

# On their marks, get set, go

A refreshingly adventurous and witty collection stretches the conventional boundaries of drawing.

**VISUAL ART**  
**JOHN McDONALD**

## **I Walk The Line: New Australian Drawing**

Museum of Contemporary Art,  
until May 24

NOTHING could be more fundamental than the act of drawing but its definition remains a thorny topic. In a Phaidon anthology of 2005 called *Vitamin D: New Perspectives In Drawing*, the working definition is: "a mark-making process used to produce a line-based composition." If this is how we understand the term we are in trouble almost immediately with the Museum of Contemporary Art's *I Walk the Line: New Australian Drawing*.

The curator, Christine Morrow, justifies the diversity of work in this show by arguing that the artists are not exclusively concerned with using drawing as a way of recording appearances. Instead, they aim to "uncover and exploit what it means to draw". In other words, they are less concerned with the creation of artifacts than with the entire field of discourses surrounding drawing - the "social and psychological factors", personal narratives and popular culture.

Within this expanded definition there is room for works that escape the boundaries of the more conventional definition. This applies to John Vella's video shot from the point of view of the subject watching a group of artists in a drawing class. It encompasses a video by the Mangano twins, who face each other in a confined space and draw around each

other's bodies. It certainly includes Lionel Bawden's sculpture - made of pencils glued together and carved into a biomorphic shape - and Sky Bivens's three-dimensional objects - using chalkboard and chalk - that resemble pieces of jewellery.

It may sound like a collection of novelties and gimmicks but the exhibition hangs together remarkably well. *I Walk the Line* is one of the MCA's more interesting self-generated shows. With the Yayoi Kusama survey, this is a good time to visit the museum.

It seems that whenever there is a new exhibition or publication on drawing, it has to be hailed as a revival or "renaissance" following a period of neglect. While this is patently untrue in a general sense - drawing has been going on uninterruptedly since time immemorial - it is understandable if we consider the way the activity has been treated by museums and art schools. In the libertarian '60s,

anything that seemed like a discipline was viewed as a restraint on natural creativity. Those classes that consisted of many hours spent drawing from a life model or inanimate objects were seen as old-fashioned and reactionary.

This is a marvellous example of the way that every aspect of life and education can be mindlessly politicised. Now we can see that the institutional neglect of drawing was not a liberation of the imagination but a radical abnegation of responsibility. Of all forms of artistic expression, drawing is the closest to thinking. To learn to draw is also to learn to think as an artist does.

