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ART REVIEW

Authorship or Translation? Notes Toward Redefining Creativity

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[“Drawn From Photography,”](#) at the Drawing Center in SoHo, is all about the vulnerability of movements, some aesthetic, others political. It’s a narrow slice of drawing today, encompassing a mere 13 artists, but it feels right for our moment of global trepidation.

In formal terms it might be seen as a coda to the Museum of Modern Art’s recent [show](#) “On Line: Drawing Through the Twentieth Century.” The drawings at MoMA leapt from the plane into three-dimensional space, but the 21st-century works at the Drawing Center aren’t so liberated. They cling to the page and adhere, often rigidly, to various photographic sources.

For the most part those sources document wars, riots, protests and other scenes of social unrest: historical and contemporary, fleeting and continuing, effective and not. These photo-based media — generally photographs, but sometimes text-heavy posters or newspaper pages — are meticulously recreated in pen, pencil and watercolor.

The work is methodical and labor intensive, and may strike some viewers as pointless or redundant. As the show’s curator, Claire Gilman, writes in the catalog, “This is drawing reduced to its most basic application, a kind of anybody-can-do-it approach that is high on effort but not necessarily on imagination, which raises the question of why spend the time at all?”

That’s a rhetorical question of course, and she goes on to answer it: “Or is there perhaps some value in the time spent, as if careful attention to other people’s achievements is itself a form of commitment, one that might redefine the nature of creative expression and drawing’s role in it?”

Her essay, not incidentally, is reproduced from a hand-lettered version by the artist Serkan Ozkaya. The shaky words can be difficult to read, but that difficulty cleverly reinforces the show’s thesis.

Drawing, as defined here, isn’t authorship. It’s translation. And it’s not mechanical translation, as in, say, Warhol’s silk-screened photographs of riots, but a recognizably human kind, as in Frank Selby’s hand-drawn copies of similar images. Mr. Selby pays special attention to the technical glitches of the images he’s working with, the scratches and overexposures, and he also sometimes uses mediums, for instance blue watercolor on Mylar, that make precision difficult.

D-L Alvarez does something just as transformative, drawing from computerized images of Manson family members and Black Panthers that break down, upon magnification, into pixelated grids. His delicately shaded graphite rectangles make faces and slogans appear unresolved and illegible.

Andrea Bowers goes further, drawing select figures from photographs of activist groups practicing nonviolent resistance. She floats the bodies on large sheets of white paper, divorcing gesture from context (or, maybe, asking whether it’s possible to do so).

Curiously, the show doesn't differentiate between artists who use found images and those who work from their own snapshots. Ewan Gibbs takes "tourist" photographs of New York, from the vantage point of the Empire State Building, and then renders them on graph paper using tiny triangles, circles and other notations from knitting pattern books. And Richard Forster draws from his own photographs, taken from a moving train, of an English steel plant that had been slated for closing. In both cases drawing becomes a way to rationalize a sentimental image.

For other artists it's a way to take back control of a picture that has been released, voluntarily or not, to the Internet. Paul Sietsema's mesmerizing pen-and-ink self-portrait is based on a photograph that he found during an episode of self-Googleing. It had been taken by Hedi Slimane for a feature about the Los Angeles art scene but lived on as part of Mr. Slimane's Fashion Diary; with his drawing Mr. Sietsema reclaims his own visage from the fashion designer's archive.

And though it looks like a newspaper page, Karl Haendel's "Birthday Drawing" is also a kind of self-portrait, a rendering of the front page of the Soviet newspaper Pravda from July 1, 1976, the day he was born. The show could have used more work from Mr. Haendel, whose [installations](#) of photo-based drawings make technical discipline look like a radical choice.

While "Birthday Drawing" looks back to a specific date, two other projects in the show are continuing. In her diaristic series "Currency" Mary Temple makes a kind of graph or matrix from portrait heads of world leaders in the news. She assigns them to high or low spots on the page based on her feelings about that person on that particular day. It's drawing as Twitter post, an in-the-moment thing; weekly updates will help to keep it fresh, though it's doubtful that viewers will find anything contentious in Ms. Temple's placement of, say, Col. Muammar el-Qaddafi.

More poignantly Emily Prince has been making [small portraits](#) of all of the American servicemen and women who have died in Iraq and Afghanistan since 2004: 5,720 in all, as of Dec. 31, 2010.

Here she is showing more than 500 drawings dating back to the beginning of last year, pinned to the wall in the form of a large United States map, and will add to them as new casualties are reported.

The drawings are fairly crude, based only on images from the Web site Military City, and Ms. Prince's use of five shades of paper to approximate different skin tones is a well-intentioned gaffe. But she is performing an important function: paying "careful attention to the achievements of others," in Ms. Gilman's words, the kind of attention that's hard to sustain in more current forms of media.

As the fiction writer Lynne Tillman, another catalog essayist, reflects: "I see a hand moving on paper, erasing a line, doing it again. It's so human."

"Drawn From Photography" continues through March 31 at the Drawing Center, 35 Wooster Street, SoHo; (212) 219-2166, drawingcenter.org.