

ON DRAWING: The Grey Voice

In the film *Smoke* (1995, directed by Wayne Wang and Paul Auster), the novelist Paul Benjamin (William Hurt) tells the tobacconist Auggie Wren (Harvey Keitel) how Sir Walter Raleigh, who is reputed to have introduced tobacco to the English, had smoked a cigar, weighed its ashes, and by subtracting the weight of the ashes from the weight of the cigar, he tried to determine the weight of smoke. They have a chuckle. It's a comedy with tragedy swept into its corners, and that's what it's about: (the idea of) residue, tell-tale evidence of human imperfection like sweat-stains on t-shirts, or missing limbs. In this film, the present is a sign-riddled version of the past (including confusions of paternity and maternity). And works of art – narratives, photographs, drawings – are the remains of intense emotions. For all its fuzzy, feel-good moments – a bunch of heroes and heroines striving against all the odds (murder, drugs, accident, abandonment, amputation, blindness) for domestic bliss, for whatever keeps the home-fires burning – the film is strung with passion. “My works will have been written in vain if a smoldering and unquenchable fire is not felt in them”, says the protagonist of Ivan Turgenev's novel, also called *Smoke* (1867).

Central to the film is the rite of passage of a black teenager who calls himself Rashid, though at different stages of his initiation-story he tries on different identities and names. He has run away from home to find his father, and when he finally discovers him working at a petrol station in the Catskill Mountains, the boy holds on to the very last bit of distance between them, by sitting down across the road and drawing what's before him. It is a moment of attenuation with as much yearning for ancestral fulfilment as the work in this exhibition by John Mawurndjul, a bringing together of the notion of line and lineage, which also concerns Vernon Ah Kee and Andrew McQualter. The works of Maria Kontis and Jacqueline Rose, on the other hand, reinscribe their cultural inheritance, so that new associations – elective affinities – can take shape. Rose's meditation on the fertility of Kafka's name, for example, reflects the rich inheritance left to her, the individual reader, and to all of us, in Kafka's writing.

But now it's night-time. We're looking at a picture book; there is no text. A bear goes into the forest with a pencil in his hand. He meets a lion. The lion roars and the bear is frightened. “Do the voice”, my young son urges. “What voice?” I ask. “The pencil's!” he shouts as if there is no time to waste. And so the pencil says to the lion, “You're much too scary; I'm going to draw some lines over you.” The pencil draws a cage around the lion. The bear walks deeper into the forest with a smile on his face. The child falls asleep.

Like a spell, the same scene is repeated night after night (because resolutions are tentative; also, the objects we fear are not without attraction). Little by little, the narrative reveals its fault-lines, and we take advantage of the cracks, tweaking a word here and there. Eventually we create variations: like the poetic grafting between subject, medium and meaning in some of Louise Weaver's work; the permutations in the work of Jacqueline Rose; the exchange of significance, between portraiture and history, in the work of Vernon Ah Kee.

Pencils and childhood go hand in hand. Drawing is magic. There are no rules. No rules for **Alex Kershaw**, who takes the infantilism that Freud located in thumb-sucking and pencil-chewing to its (logical, dangerous) extreme in the performance piece *Pencil as Repository*, where a man eats a pencil as if it were a crunchy biscuit, something he just has to have. The artist knows the rules. He understands the symbolic connotations of his work. And he makes a conscious, almost ceremonial decision (before eating it, he rubs the pencil against his *temple*), to break the rules. Repository, then, in the sense of archive: of both the primitive and sophisticated connotations that the idea of a pencil arouses in us. Repository also in the more intimate sense of an object in which we confide our most private thoughts and desires, and which deserves nothing less than a gesture of trust: to be sucked and eaten.

The innocence of childhood casts great shadows, like a throw of giant dice. And so we start to carry an eraser. A ruler. The promise of a set of coloured pencils, always brighter in their box than the mark they make on paper. It's a dilemma, whether to remain faithful to the Derwents. Or to go with Acrylics, like Adam Cullen does, when he takes his line for a burn through the urban forest. But who hasn't been seduced by luminosity? If it moves (me), it's alive (and so am I).

We also learn to measure, to distinguish black and white, shading, tone: *chiaro* and *oscuro* must be weighed, negotiated, one against the other, as in the work of Vernon Ah Kee or Shirley Diamond, if we are to inhabit a space, see a figure, read the signs, hear a voice. Weighing is movement, backwards, forwards, like a wave, *une vague*: it's the moment of vagueness (in the cradle), of ambiguity and interpretation, when we read (and are read) between the lines.

This is where the momentum of a work, its pull, its urgency, resides: in *the art of omission*, to quote Paul Klee quoting Max Liebermann. As both an artist (inclined to draw like a child) and a musician, Klee believed that art comes from the void. He understood vacancy or vagueness as an inner voice, an irrepressible necessity to emerge from isolation, but he warns that *vagueness in one's work is therefore only permissible when there is a real inner need. A need which could explain the use of coloured or very pale lines, or the application of further vagueness such as the shades of grey ranging from yellow to blue*. In just such coloured shades of grey, Andrew McQualter's work whispers secrets, and passes on an esoterica of knowledge.

With diagrams, maps, instructions – the faint memory of school text-books – McQualter signals the workings of a work of art. While the intellectual or emotional significance of a drawing can be communicated through pictorial (or anti-pictorial) language and traditions, it's always a privilege for the viewer to be able to imagine the physical labour of making art. Anyone who has ever experienced the satisfaction of ruling lines with a newly sharpened pencil, or the hypnotic pleasure of looping cotton with a crochet hook, anyone who has been compelled to etch or to erase, vigorously, or to overwrite, madly, or become lost (become vague) in the concentration of repetitive action, will understand the work of artists like Shirley Diamond, Jacqueline Rose, Leo Cussen, John

Mawurndjul, Louise Weaver, not just theoretically, but muscularly and intrinsically, not just graphically, but choreographically.

When I think of a grey voice, Tom Waits pops up, all smoke and gravel. His song plays over the closing scenes of *Smoke... It's such a sad old feeling/ the fields are soft and green/ it's memories that I'm stealing/ but you're innocent when you dream...* As a child he kept paper and pencil by his bedside, in case he woke up in the middle of the night with some ideas. Now, he says, he writes down people's conversations, in bars, on the street; and when he puts it all together, he finds "music hiding in there". Just like Leo Cussen's *Broadway Melody*. The build-up of rhythm in Jacqueline Rose's *Kafka Writing Machine*. Louise Weaver's play of camouflage, imagery and nostalgia. Or like Maria Kontis's confrontation with the void – with the fearful duplicity of intimacy and distance – by drawing from photographs, and magically recreating them. Kontis's *The Warning* depicts two women smoking, one old, one young (a bride), with black space between them, like a moment snatched (while it is already doomed), from the greater scheme of things. It captures the melancholy lyricism of this exhibition: the grey voice.

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