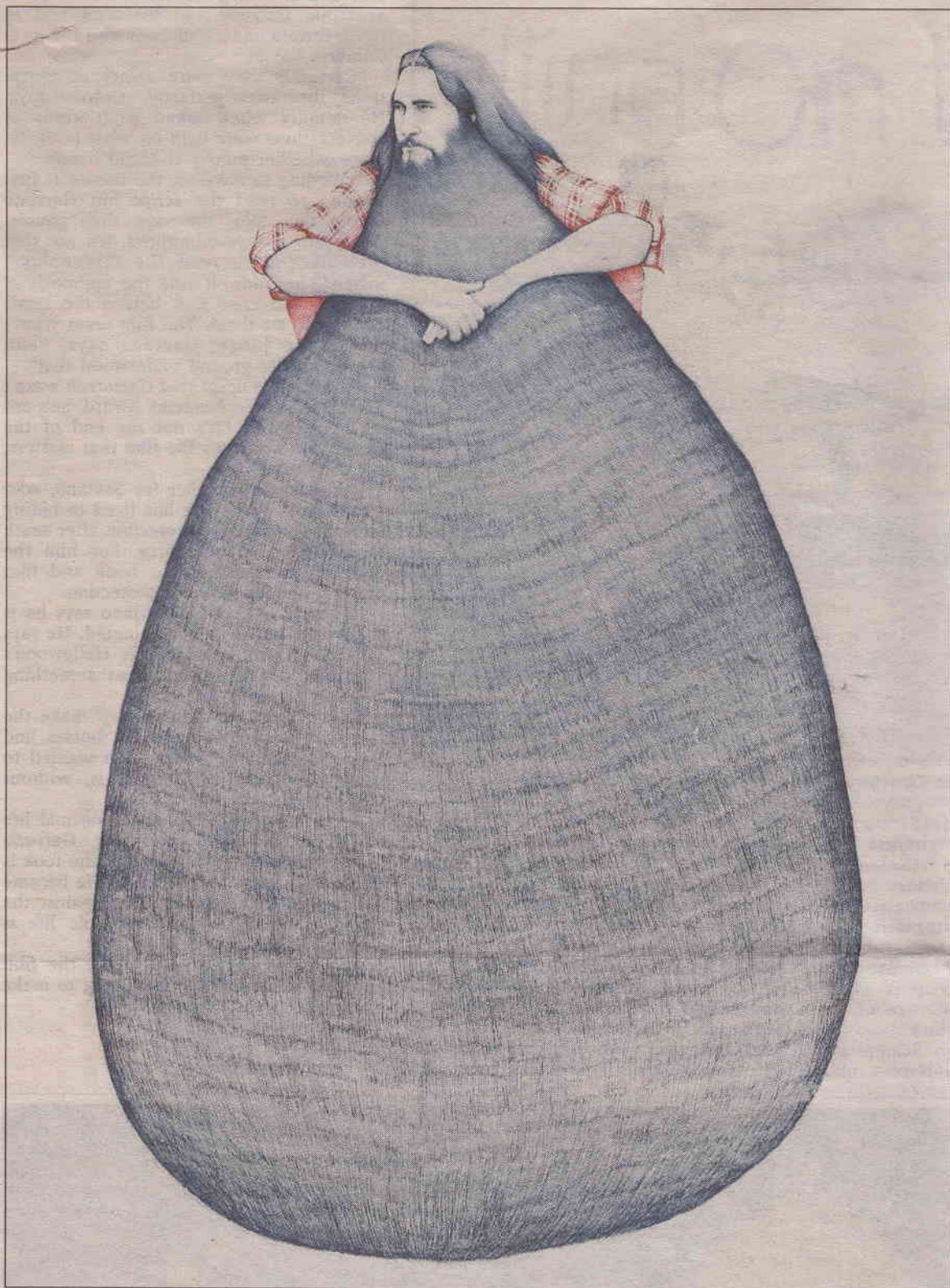
Many artists draw constantly - even heroes of the avant-garde such as Mike Parr, who owes much of his reputation to his vigorous drawings and etchings. Artists who say they don't draw will often claim to have internalised the drawing process. That is, the sketch they once drew in preparation for a painting or sculpture is now a purely mental affair.

Drawing is most certainly a discipline because everyone gets better at it with more practice. Yet one does not progress towards a universal standard of perfection. Even in courses such as those taught at the Julian Ashton School, where students learn a specific set of techniques that may be corrected by a master, there is still a sense of individuality in the way each person draws. A drawing is no less personalised than a piece of handwriting. As Nietzsche might say, drawing is a tool for understanding "how one becomes what one is". It is a means for perceiving both the world and oneself, presented to an audience through the minor miracle of personal style.

Some artists have learnt to draw like old masters only to



**Personal style ... detail from Kirsty Bruce's *Untitled* (2008-09).**



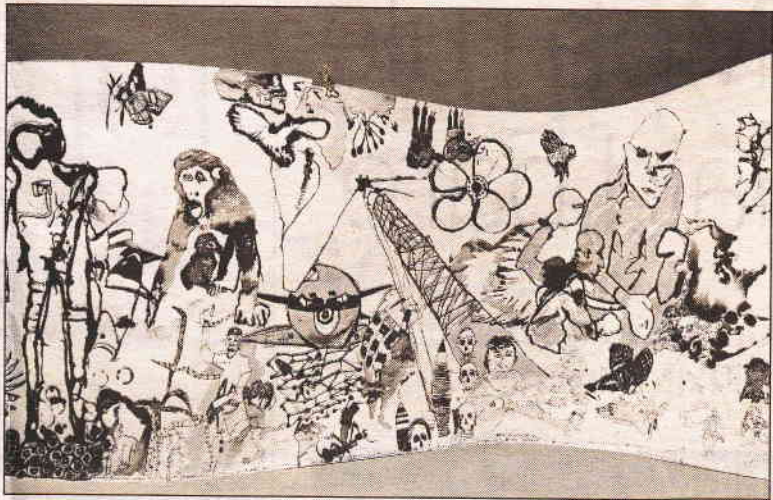
spend a large part of their career trying to deliberately de-skill themselves, attempting to see the world again with the freshness of a child. Yet there is a huge difference between trained and naive hands, even when they are both drawing stick figures. One can strive to overcome skill and knowledge but it is not so easy to pick up these qualities from scratch.

