

Beyond Drawing
Book Launch by Brian Fay
Monday 31 July 2023

Thanks to Ann, all at Uillinn and everyone involved with this most beautiful book *Beyond Drawing* to give me the opportunity to speak about two things that matter a lot to me: drawing and books. Furthermore, when the two come together it is even more of an event.

In so doing we decided that as there is an exhibition on in the spaces here that we wouldn't show slides as part of the talk, to be fair to the current artists. So, the invitation here, like drawing where the saying of we can wrap a line around our thinking, is that you are invited to think through some examples of drawing practices as I do my best to invoke and describe them. I'll pick up on some of the points raised in the texts and personal responses from the artists' work in the catalogue and map them on to some general discussions within historical and contemporary practices.

But first to the catalogue. Before going back to art college to do an MFA in Belfast in the mid 1990s I used work in an independent bookshop, *Books Upstairs* bookshop in Dublin, both part time and full time for about 10 years. As well as being in the shop itself, I would find myself at events like these, sat at a table usually at the back of a room, with the books that were being launched, a little bag of coins and a manual swipe credit card machine, having to listen to someone – like me now. What I did note is frequently the speaker wouldn't necessarily remind people to get the book. So, the bookseller in me will not do this and invite you - if you can at all – to pick up a copy of this really gorgeous publication.

The book beautifully marks and records the exhibition *Beyond Drawing*, held here at Uillinn from July to September, 2022 which I hope and suspect many of you might have seen during its run. The exhibition featured 6 artists, three from Ireland and three from The Netherlands. Irish artists: Felicity Clear, Kiera O'Toole, Mary-Ruth Walsh and Dutch artists Marleen Kappe, Romy Muijers and Marisa Rappard. The show was curated by artist and curator Arno Kramer and the book is designed, with her signature sensitivity and elegance, by the ever-inventive designer, gallerist and curator Oonagh Young. The book with its marvelous photographs of each artist's work and installation shots of the show by Jez Niezgoda, as you will see, presents so effectively the new and site specific work that ran through these exhibition spaces. In addition, it includes an introduction by Ann Davoren, a curatorial framing note from Dutch artist and curator Arno Kramer, and a historical positioning text on expanded drawing by critic and writer Caoimhín Mac Giolla Léith, linking the works in *Beyond Drawing* to these wider concerns. So that's the hard sell over!

The word beyond, in the exhibitions title, I suggest is a useful point of departure for us to think about this show and book, and to more broader issues in contemporary drawing. If something is beyond – then from what is it beyond? and how has this been done?

From the off it is important to note that drawing is not a single defined entity that has remained unchanged. It is an activity that is continuously mutable, constantly adapting to new forms, emerging technologies and conceptual attitudes. Artistic shifts in the last 120 years have seen drawings role, materials and conceptual approach move across multiple forms and conceptual positions. Equally, drawing does not belong to any one discipline, as we know everything we wear was drawn, everything in this building was drawn, each form of and use for drawing coming from their own sets of visualising and pictorial vocabulary that was necessary to communicate their development and realisation.

One train of thought on drawing is that since Modernism, drawing, which had previously been considered a more traditional medium and not a discipline in and of itself, began to re-examine and investigate its essential nature and uses. Drawing was previously seen and taught through the academy systems as something to show observational skill-based mastery and virtuosity, to develop studies and prototypes, to present architectural plans and for technical problem solving. It was as Ingres declared the 'probity of art', but not an activity that had the same status as other art forms - chiefly painting and sculpture, drawing being decidedly secondary in status.

