



Drawing on the Edge: Six Voices at the National Portrait Gallery

ART REVIEW JANUARY 7, 2013 BY: BRETT BUSANG

If, in the beginning, there was The Word, drawing is the backbone of art's creation story. The first figures Western Man created were with the knottily vigorous strokes of a stick dipped in animal fat. Whatever one may think of their artistic value, they have an eerie immediacy even today. It would be no exaggeration to say that drawing is at the very foundation of representational imagery – all imagery, in fact. How its precepts are filtered through cultural meanings as well as how inventive one may be, are part of a history that is as old as man. And until after WWII, drawing was seen and appreciated on a worldwide scale. Since that time, other graphic media, as well as electronic facsimiles, have begun to replace it - though mostly in commercial sectors where immediate impact carries the day. Yet the urge to put pencil, charcoal, and other media to paper is in a thriving condition, but mostly in the studio and classroom. Whereas commercial applications supported artists "back in the day", the university allows our nation's drafts-people a livelihood while they experiment with old forms as a way to extract fresh meanings. It is good that these men and women have a gig. Though drawing is painting's foundation stone, it has been relegated to our culture's remainder bins and basement hideaways. Because there has been such an explosion of alternative forms, drawing isn't - as one might say - what it used to be. Pundits have knit their brows about the death of art ever since the advent of photography. And they might have better reasons to be gloomier about it - should they care to think of it at all - than ever.

Yet at the National Portrait Gallery, we are given an entirely different message. Drawing, as it is practiced in America today, is very much alive and is no more likely to fade than the electronic media that squeak and gibber at us twenty four/seven. Our heartiest thank-you's should be extended to the curators of "Drawing on the Edge", which opened in November. They have assembled a bewildering array of images - most of which can be said to be drawn – by men and women who are at the top of their game and likely to stay there for some time.

I want to start with the group's least likely representative, who has taken her identity and scrambled its fragmentary toe-holds together. She is Mequitta Ahuja and was born in 1976 . Her identity politics – which she describes as “auto-mythic” - are refreshingly personal while her iconographic style has the qualities of an illuminated manuscript, folk mural, and shy self-portraiture. To select a random image, Royal Ease is a patchwork quilt of stamped-on symbols, color-fields, stencils, and a cross-eyed, cross-legged lady who holds a computer mouse in one hand and makes a fist with another. It is an audacious piece of work, and makes, like all of her work, an immediate impression.

If one subscribes to the apothegm that all art is autobiographical, we have an exemplar in Ms. Ahuja, who was the recipient of the 2011 Louis Comfort Tiffany Award. She isn't afraid to tell us her story, and with a patchwork of conventions and question marks. Of all the contributors to this

exhibit, her work seems the least tied to formal representation. Yet I suspect that, in choosing such an eccentric approach, she wishes, not to abolish representation as we in the West know it, but to acknowledge it as one among many possibilities. Just as immigrants must see a country that is new to them. Or a culture that could - if it let its guard down - subordinate its own traditions.

Alongside of her are two very different artists, in terms of scale, but not intimacy. Mary Borgman, who was born in 1959 and teaches at Washington University in St. Louis, is not constrained by her medium. She will make something as big as she wants it to be and settle into its dimensions as a foot might find its way into a shoe. Her command is so absolute that she just grabs ahold of a thought or idea and runs with it. Her charcoal drawings on sheets of Mylar contain multitudes of hatching, rubbing, stomping, blotting out, and burnishing, which come together to create ostensibly perfect images. Yet, of all the artists in this exhibit, hers is the most vigorous approach – even if the result appears, from a distance, majestically serene. It is interesting to note that, before she became an artist, she was a professional sign language interpreter. The gestural quality of her drawings is therefore embedded, not only in her personality, but in her work history as well. Her artistic forbears go back to Thomas Eakins, whose life-size figures have an almost mesmerizing presence. One might also appoint Alfred Leslie – a far less dynamic personality – and Herbert Katzman, who wielded charcoal like a stun-gun. More recently, Robert Birmelin, Bill Murphy, and Jerome Witkin might be considered contemporaries – not only in terms of chronological nearness, but in artistic sympathy. All of these men have not hesitated to interpret the human figure in life-sized drawings that are as conceptually finished as a painting. (All are painters who have conceived of their pictures with a drawing pencil first.) Chuck Close also comes to mind, though he is not so much interested in human personality as in the techniques of representing life from photography.

Ms. Borgman, however, is keenly interested in her subjects – whom she chooses on the basis of a momentary impulse, but gets to know as she photographs them. Yes, she does utilize photography, but seems to rebel against it. One could say that her drawings look photographic, but I'm not going to. They are part and parcel of a tradition that is equally concerned with what happens when subject and artist collide. To what degree does improvisation guide the artist? How does the artist wish to reconcile his or her need to show something with an equally legitimate yearning for self-realization? There's hardly any chance, when among these pictures, to react with a shrug. Their incredible vitality compels one's attention while the humanity that breathes from inside of them asks important questions about who we are, where we're going, and how in hell will we get through this day?

