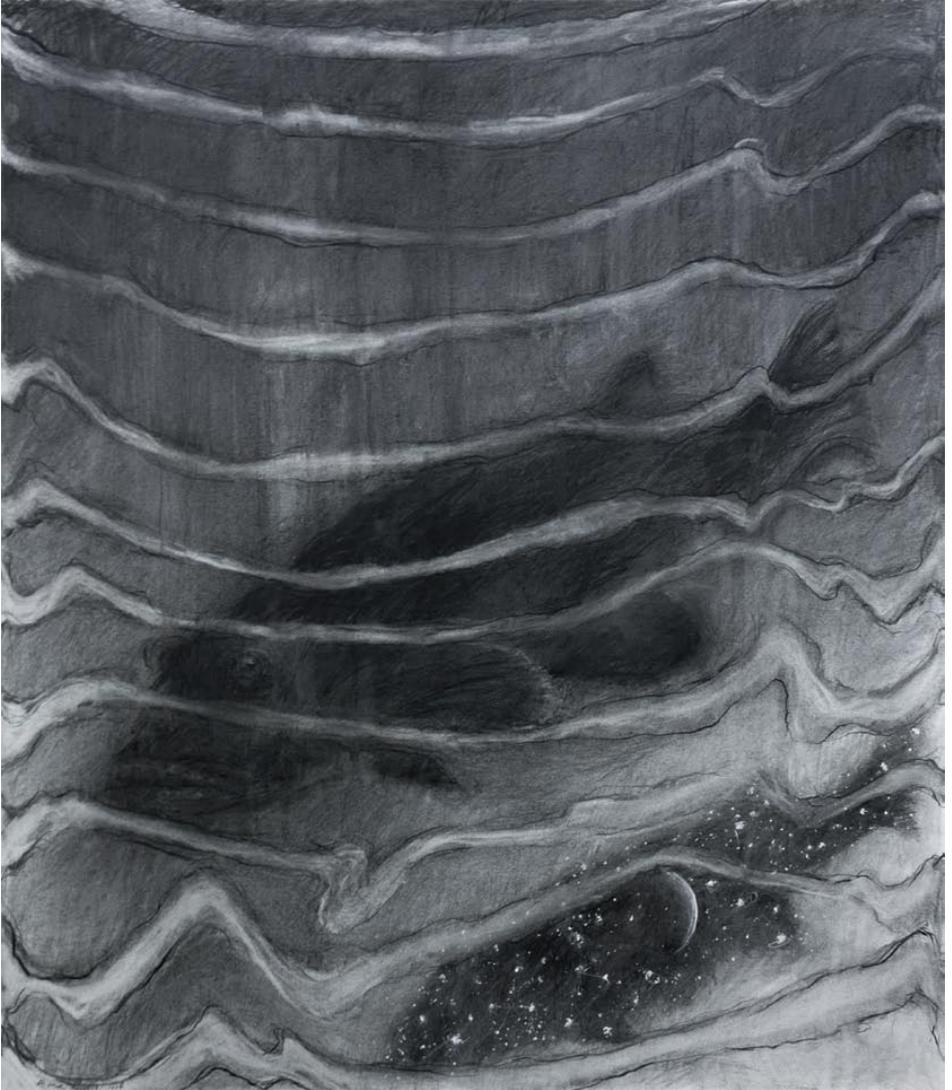


DRAWN IN



Peter Hudson, *Fish Moon Relationship* 2014, Charcoal on paper

A exhibition of drawings by

Ian Smith, Ron McBurnie, Peter Hudson & Euan Macleod

A Delicate Method

The visual sources for the four artists in this exhibition extend from the letter box to the cosmos. Ian Smith contemplates the social and emotional implications of the “unavoidable images” of women in underwear regularly delivered to him as junk mail from large chain stores. Peter Hudson ponders the systems that link land and animals. Ron McBurnie reflects on the potential for Australian landscapes to conjure that mood of the British romantic pastoral artists that reach back to William Blake. And Euan Macleod creates landscapes that are charged, not by reference to place, but by the psychological atmosphere created by introducing a figure. What brings them together in this exhibition is the fact that they all draw, although it is no doubt significant that three of the four are regularly identified as quintessentially Queensland artists, where they have spent the bulk of their lengthy careers and where they were all born; in Cairns, Townsville and Brisbane, respectively. Macleod was born in Christchurch, New Zealand and moved to his permanent home in Sydney in 1981.



Ian Smith, *4 Women Who Arrived Through My Letter Box* 2013, Mixed media

Robert Mercer, the curator of *Drawn In*, taught at the Queensland College of Art throughout his extensive career where he championed innovative drawing practice. Ian Smith also taught at QCA during the 1970s and both Ron McBurnie and Peter Hudson studied there. For many years Euan Macleod has taught painting and drawing at the National Art School in Sydney, a bastion of rigorous drawing practice. Forgetting any predictable institutional nepotism, the association with QCA by the majority and Macleod’s role at NAS, is important in the context of this drawing exhibition because they all share a generational attitude to the value of drawing as a form of thinking about one thing or about everything.

