

April 13, 2023

The order of the drawing

History

In 1767 a book was published in Amsterdam by Pieter Myer that contained a eulogy entitled **Triomf der Teekenkunst**. In this poem of praise, written for the Mayor of Amsterdam, the writer goes out of his way artistically, whether or not in rhyme, with the aim of persuading the city to build a building where the noble art of drawing could be seen and practiced. In the last stanza of the long verse this is again advocated in this way:

One hears the tongue of Art praise den Burgervadren.

The River God joyfully lifts up the gray crown,

To see Drawing art show her might,

In the royal Stadsbouw be led to the throne.

In 1784, 17 years after the publication of this text, Teylers Museum was opened in Haarlem, the first museum in the Netherlands. And it was striking that, in addition to many scientific and physical attributes and books, the collection soon also possessed an enormous collection of drawings and prints.

Almost two centuries later, art historian Carel Blotkamp put together **Lof der tekenkunst** in 1973, and I have always seen this exhibition as a landmark for contemporary drawing. Carel Blotkamp was probably the first to introduce the concept of autonomous drawing in the accompanying catalogue. The curious fact occurred that in the exhibition, which took place in the Van Abbemuseum in Eindhoven, he only showed abstract drawings.

In many of the drawings that I want to show here, you will see predominantly figuration. And that also applies to the exhibition POPLIFE. It is about craftsmanship, vision and fantasy. But there is also 'playing' with concepts such as illustrative and decorative. Concepts that were not seen as qualitative for a very long time. This exhibition proves more than enough that these are autonomous visions, that you can play with concepts such as decorative and illustrative. The explanatory text cites data and assumptions such as references to film, television, pop music, comics, novels, commercials and contemporary forms of social media, and turns traditional pop culture myths into personal statements about history, feminism, colonial power, politics, identity, beauty and various other existential questions. They all embrace some form of illustration, a term often used as a disqualification in the art world. It's great that the compilers of this POPLIFE Witte Wartena and Euan Gray have brought together well-known artists and real discoveries. Free-spirited drawings by Charlotte Schleifert, by Paul McDevitt and Andrew Gilbert, alongside the precision and delicacy of Marie Hartnett. Mysterious images of figures and grids in the work of Euan Gray and the real narrative images of Witte Wartena. With the work of Rinus Van Der Velde, Marcel van Eeden and Sandra Vasques de la Horra, the exhibition also includes international top artists.

It is more than clear that many of the works have a figurative starting point. And in that sense it all fits in perfectly with the present time, in which that figuration, especially in drawing, still has the upper hand. The boundaries of drawing, for example, in that direction of abstraction have not yet been explored. If we make a comparison with painting, you see much more abstraction there than in contemporary drawing. Is it more obvious when painting, when working with the material paint and with colour, to look for that direction of abstraction?

In many cases, making a drawing is no more and no less than provoking a derailment. No matter how controlled the artist develops his image, there often comes a point when control no longer seems so important, when things are intense in the mind and that translates into the drawing. Although bookshelves are full of speculation about what a work of art, and in this case a drawing in particular, could mean and how the work could be interpreted, some modest and hesitant writing has been written about contemporary drawing. Perhaps it is so difficult to theorize about a drawing because it is the most intimate and personal form of expression in the visual arts. Drawings are mainly testimonies of processes. They may have a theoretical starting point, but there comes a point when sensibility seems to take over from technique and then the spirit and life come into a work. The inspiration and vision become tangible and the more they become tangible, the more difficult it is to describe.

For me, the basis of a drawing is mainly hope and not a reason. Let alone a theory that needs to be clarified or defined with a work. Even more often it is breaking down and then breaking out. Two Irish writers described this independently. Samuel Becket wrote: *fail again, fail better* and John McGahern *break down and break out*.

So work towards something unknown. The Dutch writer Oek de Jong described art as an exploration of reality, embedded in imagination and fantasy, and it enters the space of the soul. To create art to overcome sorrow, suffering, confusion and transience. Art to survive. Oek de Jong calls this phenomenon 'cleaving art'

Always further

A drawing is often all or nothing. Pathetically speaking, drawing for me is exploring the back of the soul, the mind and the heart. Making a drawing therefore always balances on the edge of a confession. Usually a drawing is a confession, about melancholy and longing, about doubt and certainty, about reality and fantasy. A drawing sometimes seems like a materialized dream that is mainly about abolishing knowledge. The drawing is also a monument to the poetics of the artist, in which signs pointing back as well as pointing forward can be found. The immediacy of many drawing techniques is, in most cases, an obvious factor for sensitivity. Clarity, obscurity, change, concealment, immediacy are all concepts related to a secret desire to find things that were not there before. In that resulting, drawn image, there is something of what was suspected and what was reached for. On paper it has acquired its outline and its meaning. That final cohesion of lines and spots, lines that traveled across the paper, spots that arose impulsively, that has become the image, that is the drawing. Finished!

