

Just talking – about drawing

Curators Todd Fuller and Lisa Woolfe discuss Just Draw

Todd: It is important to say at the outset, as artists and curators we are passionate about drawing. Lisa: As artists, drawing is our practice and as curators, we spend a lot of time looking at drawing and contemporary drawing practices both in Australia and overseas. **Todd:** And, simply put, that is what this exhibition is about: it is a survey of contemporary Australian drawing practices. Importantly, we have focussed on emerging and mid-career artists, as opposed to very well established artists. We want to introduce audiences to a new generation of Australian drawers. **Lisa:** Thematically the concerns of the artists are quite broad, and for most, drawing is not just a part of their practice, it is the entirety of their practice.

Todd: We have presented a diversity of approaches to drawing, both in material and method. We have included artists using traditional materials to explore contemporary concerns, sitting alongside those exploring interesting methods and periphery of drawing, if you like, materials. Artists working at the edge of drawing, if you like, consists of a fan placed opposite long strips of hanging VHS tape. **Todd:** Connie particularly defines traditions. She seeks out unconventional materials to explore 'performing' before the audience. She also uses new technology called 'Tagtool', a digital drawing software enabling her to create more of a spectacle with light and animation. **Todd:** Kellie and Flatline are making significant contributions to the 'Draw

Visitors are invited to turn the fan on, creating a graceful, gestural 'drawing' in space. **Lisa:** While Grant Stewart uses pen on paper, the drawings are actually executed by a robot. **Todd:** His original robot replicated intricate designs created by Grant with software. His goal was to remove human decisions from the process, and since collaborating with an engineer he's been able to achieve this. His robot responds to movements in the gallery space, raising interesting questions of authorship and the value of artistic structures (like the Blacktown shopping centre in *Available for public hire* (2009)). She creates compelling narratives with hyper-realistic images, devoid of people. Her work speaks to class divides, inequality and the social and domestic problems concealed within these walls. **Lisa:** Paul White's broken vehicles offer a new take on the still life genre. Paul grew up in Western Sydney and embraced the car culture of his youth. Undoubtedly his drawings are nostalgic, but conceptually the work raises questions of obsolescence and our throwaway society.

Todd: That's right. Many artists use traditional mediums to explore challenging traditional drawing mediums. **Lisa:** However, *Just Draw* is not all about new technology and challenging traditional drawing mediums. **Todd:** That's right. Many artists use traditional mediums to explore very contemporary ideas. Catherine O'Donnell applies the 'golden mean' a foundation of architecture of the Renaissance, to the fibro houses of western Sydney and sterile suburban questions to dig deep into their psyche. The result is an intricate, symbolic map of the subjects' consciousness. **Lisa:** Jack Stahel interrogates his own thought processes, rather than others. He is draws obsessively over hours, days, weeks accumulating his thought patterns. He calls his work 'the study of drawing as thought process, and a study of thought process through drawing'. The end result is a collection of interweaved territories, objects and languages that seem inscrutable, but then again so are thought processes.

Todd: Finally, drawing for many artists is an act of daily practice. Like a musician perfecting a scale it can be from observation but rather *to Perform*, movement, a movement gaining momentum internationally as an exciting interdisciplinary artform. **Lisa:** Jeremy's portraits are not thought processes. Instead he takes us on a journey into the mind of his subjects and into himself. **Todd:** His process resembles a therapy session rather than a typical portrait sitting. He asks his subjects a long series of quite personal questions to dig deep into their psyche. The result is an intricate, symbolic map of the subjects' consciousness. **Lisa:** Jack Stahel interrogates his own thought processes, rather than others. He is draws obsessively over hours, days, weeks accumulating his thought patterns. He calls his work 'the study of drawing as thought process, and a study of thought process through drawing'. The end result is a collection of interweaved territories, objects and languages that seem inscrutable, but then again so are thought processes.

