DRAWING THE FOREBODING

Emily Gordon

This article discusses my Masters of Fine Art project, which I have been focused on for the last two years. It culminated in my exhibition "Seen, Unseen" (2020). The project was an exploration of the feelings of unease, discomfort and non-overt fear which have been created in my drawn works through the atmosphere of the domestic spaces depicted. These spaces, which depict interiors of the home, are transformed from the homely; from being warm, safe and comforting to the 'unhomely' – discomforting and at times dangerous.

A pivotal area which inspired me to utilise the idea of the unhomely was the horror film genre, where through the intrusion of a hostile aggressor or supernatural entity the home can become a place of danger and fear, thus making it unhomely. In order to render this sense, I played off two common enablers of fear against each other. The first is childhood fears represented in film – for example, the monster hiding under the bed, in the closet or behind the curtains. The second are adult fears with a stronger basis in reality – for example, stalking, home invasion or murders committed by psychotic killers. Thus, my work offers a mix of the fantasies and realities of fear and dread. This mix of reality and fantasy gives my work a sense of the unknown, making us unsure of what is real – are we observing a real danger or is this a representation of irrational fear and paranoia?

THE REPRESENTATION OF FEAR IN HORROR FILMS

> We are used to the jump-scares of horror film, startling, fast movements that aim to shock us, to make our heart rhythm jolt. It is assumed that these sudden shocks are what truly scares an audience, but this is incorrect as demonstrated in M. Night Shyamalan's *The Sixth Sense*, 1999, Alfred Hitchcock's *Psycho*, 1960, and Daniel Myrick and Eduardo Sánchez's *The Blair Witch Project*, 1999. What truly terrifies an audience to the point of complete dread is the foreboding atmosphere and the inexplicable certainty that the characters are moving towards their doom. The foreboding, the unease, the dread lies in the slow movements, the out of place objects, the bumps and creaks during the night and the unexplained shadows.[1]

I started this project by taking inspiration from Alfred Hitchcock's *Psycho* (1960), a pivotal film in the representation of fear as foreboding. This film was unique at the time it appeared as it utilised real-life fears. The film was set in present-day America and the violence was committed by a deeply unstable human, rather than an otherworldly being. Before *Psycho*, the dreadful events depicted in horror films often took place in faraway lands (for the Western audience) and involved exotic monsters. For example, "in the cases of *Dracula, Frankenstein, The Mummy*, and *King Kong*, these [locations] were Eastern Europe, Germany, Egypt and Skull Island."[2] This device gave the audience a sense of security as the horrible events depicted were far away and detached from them.

Initially for my project, I worked from screen shots from various horror films in order to understand how atmosphere could be transferred from the moving image to a still image. As my project continued, I created my own source material by taking photographs of interiors. I used my own personal childhood fears as the starting point. I did this by taking the photos in my childhood home, focusing on areas which held a particular sense of childhood fear, now experienced nostalgically – for example, the stairs I would walk up to go to bed at night, where I often experienced the unsettling feeling that I was being followed. By using this one location, I was also able to create a point of

consistency between the works. As another point of consistency, I always took the photographs at night-time. Night and darkness the most common devices used to create fear in horror films, as darkness intensifies the sense of the unknown and the feeling that anything or anyone could approach unseen. Thus, adding darkness to my work was a useful way of creating a sense of foreboding. This use of darkness can be clearly seen in *Strange, Dark Corner*, 2019 (Figure 1), in which the deep blackness in one corner draws the viewer in. This device is also utilised in *Bathtub Plughole, Draining Dirt*, 2019 (Figure 2), in which the dark plughole suggests a cosmic black hole which threatens to suck us in.

Figure 1. Emily Gordon, *Strange, Dark Corner*, 2019, charcoal and pastel on paper.

CLOSE-UPS AND PERSPECTIVES

However, as I have noted, childhood terrors were not the only fears I wanted to represent in my final series of works. It is also important to discuss how I realised the more adult and perhaps more real fears. This was primarily achieved through the voyeuristic nature of the works, where a lone female figure is being stalked in her own home. One of the ways in which this was represented was through the use of close-ups, implying that the viewer, who often adopts the point of view of a stalker, is

Figure 2. Emily Gordon, *Bathtub Plughole, Draining Dirt*, 2019, charcoal and pastel on paper.

watching her through binoculars or the zoom on a camera lens. We can see this in *Head and Hair in the Sink*, 2019 (Figure 3), where the subject cannot see the viewer and therefore seems oblivious to being watched. I also refer to the use of close-up shots in film, where they are often used to draw attention to specific objects or characters.

Another important element that derives from my focus on the close-up is cropping. The objects and/or people in my images are cropped and rarely appear as complete figures. This strips way their context and allows us to imagine what might be going on outside the frame of the image, thus adding a clear sense of the unknown. Also, the cropping of the person which I utilise in several of my images adds a sense of fragmentation or dismemberment, which also creates the suggestion of violence. When part of the body is cut off by the frame, we perceive that the unshown portion has become detached; as there is no blood or gore represented in this detachment, we feel discomfort in this moment, rather than horror or disgust.

