special issue on drawing

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CONTEMPORARY DEVELOPMENTS IN DRAWING

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THE most recent revival of drawing as a primary medium for making art began in the mid-1990s and, over the past decade, it has revealed the versatility of this sometimes trivialised mode of production. Certain artists have developed drawing's conceptual aspects: its ability to embody ideas and systems, suggest processes and experiments, and engage with questions of abstract form and visual perception. Others have used drawing for its subjective and narrative qualities, its connections to literature and mass culture, and its ability to express emotions, create symbols and explore questions of identity and selfhood.

Lance Winn explores the contemporary preoccupation with mechanised death and destruction in a rigorous and conceptual manner. In Atomic Clock (2003), Winn superimposes three circular plastic sheets containing graphic information that, together, form an image of an atomic explosion. The monochromatic sheets, painted red, yellow, and blue, revolve at different rates, corresponding to a clock's second, minute and hour hands. Once an hour, when the screens line up with one another in the proper relationship, they create an image of an atomic mushroom cloud. At all other times, their combination produces an abstract moiré pattern. Evoking the mechanical reproduction of graphic and photographic images through its reference to a three-colour separation printing process, Atomic Clock also explores the creation and dissolution of an image of destruction, while simultaneously emphasising the role that time plays in the perception of images.

In Eight Hour Wall Drawing (2003), Winn scanned a gallery wall with a metal detector for eight hours, using it to trace the wall's interior structure with a graphite pencil. As is the case with many of his works, the system used to
generate the image is an important part of the work's overall meaning. Here, Winn varied the weight of his pencil marks depending on the strength of the sound coming through the headphones of his metal detector. Again, reminding his spectators of the element of time that is required to create and to perceive a supposedly static image, Winn's synaesthetic wall drawing also evokes the contemporary western preoccupation with hidden bombs and terrorism. Winn also makes large word drawings that undermine the distinction between word and image. In There Said it (2004), Winn began with the word 'death', the outlines of which he traced in ever wider configurations until he built up a strange pattern that evokes topographic maps as well as representations of waves of energy propagating through a medium. As is the case with Winn's other works, the word drawings provoke the viewer to think of the dissemination of signs of danger in the form of both words and images, the development of these signs through time, and what the discourse of fear and destruction suggests about the current moment. Also evoking conceptualist practices, Japeth Mennes uses drawing to explore the mechanism of art as well as the complexities inherent in apprehending even
the simplest of shapes. In 2002 Mennes created a small army of rudimentary drawing machines called 'motorheads', battery-driven robots that scribbled, repeating, circular patterns on the floor. The resulting images looked like projection maps of uncharted planets or traits left by insects on acid. Over the next two years Mennes took the mechanised line into three-dimensional space by creating ephemeral, spider-weblike installations with coloured string that moves slightly under the influence of tiny unrigged motors. Both beautiful and ethereal, these fragile installations confound distinctions between twodimensional lines and three-dimensional space, animate and inanimate objects, and humans, animals and machines.

Most recently, Mennes has focused his attention on drawings that build up abstract patterns out of simple, modular components, which are laid on so densely as to occlude and erase one another. Typical of these drawings is Untitled (2004), in which a rectangular pattern is traced and repeated by hand in a variety of different colours. Here, through repetition, a simple form is transformed into a complex, unfamiliar and vaguely organic structure, which, like Mennes’s earlier installations, seems to exist in a perpetual process of becoming. Brain (2005) articulates a strange organic web containing cells of vibrant, contrasting colours. It simultaneously suggests a topographic map and a cross section of some unknown organism, and, like his other graphic works, it seems both complete and in a process of open-ended development. Exploring the qualities of abstract lines to their fullest potential, Mennes suggests that drawing today operates in a liminal space between system and improvisation.

For the past few years Claire Brussl has created delicate pencil and gouache drawings of surreal scenes derived from stories of rural life in Maine. Although based on family photos and tales of everyday life, Brussl’s tableaux of human and animal interaction are edited and stylised so as to create uncanny effects. Brussl increases the unnecessity of her strange juxtapositions through a technique that emphasizes the disjunctive nature of her elements. Finely rendered, black-and-white heads are paired with flat, doll-like bodies, and her often-blank backgrounds frequently resemble theatre sets in which a few abstract elements serve to delineate a scene. Repetition is also used to create an eerie atmosphere. The same face appears more than once, and the abstract bodies and other elements — the heads of deer, for example — are presented as multiples rather than individualized forms. Brussl’s subjects involve play, consumption and competition: the scenes she depicts include hunting, forgaging, bathing, eating, vomiting and sports. And, for the most part, the moments that her tableaux evoke are those of childlike and adolescent. Suggesting memories of a life already lived, Brussl’s scenarios are psychologically charged and often suffused with a sense of melancholy and death. Various forms of ropes, gallards and harnesses frequently trap her sometimes androgynous figures, and when not interacting with one another or with animals that they occasionally abuse, Brussl’s protagonists gaze out at the spectator in mute appeal. By using drawing to suggest the exploration of a unique, isolated and self-questioning psyche, Brussl suggests that the medium can become a means of subjective self-discovery.

In a somewhat related way, Shiva Ahmadi uses drawing to explore her identity as a Persian artist working in the United States. Employing a multicultural visual vocabulary inspired by Persian miniature painting, Islamic architecture and most recently, Western gestural abstraction, Ahmadi creates graphic works that investigate contemporary geopolitical events as well as the social, psychological and political experiences of women in Islamic societies. Bullets and Boots (2004) depicts an irregularly shaped, walled garden enclosing an incongruously flat oneroom structure. Unlaced army boots articulate the blank space in front of the garden, while two oversized jellybeans rest on a table inside the fenced-in structure. The stylised, cursive vegetation of the garden, as well as the geometric patterns around the doorway and oneroom structure, suggest an Islamic past, while a contemporary, wantal present is evoked by the army boots as well as the garden’s fence posts, which, upon closer examination, reveal themselves to be bullets. Linking the past and the present, the domestic and the political, Ahmadi’s hybrid Persian miniature suggests both the clash of cultures and — through its formal harmonies and balance — hopes of reconciliation.

Vein (2006) focuses more directly on the plight of women. It juxtaposes front and back views of a young woman in a flowing red dress. Her head is rendered realistically, while her body, enveloped by her dress and weighed down by a series of objects — boots, jellybeans and a strange armoured foetus — dissolves into an abstract play of colours and patterns. As suggested by the title, the agony of the woman’s situation is evoked by the distortion of her body and the suggestion of blood. Once again, however, hope for the transcendence of violence is implied by the balanced play of colours and patterns, which suggest both the transfiguration of matter and an attempt on the part of the artist to balance eastern and western traditions. By juxtaposing criticism and hope, Ahmadi uses drawing to explore cross-cultural experience and to envision an end to contemporary political conflicts.

As suggested by the graphic works of Whim, Mennes, Brussl and Ahmadi, the contemporary preoccupation with drawing has given new energy to both conceptualism and identity politics. By working in a graphic medium — albeit one that is constantly being expanded to incorporate painting, sculpture and installation — these artists demonstrate the possibilities of drawing in the current moment.