Todd: For me, drawing is a kind of canary in the mine, for the contemporary art world. An indicator of health, concerns and conditions, it offers an insight into what is going on. There has been a lot of discussions about the relevance of drawing in contemporary art practice, and contemporary art education. But I like to think of drawing as a microcosm for contemporary culture. At any

Lisa: Matilda and John Bokor offer great representations of a dedication to constant studio practice. Matilda's studio in fact feels like a Renaissance atelier. For Matilda, drawing crucial foundation to a strong painting practice. When we visited Matilda, not only did her work excite us, but we wanted to give an insight into her studio and its delightful qualities. **Todd:** Similarly John Bokor is a constant drawer. Although John and Matilda's approaches are quite different, their concerns are quite similar, and in many ways echo those artists of the early 19th century – everyday life, the human condition if you like. **Lisa:** And perhaps simply demonstrating what can happen if you just draw.



Hannah Quinlivan, *State of Suspension* (with artist), 2015. Steel, PVC, nylon, salt and shadow, dimensions variable (2 km wire, 1.5 km nylon, 6.5 kg salt).

point in history look at what was happening in drawing and you get a clear marker of the dominant and diverse artforms of the time. Surveying drawing gives us an understanding of the gamut of art making and prevailing themes.

www.just-draw.com.au
produced by Lisa Woolfe and Todd Fuller

Just Draw

Newcastle Art Gallery
February 6 - May 1

Bathurst Regional Art Gallery
August 19 - October 2

NEWCASTLE ART GALLERY

BRAG
bathurst regional art gallery

Just Draw is an exhibition presenting the diversity of contemporary Australian drawing. It is a celebration of a medium which continues to nudge in new directions while at the same time staying true to the familiar qualities which we have come to know and expect of the artform.

Drawing is an enduring and endearing practice. It uses the most simplest of tools, in this way it is accessible, humble and even democratic. More importantly, it often uses the most basic of actions being that of an implement simply dragged across a surface. However this mundane formula is enlivened by intense observation, expressive gestures, daily practice, rich ideas and even an interrogation of this very formula itself.

Exhibiting artists

Connie Anthes, Hannah Bertram, John Bokor, Todd Fuller, Flatline, Kellie O'Dempsey, Matilda Michell, Catherine O'Donnell, Hannah Quinlivan, Jeremy Smith, Jack Stahel, Grant Stewart, Jane Theau, Paul White and Lisa Woolfe.

Hannah Bertram's installation for *Just Draw* is presented with the generous assistance of the students and faculty of The University of Newcastle School of Creative Arts, Watt Space Gallery and Ms Emma Cother (Backyard Bus Residency).

Just Draw is the first collaborative project of emerging curators **Lisa Woolfe** and **Todd Fuller**. Both are exhibiting artists with a focus on the drawing medium.

Paul White, *Black and Blue (Phoenix Firebird)*, pencil on paper; 40 x 53 cm, courtesy the artist and Scott Livesey Gallery, Melbourne

Catalogue contributors

Writer and artist **Dr Janet McKenzie** studied at the Australian National University (History of Art/Philosophy) and the Canberra School of Art. She taught at the Canberra School of Art, the Victoria College and the City Art Institute, Sydney. She has written and co-edited numerous publications, including the major publication *Contemporary Australian Drawing # 1* (2012).

Artist **Hannah Bertram** is a PhD candidate at VCA, University of Melbourne with a MFA and BFA from RMIT, Melbourne. Her ephemeral dust installations and building interventions have been exhibited across Australia and internationally. She is a lecturer at Deakin University Melbourne.

Artist **Matilda Michell** has a BFA from National Art School, Sydney and BA (Media Arts and Production), UTS, Sydney. Matilda has exhibited widely in curated, group and solo exhibitions across Australia. Matilda lives in Sydney, where she also teaches painting and drawing.

(Who cares) What Drawing Is?

Matilda Michell

The notion that art cannot be taught has gained such currency in recent times that we are in danger of convincing artists that there is no point in attempting to acquire new skills. The single biggest problem I encounter as a teacher, is that people perceive the deficiencies in their skills as unalterable aspects of their artistic personality or style. This idea is dangerous, as it prevents the student from moving forwards and restricts their capacity to express themselves coherently.

The problem is at its worst in tertiary institutions because of the relatively short time frame between entering the school as a novice and leaving it again three years later as a fully fledged 'artist'. Art is a slow game and rushing students into weighty conceptual concerns before they've mastered the basics can be seriously detrimental to the evolution of their work. The prevalence of the 'art cannot be taught' approach has a number of knock on effects that persist well beyond the official study period.

