

DENA ASHBOLT

Dena has participated in many group exhibitions and has had solo exhibitions in Australia, Canada and Europe. She holds a PhD and MFA in Fine Art from Monash University, Melbourne, and a BA Hons from Westminster University, London in Film and Photographic Arts. Her Video Drawing *Wet Feet Under the Pier* was awarded the Nillumbik Shire Art Prize and she has exhibited as a finalist in both the Rick Amor Drawing Prize, and the Paul Guest Prize. In Melbourne she is represented by Alcaston Gallery.

CINEMATIC DRAWING – WHAT MIGHT THAT BE?

Framed by the visual representation of time and Henri Michaux's term *cinematic drawing*, this studio-based project employs methodologies derived from a perceptual drawing practice in response to the experiential aspect of time passing to uncover the operation of *the buffer* and explore *the almost* as an instrument of the cinematic.

Cinematic Drawing – What might that be?

In this presentation I would like to take you on a journey to investigate the French artist Henri Michaux's (1899 – 1984) term 'Cinematic Drawing'.

I'd like to explore how methods of making, bodily perception, gesture, and response are embedded in drawings, and how 'poetry of the almost', coined by Erin Manning in her book *Relationescapes* (Manning 2009, 92) may relate to the cinematic in drawing.

In his essay *To Draw The Flow of Time*, 1957, Michaux writes,

Instead of one vision to the exclusion of others, I wanted to draw the moments that end to end make life, to show the inner phrase, the wordless phrase, the sinuous strand that unwinds indefinitely and is intimately present in each inner and outer event. I wanted to draw the consciousness of existing and the flow of time. . . . Cinematic drawing (Michaux et al. 2000, 7).

Cinematic Drawing questions the possibilities of drawing in response to the flow of time.

In the context of this paper, drawing is positioned as an experiential act made permanent. The drawings presented here are neither rehearsal nor preparation for painting, sculpture or installation. In this body of work the act of drawing is restricted to an act that responds directly to a perceptual experience. The notion of the cinematic, as a moving image on a static ground, is investigated through a studio practice of perceptual drawing.

Whilst working in the studio attempting to understand Cinematic Drawing, I found narrative, so embedded in our understanding of cinema, disruptive to my

process. The flow of time framed by narrative lead me to works locating time in the sequencing of event, as opposed to experiencing the flow of time.

Movement struck me as something that cinema and the flow of time have in common, and which could potentially be observed without imposing a narrative intent. That is not to say that narrative readings are not made from the resulting works, but that the intent in making is to observe and respond to movement as evincing the flow of time.

My journey to draw the flow of time as witnessed by movement takes place in the life studio with a moving life model. Drawing directly from the moving model proved to be immensely frustrating. As I reviewed my materials and methodologies employed two main methods became apparent.

In the first I am much more conscious of, and privilege, the marks I make on the support and how these marks relate to the moving subject before me. There is much looking backwards and forwards the brain preferring the eyes as search engines over the utilization of memory¹ (Ings 2007, 136-137). Each time I turn from the drawing paper to look back at the subject before me there is an immediate jolt/jump as I register the extensive change that has occurred whilst I was immersed in the action of drawing over looking at the subject.

In the second mode, I resist the temptation to look at the paper whilst drawing. I privilege the subject with my eyes looking only at the subject and my hand responding on the paper to the information received. As the model moves so does my hand, the model and hand becoming choreographed to move as one. Through 'the looking' with charcoal, pencil, brush or iPad in hand, I find my entire body becomes involved in tracing a response onto the paper. I become

increasingly aware that my observations are made not only through my eyes, but through my whole body, I find myself in, and conscious of, a more bodily perceptual experience described by Merleau-Ponty, and expanded by Taylor Carman (Carman 2008, 106-107) as body schema.ⁱⁱ

This second method of making occurs with no regard for how the marks are forming or relating to the subject's movement before me and, one could almost say that I am 'drawing blind'. This second mode of drawing, *blind drawing*, could be considered as a parallel to copy typing. Blind drawing like copy typing is undertaken without looking at the result (drawing or text) as it develops. However, unlike copy typing, blind drawing and its result is not predetermined. It is the by-product of an interaction between the hand, the eye and the observed subject.

With copy typing *muscle memory* plays an essential role as the typist creates words—the muscles knowing exactly which key to hit with the predetermined pattern of the keyboard. During the making of the drawings I am aware that the more repetitious the figure's movements are, the easier the hand responds. I believe that the outcome of blind drawing is as much the product of muscle and visual memory as is the result of the act of looking.

Once the 'image' enters the mind the drawing hand responds automatically. My muscle memory was developed in the repetitive practice of drawing blind and accessing the results; in this way each drawing became a rehearsal for the next. Whilst looking in the present moment, my body/hand/eyes were also informed by a visual and muscular memory of what had gone before. Thus I expanded my understanding of drawing as a performative act. The act of being in and of the

moment is the performance that manifests in the drawing, even if for my practice the performance is a private one.

