

A Slice through the World: Contemporary Artists' Drawings
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The title of this show refers to Walter Benjamin's essay fragment, *Painting and the Graphic Arts*, 1917, in which the term *Graphic* is ascribed a symbolic function involving signs rather than painted marks, signs which are visualised as a horizontal slice through the world. Collaboratively arranged by Modern Art Oxford and The Drawing Room London, the show presents drawing as a focus of contemporary artists' wider conceptual practice, a humanistic activity in our increasingly digital world. The show is seen in context of a 1973 exhibition entitled, (*Drawing*) at the then alternative space, Museum of Modern Art, Oxford. This show emerged from the conceptualism of 1968-1970, arguably the last avant-garde era.

Cyprian Murisan's drawing *Palimpsest, Artforum November 2007 (1)*, 2016, and his wider practice including experience as a magazine editor, interrupt the apparatus of the production of Art. He describes his drawings as palimpsests that consist of superimposed sketches of all artwork and advertising imagery, from the specified issue of Artforum magazine. The effect is ungraceful, involving laborious copies of copies of copies where all signs become saturated and are levelled through re-use, a mindless mimicry that forms, paradoxically, a critique of originality or authenticity. A levelling occurs, akin to a last judgement, of all aspects of both drawing and of imagery related to the art market.

Distracted scratchings and doodling on Plexiglas panels from a bus shelter, a record of people waiting, make up the readymade/ aided drawings by Ian Kiaer. They form part of an installation entitled, *Endnote tooth, (panoramico, pink)*, 2017. The panels are sandwiched with layers of smudged plastic membrane and stained paper on which can be seen minimally drawn architectural shapes. These are stacked one above the other in the manner of an 18th century academy display. The artist connects his ideas to the writings of Utopian architect Frederick Kiesler and to the architectural ruin of the Monsanto Panoramic Restaurant, built in 1968. This is now reduced to a viewing platform above Lisbon. It is leftover utopian architecture of Portugal's 'New State' regime. This building is referenced in the show as an image of a cardboard model projected on the wall alongside the drawings. There are quite a few signs here to unravel. I find the contrast between utopian ruin and bus shelter to be provocative, likewise the combination of the salon and the street. These paired associations form a confluence of current artistic practice where a distanced utopia and an academicised inert avant-gardism are metaphorically, and absurdly, experienced as waiting in the street in distracted limbo for the bus.

While the sacred space of representational play and aesthetic experience remain admirably inviolate in David Musgrave's, *Spirit plane no.3*, 2015, the wider discourse generated by the artist around the work is important to its meaning. The relationship between artificial intelligence and his tromp-l'oeil drawings of mundane objects has Orwellian undertones which are not visually obvious. Crumpled paper drawn with barely visible marks merges seamlessly with the flat paper ground, yet here what fools the eye also fools the mind. The process of cognitive reception in our minds, the subject of the work, alludes through Musgrave's wider practice of conversation and writing, to anxiety about the controlling potential of Artificial Intelligence. Whether these anxieties are really apparent in the drawing is a moot point as these drawings are perceived through the rhetoric that surrounds them.

'Piercingly sinuous line' is an art historical descriptor of Ingres' primacy of drawing before painting. Ingres', *La Grand Odalisque*, painted in 1814 depicts an exoticised reclining courtesan. This figure is interpreted without line by artist ruby onyinyechi amanze. The title of her drawing consists of a narration by amanze, including the fragment: ...'*who are you kissing when you kiss a mask*', 2015. The reclining figure in her drawing wears an African hat and mask. Another head, depicting an African woman, possibly the artists' self-portrait hovers close by and kisses the 'odalisque'. The proposition of the mask invokes a plethora of received identities - primitivism, orientalism, exoticism which when kissed transform the sense of selfhood through increased complexity. This large-scale drawing by amanze also extends into floating landscape. Travel imagery, scooters and walkers, trek across the paper ground. Similarly Wura-Natasha Ogunji's drawing in this show, *The proof, an undersea volcano, attraction, extraction, distraction*, 2017, is a large, elegant dream scape with sensuous bodies entangled in the contours of landscape amid magically floating eyes, ears and noses. Both artists are comfortable in a cocoon of global identity politics.

The scribble-drawings of Kate Davis' *Disgrace*, 2009 series also critique the relentlessness of sinuous line applied to nude women in a group of Modigliani prints taken from an art book. The prints have been over-drawn in what Davis describes as disgraceful protest, using her own body as stencil. Her method is to superimpose every outline of herself that will fit over the Modigliani print. As a conceptual task this is closest to the 1973 show. Its clarity, negation of skill and straightforward approach is effective within the parameters defined by the artist.

Barbara Walker's *Flags*, 2018, depicts the King's African Rifles on parade, a British colonial regiment. It foregrounds the historically marginalised black troops with realistic pencil rendering while making the white officer class barely visible, through a method of white on white embossed relief. Walker's drawing makes its point yet the work reverts to ideologically conservative modes of production such as technically conventional drawing skills. The wider context of disenfranchisement is also invisible: who made the flags, who made the rifles and whose class interest did that machinery serve? Avant-garde and kitsch, both military terms, resonate as artist strategies today. An analogy can be made between the contradiction of marginalised soldiers surviving by supporting the interests of imperialism, and an historically disenfranchised artist today confirming or disaffirming the machinery of a corporatized art world. Walker's back - to - basics, skilful drawings in 1970 would have been considered by some to be reactionary, yet here method is subsumed by the directness of a confrontational critical realism.