

## The Active Line: Five Idioms of Drawing

### Drawing as a Major Art

What, it has often been asked, is the precise relationship of an artist's drawings to his paintings? One possible answer is that drawings represent a preparation for painting, that they are studies or sketches which will find their eventual fulfillment in painted form. The other answer is that they are an escape from painting, an alternative conceptual space in which the artist tries out subjects or treatments different from those he favours in his role as a painter. The latter answer forms the curatorial basis of this exhibition. It leads us to contend that drawing is a major and autonomous art, which deserves the recognition long withheld from it on the plea that it is a minor practice, an ancillary exercise for the more elevated vocation of painting or sculpture. The present exhibition has been developed around the argument that drawing is an art impelled by its own inner logic and occupying its own special context.

I will address, right at the outset, a vexed formal question that is often posed in this connection: What distinguishes the drawing from other forms of visual art? I would insist on the imprint character of the drawing. Even when it is allied with, or enriched through the use of, watercolours or other pigment media, the crucial definition of the drawing is that it be essentially shaped by the line as marked by graphite pencil, pastel crayon, charcoal, or ink. Drawing is that idiom of composition in which the primary formative structures and key linking movements are made with the line, and not with passages of colour or textural devices. There is considerable truth to the belief, traditionally current among artists, that drawing is the graphic expression that springs most directly from the human nervous system: the sensuous immediacy of contact between body, medium and surface ensures that drawing is a continuum of impulse, in which spontaneity and skill are woven inextricably together.

The imprint, the pressure of the line on the marked surface, is the record of the self's passage through substance; it is the self's act of registering its presence in material form. Every artist, when he draws, acts with the direct and inescapable consciousness of mark-making; the structures of drawing offer the formal restraint that translate the vitality of the marking hand into a charged energy. And what do the marks themselves, in their tensility or density, convey? They effect the capture of movement or serve as studies in repose, they pin down the fugitive impression or the elusive memory; for drawing is related more closely than any other art, except photography, to time. The drawing can function, therefore, at many levels: as an autobiography in miniature, as a small process of discovery, as a mapping of the self's movements through the terrain of reality.

### The Persistence of Classical Disciplines

The present exhibition brings together drawings by five distinguished artists: the painters Jehangir Sabavala, Mehlii Gobhai, Jogen Chowdhury and Manjit Bawa, and the graphicist K Laxma Goud. Each places his hallmark on his chosen subject: the human figure, the animal study, the interpersonal situation, the implied landscape, or the transmuted still life. The exhibition allows us to compare five distinctive approaches to the medium and its possibilities, the affinities that their drawing bears to their painterly or graphicist practice or the independent departures that it stages. We may also observe the continuities and mutations in the practice of drawing across three generations of post-colonial Indian artists: Sabavala was born in 1922; Gobhai in 1931 and Chowdhury in 1939; Goud and Bawa, respectively, in 1940 and 1941.

The drawings that form 'The Active Line' have been chosen from various phases of the activity of these artists: they include both 'preparatory' and 'finished' drawings (I use these terms purely for descriptive purposes, and not as indices of aesthetic judgement; we have now abandoned the academic distinction between 'preparatory' and 'finished' drawings and prize the fragmentary, the notational and the provisional as vital expressions in their own right). The artists represented here do not take, as their point of departure, the Surrealist-inspired automatic writing and collage aesthetic that informed much drawing between the 1950s and the 1970s; nor are they motivated by subsequent Conceptualist notions of the drawing as a fictive space or field of manoeuvre.

These artists pursue, for the most part, the classical disciplines and preoccupations of drawing. In their handling, we encounter drawing as delineation, embodied in the pure line associated with contour drawing, which provokes a kinetic response on the viewer's part; or as form drawing, in which cross-hatching or the washing-in of shadow admits the general illumination of the picture surface without regard to local tones; or as colour-value drawing, where light and dark areas are employed to express the difference in the local tones of the bodies or objects depicted. The drawings in this exhibition are united by two basic features. They are all presented as means by which the palpable reality-fabric – of beings, objects, dreams, and their mutual relationships – may be apprehended. Also, there is barely a trace of resort to coloristic devices among them; rather, they emphasise the imaginative and form-ordering capacities of line.

