydia Ashman - Sunny Cheung - Anneka French
Manjinder Sidhu - James Steventon. **Editor** Chris Sharratt

Welcome

On Wednesday 23 September 2015 at Jerwood Space, London, a-n The Artists Information Company held the first of three workshops in its new Writer Development Programme.

Led by a-n News editor Chris Sharratt and attended by five writers – Lydia Ashman, Sunny Cheung, Anneka French, Manjinder Sidhu and James Steventon – the last task of the day, the result of which you now hold in your hands, involved a visit to the Jerwood Drawing Prize 2015 exhibition.

The writers were given a very open brief: respond to the show with a piece of writing between 300-500 words. It could focus on a particular work or explore a perceived theme, but what it couldn't be was a straightforward review of the exhibition.

The hope was that this approach would produce five diverse pieces of writing that would add another layer of thoughtful interpretation to this fantastic showcase of drawing talent. We think it has done just that – and hope that you agree.

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Jerwood Drawing Prize is a joint initiative, led by Professor Anita Taylor, Dean of Bath School of Art and Design at Bath Spa University and supported by Jerwood Charitable Foundation through its contemporary gallery programme Jerwood Visual Arts in London and on tour nationally.

Ancient & modern: the myths & reality of drawing

James Steventon

Legend has it that the ancient Greeks Zeuxis and Parrhasius once held a competition to establish who was the better painter. Zeuxis unveiled a painting of grapes so realistic that the birds flew down to peck at them. Zeuxis, keen to reveal Parrhasius' painting, grasped at the curtain, not realising that it too was a painted illusion.

The story offers us a means to navigate this year's Jerwood Drawing Prize. One could easily substitute Zeuxis for Roland Hicks' image of the detritus of drawing activity – the shrapnel of broken pencil lead and the skirt of a pencil shaving, seemingly trapped under a strip of Sellotape.

As Parrhasius, Daniel Crawshaw presents the object itself: an old pan, the base of which has been scratched through a lifetime of use until it now resembles the surface of the moon, touching on both the sublime and the everyday.

In the tale, Parrhasius is deemed the victor: Zeuxis deceived the birds but Parrhasius deceived Zeuxis. However, the Jerwood exhibition is not attempting to deceive. Rather, it is an investigation into what drawing can be. As such, the artists are in collaboration rather than competition.

The material qualities of drawing are at times examined, with rough and dirty media such as graphite, chalk, charcoal and carborundum. There are digital prints, too, as well as wool and thread – even burnt light on paper (a photograph?).

Thomas Gosebruch's entry is rendered in oil paint, that staple medium traditionally signifying painting. What sets these works aside as drawing is the intention of the artists to question rather than answer.

Selection panelist (and painter) Dexter Dalwood notes: "An important condition of drawing is that... it is explorative". Fellow panelist Salima Hashmi adds that "one is compelled to test it by presenting to a wider audience". Drawings are an exploration of territory, whereas a finished work might be seen as a definitive proclamation of the explored, like a conquering flag, only to be eventually usurped by another, just as Parrhasius' curtain followed Zeuxis' grapes.

A number of works in the exhibition also test the potential of drawing to express realism, whose shadow often falls upon those who feel they 'can't draw'. But seen in the light of investigation, who would ever claim that they couldn't explore?

As marks made on a surface to test and resolve ideas, writing too might be considered a form of drawing. Certainly this writer does not seek to provide a definitive answer, but to invite the audience to consider what drawing may be and to take part in the exploration.

Hands contain knowledge: exploring the drawings of Lee John Phillips

Anneka French

Washers, nails, screwdrivers, tubes of glue and electrical socket covers fill the sketchbook pages of Lee John Phillips. But while the subject might on first mention appear mundane, this is an extraordinary and nuanced undertaking.

