

Bill Woodrow and Richard Deacon: Shared Drawing

1st – 28th April 2022

Since their first exhibition in 1993, Bill Woodrow (b. 1948) and Richard Deacon (b. 1949) have made over sixty ‘shared sculptures’. These form distinct bodies of work, often orientated around particular materials, such as bronze, lead and glass, and a selection of these sculptures was shown at Holtermann Fine Art in 2021.

This new exhibition - *Bill Woodrow and Richard Deacon: Shared Drawing* - showcases some of their recent works, in which we find them working together on paper. Some of these new drawings were shown in autumn last year at the Ikon in Birmingham in an exhibition called *We Thought About It A Lot And Other Shared Drawings* and was accompanied by a new book on their shared work *Bill Woodrow and Richard Deacon: A Democratic Process: Shared Sculptures and Drawings* (Anomie Press, 2021).

The shift from three to two dimensions brings with it fascinating new challenges and opportunities, while reframing questions that both artists have gained familiarity with through their previous works. Assemblage and construction have always been important means of making, creating their shared sculptures piece by piece. These new shared drawings continue this approach, accumulating materials and building the work out, layer by layer, from the surfaces of each of the sheets. Although ‘flat works’ they all enjoy a rich and sculptural surface life, employing collaged paper and fabric. And alongside more familiar art materials, such as ink, paint, graphite, wax crayon and oil stick, we find more surprising constituents, such as coffee and natural dyes.

Spontaneity - and creating artistic freedoms for each other beyond their own individual practices - have always energised their shared works and this is also nowhere more evident than in these new works on paper. As Woodrow remarks: ‘Drawing offers an instant reward. You don’t have to go through a process and you are working at the pace that you are thinking at. It can still take a long time, but it is there in front of you. You can have it in your hands!’ What Woodrow had in his hands at the very start of their shared drawing project in 2019 were two rolls of paper, each 1.5 metres in width, that Deacon had in his studio. Both agreed to use them for the new drawings and Woodrow cut them into individual sheets. This new body of work comes from these rolls and subsequently other paper, and comprises sixteen large works and three groups of smaller works: *Each* (2020) (a group of ten), *In Spite of Ourselves* (2021) (a group of twelve) and *Who’s Next?* (2021) (a group of twelve). They used Woodrow’s studio to make the works and, as Deacon recalls, ‘there were usually two or three in play at any one time.’

Their shared drawings were made immediately before and then during the Covid pandemic. Finding the opportunities to work together, initially straightforward, became more difficult. Their joint, creative activities acquired different intensities and temporalities. Like all of us in these last two years, what we perceive and the ways we do it has changed. Subject matter has been impacted too as their articulations of the natural world, which feature in many of their previous shared sculptures, underwent a series of interesting shifts. We find them exploring the floating aqueous and airborne life of animal forms, as well as their land-based existence – all with different kinds of focus and depth of field. From the pelts of *Running Bear* (2020) to the floating jellyfish of *Wipe-Out* (2020), the animal kingdom is recalibrated as animate material fact, from larger animals to smaller creatures seen *en masse*. In *Shroud* (2020), another of the larger drawings, such shifts in scale are taken further to more microscopic levels, as we face what might be read as a series of Petri dish explosions. Che Guevara even puts in an appearance, courtesy of one of the artists’ old T-shirts, and in doing so brings to mind Deacon’s words about the potential energy of the very first sculpture they made back in 1990, *Democratic Process*: ‘Explosions might well be democratic as much as molecular, genetic or viral arrangements.’

Here, as in all Woodrow and Deacon’s shared sculptures, the titles are used as active and constituent parts of the works. Often playful, they sometimes give viewers helpful handles on things, and at other times deliberately send them off in the wrong direction. See *What You Know* (2019) – a line from the 1965 James Brown song *Papa’s got a brand new bag* - is a call for a direct personal response: an invitation to viewers to

see things their own way, as much as wonder about what might have been in the artists' heads and hands. The interlocking forms, both painted and drawn to varying degrees, draw us in and encourage us to unravel and reconstruct the larger overall image as a whole. *Radio On* (2019) is a reminder of the importance of music to both artists and of the special place it has in their shared work. With its floating fragments seemingly orbiting around a partially off-screen circle, it brings to mind a very material music of the spheres and a hand-made studio counterpart to this celestial phenomenon. Musical references are employed in the titles of many of their works, using phrases that might conjure up tunes or soundtracks in our heads, as well as invite us to think about these shared works as being charged by the spirit of collaboration and play that musicians enjoy when working in unison.

The surprising and exploratory hybrid life that their shared work has always had – at once for them as artists and us as viewers – shines powerfully through these drawings. So too do the energies and pleasures of actual making as, time and time again in these new drawings, we find motifs sparking off each other: soft against hard, spiky geometries combining with watery and cloudy forms, and subtle washes contrasting with powerful colour clashes. Working together in Woodrow's studio-laboratory, away from home but at home, we can see both artists – and 'Bill Woodrow & Richard Deacon' – once again in their element.

Dr Jon Wood