

Euan Heng: Conjured Constructions

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Reading these drawings by Euan Heng is to give oneself over to the frisson of our paradoxical age. In responding with uncanny sensitivity to the formless continuum of critical painting practice and popular graphics, art-historical academia and contemporary theory, Heng is master craftsman, gymnast and magician rolled into one. Most important in this conjuring, however, is the delicately preserved sense of a charge, sometimes erotic, sometimes tragic, generated between these various perspectives. As Heng explains: 'It is not my intention to express thoughts... but [to] incite thought'. Heng's drawings present mechanisms for excited imagining, or 'advanced juggling', to borrow the title of a recent work, in which the influences of Patrick Caulfield and Juan Gris sit alongside Hokusai and Hergé.

Despite an exquisite sense of touch, it does not seem inappropriate to describe these drawings as machine-like. Heng has developed a respect for line to the point where drawing templates such as French curves and protractors are used to create his images. Like Piero della Francesca, Heng constructs subtle formal rhythm in his narrative scenes, establishing an abstract order of narrative that underpins and often directs the pictorial story-telling. We are reminded that Western mathematics was founded upon drawing, as first geometry and subsequently algebra arose from the investigation of volume, shape, fields of relation and points of intersection. Similar foci bristle within Heng's drawings, mapping visible and invisible coordinates of correlation.

Importantly, however, these mathematical strategies are tempered by lapses and slips; perhaps better considered as melody in relation to the rhythms alluded to above. Modelled tonal passages contrast with the rigid authority of line; brilliant pinks, yellows, turquoise flash within small pockets of black-ringed space; occasional free-hand gestures wobble and pulsate with tremolo. Also an amateur banjo-player, the musicality of Heng's work is akin to Django Reinhardt rather than Bach. His terrain is the pizzicato of simply patterned ballads: variations on families of closely related chord sequences, given nuance through the improvisational techniques of left-handed chord shaping; deft accompaniments to the telling of love stories, comedies, legends and tragedies.

Narrative is of primary importance to his practice. While aware that his work is closely related to modernism in this regard, he is quick to qualify his approach as:

imbued by a desire (or conceit?) to retrieve the image and to harness it with an individual vision and experience of the world, somewhere between what is seen and the imagination and hopefully – a poetic dimension.

This interest in poetry and the poetic has characterised Heng's career; and suggests a distinction between the conditions of narrative in poetry and prose in relation to Heng's work. The fluid 'poetic' narrative of Ovid, Pope, Kafka or Borges, characterised by crystalline forms describing riddle and paradox (highly influential on theorists such as

Kristeva, Baudrillard and Barthes) is perhaps the mode closest to Heng's. This approach is also comparable to the game-playing of contemporary post-modern writers such as Paul Auster or Haruki Murakami (as well as the filmic devices of Charlie Kauffman, The Simpsons and, arguably, Walt Disney), wherein the author, the reader, as well as the novel form itself are incorporated into the conceptual parameters of the work. Heng does not (or very rarely) labour over grand rhetoric or political commentary ('I have always felt a strong allegiance to and admiration for work with a certain stillness/silence'), associated in the distant past with genre such as history painting and more recently with the resurgence of narrative-driven figuration; but rather, the more supple, intimate, epistolary world of personal events and enigmatic anecdotes, expressed in a manner comparable to Borges' 'voluntary dream which is artistic creation'.

This poetic rather than prosaic approach allows for extraordinary flexibility in the conceptualisation and visualisation of Heng's motifs; a quality also found in the sculptural approach taken in constructing these works. It is often possible to trace the cut edge of sections of his drawings, where images are cropped and altered, insertions made and forms re-composed, sometimes late in the working process. These almost invisible traces (Heng has developed a technique where the insertion is near-perfect, like marquetry) witness, on the one hand, a modernist confidence in the painting as object (indeed, his barely modelled drawings flirt with a flatness and a pictorialism redolent of modernist abstraction) as well as an engagement with the condition of his images within 'the real'. His drawings approximate objects through their ontology, rather than the imaginary. This is perhaps most apparent in regard to how Heng has developed this latest series. An initial drawing was taped to a glass wall of his studio. This was overlaid with additional motifs, while the original drawing could still be seen against the light, through the semi-translucent paper. Subsequent alterations were made by moving these elements in space in a process close to installation; located somewhere between collage and film-cell production, drawing strategies that perhaps most closely approximate real-time and real-space.

Heng acknowledges that, since art school, he has never kept a sketch-book: preferring this loose-leaf approach to drawing, each image existing in isolation rather than a bound format, however peremptory. This distrust or 'deconstruction' of the authority of a journal, even of the most personal kind, again points to Heng's innate tendency towards critical, broken or 'poetic' narrative methodologies. These poised fragments emphasise the space and silence of the page, so important to Heng; voids that also echo Chinese and Japanese landscape traditions, as well as Indian Mughal and Kalighat painting, in which empty space was considered the most difficult and most important part of painting: a dynamic absence, a site of potential. Heng eloquently draws upon this pregnant field of the blank page; at the same time as the lucid authority of the diagram as schema. In this, as with all of his 'games of adjustment', we are left spell-bound by the sleight-of-hand.

Kit Wise

Notes

Borges, Jorge Luis, *Labyrinths, Selected Stories and Other Writings*, ed. D.A Yates and J.E. Irby, Penguin Books, London, 1970, p.220.