Whilst I felt my body/hand/eyes were looking and responding in the present moment Simon Ings' book *The Eye* introduced me to Michael Land's research into eye behaviour and eye movement. Land discovered that in cricket when a ball is bowled at a cricketer, the player takes his eye from the ball to look to where the ball is about to bounce.

It seems, from Land's studies, that half a second of visual information is held in a 'buffer' of some kind. The eyes stay one step ahead of the body, dealing with the next view, the next task, the next set of predictions and calculations, while the body relies on the 'buffer' (Ings 2007, 139).

As Ings points out,

This raises the odd but compelling idea that the 'present moment', as we experience it, has a measurable duration. We operate in the world, not as it is, but as it existed half a second ago (Ings 2007, 139).

In the studio I uncovered that in the performance of blind drawing my eye was responding before I had become conscious of the movement being looked at. The immersed state I felt in making these works was due to being in the 'buffer', where the perceptual experience of the eye drives my bodily response, rather than my mind directing the eye on the topic of what to see.

On 11th June 1895, the Lumière Brothers presented their invention, *Cinematographe*, to photographersⁱⁱⁱ (Campany 2008, 7). They filmed the arrival of the photographers to the presentation and then later played the film back to them. The way the photographers walk through the fixed frame results in a

layering of photographic frames, one on top of the other creating movement on the cinema screen.

In the Lumière Brothers' film, with a fixed camera frame the operator directs the camera in a particular way of looking that is similar to the fixed nature of the drawing support. This connects with the layering experienced in my drawings as the marks accumulate on the paper's fixed surface.

Initially an intense density of marks began to appear in the drawings, and as a result I introduced a strategy of both making and erasing marks, the erased mark referring to the body that had moved on.

With erasure as a method of working, the trace left from an erased line, the residue of touch, was resonant. Duration and embodiment — the trace of erasure as the evidence of time in drawing — is essential to my understanding of what drawing is^{iv} (Krema 2010). I started to explore ways of layering my mark-making to simultaneously evoke both presence and absence^v (Berger and Spencer 1993, 207). Something other than my drawing response began to emerge on the page allowing the flow of time, if not the precise direction, to become evident.

The reciprocal relationship between the layers of erased marks and marks allowed a dialogue to emerge on the paper as the eye travelled through the gap between these sets of temporal marks. Erin Manning, in *Relationescapes*, referencing the chronophotographic photographs and late smoke photographs of Étienne-Jules Marey (1830-1904), which involved overlaying multiple exposures on a single plate, elegantly describes this gap as 'the interval'^{vi} (Manning 2009, 114). This interval creates a dynamic that speaks to what the

eye can and cannot see when looking at a moving subject. Marey's photographs caused me to question how to work in and with this temporal interval as I investigated Cinematic Drawing.

When drawing it is my bodily movements, the gesture of mark making, that disturbs the static surface of the paper. In my drawings, what Manning described as Marey's 'dance of appearance disappearing'^{vii} (Manning 2009, 88) is reflected in the weight and the hesitation of marks made in response to what is seen and felt. Increasingly I reduced the pigment in the medium to permit a layering through transparency of mark.

From the first drawing in the life studio *the blur* was evident as a mark made and then rubbed back. The blur is implicated in the continual impression of appearance disappearing that I experienced, and often arose as a result of media blurring. When considering the role played by the interval, trace, erasure, gesture and the blur in mark making, I found the residue of visual ambiguity became important in shortening the gap between the viewer and the work. Manning on Marey's gaseous images states, "(Marey's) . . . movement experiments with gaseous fluids are perhaps the best evocation of the poetry of the almost" (Manning 2009, 92).

Poetry of the almost—this struck a chord with me. In my drawings, marks that have been made and erased are *almost* visible and the *poetry of the almost* resonates as it relates directly to the interval and to those marks that are almost but not quite made.

I consider the 'almost' to be a state that is not concrete; rather it is transient and incomplete, certainly not static. It is a state of movement, which is vibrational

rather than directional. The 'almost' swells with a potential of becoming. Potential is a strongly seductive feeling to engage with — consider the sense of potential experienced when entering an art supply shop, a hardware store or even a fruit and vegetable market. The potential of these elements *to become* something, their appeal to the future, is palpable. The 'almost' is a particular sensibility or feeling of the mind, that has much to do with anticipation.

With a moving subject, the reciprocity of appearance disappearing evokes a sense of incompleteness in the drawings that engages simultaneously with a state of remembering and anticipation. The 'almost' is seen to operate in the works as the trace and erasure of marks responds to appearance disappearing. In the context of the drawings the word *almost* evokes a sense of movement and time, whereby being *almost* defies arrival and completion – there is no end. By maintaining an aspect of 'almost' in relation to time, one is able to keep the journey alive as we are only ever almost there.