### The Drawings in the Exhibition

Jehangir Sabavala's drawings are, chronologically, the earliest works included in this exhibition. These seven drawings were executed in Paris during 1949-1950, when Sabavala was a student at the Academie Julian and the

Academie Andre Lhote. Figure drawings intended as studies towards an eventual formal expression in painting, they also assert themselves as lively, informal glimpses of the human animal at rest and play. The reclining nude rendered in charcoal incarnates passion in repose: relaxed, absorbed in the memory of sensual pleasure, she takes a haughty view of the viewer, and is no simple erotic subject. These drawings convey the immediacy of the artist's response to the body as volume and mass, to the model's stance; while evoking the particularity of the subject, they also invoke the figure as archetype. The man with his arm over the back of a chair and the woman from Madagascar are cast in precise curves, while the portrait of the boy sitting cross-legged, an apprentice yogi or a Kiplingesque Kim or Mowgli figure, immortalises that ideal of natural elegance which Sabavala cherishes.

For Mehlli Gobhai, the exercise of drawing serves as an alternative to his painterly practice, which is resolutely abstractionist. These encounters with palpable materiality and organic forms serve to replenish his austere geometrical and planar conceptions, permit him to delight in a lighter, informal technique. Gobhai's life studies not only return him to representation, but also afford him the opportunity to demonstrate movement as a gesture or pose, isolated like a phrase from the liturgy of time. A student of Robert Beverley Hale, the master of anatomical drawing, Gobhai accentuates underlying structure, cutting below the visible surfaces of fruit, limb and head to establish the inner workings of the object. Many of his drawings begin as anatomical or botanical studies, but become quiet fantasias: he demonstrates the relationship between the still life and the head study, engages in a dialogue between the severe arrangement of nature morte and the pulse of the living, random subject seen in the street or at a railway platform, who is perhaps unaware that he or she has been memorialised in the artist's notebook.

Jogen Chowdhury's drawings have often been contiguous with his paintings, since he operates in a seamless mixed-media idiom in which ink, crayon and watercolour are crafted into the unified texture of the image. However, the four recent drawings included in this exhibition, executed in black dry pastel on paper, signal the beginning of a scintillating new phase in his creative journey. Playing the vigour of the strong pastel line against the velvet richness of the pastel smudge across the paper surface, Chowdhury's technique achieves the effects of contour as well as mystery. The man and woman locked in the embrace of love and violence, in 'Not So Gentle', inhabit a poignant and intimate theatre; its ambiguity is compounded from sadism and desire, the constant shift of power that takes place in sexual relationships. 'Light! More Light!', with its emaciated man-child spreadeagled across the frame, is a homage to the children dying of hunger and internecine warfare in Afghanistan; 'Reclining Woman I and II' speak of the zest for life, which animates the flying braid, the hypnotic eye of the dancer-like figure.

K Laxma Goud's ink drawings on paper are charged with the expressive power that imparts a special aura to his graphics; the intimacy of scale only magnifies this effect. Goud's female figures articulate a manifest eroticism, combining, as they do, the robust muscular humanity of the peasant and the stone-breaker with the iconic and terrifying presence of the goddess in her forest shrine, before the advent of civilisation and the mollifications of priesthood. His couples celebrate fertility through their union, but the act of coitus is often heated, violent; he evokes encounters between animals and humans, introducing allegorical resonances into the drama of the raw carnal instincts. Goud is a master of teratography, the art of depicting monsters that are both grotesque and sublime; his preferred strategy is hyperbole. Woman, conceived of as a symbol of fertility, is no tame deity in his vision: with her multiple breasts, distended nipples and slashing tail, she is a feral generatrix; Goud inherits Goya's hallucinatory anti-icons through Picasso, and melds them with the rural Indian iconography of the Great Mother.

Manjit Bawa's recent graphite drawings emerge from the flow of phantasmagoric images that course through his imagination: enigmatic figures collected from myth, folklore and actual life. In the drawings included here, we come upon a woman playing with a she-dog; a bull cast as a study in fortitude; and a possible self-portrait – the artist as impassioned prophet, arms upraised, his robe like an electric serpent around his body. The dream-personae that occupy Bawa's drawings are identical with those which inhabit his paintings; but in the drawings, the artist strips away the skins of colour and carves his

figures through the urgencies of the incised line and the hatching, through the allusions of shading and the space left deliberately untouched. In so doing, he sets before us the essential bone-structure of his images. Bawa's compositions are raptures; they are also deeply serious allegories developed around a cluster of recurrent themes: the overcoming of terrestrial limitations, the possibility of dialogue between species, the symbolisation of the instincts as chimeras emerging from behind the grille of reason.