A student goes to art school to learn to draw. The student begins by trying to draw an apple. As is natural, he struggles with simple proportions, accuracy and rendering form convincingly. While he is wrestling with these basics, a tutor comes by and demands to know WHY he is drawing the apple.

The tutor questions the student's approach to drawing and accuses him of irrelevance and failure to contribute anything new to the grand narrative of art. Confused, the student re-evaluates his drawing. It looks amateurish and dull, like a study exercise rather than a work of art.

The tutor encourages the student to draw quickly and without looking at his page. The result is heavy, dark and clumsy but seems confident in its mistakes and is superficially more pleasing than the student's previous tentative attempts to render the apple faithfully.

The student becomes preoccupied with style, with HOW he is drawing. He begins to confuse the standard errors arising from his lack of experience with stylistic expression and is praised for it. His 'style' becomes one dictated by the limits of his skills and is likely to look

very much like that of his classmates.

He has now learnt to think of his drawing as something essentially out of his control, and to rely on gimmicks and tricks to feign a confidence he has not earned and does not understand. The technical skills of drawing come to be thought of as inherited rather than learnt, and so the student makes no attempt to improve his basic skills. On the occasions when he does, the results are disappointing. They look tentative, maybe childish or amateur or clumsy. They look, in fact, like student works.

The student complains frequently of having 'overworked' his drawings, not realising that the process of developing the drawing has merely revealed existing deficiencies rather than created them. He strives instead to complete things in a kind of frenzied, ill considered rush. He varies his media often and arbitrarily. Because he has no real control over what he does, he assumes that his emotional state will have an effect on the expression of the drawing. He is now paying very little attention to the drawing itself and concerns himself primarily with his own thoughts and feelings as he draws, assuming they will automatically transmit to the viewer.

Increasingly desperate to show his relevance and originality, the student abandons any attempt to depict his apple using traditional techniques. What is he to do? Perhaps he could draw with the apple? Apple makes a poor pigment ... but it is certainly novel. Or perhaps he could draw the apple and then erase it. The end result wouldn't really communicate anything to the viewer, but the accompanying artist statement could explain why they ought to find it interesting.

Eventually, it is very likely that the student will come to concern himself with a very grand sounding question. 'What is drawing?' This question is increasingly taking precedence in modern drawing rhetoric. It sounds initially like a very important question, one that we should all be interested in finding an answer to.

But what does it really matter what drawing is? To the artist driven by the desire to express something of life, defining the means he uses is pretty irrelevant. He will use whatever media are necessary to communicate most effectively. Is there any pressing reason why we need a clear definition for what drawing is? The only conceivable motivation is to establish a boundary,

which can then be broken. 'Pushing the boundaries' is an acceptable substitute for having something meaningful to say. And, in the absence of the necessary skills to interpret the world, the artist is obliged to take drawing itself as his subject; an endlessly self referential and suffocatingly narrow brief.

What we should really be interested in, is not what drawing is, but what it has to say about the world we live in; and to do that, artists need all the skills they can get. While there is certainly some truth in the old adage that art cannot be taught, it does not necessarily follow that none of the associated skills can be taught either. We will produce better, stronger, more original artists if we give students an art education that provides them with a comprehensive skill set and not one that actively discourages students from acquiring new skills.

Evolving and Devolving into Dust.