The first volume of Phillips' work, *The Shed Project* (2014-15), on display as part of the Jerwood Drawing Prize exhibition, is a lovingly drawn and numbered inventory of 3672 objects found in the shed of his late grandfather. Drawing in fine black ink and sometimes working up to 15 hours a day, by the end of the project Phillips will have catalogued more than 80,000 separate objects.

Traces of the artist's grandfather are recorded through these meticulous drawings across 88 sketchbook pages. The accumulated smudges, dents and chips refer to the material memory of each object and of time spent making; the tools and parts left abandoned by Phillips' grandfather reveal the potential of projects never started and never finished.

This is a catalogue of emotional memory too; a slow and considered way of coming to terms with loss. Drawing and making coalesce on Phillips' pages, metaphorically layering two sets of working hands in time; family hands that mirror each other.

Our hands, as the artist and maker Linda Brothwell noted, contain knowledge. Hands are to be trusted: they are our most direct interface with the world and

the basic vehicles for making everything, from a line drawing to a chest of drawers.

This recognition of the hand made, of 'hand skills' and hand tools – be they a pen or plane – is important within the context of the Jerwood Drawing Prize.

As ordinary lives become increasingly dependent upon the digital, our hands are still vital in the clicking of keys and the swiping of screens. They remain the finest tools we have at our disposal – and especially when it comes to making and to drawing.

The Dalston Myth

Lydia Ashman

The uncomfortable tangle of limbs and torsos in John Close's drawing invokes Centauromachy, a drunken brawl from Greek mythology. When the Lapiths invited their Centaur cousins to a wedding feast, the guests overindulged in wine. Their barbaric nature was unleashed and a bloody fight broke out.

Intriguingly, Close has chosen Dalston, the notorious East London neighbourhood, as the setting for the classical battle in his work *Dalston: Battle of the Lapiths and Centaurs*. A Hackney native, he has experienced changes in the area and seen its shifting demographic.

Though he doesn't object to the transformation of Dalston, Close is aware of the resulting inequality. Despite the relatively high level of deprivation in the ward, the average home is now sold for over £500,000.

He is also sensitive to divisions between communities. "As an artist," he says, "it's dismaying that Hackney has a worldwide reputation for arts and culture, but many local people who are so geographically close to it find the art world baffling and alienating."

These cultural and economic gaps breed tension, misunderstanding and conflict. Recently, protesters in neighbouring Shoreditch attacked a café, Cereal Killer, and an estate agent. Angry with the rising cost of living, they saw these businesses as representative of the ongoing gentrification of East London.

Close wanted to present these clashes without resorting to the caricatures or cliché that Dalston is often subject to. In

the last ten years, the area has been dubbed both one of the worst places to live in Britain and the coolest neighbourhood in London. Now, some assert that its star is on the wane.

Yet these one dimensional headlines do little to encapsulate Dalston's true nature. Though Close's drawing presents a fight, the figure in the top left-hand corner looks like she could be experiencing reverie in movement. Like Dalston, it can be tricky to tell what's actually going on, even while you're looking at it.

Similarly, class, creed and race are largely absent from the drawing, as are some of the stereotypes you might expect in a portrayal of contemporary Dalston. There are no extravagant beards, eccentric shoes or Turkish restaurateurs; no city workers, Rastafarians or Ridley Road Market traders.

Instead, the figures are connected only by their participation in conflict. Close is keen for us to focus on the futility of the fighting itself, and question why and how the altercation might be taking place.

Close's ambiguous drawing encourages a more nuanced, considered and pluralistic reading of Dalston, and the wider issues concerning cities and gentrification. By eschewing well-worn narratives, he avoids perpetuating the Dalston myth.

Titular transformations

Sunny Cheung

There are many ways to read an exhibition. In the Jerwood Drawing Prize 2015, for example, 40 (or 69%) of the selected artists have surnames that start with the letters A-M; 18 (or 31%) of the artists have surnames which start with letters in the N-Z range. Statistically, this almost adheres to the 80/20 Pareto principle.

