

'It's all around you'

By Andrew Sayers

2014

What are the circumstances that make drawing possible? Drawing, unlike any other kind of image making, is about the opening up of space. Much has been said about the primacy of drawing, the immediacy of drawing and the probity of drawing, but these concepts fail to get to its essence. On the other hand, if we see the essential character of drawing as the opening up of space, then its unique place in the process of image making become clear.

In his philosophical reflections on art and space, Heidegger pointed to what he described as the peculiar characteristic of space: 'behind space, so it will appear, nothing more is given to which it can be traced back. Before space there is no retreat to something else'.

The blank sheet of paper: from childhood we are used to treating the page as free of form, and void. This simple lack of definition allows for freedom and limitless promise. The promise of drawing lies in the fact that the act of making marks opens up space. It is a sense that stays with us through life. No other medium or circumstance available to the artist has this character.

In Andrew Browne's drawing the character of the medium is very apparent. The images hover within the paper's clean margins. With immense care he brings the images forth from the sheet, elaborating them, deepening their tonal complexity, yet all the time conscious and respectful of the original blankness of the paper. The simplest drawing in the series #15, 2014, based a blind corner on a landing of the brutalist Whitney Museum, provides an opportunity to observe a Seurat-like tonal construction. His drawings are an infinitely subtle interplay between black and blank.

When I visited the artist's studio he was in the final orchestration of this suite of drawings. I was struck by the way in which sheets of paper were interpolated along the walls. It was unclear whether they were destined to become drawings, or acted as pauses in the rhythm but they were reminders of the unelaborated ground that lies under and inside the drawings.

The title of Andrew Browne's collection of drawings, 'It's all around you', is a statement and a direction - a direction to see. That is a role of drawing, too - to jolt us out of our inattention or to focus our wandering attention on details of the world around us. There are two ways in which the direction operates. Firstly, of course, the subjects are drawn from the overlooked edges of urban experience; the images bring these things to our notice. Secondly, the artist creates a central focus, an 'eye' if you like, in each drawing, so we see motifs isolated from their surroundings and elaborated with minute care. The best word I can find to describe the artist is: gatherer. It is as though he is honoring the world with the

precision of his attention. That the objects of his attention are as abject as a deflated balloon, or a piece of turf, only heightens, not diminishes our sense of wonder at the overlooked.

The paradigmatic circumstance of such attention is the way we see faces everywhere. 'It's all around you' could be: 'they're all around you'. It is impossible to read two holes in a piece of plywood or a sheet of paper other than as eyes. And thickets of twisted branches can bring forth monsters. When we look at almost all the drawings in the series we half expect to see these physiognomies to appear. #7, 2013 is, in isolation, a view of dense undergrowth seen through a rotting fence. But perhaps it is a face; with a disturbing sense of threat. Similarly the jagged timber of #25, 2014 seems to be inhabited by a malevolent spirit.

The vocabulary of images in these drawings relates closely to Andrew Browne's paintings, yet the drawings are in no way preliminary. They provide a parallel experience but with the difference in scale each work proceeds according to its own internal logic. In one sense the drawings in 'it's all around you' behave as an index. These are the images that haunt the artist's work, appearing in his paintings, prints, drawings, even, now, in three dimensions, as sculptures. If there is a comparison to be made in the history of Australian art it would be with that Nineteenth-century master of precise detail, Eugene von Guerard, who made sets of finely wrought drawings of landscape motifs he had elsewhere created as paintings or prints. A century-and-a-half later, Andrew Browne echoes the earlier artist's commitment to detail ('microscopism' was the epithet his critics used) that von Guerard argued was not incompatible with the creation of feeling or mood.

Mood, after all, is evoked by very specific, highly subjective, stimuli. One feels that the places that Andrew Browne elaborates in his drawings have some deeply felt evocative qualities for the artist. Speaking personally, the eerily illuminated thickets of tangled undergrowth such as #19, 2014, evoke, for me, childhood night journeys through bush lit by car headlights. Beyond the circle of light is fear of the unknown. And the damp, claustrophobic setting of the black channel of Merri Creek as it cuts its way through the urban fringe of the city, I cannot see but through the prism of Andrew Browne's imagery.

The drawings belong to a series, and yet they are episodic. We can no more make a continuous narrative of Andrew Browne's drawings, than we can of our own lives and seeing. The images are discrete; in some cases their origins are obscure, in other instances familiar. They sometimes 'riff' on each other; in other instances they stand alone. In sum these instances of the artist's vision are a richly chaotic oscillation between the focused and the sprawling, the profound and the banal, the built and the natural. The dualities of paper white and charcoal black, daylight and night illumination create the world: it's all around you.

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