

## MAKING SENSE OF DEPICTION

Peter Belton

### Introduction

Representation is predicated from a theme selected for depiction by the artist; the 'what' of our interest. I argue that depiction itself, however, privileges how a subject or theme is presented. Subjects are created when we identify and question the contexts for, and relations between, those objects and ideas which are of interest to us. Depiction is a process; it is performed, and in so being it entails the physiological events of looking, feeling and responding through the medium of our own bodies. Process can be recognised when we realise a structured response to perception and experience, and when we reference cultural paradigms and practices through our own modes of depiction. An account of this is given in this article through the use of examples from the author's own depictive practice, which can be related to models of other artists' practice cited.

### Premise

For me as a visual artist, questions that define my practice include: What constitutes a depiction? Could we start with the proposition that depictions are the 'how' signals which affect the way we communicate the 'what' of our experiences, our stories, our subjects? If this is so, how can I construct an idea into a depiction on a two-dimensional surface? And, to what extent does this entail knowledge about the way my own body processes experiences to make sense? How do I convey the sensible qualities of things remembered; their substance as found in their materiality, weight, texture, smell, taste and sound with materials such as carbon or paint, canvas, wood or paper; materials which are patently not rock, water or airy space?

No place, no being. The images I make; these depictions are ultimately about me in relation to an 'Other'. I recognise, I feel, reflect, identify and analyse. Synthesis into a subject happens through depiction when I develop ideas in relation to objects and sites. "Self portraiture...after all, is what painting [and drawing] is." <sup>1</sup>

My own practice entails a 'formalist' resolution to the 'how' of depiction through ordering of the elements of art-making practice: things seen in relation to the space they occupy as well as to each other. My formalist approach also references conventions such as linear and aerial perspective, the presentation of proximity and the organisation of elements into an intelligible whole through the act

of composition. Such deliberation signals a desire to communicate the 'thought about' and 'feeling about' which can only be explained through the applied conventions of a language.

This cannot be done without reference to the determinants of received meaning; that is, to cultural paradigms, practices and their contexts. Language is, through the imperative that it has structure, depictive. If this is the case; apparently abstract works of art are depictive too, given there is intention in their making. For are these not also referenced into the languages of social and cultural experience? If this is so; any work of art can be seen to depict. This was the point of Picasso's objection to being labeled an 'abstract' (Cubist) artist in a time and place where audiences often took the view that abstract works were subject-free. Any circumscription through drawing with any medium can be read, and described, as a depiction no matter how slight, or banal, or abstract it may be judged to be. "This is circular; this is square..." – even these minimal descriptions involve depictive adjectives which can be recognised as being shaped by a context and a perceived character. Do not, however, confuse the 'how' of 'depiction' with the 'what' of 'representation'. What the circle and the square might represent at any given time is another question.

### **Toward depicting a theme: landscape as a theatre for the Sublime**

That the *process* of reading represented subjects might be evocative and allusive was, and is, a premise of the Sublime. Put another way: the Sublime, read as an adjective, signals a character or quality of performance. I read this as affect. I associate the manifested Sublime with chaos, atavistic behaviours, darkness and the terror of the unseen. Those thrill seekers who delighted in Sublime moments were responding to the excitement delivered by ambiguities, malformation and a (suggested) magnitude of horror. Edmund Burke wrote: "terror is in all cases whatsoever, either openly or latently, the ruling principle of the Sublime."<sup>2</sup> He proceeded to identify the characteristic effect of experiencing the Sublime as "astonishment". In addition to this, Burke's essay is significant to my project because he "explained the opposition of Beauty and Sublimity by a physiological Theory", as G P Landow explains.<sup>3</sup> Burke was, Landow asserts, the first English writer to attempt an explanation of Beauty and Sublimity in terms of the process of perception and its effect upon the perceiver.

Burke writes: "I know nothing Sublime which is not some modification of power."<sup>4</sup> Thus the effect of capture in a Sublime moment is that one is 'out of one's depth'; powerless in the circumstances. And, the thrill of *feeling* can be as if one is teetering on the edge of a hole in a fast flowing tide. That is the key to defining the engagement. The horror is experienced vicariously. We are not so much in the moment of sublimity as to be unable to regard and report on its effects and their implications. A master of these effects was J M W Turner.

My own practice as an artist is shaped by where I live, what I do, and how I perform 'being'. The questions about how, when and why follow when I try to explain my 'doing'.