*I Walk The Line* makes much of the implicit individuality of drawing, where the style and subject of each artist's work denotes a specific set of concerns. They may be political, psychological, satiri-

cal or broadly theatrical but no piece can be classified in a simple, monolithic way. Locust Jones's contribution to the show is a 30 metre-long ink drawing called *Everyday Atrocities* (2008-09), which is both a chronicle of world events during the past year and an expression of personal anger and anxiety. Jones conveys this impression through his technique as well as his subject matter. He applies the ink with a sharpened bamboo nib that leaves a trail of slashes, smears and scratches, creating a sense of burgeoning chaos.

By contrast, Maria Kontis's serene, near-monochrome pastels are precisely drawn records of old photographs. While these works are no less personal than Jones's response to world events, they are completely interiorised. It is commonplace to say that a photograph often acts as memento mori, because it captures an instant in time that is always already gone. By extracting a detailed, slightly blurry drawing from a photo, Kontis makes that feeling seem even stronger and more poignant.

In another work called *Eugene*



**Irreverent ... (above) Locust Jones's *Everyday Atrocities* (2008-09); (left) Laith McGregor's *Woke On A Whale Heart* (2008).**

*To Beatrice* (2001), she depicts a letter where the writing is tantalisingly visible but unintelligible. This sets us wondering. What is the letter about? Who are Eugene and Beatrice? Kontis's true subject may be the impossibility of ever arriving at a correct, definitive interpretation of a work of art. There is always something that escapes us or perhaps some element that we feel obliged to add. For instance, Morrow speculates that the note may be a love letter.

The essays, in a cleverly designed catalogue that imitates a sketch pad, are primarily concerned with the timeless and universal aspects of drawing. This, in itself, is a big improvement on the usual MCA presumption that everything on display is wildly original and innovative. There is very little in contemporary art that is really new, although there are endless potential variations on well-worn themes.

Morrow points out the preponderance of portraiture in this show, by artists such as Vernon Ah Kee, Peter Grziwotz and Patrick Hartigan, but even more prominent, to my mind, is the element of wit. The exhibition is full of delightful twists and visual gags. Although most works seem to have been carefully planned, not dashed off spontaneously, the ideas feel fresh and sharp. Take, for instance, John Turier's *Never Need Artists Again Machine* (2005) – a large, cumbersome metal apparatus that draws a wonky-looking face in red pencil when a handle is turned. Instead of removing the need for artists, as promised, the machine demonstrates the difficulty of making a convincing image and the subsequent necessity of artists. The piece is an elaborate joke: a “useful” sculpture that turns out drawings in the most laborious manner.

The humour is more overt in pieces such as Tim Silver's model

cars – made of compressed blue crayon – that leave “drawings” in the shape of skid marks; in Elvis Richardson's coloured pencil drawing of the test pattern on a TV set; in Jess Johnson's cartoon about a cartoonist feeling her lowly status in the arts community; or in Gordon Hookey's characters from imaginary boxing troupes.

The humour and irreverence of so many pieces seems especially well suited to a show about drawing – an activity that is often concerned with quick, provisional responses rather than monumen-

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tal statements. These qualities are also well-matched to participants in this show – a group of reasonably young artists who are a little beyond “emerging” but not quite established. It is a real pleasure to see a show at the MCA with artists such as John Turier, Gosia Wlodarczak, James Morrison and sundry others whose work is beginning to attract some well-deserved recognition.

When I think back to the '80s and '90s, and remember how every institutional survey had a virtually identical roll call of “name” artists who could be included under every conceivable heading, an exhibition such as *I Walk The Line* seems genuinely adventurous. It confirms there is no excuse for bad, boring and predictable shows, when there is a large pool of talent waiting for its 15 minutes of fame.