

Essential Utility - Group show AAAB Gallery, Melbourne 2021
Curated by Augusta Vinall Richardson

It is easy to describe. It is easy to feel without real feeling. It is easy to pretend to understand lest you ask for clarification.

To me drawing is the product of 'eager, industrious, unkempt activity', as worded by painter and film critic, Manny Farber. He is writing in reference to what he refers to as 'termite tapeworm-fungus-moss art' which 'goes always forward eating its own boundaries'¹. In this text he refers to film, but to my mind the same surging statement could be considered in relation to any art form.

I think of drawing as the foundation of ideas. It assaults the written or spoken word with its enormous and diverse ability to communicate and encompass plans, notions, theories, emotions. Wordlessly or *with* words. The intensity with which line is applied to the surface of paper, fabric, a body was what attracted me to the work of the artists gathered for this inaugural group exhibition.

Unconsciously (*or consciously?*), I selected these artists who happen to be women. This was the first remark made by a friend when discussing the show. Yeah, I replied, this creates a context and sets the conditions for making work.

This female identification doesn't necessarily define the subject matter or the course of interest for artists, but for these particular artists being women is important or integral to their practices. Writer, Andrea Long Chu, distinguishes 'woman' from 'female' as "any psychic operation in which the self is sacrificed to make room for the desires of another"² For all its essentialism, I like this interpretation because female is framed beyond gender or fixed classifications, such as 'they', 'I', 'me', 'you', 'him', 'her', etc. Identifications such as 'femineity', a trait historically overlaid on woman-ness, can now be applied to all gender identifications. This freeing up of understanding of 'women' sets the conditions for reading these works.

Deleuze says something about the way writing shapes the self through memory that I suggest could be applied to the act of drawing. Drawing becomes a device in which to recall, transcribe and remember. The works in *Essential Utility* rely on non-logocentric experiences, whether it be the physical enacting of mark making, or the expression of an experience that has been imprinted on the mind. These works operate as a series of investigations into the self. Shaping the self, through action and memory.

Jasmine Pickup approaches her artmaking, which consists of mostly drawing, with a certain kind of apathy. Drawing is a tool. A way to make a buck. Resting between pleasure and commerce, the initial drawing is what matters, that moment, then. It can be copied many times. She bootlegs her own work, reproducing an original drawing over and over, tracing her own impatient lines. Graphite on paper. I like how she does this. Everyone who has a drawing thinks that they own the original, the only one. And they do. In a way.

In her digital video works, musician and visual artist Rachel Button's collage method also utilises the idea of the copy. However, there is an earnestness to her manner that Pickup eschews. Layers of marks, moving image and sound dance across the screen. Noise. Ripped paper. Cut out bodies. Her work is formed from layers upon layers of self-produced and found content. Each scene has its own rhythm. The looping of the video and sound leaks from it, building on the works' meaning. A feeling of inertia. Button narrates without force, guiding our visual experience.

¹ Manny Farber, "White Elephant Art vs. Termite Art" *Film Culture* No.27, 1962

² Andrea Long Chu, *Females*, Croydon: Verso, 019

Julia Frances' drawings also respond to an internal drumbeat. A different rhythm and tone from Button's. Her works are monochromatic, and dark. Wordlessly, she creates imagery that explores the subconscious. Vast feelings well up in the corners of the pages; smudges of black attempt to muddy strong inscriptions. Thin lines make repeating forms. What do we find in this landscape?

Gabriella D'Costa's drawings are composed. Atoms, the sound of space echo amongst the layers of grey graphite. Everything is pulsing but the hand is steady, nothing erratic occurs on the page. In this way the drawing that takes place is an expression of an idea — a knowing application of line and form. I imagine the actions she takes; erasing, reshaping, rehearsing the movement of the outline of form, the graphite glides across the pale expanse desiring to be filled.

Using bright pastel colours, Anastasia Klose's mark-making is also in some ways sure and exacting, and yet uncertainty creeps into the work. Vulnerability is key. This integral softness gets diverted into forms of performance. Teetering, always teetering, the work feels intimate and tactile. For knowing-viewers, traces of her past performance works will be evident in the expression of her lines. Embedded in the constant flow of colour and texture is a heightened sense of reality. My senses imbibe all this and more, the large paper page seems barely enough.

Britt D'Argaville's 'drawing' is not substrate on paper, but three-dimensional object, observational and time based. Dargaville's sculptural practice centres on her own body in relation to others. In some ways, this statement could apply to all the artists exhibiting, however the lack of a specific or traditional material base, the lack of *paper*, makes D'Argaville's method of making harder to locate in the established sense of line and page.

For abstract painter Amy Sillman, drawing is an endless stream of doing.

To inscribe, to graph, to lay out, to compose, to re-jigger, to elaborate, to invent, to diagram, to map out, to point out, to plot, to plan, to envision, to configure, to enlarge, to spatialise, to slice, to mesmerize, to maximalise, to territorialise, to demonstrate, to stage, to choreograph, to animate...³

Emanating from D'Argaville's body, her bodily movements, seen against the breadth of Sillman's drawing possibilities, offers a way to locate D'Argaville's work within a field of expanded drawing practice.

Separated, as with the layers of pencil, marker, pastel, charcoal, fabric or monitor, subject matter intertwines with unburdened line. Together, the works in *Essential Utility*, represent powerful drawing practices by women who unabashedly seek to explore, explain, confuse define.

Augusta Vinall Richardson, May 2021

Text kindly edited by Dr. Jan Bryant. Thank you.

³ Amy Sillman, *Conversation with Amy Sillman: Drawing in the Continuous Present*, 2017, YouTube video, 1:24:29