A perhaps more enlightening way to read the show would be to explore the titles of the drawings in it. Considering the wealth of visually and conceptually imaginative works, there is a surprisingly large number of literal descriptions, from Lois Langmead's *Pelvis* to Tom Harrison's *From Andrew's Flat, Singapore*, this year's winner.

This is not to suggest that a work's title is any gauge to the artistic merit behind the work – that would be nonsense. Some pieces would be impenetrable were it not for a descriptive title. Yet the title of Hannah Blight Anderson's sculpture, *1 Minute*, offers significant clues as to its method and meaning, without giving the whole game away. In this case, the method involves traced head motions captured over a one-minute period.

Daniel Crawshaw's *Moonshine*, meanwhile, is a wonderfully thoughtful piece made with the most unusual of materials – a well-used frying pan. The title simply acts as a confirmation of what is represented, and thus simplifies the work as an etched image presented to the viewer, rather than exploring the phenomenology of perception so cleverly exploited here.

However, that is not to say that a literal interpretation of a work is necessarily to

its detriment. On the contrary, as well as being descriptive the title can also become a conceptual driving force, bringing further implied meanings and readings.

A good example of this – not featured in the Jerwood show – is Janek Schaefer's 1995 work, *Recorded Delivery*, which traced the aural journey of a Royal Mail parcel. Its title references both the method of production and the subject matter itself.

Robert Battams' work for this year's show, *Space for Redevelopment*, highlights this potential for visual and literal play. While the hand-cut paper piece has an obvious architectural quality and Escher-like allusions, the title adds a slightly ambiguous quality, playing on real-world ideas of gentrification as well the physical spaces that occupy the sculpture itself. It also adds a potentially psychological component to the work.

Although mostly rooted in architectural systems, Battams' wider output meanders between the sculptural and the gestural, the commercial and artistic. Seen in this way, the lines in the work coalesce like the firing neurons in a human brain, alluding towards the psycho-artistic development of his output.

Titles, then – as well as being able to cause great anxiety in those involved in naming a piece – can transform the viewer's experience of a work. Even, perhaps, when the title in question is *Untitled*.

Is drawing today a noun or a verb?

Manjinder Sidhu

Beyond semantics, the question 'Is drawing today a noun or a verb' invites you to reframe your experience of the Jerwood Drawing Prize 2015 exhibition.

In the late 1970s, as the materiality of the art object was keenly reappraised, the artist Richard Serra famously described drawing as a verb: "Anything you can project as expressive in terms of drawing – ideas, metaphors, emotions, language structures – results from the act of doing."

Art as process, that is art that bears the traces of its own making over time, was everywhere in all art forms. Artists were making concrete what could not be considered material: translating artful actions into art objects.

In 2002 at MOMA (New York), the exhibition 'Drawing Now: Eight Propositions' challenged Serra's interpretation. Curated by Laura Hoptman, it was a show of contemporary drawings that rejected his orientation towards process: "By and large these drawings are finished and autonomous and to some degree representational," she explained.

Hoptman described contemporary drawing as projective; depicting something that has been imagined before it is drawn, as opposed to being found through the process of making.

Beyond the realm of fine art, these artists were creating works that were directly responding to and communicating something about the language and life of the world around them. Boldly opposing Serra, Hoptman suggested that contemporary drawing is a noun.

Exploring the fantastic variety of works in the Jerwood Drawing Prize show, what is drawing in 2015? The three judges on this year's panel viewed 3072 works over two days, finally selecting the 60 drawings you see in the exhibition – work that communicates drawing at this moment in time.

Looking around, transgressing the seductive formal qualities of the work itself, is it possible to identify key issues unique to our world now?

How, for example, has technology such as CAD influenced what you see here? And what of globalisation, migration, the media, economics, the environment? If drawing is a way of seeing the world, what is the work saying about our relationship with that world?

And as a final reflection, what of that opening question? Is the drawing here a noun or a verb? Or is it, perhaps, both?



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