Where I live, landscape is the dominant theatre. Being in and of it is my pursuit. I seek engagement and experiences in the landscape and I have come to recognise the searching to be as much the product of my cultural projection as it is a physical event. One reading cannot be made without

the other. Any sketch, or trace, I make as an initial response to being in a landscape will present as a 'natural' signifier; as speech is to language.<sup>5</sup> However, a critical reading of such texts as Simon Schama's *Landscape and Memory*,<sup>6</sup> J L Koerner's biography of Caspar David Friedrich<sup>7</sup> and Lopez-Pedraza's idiosyncratic reading of Anselm Kiefer's life and work<sup>8</sup> – amongst other texts – shows landscapes, as read, to be essentially projections of culture. In the process of 'ordering' a depiction I construct from what I have assimilated and what astonishes me.

Depiction is not about verisimilitude or about mimicry; not the 'what' of representation but, rather, presentation of the 'how'. This is where I see the attraction of the Romantic Sublime for my own practice as an artist who prefers to draw. The attraction functions on two levels: I am attracted to hiking and sailing, to being in 'these places' and, also, I find myself relating these experiences to the inner life of feelings and ideas assimilated from others. 'Sublimation' describes a process of assimilation into 'being'.

### **In order to depict: a drawing is performed**

Where he discusses the "Phenomenology of Drawing", David Rosand quotes Maurice Merleau-Ponty (1964), who has in turn invoked Paul Valéry (1960):

"It is by lending his body to the world that the artist changes the world into paintings. To understand these transubstantiations we must go back to the working, actual body – not the body as a chunk of space or a bundle of functions but that body which is an intertwining of vision and movement."

"That observation is even truer of drawing, where the movements of the body, actual and imagined, are more directly recorded by the tracing hand. What we here call the imagined movements of the body, however, refer to and ultimately depend upon the body image of the viewer; that is, upon our tacit sense of our own body in the world, extending into the space around it and relating to other objects in that space."<sup>9</sup>

"The gesture of drawing is, in essence, a projection of the body, and, especially when viewing a drawing of the human figure we are reminded of that. The drama is in the line. Meaning is generated in and by the act of drawing itself, for the act of drawing is already one of feeling. In no other art – save, perhaps, dance – are means and end, the how and the what of significance, so perfectly identified."<sup>10</sup>

As Merleau-Ponty points out, the wisdom in this noumena is rooted in 'being'. And, what makes this significant is that it can be recognised by the viewer as a shared understanding. However, what is specific and personal and varied must, necessarily, be referenced into the familiar 'Other' if it is to make any sense. Thus the structural patterns in drawing are rooted in both physical experience and in culture. Motifs of line and form which distinguish an artist's work and correspond to kinaesthetic sensations can be termed 'structural signatures'. These structural signatures do not merely represent feelings about events and ideas but also *embody* (depict) them.

### Example of a structural signature in the practice of two artists: the unwinding ellipse

We find in the drawing practice of Leonardo da Vinci a recurring device which gives structural cohesion to an entire surface. In his single figure drawings and in his construction of figure groups such as *The Virgin, Child and St. Anne* (National Gallery, London), Leonardo would transect the cone of constructed space occupied by figures with dynamic ellipses and arcs; lines looped where arms, shoulder and inclined head align. We find the same lines in the construction of drapery over the inclination of legs in the lower half of the figure. And, as this system of drawing manifests as a rotation of arcs along and across forms it is infinitely repeated; echoed down to a quiver on the extension of a digit. Leonardo fully acknowledged the determining quality of certain complex forms, the spiraling ovoid in particular. Even as it presents a certain calligraphic elegance, the sinuous line that is the basic constituent of this form more deliberately asserts its three-dimensional implications; its curve functions stereometrically in the modelling of solids and spatially in the creation of volume.

Rosand<sup>11</sup> identifies where Leonardo saw the trace as having its own *istorie* as a depictive device which functions as a signifier; a signifier located within the Neoplatonic paradigm. To this end Leonardo proceeded from a physical investigation of actions and effects first and foremost. He sought in these effects evidence of an internal consistency of parts to the whole and, through that, of causation. This is why Leonardo and his followers took an analytical approach to understanding structure, in order to recognise patterns and identify the sense of the logos in all things made, and to be made. His structural autographs, the spiraling ovoid and the returning ellipse were such 'effects' of 'connection' being made.