In his catalogue essay for *Beyond Drawing*, Caoimhín Mac Giolla Léith discusses the late 20th century contested discussion of drawing being understood and distinguished as a noun and drawing understood as a verb. In English, drawing's root is both a noun and a verb. The former implying a completed object – that which has occurred; the latter an act or process – an ongoing state of present-ness. It's a useful barometer of a way of seeing drawing as operating from an identifiable object – charcoal or pastel on a sheet of paper for example to the more expanded field of drawing that could include materials such as wire, tape, wood and steel (all in this show). Here he cites American artist Richard Serra's claim that drawing is a verb, as in a system, gesture, intuitive activity that is not dependent on just a pictorial outcome, who at this time like many other emergent conceptual artists in the 1960s began to use drawing to push conceptual boundaries. This, within a western tradition becomes, while not exclusive, a dominant approach for drawing. What it also achieved as, curator and writer Barbara Rose in her earlier 1976 seminal survey exhibition and catalogue essay *Drawing Now* noted that while drawing, as a result of Modernism:

'[drawing] moved from one context, that of a "minor" support medium ... to another, that of a major and independent medium with distinctive expressive possibilities altogether its own', it also crucially maintained a relationship between idea and execution which was always present in the history of drawing.

Here Rose also acknowledges that drawing had always carried with it the idea of concept within drawing, which perhaps academy teaching had suppressed. As in for her, even during the Renaissance ideas were tested through drawing. Here we might think of Da Vinci's drawings for flying machines and submarines, or the flow of the river Arno. Rose would curate and promote drawing that operated within this conceptual verb-based category frequently curating works by Hanne Darboven, Sol Lewitt, Robert Morris. Art Historian Anna Lovatt, who specialises in drawing history and research, in her excellent recent book *Drawing Degree Zero: The Line from Minimal to Conceptual Art* further discusses Rose's show and speaks of the omission of so many women artists also practicing at this time – Howardina Pindell (stunning show of her work currently on at IMMA) and Adrian Piper for example.

However, Mac Giolla Léith goes on to cite the importance of the later show *Drawing Now: Eight Propositions* in 2002 curated by Laura Hoptman (now Director of the Drawing Center in New York). A more global facing show than Rose's US focus, where Hoptman firmly embeds the idea of drawing as also being a vehicle for the figurative, illustrative and pictorial including artists Elizabeth Peyton (luscious portraits of Leonardo deCaprio and Noel Gallagher no less) Toba Khedori (large architectural spaces floating in an empty space) Yoshitomo Nara's (playful inspired manga type figures) Kara Walker (figurative exploration of African American history, using the image of the black silhouette to tell stories of slavery and oppression) and unlike Rose's selection – all daring to use colour! (which if anyone happened to see my own show here at Uillinn early in the year will know that's a little rich coming from me ...)

Mac Giolla Léith also usefully goes on to say that since these determinations – of verb and noun:

'that some of the best work being produced in the medium derives its impact from a dynamic tension between these two contrasting inclinations.'

In this way of thinking we can again consider drawing as something operating in a field that goes beyond binary distinctions. In many ways drawing's strength is its insistent resistance to being categorised both as a discipline and as an activity. For any one claim about drawing there is usually an equal and valid counter claim. For example, these far from exhaustive simple binaries all hold validity within drawing – the previously mentioned: Verb – Noun distinction.

We could also consider:

Linear – Tonal

Traditional - Contingent

Image based – Object based

Observational realism – the Autographic mark

Skills based – Gestural

Monochrome – Colour

Instructional – Ambiguous

Intimate – Monumental

Pictorial – Performative

Declarative - Speculative

Diagrammatic - Illusionistic

Modest – Monumental

Text - Illegibility

Forceful – Fragile

Layering -Erasure

Serial – Unique

Abstract – Representational

Preliminary – Finished

This list brings to mind F. Scott-Fitzgerald's maxim that

The test of a first-rate intelligence is the ability to hold two opposed ideas in mind at the same time and still retain the ability to function.

Again, we can see the usefulness of these contradictory impulses. As philosopher Alain Badiou notes 'Drawing is fragile. But it creates a very intense fragility'.

In this way it is drawing's ability to function in these endless oppositional contradictory manners that allow for its plurality, strength, durability, open-endedness and continuing inventiveness. Artist Shazia Sikander, who uses the Indian and Pakistani miniature painting tradition as a source for her drawings on ideas of identity and politics observes that for her:

... drawing is a way of navigating the imagination and it remains the fundamental vehicle of my practice. Drawing allows me to be at my most inventive.