Many drawings seem to happen to me, as the English writer Graham Swift said about how his novels come about. You anticipate something, a spot, a line, sometimes a concrete image from reality. That's how the subconscious works. You use your imagination, but you don't always understand it. There is a huge level of inspiration lurking beneath the surface. According to Swift. There is always the hope that the drawing creates a transmission from me to the viewer. Everything has a beginning and setting a line can start a process, even direct it. I know it happens, excitement can arise, because I see "something" developing on the paper. I feel that something special is happening. I admit it. I have to face it. I feel that I am at the beginning of 'something', after all, it is in front of me. An hour ago there was nothing, a minute ago nothing, now there is something and I am responsible for it.

But any explanation about the creation of a drawing may be too much. Let silence reign more. Let the silence do its job. Due to the static that many drawings and paintings already have anyway, there is always a silence in the artwork. If you can bear the silence, you can bear yourself writes Pascal Mercier. And our imagination, he says, is our last sanctuary. Points of view may not belong in good art. Making a work of art gives me, also pathetically speaking, the opportunity to feel time in a special way.

Search further

It is good and pleasant to wander in many contemporary drawings. Following lines in your work, you 'pass' compressed collections of linearly constructed clusters, as 'points of interest' that take you further to slightly more open areas, where a recognizable element sometimes confronts you

with reality, so that you are even more amazed on the journey through the drawing . Structures, shadings, shapes and figurations keep your gaze sharp. Because what is that head doing there? Or those branches and that animal? Why the subtle attention to that leaf? Why do I want to penetrate further into unknown areas, what can I expect and should I expect in this fabulous labyrinth of lines? There is always time and very often there is a line. Drawn on paper, created in a landscape, sought and found in what a jet plane can leave behind in the air of condensation trails. Also conceived and drawn, but also developed into a scheme or a grid. And in that grid there is time again. The actual time of drawing, the fictional time later of the observation and experience. When you try to discover a motif in the maze of thousands of different lines, it will not be easy. It is better to experience the drawing first, that observation and search for something to hold on to, for a possible shape, will then come naturally later. As your eye wanders over the sheet of paper and continues to follow your lines, a motif can suddenly emerge that is very emphatically included in the complexity of the drawn lines. The 'discovery' of a motive gives the opportunity to take a deep breath and continue the search.

Every line remains a vehicle, every line has a degree of sensitivity, every form that arises seems like a necessity. Although you can say that many drawings in the finer points also have an enormous abstract quality, sometimes something necessarily figurative springs from the imagination. The line therefore initially seems to be the vehicle for the mind, it steers, it searches, it responds to the moment and sometimes derails for a moment in the complexity of a number of lines mixed together.

Although it is an obvious fact that the line in a drawing can be the 'vehicle' to an image, it is still amazing that artists are able to arrive at an original image every time with something as simple as the line. Marksmanship, but also motor skills and of course technique and vision determine whether a drawing acquires a quality that you can call original. Control, condensation, concentration and daring determine the image that the artist wants to show us. Art has no conscience, but why is it that I keep working with it all the time and look for a long time, looking for interpretation, that the work gives rise to reflections such as: it started that day, as so often with me, with an espresso. With the cup in my hand I walked into the hallway and looked at the drawings hanging on the wall, I continued to the library, where more drawings hung on the wall. It seemed like such a moment of reflection and attention to what was there, I was not looking for something special in all those works. Still, I seemed to be waiting for something, but what was it? There was time, of course. There is always time, and there are different times. A time in memory, and one in memories. I had a personal history with some of those drawings that were hanging there. You see what, it is a first meeting and then something starts to work deep down inside, a degree of greed grows and then there is the consideration of buying a work, and now and then I have the opportunity to exchange a work with a colleague. I experienced the time again and again when I looked at all those drawings, but yet another time, a time that I could not grasp and could not interpret. I was convinced that there was also time in all those drawings, another time. How long did I look at work? Why did I want to watch it over and over again? Each time the context was different. But lines kept pulling me into the work. Everything was possible, everything was there.

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