Another artist for whom the unwinding ellipse was an autograph was J MW Turner:

The crazy perspectives, double focus, the melting of one form into another and the general feeling of instability: these are the kinds of imagery which most of us know only when we are asleep. Turner experienced them when he was awake. This dream-like condition reveals itself by repeated appearance of certain motifs which are known to be part of the furniture of the unconscious. Such for example is the vortex or whirlpool which became more and more the underlying rhythm of his designs...<sup>12</sup>

Turner's structural signature is characteristically presented in rotation on the flat vertical of the picture plane as an unwinding ellipse. This device underpins virtually all of his alpine painting as well as his seascapes. Where the depicted subject does not continue the sweep of the ellipse, Turner would employ a quick shift of hue or tone to ensure that the viewer's eye would keep the structure in place. There is a physiological effect, too, consistent with the stories about Turner being mast-bound in a wild sea, or leaning from the window of a carriage as the London to Bristol Express swept through a rain storm. We notice how the ellipses tuck through and behind each other as a projection of remembered travel; of going back. There is a resemblance to the appearance of a coil under compression suddenly released, sprung; opened out. Often, too, we will see a trajectory fly from the edge of elliptical movement as a release of centrifugal energy. In some paintings, such as *Loch Coriusk, in Skye* (1831), the gradual displacement and repetition of many elliptical springs and

their stacked trajectories anticipate the fracturing of time in space seen in the paintings of Giacomo Balla in the early twentieth century.

The *Loch Coriusk* painting is probably the nearest Turner came to the appearance of Leonardo's analysis of the *Deluge* (1503). In both instances we see tightly packed lines comb through mountains and atmosphere; subsuming rock and precipice to the engulfing effects of scouring water; the irresistible force of the Sublime. But, the effect, in Turner's practice, is to present us with an expanding universe of limitless sublimity.

### **A difference between one artist's analogy and another artist's metaphor: contrasting evidence in the practice of two artists working in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century**

Charles Harrison, in his essay, "The Effects of Landscape" (1994) compares the painting practice of Paul Cézanne with an example of practice by Georgia O'Keefe.<sup>13</sup> He writes about the "initially dramatic effect" presented in a painting by O'Keefe achieved by complementing one reading with another. In describing one of her New Mexico landscapes, Harrison points to O'Keefe's treatment of the landscape as landform with tumescent swellings, clefts and orifices. I read this as an analogy of subject matter.

Cézanne's mature practice resists relocation in analogy. For him, the act of depiction and the reading of depiction is what his practice is essentially about. It can be argued that the ways and means of performing a painting, or drawing, come closer to a definition of landscape as metaphor when we, as spectators, are engaged in 'reading' how a response to 'being there' happens. Previous remarks, in this article, about physiological and cultural prerequisites for drawing attest to this. The happening of a drawing is limited by the circumstances of site and time, the physiology of the drawer and by what the drawer has previously assimilated and is given to understand. In a different way from O'Keefe, Cézanne uses landscape as a means because landscape being 'site' can present a range of questions about our being in a place and in a time. He doesn't posit a declamation or a story but, rather, he posits doubt about the way we perceive and the wisdom implicit in this doubt is profoundly rooted in the physiological and in memory.

Harrison contends that Cézanne worked with an illusion of relatively deep space and that the position the viewer is put in will challenge the viewer's cognition about the reading of mass, light, distance, surface and so on. The viewer is invited to do the work. The process entailed in doing the reading is a metaphor for the artist's experience, rather than the illustrated object itself and the connection is in 'how' the physical event and the cognitive and emotional responses are realised as being confluent in the structure of a depiction:

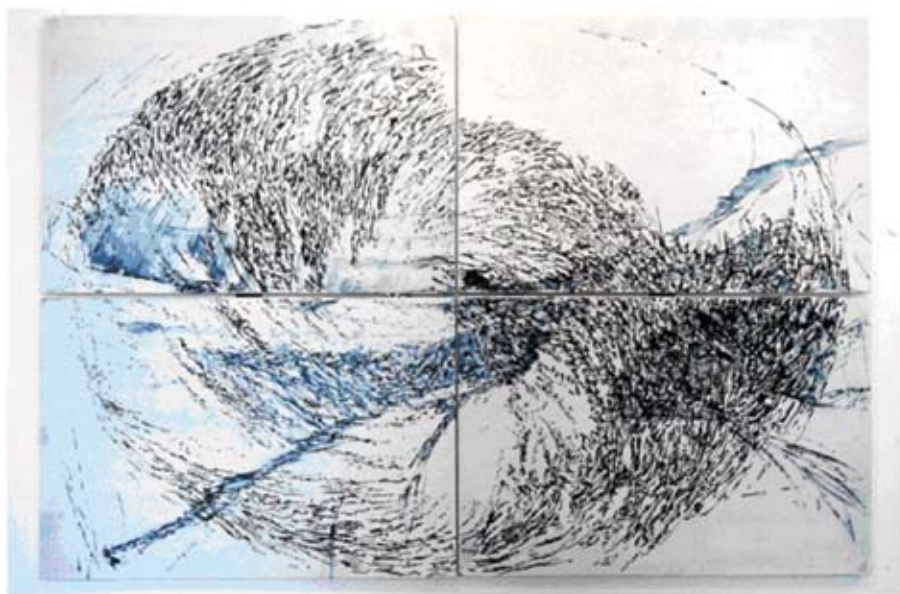
...to adopt in imagination the position of one doing the looking...is also to be faced in actuality with the complex practical mechanisms by which the illusion is established – the planes and touches and contrasts on the literal surface of the painting, which register the factitious activity of the artist with great vividness, and which thus establish the details of the painted surface inescapably as the constituents of something made...the imaginary position of the viewer is never abandoned, but the consequence of it being maintained is that, as

one aspect of the painting 'corrects' the other; that position is rendered at every viewpoint subject to correction from the position of the maker of the painting. The technical character of O'Keefe, in contrast, is simply not so much as to produce a spectator who goes on working at the painting.<sup>14</sup>

### **My own practice, as a visual artist, reflects the discussion in this article**

The discussion in this article has relevance to the cast of my own practice. Indeed it arises from the questions I grapple with when making my own drawings and when working with paint. The three attached annotated images should make the connection apparent. Each has been predicated from the experience(s) of being 'there' and each is not so much an epiphany on arrival at a subject or site as the product of recognition which happens as the work is developed in the studio. Sometimes I find myself working with sketches taken in a moment of excitement ten years ago. Surprise can happen when these are seen to present differently and uncertainly when the 'connecting' of moments is reworked. The metaphor functions on more than one level. It can be developed in the physical act of drawing as relived moments. The large size of the studio pieces is no arbitrary decision. These works are intended to be physical in their effect. Metaphor can also be recognised in my reference to paradigmatic practices, such as I have described in the 'unwinding ellipse'. Decisions can be linked to questions about relationships to cultural memory, desire, anxiety and, yes, to astonishment.

The traces left by the process of depiction, then, are not just the marks of manufacture; rather, they are the structured evidence of a response to being.



*Shift*, 2004, mixed oil paint and oil drawing media on board, 150 x120 cm.

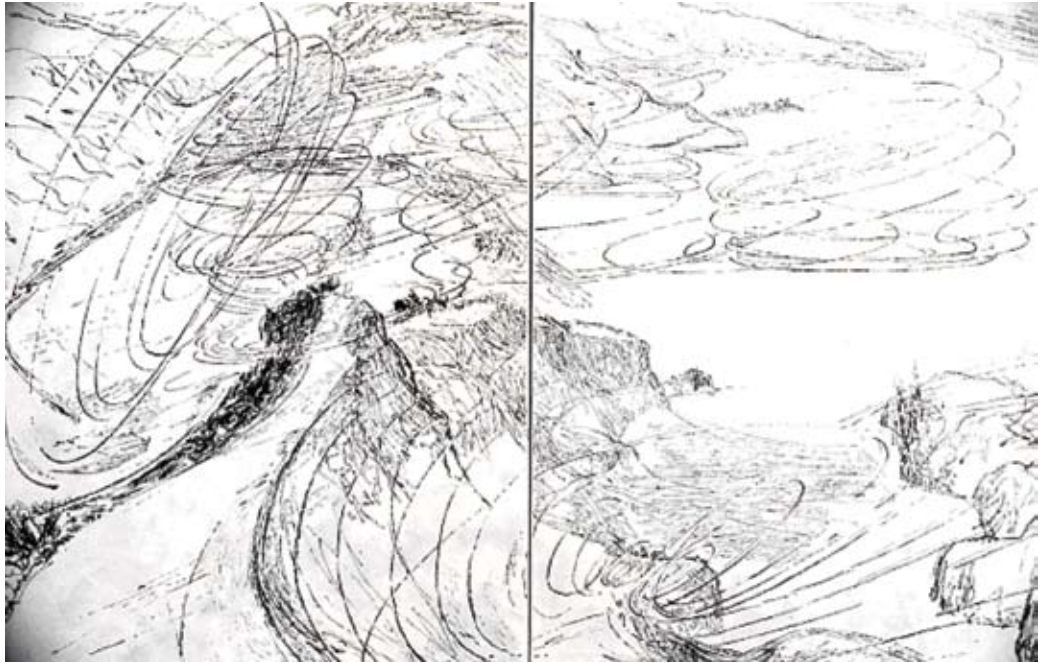
The drawing on the previous page uses a vortex of winding lines, drawn with a black oil stick over a landscape image found in a midsummer storm over Pigeon Bay, Banks Peninsula. I did my initial drawings of this event in 1998 and the sketches have been seminal for ten other images. The storm developed into a sublime spectacle and I spent the night anchoring tent poles and wild ropes.