It seems almost obligatory to begin any discussion of drawing with a definition, usually to establish the primacy of drawing in art practice. Often this is allied with the enthusiastic revelation of the return of drawing as a fashion or form in contemporary art and as an essential element in art education. This last claim is of course nonsense, considering every child in nineteenth-century Australia, Britain and the United States was taught to draw as part of a general education and specialised art education was built almost entirely on identifying and developing drawing skills. There is absolutely no evidence of a return to anything like that, with little indication that there ever will be, acknowledging that it is impossible to predict anything about what will happen in contemporary art and education, especially in Australia.



Euan Macleod, *Untitled* 2010, Acrylic crayon on paper

Clearly, the best indication of the demise of drawing as a widely practised craft and core discipline in art education is the very fact that it now needs a definition - almost always a defensive strategy to justify its existence. All such attempts tend to begin with the essentialist, or indexical claims for mark making that develop into the expansive synthetic view that extends the scope of drawing activity. The strategic aim is clear enough; to establish that everything is drawing, be it moving the computer mouse, doing burn-outs in a car on the bitumen, dipping a snail in ink, climbing walls with dirty boots and so on. The desperation in such spurious ploys to update, by categorical extension, the definition of drawing is only made obvious when drawing is compared to its sister discipline of philosophy. Drawing relates to programed Photoshop techniques, such as posterizing of photographs, as philosophy relates to Eddie McGuire's *Who Wants to be a Millionaire*. That is, these Photoshop effects give the illusion of invention and creation, as Eddie gives the illusion that the currency being dealt with has a relation to knowledge.

Unfortunately, the foundation myths of drawing stress only its mimetic, practical application – the Corinthian Maid tracing her departing lover's silhouette, the discovery of a young Cimabue or Giotto or any of the other contenders for the first secular European artist drawing a sheep in the field, and so on. On the other hand, the myths that drive the contemporary conception of philosophy have at least kept alive that discipline's fundamental non-vocational, transcendental location in pure thought, though it is probably cold comfort to the few staff left in philosophy departments in our universities. Anyone who catches cabs regularly confronts the absurdity of the widely held proposition that all philosophers end up driving cabs after their university degree, the only vocational avenue most people can imagine that involves sitting around thinking interspersed with periods of talking shit.

The wrong-headed urge to define, or more correctly, redefine drawing in a contemporary context arises from a misconception about the history of drawing. The mechanical nature of drawing as a skill and discipline is all too evident in the legacy of manuals and countless academic studies of casts and live models, yet none of this was what was prized in the application of drawing as a professional practice. Drawing, above all, is always about insight, cultivating visual intelligence and invention.

In fact many of the key drawing manuals from the nineteenth century accepted as a given the educational and generic vocational value of drawing just as they warned of the dangers of any singular focus on this aspect. Philip Hamerton noted in his 1892 *Drawing and Engraving* that "Drawing is known to be valuable as a training of the eye, nobody disputes that, the doubt concerns its value to the mind." After a lengthy description of the contribution to mental education such as power of co-ordination, observation, memory and accuracy he makes a much broader claim:

Besides this [drawing] opens the mind to ideas of relation by compelling us to take accurate account of the laws of harmony and contrast which are more conspicuously visible in the graphic arts than they are in literature and in life, though they concern, in reality, everything that is human.

What Hamerton develops is an argument against “consummate manual skill” as vain and nugatory cleverness in favour of a discipline of accurate observation. When he writes of drawing that “analogies between learning to see with the eye, and learning to see with the mind are so close one cannot fail to help the other”, he engages a common thread in nineteenth and early twentieth-century drawing manuals to dismiss linear exactitude in hand skill as hostile to poetic sentiment. Nowhere is this more characteristically expressed than in one of the most



Ron McBurnie, *Full moon in the valley* 2014, Ink on paper

influential manuals of the nineteenth century, John Ruskin’s *The Elements of Drawing* (1857). Ruskin acknowledged that invention was an individual trait difficult to cultivate which left the potential for refinement of perception. Specifically he observes that all “great schools enforce delicacy of drawing and subtlety of sight: and the only rule which I have, as yet, found to be without exception respecting art, is that all great art is delicate.” The aim then for Ruskin was to teach a “delicate method of work” such as to ensure the student’s seeing truly. For him “the sight is a more important thing than the drawing” and he said he would rather teach drawing so pupils learnt to love nature than teach looking at nature that they might learn drawing.

This fundamental tenet of drawing education remains, and remained in place when Smith, Hudson and McBurnie worked or trained at QCA and Macleod completed his study in the nineteen seventies in Christchurch. It could be said that the theoretical language has changed although I doubt any of these artists would object to the description of a “delicate method of work” for their approach to drawing. I especially include Smith in this. since he has always worn the “I” for irony on his Queensland jersey. They all understand that mechanical discipline and mark-making tricks are no substitute for a visual intelligence cultivated by observation and individual insight, for drawing is a kind of cognitive translation of the visible and invisible before it is anything else, and certainly before it is a manual skill. What makes a good drawing or painting, or any work of art for that matter, depends on a constellation of factors specific to the individual object/image under scrutiny and is contingent on the time and circumstances of engagement. Naturally, what drawing does and says can only be demonstrated in its operation and this exhibition offers the opportunity to do just that.

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