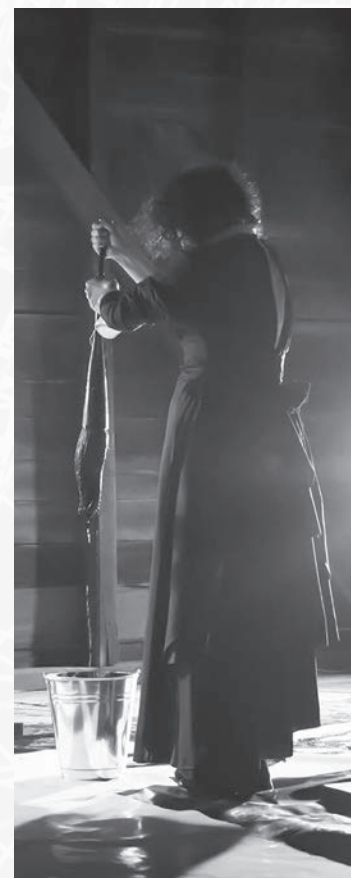
Hannah Bertram

The bookshelf in my lounge room is dusty. The colours and edges of the books are dulled by the indistinct blur of uncertain matter. At first it seems inconspicuous, almost not there, but when I wipe my finger across the ledge I draw a line through it and a soft grey film gathers on my fingertip. When we think about dust, that is, if we think about it at all, it is mostly a banal nuisance. It builds up in unreachable corners, under beds, on top of cupboards and deep in the piles of carpets, couches and curtains. We seek to banish it from our homes, wiping, beating, mopping and vacuuming it up and then promptly disposing of this worthless material. And yet, as we unknowingly shed skin and hair and as the imperceptible abrasion of our lives in motion microscopically cause our homes to disintegrate, in just a few hours, dust persistently returns. Our quotidian experience of dust may be one of mindless domestic repetition, however, dust is more than this – it is a unique and poetic material.

Under a microscope each spec of dust can be identified as a specific substance – carbon, dried skin cells, wood, soil, fiber, silicon etc. Almost

all matter both natural and man-made can be whittled away to dust. It could therefore, be thought of as potentially containing the deterioration of the whole world. However, dust is often described as the smallest thing we can see with the naked eye! We don't often see the individual mote, but instead we come across it as an accumulation of non-specific multifarious matter. It is mostly an ambiguous material, allowing us the freedom to wonder about and imagine its origins and idiosyncratic make-up.

Another unique characteristic of dust is the way in which it oscillates between form and formlessness. When it accumulates over an object, it adopts the form of that object like a second skin. Settling on a flat surface it can also describe the form of an object recently removed. But dust doesn't always come to rest. It is an airborne material. When it drifts invisibly through the air its loose shifting shape is borderless and formless. It is pervasive, always everywhere all at once. It is constantly being generated, often migratory, and eternally evolving into disappearing from itself. This transfiguring capacity makes dust void of specific form and yet is not purely formless.



Kellie O'Dempsey, *Art after Dark*, Pier 2 18th Biennale of Sydney, 2012. Photographer Grant MacIntyre

As an art material it might be best described as im/material and form/less and as 'enduringly temporary' matter. This term encapsulates both its fragile impermanence and its never-ending presence. The dust artwork in the gallery may seem to be a temporary arrangement of dust. But it also is connected to the broader cycle of dusts perpetuity in the world. Before the work could be made, dust was collected from sites around the city. These dusts are then mixed with dusts from previous iterations of the work. In this way the work is indebted to the continuous production of dust by man and nature. At the end of the exhibition the work will be swept up and thrown away. But what do we mean by 'away'? There is no such place². Instead the dust may be thrown into a rubbish bin that is then deposited into land fill. There it begins to be dispersed once more, reincorporating back into the world. Some of it may remain in the landfill where it will be contaminated by other dusts. Other particles will be lifted into the skies and carried to other locations. And some of these motes may drift on the breeze and find their way into your homes where it might come to rest on your bookshelf.

1. Joseph A. Amato, *Dust: A history of the small and the invisible* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001), p. 1.
2. Robin Nagle, 'The History and future of Fresh Kills' in *Dirt: The filthy reality of Everyday Life*. (London: Profile Books, 2011) 187-205

"Drawing is a Verb"

Janet McKenzie

The conceptual and the subjective, arguably the most vital components of contemporary art practice - connect in drawing more forcibly and more appropriately than in any other form of art. Drawing as an autonomous activity is being considered and created from numerous new perspectives enabling artists to exploit the infinite potential of the discipline using traditional materials, found objects, digital imaging, or the entire exhibition space of a gallery.

In the late 1960s and early seventies the materiality of the art object was fundamentally reassessed. Drawing represented a private and curiously unfettered position compared to painting or sculpture, which had always possessed a more public position. Yet at the same time 'drawings', in conceptual terms could

leave the page, and leave behind their status of preparatory study or sketch, and walk in to the landscape, as the work of Richard Long illustrates. If Paul Klee famously, 'took a line for a walk', on paper, conceptual or land artists in the 1970s took drawing for a walk in to the wider world. Diagrams of performances, or installations further extended the definition of drawing.