*Driving the Lindis* (developed site sketch), 2005, pencil on arches paper, 40 x 30 cm.

In this work above there are three centres of vision, hence the title. The first is established by the blue oil paint image of landscape; the second is in the epicenter of the black vortex; and the third in the cross-hair effect, as in a gun sight, presented by the structure of the four joined panels on which the image is seen. I wanted to present the space as having a 'physical' presence and the evident construction of a spatial 'ground' in the joined panels was my way of doing this.

The drawing on the opposite page was made from a moving car. My partner drove through the Lindis Pass at about twenty-five kilometres an hour and while she negotiated the road I sketched. What we have is a synthesis of what was seen and how I moved through the landscaped space. The toned blocks of textural effects were added in the studio. I made the first of my sketches from the car in 1998 and over subsequent trips have made about thirty by this method. Some have been combined and developed into large compositions using oil sticks and layered paint on prepared board.



*Wind at Mihiwaka: Wednesday, 2006, mixed oil paint and oil drawing media on board, 160 x120 cm.*

I made eight trips up Mihiwaka and then developed sketches into three compositions named for days of the week and for Nordic gods of the stuff of 'sturm und drang'. 'Mihiwaka' is a high and wild place. The name translates literally as 'greet the canoe(s)' and it is very evident that with its commanding view north, and a 270-degree panorama, this was a site Māori used as a look-out. I quite liked the idea of mixing my seafarer references.

The spiral drawing of the effects of wind was developed when I realised I had so much loose information which needed to be more rigorously structured to make sense, especially on a large scale. The differences seen in the design of space from one drawing to another have been established by depicting the structure of different takes on wind before working in topographic information. In each of the eight trips the subject was changing in aspect as I drew; the effect of wind was different. Some weathers made it all but impossible. I have a lot to thank JMW Turner for:



- 1 Arthur Dove cited from a letter to Alfred Stieglitz, in Anne Morgan, *Dear Stieglitz, Dear Dove* (Cranbury, New Jersey: Associated University Presses, 1988), 194, cited by Marcia Brennan, *Painting Gender: Constructing Theory* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT, 2001), 107.
- 2 Edmund Burke, *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Beautiful and the Sublime* (New York: Garland, 1757/1971), 97.
- 3 GP Landow, *The Aesthetic and Critical Theories of John Ruskin* (New York: Princeton University Press, 1971), 195.
- 4 See endnote 2, p. 110.
- 5 See Roland Barthes, *Writing Degree Zero and Elements of Semiology* (Boston: Beacon, 1953).
- 6 Simon Schama, *Landscape and Memory* (London: Fontana, 1995).
- 7 J.L. Koerner, *Caspar David Friedrich* (London: Reaktion, 1990).
- 8 R Lopez-Pedraza, *Anselm Kiefer: After the Catastrophe* (London: Thames & Hudson, 1996).
- 9 David Rosand, *Drawing Acts* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 15.
- 10 *Ibid.*, 16.
- 11 *Ibid.*, 97.
- 12 Kenneth Clark, *Looking at Pictures* (London: John Murray, 1965), 152.
- 13 Charles Harrison, "The Effects of Landscape", in W Mitchell (ed.), *Landscape and Power* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1994), 14.
- 14 *Ibid.*, 228.

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