While one of my aims in these works was to emulate adult fears, another was to give the woman depicted in each one an ambiguous role, so that it becomes unclear whether she is playing the role of a victim/protagonist or an antagonist. This ambiguity serves to reinforce the unknown elements in the work and, by extension, the sense
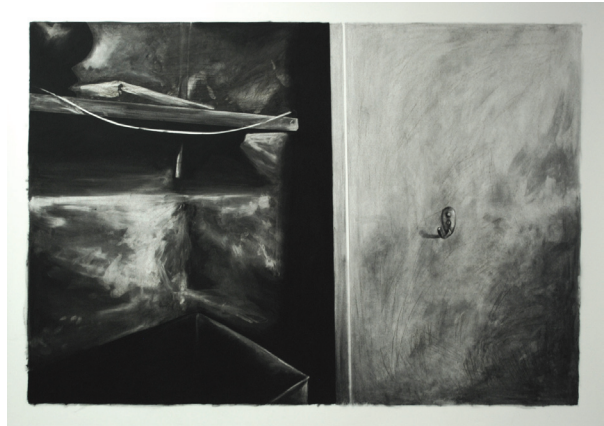
Figure 3. Emily Gordon, *Head and Hair in the Sink*, 2019,
charcoal and pastel on paper.

of unease it creates. The use of changing perspectives and angles likewise enhances this mood. Some viewers have suggested that the woman in the series is being stalked, while others believe that she is playing a dominant role, as in *Sitting, Feet Against the Wooden Floor*, 2019 (Figure 4), in which the viewer is placed in a lower position looking up at the woman, giving her a position of power. Given the changing perspectives, at times we are also unsure whether we are seeing the world from the woman's viewpoint or from that of another person located outside the frame. In *It Descends the Stairs*, 2019 (Figure 5), the slightly tilted angle of the frame suggests the viewpoint is that of a person collapsed on the stairs – either the female subject or someone she has attacked.

Figure 4. Emily Gordon, *Sitting, Feet Against the Wooden Floor*, 2019,
charcoal and pastel on paper.

Figure 5. Emily Gordon, *It Descends the Stairs*, 2019,
charcoal and pastel on paper.

DRAWING AND ITS TRACES

A final consideration for appreciating my work is the medium itself – drawing. As Laura Hoptman puts it when discussing the 2002 exhibition "Drawing Now: Eight Propositions," at the Museum of Modern Art, New York: "Drawing now can be work done on paper with charcoal, pencil, gouache, paint a dirty thumb, even a small insect dipped in ink but still sufficiently alive to scuttle and leave its mark."[3] Although the contemporary definition of drawing is extremely broad – consisting of any mark on any surface made by any medium – my drawing process is nothing if not traditional, comprising one of the oldest drawing methods, charcoal on paper.

My method of creating drawings combines very rigid and organised processes with more tactile and random methods. I begin by taking photographs to use as source material. To begin the drawing, I mark the outlines of the subject and other objects in the frame, and then identify the highlights that will be retained in the work – the area that will be left showing the white ground of the paper (excluding the border). I then completely cover the rest of the paper in a willow charcoal, rubbing it in with my hands. After this I again map out the outlines of the objects in the image. At this point in the process, I do not consider myself to have begun the work – it only really begins when I start to erase areas of the charcoal to create the shapes of the objects in the image, when I can begin to visualise the completion of the work. My process resembles that of drawing and sculpture artist Robert Longo: "I always think that drawing is a sculptural process. … I always feel that I am carving the image out rather than painting the image. I am carving it out with erasers and tools like that."[4] Similar to traditional marble sculpture, this implies a process of deletion rather than addition.

The element of the random and much of the tactile 'feel' of the work is conveyed in what I call the "trace" ("a surviving mark, sign, or evidence of the former existence, influence or action of some agent or event")[5] – the marks created by hand and finger prints, as well as the less structured shapes created by the erasure process. We can see this effect clearly in *Clothes on Hanger in the Bathroom*, 2019 (Figure 6). My use of the eraser creates what I have called a "fog" element – the appearance of undefined shapes in the image adds to the sense of the unknown. The hand and finger marks also allude to the now completed making process. While these marks embody a trace, they also serve to suggest the presence or past presence of a person we cannot see – again reinforcing the sense of uncertainty in the viewer, who is unable to define what is occurring in the image.
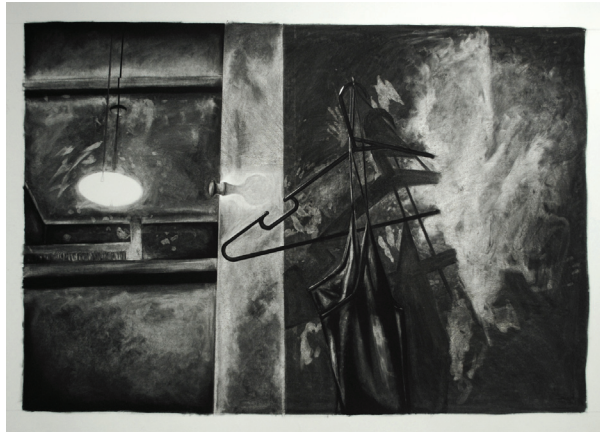

Figure 6. Emily Gordon, *Clothes on Hanger in the Bathroom*, 2019, charcoal and pastel on paper.

Emily Gordon is a visual artist who specialises in drawing. She holds a Bachelor of Design from Otago Polytechnic and a Master of Fine Art (distinction) from the Dunedin School of Art. Her work is inspired by horror film and explores the senses of foreboding and dark atmospheres.

1. Emily Gordon, *Seen, Unseen* (Dunedin: Otago Polytechnic, 2020), 2. Exhibition catalogue, Emily Gordon, "Seen, Unseen," postgraduate exhibition, Otago Polytechnic, 9-11 & 13 March 2020.
2. Stephen Prince, *The Horror Film* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2004), 3.
3. Laura Hoptman, *Drawing Now: Eight Propositions* (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 2002), 167.
4. "Robert Longo/ Artworks," *artnet*, 2018, www.artnet.com/artists/robert-longo.
5. Allegra Pesenti, *Apparitions: Frottages and Rubbings from 1860 to Now* (Los Angeles: Hammer Museum; Houston: The Menil Collection, 2015), 16.