

Vitamin D: New Perspectives in Drawing

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Review by Ian Massey

Vitamin D is billed as, ‘*a global, up-to-the-minute survey of drawing today*’. It acts as a showcase for work by 109 artists, selected by an international panel of curators, critics, and art historians. The focus is very much on finished work. There are no preliminary sketches, no working drawings. Crucially, for the artists shown here, drawing forms their total practice, or is central to it.

In her introduction, Emma Dexter writes that drawing has a, ‘*primal and elemental character*’. She cites the purity of children’s art, and Neolithic caves drawings, in stating that the medium has, ‘*mythic status as the earliest and most immediate form of image making*’. The immediacy of the directly drawn mark carries an earthy authenticity, Romantic in its associations of integrity and individuality. And it might be argued that, if there is commonality in *Vitamin D*, it is within a quest for the authentic mark, that which best expresses the artist’s intention. However, the very idea of ‘authenticity’ can become problematic, when we consider the range of motivations within the shifting complexities of contemporary art practice.

Intriguingly, Devandra Banhart cites Joseph Beuys, alongside Cy Twombly, and the Outsider artists Adolf Wolfli and Henry Darger, as artistic influences. Perhaps more than most artists, Beuys fully understood the potency of the primal mark in fashioning his art of self-mythology and reinvention. Banhart’s imaginary faces, inspired by Native American culture, are drawn in delicate traceries of ink. They are akin to third eye apparitions, ethereal rather than earthly. ‘*Some appear fully formed before I execute them*’, he tells us, bolstering the notion of the artist as savant, or conduit to forces beyond the human terrain. There are few better ways than this of establishing a direct line to the Authentic. It can make going to art school seem like a bad idea.

The American artist John Currin has been to art school, big time, as is manifest in his profound mastery of style and technique. Currin treads a fine line between cruel and tender, his dark humour tempered with humanism. The fading belles of his portraits hail from an American aristocracy, their Old Money mannerisms finding fitting expression in Currin’s artistic ones. In his pastels, it is as though the hand of Watteau has been coerced within a project to delineate the fragility at the heart of America. The uncertainty of Currin’s women, with their sense of underlying confusion and panic, is one of upper class *hauteur* on beta-blockers. Somehow, and this is a mark of Currin’s brilliance, his work carries no trace of pastiche.

In *Vitamin D*, the pencil-case rules. Hence, lots of graphite, crayon and ink, imprinted onto reams of white paper. Moreover, there is some emphasis on what

Emma Dexter labels, '*bedroom art*', whose, '*intense mark-making suggests the suppressed violence, rage, and frustration of the maker*'. Thus, many mature and seasoned artists utilise a craft-skills emphasis better associated with angst and acne. Degrees of authenticity, indeed irony, are here open to debate.

Within this bedroom tendency, there is an intensely muscular approach evident in Steven Shearer's long-haired headbangers, and in Zak Smith's glaring punks. Meanwhile however, Elizabeth Peyton's male subjects are of a non-macho stripe. If there is intensity and angst amongst them, it is subsumed within a self-absorbed ennui. Peyton's insipid pencil crayon drawings, made from photographs, are those of the eternal fan, entombed in the suburban bedroom. She revisits glam rock stars decades after the fact, breathing a pallid life into Keith Richards c.1972, and Bowie in Ziggy-era aspic. Compared to Currin, Peyton is a one-trick pony, a lightweight. But I guess that is the point. The young men in her drawings are bloodless, expressionless. Their lack of substance finds due expression in Peyton's deceptive sleight of hand, in her ventriloquism of long-faded innocence.

Memed Erdener's work is the antithesis of Peyton's. His concerns are with the inequalities found in directly lived experience. Themes of ethnicity, exploitation and prejudice are tackled with a nuanced and witty graphic force. In tightly composed digitally manipulated black and white ink drawings, Erdener borrows from the vernacular of street graffiti and populist graphics. If there is romanticism here, it is that of the artist as socio-political crusader, a true man of the people.

Vitamin D is beautifully designed, and at 350 pages, has the feel of a catalogue for a blockbuster exhibition. It acts as a marvellous celebration of the potency and vitality of contemporary drawing.