I should say, before going on, that each artist has been given a whole room in which to show the breadth and depth of his or her talent. In this regard, the exhibit is painstakingly fair and should be commended for it.

I must admit to not liking Till Freiwald's work. Its hard edges and stylized realism are not only photography-dependent, they do little to upstage that medium. I can't say that Mr. Freiwald's paintings are copies, but they're not paintings either. The focus is fairly conventional; every MFA program spawns a self-portrait painter with an obsessive nature. I don't care about what is being said if the means that embody the message lack tension, are grafted onto a too-often-seen aesthetic program, and appear – though I certainly can't know anything about this artist's professional ambitions – to be jockeying for a sweet little niche in an art world that's obsessed with “cool” while not being very concerned about kind and quality.

I am not impugning the quality of these paintings. They know what they're doing – as does Mr. Freiwald himself. I merely wonder about the artist's commitment to the sort of painting – watercolor that looks airbrushed – he has, in part, invented and, in part, co-opted from so many others.

His closest counterpart is Ben Durham, who has created a strangely eerie gallery of mug-shot characters he extracts from arrest record databases. His modeling is informed by the letters of a text he writes about his subject; these are cross-hatched quite skillfully – so much so that they're hard to see until one examines them closely. He is also adept at surface texture, which he introduces into rough-hewn paper visibly, but elegantly. Whereas Mr. Freiwald's work strikes me as self-conscious, Durham's search for a kind of static dignity, while rather cold-natured, is chillingly effective. Mary Borgman's drawings show a sort of benign potential; Durham's give us a mind and heart that seems to have stopped on the page.

A graduate of Washington University, Mr. Durham lives in Richmond, Virginia.

If anybody's obsessed with identity, it is Rob Matthews, who was born in 1974 and lives in Philadelphia. Yet he manages his obsession with a modesty and respectfulness that is antithetical to posturing. His tiny drawings of friends, family members, and other people who are fixtures in his life are so refreshingly simple, so searingly honest, and so arrestingly precise, that he hits it out of the park every time. Naysayers could claim that the man is working a gimmick. If so, it's a "gimmick" with a million voices.

His format is simple enough: a small piece of paper with a person floating inside of it. That person is assembled with tiny pencil lines that are sometimes cross-hatched, sometimes blended, but are always unobtrusive. Each of his subjects poses with an object that is intimately connected to his or her psyche. Thus an old basketball player poses with – yes! – a basketball. A priest shows us a bowl, which signifies repentance. A cat lover's special friend recoils from her touch – as cats will do when they've moved on and want to do something else. Each portrait shows its subject in a strangely vulnerable, but self-declarative moment. "I am this," he or she seems to say. Or, rather, "This represents at least part of who I am."

Of course, having one's subjects surrounded by beloved possessions – or even the objects of their trade – is not new. Holbein's portraiture is a case in point. It's as if the subjects want us to know as much about them as a single picture can tell. Sargent's people "pose in their clothes", which is sometimes enough. Andrew Wyeth's portraiture seems to pit subject against the things he or she would wish to be identified with, but might also cast aside. We are identified by the things we do. The things we own, however, are physical signs of psychological realities. Choosing a single object to represent an entire person is an intriguing exercise. It is possible that these subjects agonized over what to choose. Perhaps they selected four or five objects and weeded them out one at a time. Or perhaps they did not hesitate at all. Perhaps they said, "This is me. Now make your drawing."

I want to close with the work of Adam Chapman, an artist who is both tradition-bound and technology-driven. (Mr. Chapman, who is also a writer, lives in New York City.) He draws portraits – whose lines and color-patches are sandwiched between a piece of paper and LED illumination – which are in a constant state of metamorphosis. In his kinetic world, nothing is ever the same – not even for a moment. I enjoyed contemplating these small, self-contained, but shape-shifting "boxes" as I would any natural phenomenon. Chapman seems at war with the notion that our images must be static. He cites a Japanese concept, *mono no aware* – which emphasizes the transitory nature of beauty – to illuminate his aesthetic. And I'll have to say that it intrigues me. There are so many things we cannot represent. Drawing and painting have traditionally settled with illusion: the illusion of space, depth, and movement. Within this convention resides almost every image artists have made. And yet here is someone who defies that convention in an effort to show us what the world might appear to someone who is dreaming. Or taking to heart the fluid nature of things. Or just daring us to accept the fact that change is at the root of everything – in which case our cherished notions of a physical reality don't stand up to scrutiny. I will admit that it's hard to be so unsettled about how to perceive something. Yet it is also a good thing to be

shaken from one's everyday preoccupations about the nature of reality. Yes; it is a very good thing.

"Portraiture Now/Drawing on the Edge", which opened on November 16th, 2012, will be at the National Portrait through August 18, 2013.

The National Portrait Gallery is at Eighth and F Streets, NW. Hours: 11:30 – 7:00 daily. To contact: (202) 633-1000