For me it is this possibility of inventiveness that marks the exciting point that drawing is in now. I find that drawing moves generously, intuitively and questioningly across so many different forms now, that we do not need to ask what is it, rather what can we do with it. Since Hoptman's 2002 *Eight Propositions* show there has been so much curatorial work done on presenting new ways of thinking about and around drawing. The work of the previously mentioned *Drawing Center* in New York, the recently established *Menil Drawing Institute* in Houston, *Drawing Room* in London, *Drawing Centre* in Diepenheim, The Netherlands, and key shows like the encyclopaedic *On Line* curated by Catherine de Zegher at MoMA (2011) – which explored line in its 2D and 3D forms looking at an expanded history of drawing that moved off the page and into space and ideas of time. This show has many resonances to the *Beyond Drawing* show.

Closer to home the initiative *Drawbridge*, based in Munster Technological University, focusses on promoting the capacity of drawing to give form to thought, and again Cork's Glucksman Gallery's recent shows *A Line Around An Idea: ways of knowing through contemporary drawing practices* which presented a simple and complex line as a communicative form with its huge diversity and possibilities of same. Works by *Drawing DeCentred's* Felicity Clear, Helen Farrell, Rachel Goodyear, Julie Merriman, and O'Donnell + Tuomey, plattenbaustudio architectural drawings, Barbara Walker all orbited imaginatively around the simple gesture of line making.

Similarly, the current show in The Guggenheim of Gego's (Gertrud Goldschmidt) *Measuring Infinity*, beautiful and delicate 3D constructions. As the exhibition text notes

Gego put forth radical ideas through her intensive investigations of structural systems: transparency, tension, fragility, spatial relations, and the optical effects of motion are all methodically addressed in her singular body of work.

Where 3 dimensional thin steel and copper lines operate in space referencing organic forms in simple linear structures and systematic spatial investigations- Like delicate scaffolds for a flower.

What these initiatives and shows present is the plural non-binary potential of drawing, moving between abstraction and representation, 2D and 3D, the authoritative and the incidental.

The late and wonderful artist Phyllida Barlow, on the occasion of the show *Joseph Beuys 40 years of Drawing* (2022) thought of drawing as simply an activity 'when two surfaces touch', she further suggests that these surface interactions

'... could be the trace of lead from a pencil, a swipe of cement, a collaged leaf, onto anything from paper to brick, from cardboard to steel.'

What we see in the works in *Beyond Drawing* is this engagement with diverse materials, actions and potentialities. Without suggesting overall thematic concerns (as after all drawing is not a theme) within the works of these 6 diverse artists, who as curator Arno Kramer describes as having 'outspoken ways of working', we might discern some key motivations and forms within contemporary drawing: a care about space and architecture, of line being both illusionistic and spatial, the concerns of language and information, the weaving of previous works, the fragment and the detail, reassembling and gestural stating and in many cases investment of intense labour. In this way it is an extension of some of the key concerns of the Irish drawing project *Drawing deCentred*.

I have been fortunate enough to know of the work of the drawing initiative *Drawing deCentred* (of which Felicity Clear, Kiera O'Toole and Mary Ruth Walsh are co-founders) and of the considerable work of Arno Kramer. In Arno's case if we think of the Dutch sporting analogy of 'total football' we could consider Arno's commitment to and promotion of drawing as being 'total tekken – total drawing'. The international collaborations that this and other drawing initiatives show is a shared investigation of the plurality and richness of drawing, the open-endedness.

In a more general context this open-endedness also leads to rich questions for drawing that are still relevant to the interrogation of its current status:

Has drawing become part of a medium fetish?

If drawing, as a diverse form, is the only thematic link in a lot of drawing shows, what then of the content?

Is there a content that is specific to drawing?

What makes questions like these matter is that there is still a vibrant range of possibilities to test these propositions.

For me what I find so exciting is drawing as division and revelation, an *interrogation of the visible* ...

Kenturah Davis, Esteban Jefferson, Emma Talbot etc talk a little about these ...

What questions like the previously mentioned provoke is the opportunity rather than problems, ways of developing work rather than confining form.

So in concluding, the state of drawing is most healthy, refusing to be categorised, resisting boundaries and borders and wishing to go beyond what it once was, towards what it can be.

Thank you.