Key to the importance of drawing at the level of global culture, is its ability to express and explore ideas with great precision, strength and subtlety. Drawing exists irrespective of cultural identity and it is a basic human instinct to make marks, to draw, to write. It could be perceived as ironic, that with the knowledge of new technology and the multitude of new forms and attitudes, that artists have chosen drawing in manifold forms. Over the past ten years, drawing has assumed a pivotal role in defining contemporary culture.

One of the most useful artists, in terms of defining drawing in the twenty-first century is Joseph Beuys. *Thinking Is Form: The Drawings of Joseph Beuys* (1993) presented Beuys's conception of the processes of drawing and making sculpture as profoundly akin to thought.

*Drawing is the first visible form in my works... the first visible thing of the form of the thought, the changing point from the invisible powers to the visible thing... It's really a special kind of thought, brought down onto a surface, be it flat or be it rounded, be it a solid support like a blackboard or be it a flexible thing like paper or leather or parchment, or whatever kind of surface... It is not only a description of the thought... You have also incorporated the senses... the sense of balance, the sense of vision, the sense of audition, the sense of touch. And everything now comes together: the thought becomes modified by other creative strata, within the anthropological entity, the human being... And then the last, not least, the most important thing is that some transfer from the invisible to the visible ends with a sound, since the most important production of human beings is language... So this wide understanding, this wider understanding of drawing is very important for me.*²

Throughout his career, the practice and concept of Beuys's drawing underwent profound changes: he reconceptualised the role of his earlier drawings in the light of new ideas. And in doing so he came to radically reorder the relationship



Catherine O'Donnell, *Threshold*, 2014. Charcoal on paper, 222 X 300cm
Photograph: Adam Hollingsworth
Image courtesy the artist and Brenda May Gallery, Sydney

between drawing and what was traditionally considered to be an artist's primary form of expression. Beuys proposed a radical vision where real art, which had not yet been achieved, an art work spanning time and space, which he called "social sculpture" would transform art and life. His contribution to what we can now define as drawing is key to explaining the conceptual and formal leaps that have taken place in the last 20 years.

Drawing as a structural and conceptual necessity has become increasingly necessary for many artists working today. Not merely the creation of an illusion, but of psychological importance, the works of the artists in the exhibition here, curated by Todd Fuller and Lisa Woolfe, indicate the manner in which drawing has become an enabling activity. Drawing is both the first step towards abstraction, yet also an important way to incorporate reality in to an overall scheme of things. In our global culture, communications have been challenged and advanced at an extraordinary rate over the past century particularly in electronic terms, in the past decade. The World Wide Web, has enabled the rapid exchange of images and ideas yet it can also lead to sensory overload and confusion. The very act of drawing for the artist can be a fundamentally grounding experience, it redefines his or her contours of self and strengthens one's ability to interact, to prevent a sense of being

enveloped by the plethora of images, ideas and sensations.

Barnett Newman claimed that "drawing was the most direct and unmediated method of catching the creative process as it happened"³. The sculptor, Richard Serra made the famous statement: "There is no way to make a drawing – there is only drawing". In the same interview he stated, "Anything you can project as expressive in terms of drawing – ideas, metaphors, emotions, language structures – results from the act of drawing". For Serra and many artists of his generation, "Drawing is a verb"⁴. Serra has played a key role in the re-definition of drawing in present global culture. Drawing has attracted the attention of a wide range of professionals from anthropologists to neuroscientists, intrigued by the primal instinct to draw and to define. Well-being on a personal and societal level are dependent on the human instinct to draw, to understanding authenticity in cultural terms, the autonomy of self, interconnectedness in political terms and the ongoing understanding of global culture.

1. Richard Serra, quoted by Laura Hoptman, *Drawing Now: Eight Propositions*, Museum of Modern Art, New York, 2002, p. 11.
2. Joseph Beuys, quoted by Bernice Rose, "Joseph Beuys and the Language of Drawing" in Ann Temkin and Bernice Rose, *Thinking Is Form: The Drawings of Joseph Beuys*, Thames and Hudson with Museum of Modern Art and Philadelphia Museum of Art, New York, 1993, p. 73.
3. Hoptman, op.cit., p. 11.
4. *Ibid.*, p. 11.