## Play and Style

This exhibition also points to the dialectic between play and style, which, I would suggest, are the two major performative modes in which all artists work. 'Play', here indicates the practice of free gesture and discovery, marked by an informal and experimental attitude towards medium and material; as against this, 'style' denotes a grander and more formal approach to medium and material, an ambitious attempt at completion and the fulfillment of experimentation. In some sense, play always remains open and risk-bearing, while style tends towards closure and habit. It could be asserted, in a sweeping generalisation, that play is quintessential to drawing, while style is the hallmark of painting. What brings the dialectic between them into being – and renders the experience of viewing

intriguing and vibrant – is the manner in which the lightness of play and the gravity of style compete within the individual artist's oeuvre, within individual art-works.

The drawings in 'The Active Line' bear testimony to this dialectic. Sabavala and Gobhai tend towards play: Sabavala's drawings are characterised by a naturalistic savouring of the real that stands at the opposite pole from the highly geometricised figuration of his paintings; Gobhai's life studies and crossings between still life and head studies, similarly, explore a territory remote from the abstractionist domain of his paintings. Goud's drawings partake of the live-wire athleticism of his graphics, its dimensions of play as well as style. Chowdhury and Bawa, as authors of drawings, do indeed allude to the painterly styles these artists have formulated for themselves; but their drawings reveal a striking vulnerability and candour, which are otherwise subordinated within the *mise en scene* of their paintings. In each case, a different ratio of play to style is achieved, a different relationship evolved between the artist as producer of stylistically uniform images and the artist as experimenter with multiple formal and thematic resources.

The world of the drawing is an intimate world: within its compass, epic-scale forces can be held, regarded and rendered at a human threshold. And yet, the few swift strokes of the drawing also invite the viewer into a consideration of the unrepresented that lies beyond form. I will conclude this essay on a personal note: 'The Active Line' began as an exploration of the manner in which the drawing acts as a transition from private reverie to an engagement with the world; in mobilising the exhibition, I have learned that the drawing can, with equal validity, measure the reverse passage, from the intensity of engagement to a creative withdrawal into reverie

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Notes and References

To quote a connoisseurial authority of the traditional school such as Paul J. Sachs, curator at the Fogg Museum, Cambridge, Mass., and later Professor of Fine Arts at Harvard: "The word 'draw' means:– to drag a pen or other instrument over a surface, which leaves a mark behind it. To draw is to outline; to delineate; to represent a form or shape by lines or by means of light and shade alone or within a simple outline:– in short, to make a picture by such means." See: Paul J. Sachs, *Great Drawings* (New York: Pocket Books Inc., 1951), p. 1.

As I have suggested elsewhere, the artist's chief formal problem, while drawing, is "to bring about the crystallisation of the image while at the same time regulating the mutable forces that threaten its composure". See: Ranjit Hoskote, 'Inscriptions on the Surface of Time: Drawings by Nine Post-colonial Indian Artists' (catalogue essay for the exhibition, 'Drawings'; The Guild Art Gallery, Bombay, September-October 1998).

John Berger articulates the magic of the act of drawing beautifully in an autobiographical reflection: "I looked at my drawing, trying to see what had been distorted; which lines or scribbles of tones had lost their original and necessary emphasis, as others had surrounded them; which spontaneous gestures had evaded a problem, and which had been instinctively right. Yet even this process was only partly conscious. In some places I could clearly see that a passage was clumsy and needed checking; in others, I allowed my pencil to hover around – rather like the stick of a water-diviner. One form would pull, forcing the pencil to make a scribble of tone which could re-emphasise its recession; another would jab the pencil into restressing a line which could bring it further forward." See: John Berger, 'Drawing', in his *The Look of Things: Selected Essays and Articles* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1972), p. 170.

: We might now safely avoid, as a basis for classification or the judgement of aesthetic merit, such excessively elaborate typologies of drawing as the one presented by Philip Rawson in his magisterial study, *Drawing* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1969), pp. 283-316. This categorisation of drawings into a large number of sub-genres does not substantially assist us in the actual experience of responding to various kinds of drawings, which tend to blur, rather than stressing, the lines between such sub-genres as the 'calligraphic exercise', the 'diagrammatic summary', the 'first thought' and the 'sketch after nature'.

: Drawings such as those included in the present exhibition find their origin in a moment during the Italian Renaissance, when drawing became recognised as an intellectual discipline and discovery procedure in its own right. Bernice Rose records this moment: "As drawing departed from its craft traditions, skill was admired as facilitating individuality. Personal touch distinguished one artist from another and established hierarchies according to the quality of the 'handwriting'.... A single drawing [was] thus descriptive of a whole stylistic language, synthesising all of the elements necessary to recognise the artistic personality." See: Bernice Rose, *Drawing Now* (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 1976), p. 10.