'Almost' is about being on the path and experiencing the journey, as opposed to having arrived at a point of accumulated chronological happenings. Death, the allure of the end, is implied and contained in the 'almost'. It happens when the 'almost' expires.

The 'almost' evident in the marks of the drawings encourages a viewer *to enter into that thing*^{viii} (Merleau-Ponty 2004, 100), which is the intimate space of an artwork. It is when a viewer enters this intimate space and engages with the 'almost' that they embark on a journey that is the 'cinema' of the work, i.e. the cinematic experience of time and movement, the moving image on a static ground.

To conclude, 'almost' is the word that for me best clarifies what cinematic drawing might be, and offers insight into drawing the flow of time. As time collapses into the drawing's marks, an intensity of looking allows *the flow of experience* to be felt over the object's presence. The works do not tell a story so much as evoke the experience of looking at the flow of time.

The drawn result permits both viewer, and the artist in retrospect, a sense of mastering the flow of time^x (Bergson and Pogson 2001), as each mark informed by movement holds in its gesture the awareness of appearance disappearing, a past moment contained in anticipation of a future moment.

ⁱ (Ings 2007) Dana Ballard, one of a new generation of robot builders when working on the needs for a robot's eye he undertook many experiments one of which is, the eye, memory and block experiment in which "He asked a group of volunteers to copy a geometrical pattern, using a set of coloured blocks. Looking closely, this is what he saw: First, his volunteers glanced from the pattern in front of them to the tray of loose blocks. Next they picked up a block of a certain colour. Then, they glanced at the pattern again. Finally, they fitted the block they had selected into the position required to make a copy of the pattern. This seems just a bit complicated: if the eyes see a block of a certain colour in a certain position, why can't both pieces of information be retained in one go? Why does the eye make one set of movements to choose a block of a particular colour, and another, virtually identical set, to establish where it should go? The answer seems to be that it is easier for the eye to move than it is for the mind to remember. ... The eyes are our search engines, cheaper and faster than memory."

ⁱⁱ (Carman 2008) The body schema thus constitutes our precognitive familiarity with ourselves and with the world we inhabit: "I am aware of my body via the world," Merleau-Ponty says, just as "I am aware of the world through the medium of my body".

ⁱⁱⁱ (Campany 2008) Campany writes, "The subject matter was ideal: endlessly different figures passing through a fixed frame express so much so simply, about photographs in motion."

^{iv} (Krema 2010) In, *Cinematic Drawing in a Digital Age*, Ed Krema, argues that the impact of the digital on drawing has resulted in an increased interest in duration and embodiment, due to digital's ability to remove any mark without trace.

. . . a richer and more precise conception of drawing's specific capacities can be arrived at by exploring its alignments with, and differences from, other forms of practice. . . . moving away from issues of medium to those of duration and embodiment.

^v (Berger and Spencer 1993, 207) Berger, "You can't really look at movement without evoking the static in the same way as the minute you consider presence you evoke absence."

^{vi} (Manning 2009) Thanks to the persistence of vision, the interval between frames remains imperceptible as such, the moving image apparently a seamless unity across the cuts of the frames. Yet the interval is nonetheless active in the watching: it is a virtual event in which the

spectator unwittingly participates. We do not actually see the interval, but we do feel its force as it infolds into the perception of movement moving.

^{vii} (Manning 2009) “Marey creates an uncanny dance of appearance disappearing. We feel the palpability of the imperceptible. Body, movement, and environment have become one.”

^{viii} (Merleau-Ponty 2004, 100) fn3 Stéphane Mallarmé, *passim*. See, in particular, his *Réponses à des enquêtes* (response to Jules Huret, 1891), in *Oeuvres complètes* (Paris: Gallimard, Pléiade, 1945).

^{ix} (Bergson and Pogson 2001) Thus the perception of ease in motion passes over into the pleasure of mastering the flow of time and holding the future in the present. See also Rodin on drawing movement (Rodin and Gsell 1971).



Figure 1. Dena Ashbolt, Response 4629, 2013, ink acrylic watercolour on paper, 60 x 48 cm.



Figure 2. Dena Ashbolt, Response 4670, 2012, ink watercolour on paper, 33 x 44 cm.



Figure 3. Dena Ashbolt, Response 3079, 2011, charcoal on paper, 54 x 35 cm.



Figure 4. Dena Ashbolt, Response 2565, 2014, ink and watercolour on paper, 30 x 37 cm.



Figure 5. Dena Ashbolt, Response 7003, 2013, ink on paper, 49.5 x 28.0 cm.



Figure 6. Dena Ashbolt, *The Fall*, 2012, ink and acrylic on paper, 221 x 130 cm.



Figure 7. Dena Ashbolt, iPad Response 0701, 2014.



Figure 8. Dena Ashbolt, Response 2700, 2014, ink and watercolour on paper, 25 x 20 cm.



Figure 9. Dena Ashbolt, Response 2594, 2014, ink and watercolour on rice paper, 46 x 46cm.

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