

Between the lines

An exploration of drawing takes in all its permutations, from the sparest observation to lavish documentation

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Constable and William Blake were once looking at some drawings together when, enthusiastically, Blake exclaimed of one, "That is pure inspiration!" To which Constable, always ready with a dry put-down, responded "Is it? I took it for drawing." So Blake might have been more at ease than Constable in the Royal Scottish Academy show, Scottish Drawings, where sometimes what is on view suggests more inspiration than actual drawing, for what passes for drawing nowadays is as diverse as modern art in general. There is, nevertheless, enough here to demonstrate that however far it ranges from it, drawing has still not lost its vital link with its starting point, the simplest marks on a piece of paper that can miraculously stand for something seen, something remembered, or something thought: an observation, or an idea understood, made visible and so recorded and shared. It is no exaggeration to say that drawing was the key discipline in the making of the modern world. The handmaid of both art and science, without

its power to analyse, record and project, none of what we like to call progress could ever have happened. So, understandably, drawing was for centuries considered the one essential skill for an artist. Indeed in the late 18th century, the Scottish artist John Brown, an early minimalist perhaps, eschewed painting altogether to work exclusively with a pencil, while Blake himself spoke of drawing as "the wiry upright line of rectitude" and so gave its simplicity a moral value.

Scotland has a strong tradition of draughtsmanship passed down through the art schools from our oldest art institution, now incorporated into Edinburgh College of Art, the aptly named Trustees Academy of Drawing, founded more than 250 years ago. If in recent years drawing has lost its position at the centre of art education, with this show the RSA raises the flag for its continuing importance and amply demonstrates too that this ancient skill is not yet lost. The show includes some 200 works by academicians and invited artists. Presenting drawing in all its dizzy modern variety, the works range from simple observations to highly finished, coloured compositions and even constructions. Mary Bourne's beautiful drawing in ink and wash of a wooded hillside is so simple you could almost count the marks which summarise what she has seen, yet



it is wonderfully eloquent. Victoria Crowe's large study in pencil of a group of tall lilies is another superb example of the elegance that drawing can attain. A study of tiger lilies by David Michie is also beautiful. Drawing can be akin to singing and like singing, it is often most eloquent when it seems, as in this work, to be most spontaneous and direct. But it can also be equally telling when it is much more finished and elaborate. Frances Walker's *Storm Beach Fank* is more highly worked, but it too displays the skill of a master draughtsman as Walker penetrates the very anatomy of the landscape to find there, not only the structure of its geology, though she's pretty good on that, but its witness to the human history that has shaped it too. Willy Rodger's *Easter in the Field*, a black and white study of a tangle of barbed wire, is also big and highly finished, but achieves real power by balancing complexity with restraint.

For Ian McCulloch and John Grant Clifford though, drawing's power lies in its expressive freedom. Both artists use it to explore a strange dream world. In a beautiful pencil drawing called *Phantoms of the Ripary* composed around the ghostly skeleton of a boat against the sea, Will Maclean explores the world of his imagination more quietly, but to no less effect. Sculptors Jake Harvey and Doug Cocker both manage to give their drawings the solid character of their three-dimensional work. Others actually wander into three dimensions. Allan Watson, for instance, has several images of simple furniture constructed in low relief from cut-out coloured card. While Charles Stiven has a construction of miniature upside-down beach huts attached to the wall, drawings only in their spiky lines. Without drawing there could be no architecture and one of the

most striking exhibits here is by John McAslan for the extension to King's Cross Station. This is not just drawing on paper, but actually soaring into space, too. The elegant lines of the finished structure keep the character of the drawing from which they grew.

Ian McKenzie Smith's beautiful study of Chanonry Lodge in Old Aberdeen was done more than 50 years ago. Like so many here, he belongs to the generation of artists for whom drawing was still the primary discipline, but this show is not just about nostalgia for the past. One of the most striking groups of works is a set of unframed chalk drawings by Caitlin Hines, a recent graduate and an invited artist. Their brilliant colour belies the nightmare visions they portray.

Some of the work of the four abstract artists showing at the Ingleby Gallery would fit perfectly well into the RSA show. They have called their show *Abjad*, the name for a writing system that, like Arabic, only uses consonants. The inference is apparently that abstract art can work the same way and provide the essential structure of visual language without need for the pictorial equivalent of all the fuzzy and imprecise vowels, whatever that might be. The four artists in the show are Jane Bustin, Paul Keir, Jeff McMillan and Kevin Harman. Jane Bustin makes exquisite, small panels using wood, paper, gesso and fabrics such as silk or linen. Small in scale their unity and the delicacy of colour and surface is really beautiful. Jeff

McMillan's work deploys similar delicacy. He mostly uses gloss paint on linen to create simple images where texture and perfect finish are vital to the overall effect. Painting simple abstract patterns on wood, Paul Keir likewise explores subtle contrasts of texture. A group of 40

small works on paper by him would certainly have looked quite at home in the RSA show. Kevin Harman is more obviously a painter than the others, however. His works are bigger and he uses runs of paint to good effect, much in the manner of the Abstract Expressionists, but then as though he doesn't trust the result to behave itself, or indeed doesn't trust painting at all, he locks his pictures in a heavy steel and glass frame like a kind of pictorial chastity belt. It's a shame.

If *Abjad* is a form of writing that excludes the fuzzy vowels from written language, the abstraction that these four painters practise nevertheless still has enough fuzziness to keep it human. There is, however, also a rather different tradition of abstract art that really did begin from the determination to remake the world pure, clean and hard-edged. This way of thinking found its most visible expression in the utopian tradition of modernist architecture. It inspired tower blocks everywhere and without allowing for human warmth, they mostly didn't work. One of the most monstrous of these was *Ponte City* in Johannesburg, a huge cylinder 54 storeys high with flats around a circular inner space. Begun in 1975, it was never really finished and was gradually taken over by ordinary humanity whose natural fuzziness has finally triumphed over its harsh utopian geometry. This victory of humanity over abstraction has been brilliantly documented by Mikhael Subotzky and Patrick Waterhouse. Over five years they recorded everything about the building and its inhabitants. The result is *Ponte City* at the Portrait Gallery, a cornucopia of an exhibition overflowing with humanity like the building itself.

Scottish Drawings until 28 February; Abjad until 21 March; Ponte City until 25 April

