

HELEN FARRELL

FETTER

Words by Laurence Counihan

Half-Formed Circuitry

I have always considered drawing not as an exercise of particular dexterity, but above all as a means of expressing [...] descriptions of states of being
—Henri Matisse, ‘Notes of a Painter on His Drawing’, 1939.

There are no lines in nature. Any beginner can learn this if he sits down in front of his house with a pencil and tries to reduce what he sees to a series of lines.
—Heinrich Wölfflin, ‘Dürer’s Drawings’, 1905.

The epigraphs which introduce this text both point to and situate drawing as a practice that is fundamentally fictive. For Matisse, to draw is not an act to *re(-)*present, on paper, an object or scene out in the world, but instead an endeavour that expresses, “descriptions of states of being”. To draw then is to construct — or diagram — some diffuse and ephemeral mode; it is an attempt to capture and *image* an essence which lies beyond, or beneath, the realm of visual perception. And it manifests this form in line; pencil, or other similar implement, pressed against paper, and directed upon a navigational trajectory of which no concrete beginning or end exists; because that thing, or non-thing, being drawn has, of course, no such boundaries or coordinates which could be translated into this principle aspect of the discipline. As Wölfflin’s comment attests: “[t]here are no lines in nature”. And so we might propose — although only tentatively, as any declaration based in fiction must be qualified — that drawing, at its core, signifies the *process of fictioning reality*.

Drawing as the emergent rendition of partially realised ideas and forms is an obvious truism. Preparatory sketches have always played a crucial role in visual arts practice. I draw in advance to get an *idea* of the final representation. And because of this, drawing has often, historically, been demoted in the hierarchy of the autonomous fine arts: the *prelude to something else*.





Although the Wölfflin quote was originally published in the venerable art historian's first major monograph *Die Kunst Albrecht Dürers* (1905), I first happened upon it in an introductory essay to the illustrated folio *Drawings of Albrecht Dürer*, produced by Dover Publications in 1970. I've always been more inclined towards the drawings of the Renaissance masters; the strange and almost alien-like quality of their half-finished constructions demonstrative of Freud's *Unheimlich*. Their disarticulation of form (trading on suggestion and analogy) invokes an allure whose orbit I find impossible to escape. Appearing fish-bone-like with parts missing, this capricious ambiguity maliciously overrides the blunt mimetic exactitude of figurative representation. As Mark Fisher might have said, pictures like these are *eerie*, as their presence demands us to ask: 'Why is there nothing there when there should be something?'¹

In the book of Dürer's drawings, there is a sketch dated from 1508 which has been given the title *Study in Drapery*. It is a study — a preparation in advance — rendering the volumetric form and intricate folds of Christ's gown as they were to be depicted in the 'Coronation of the Virgin' section of the *Heller Altar* (a collaborative triptych by Dürer and Matthias Grünewald completed between 1507 and 1509). Herein the entire upper half of Christ's body is "missing", with only the left foot, bearing the stigmata, present to remind the viewer that *something* is supposed to be inhabiting this garment. Regardless, this visible lack of the body emphatically declares that what is being perceived is a half-finished illusion; the explicit processual and pre-emptive status of the image suggestive of something *increate*. When gazing at the final painting we know that there is nothing — no fleshy trunk of bone and muscle — underneath the cloak, yet we allow our minds to fill in the blanks of the artificial model. That is the trick of figurative representation. But in the case of this drawing, we are unable to look away from the reality that the model isn't *formed* but *forming*, with the torso's absence

gesturing towards the catastrophe that is a *void of representation*, and with it a *void of knowing itself*.

This ambiguity of meaning communicated through the disconfiguration of objects and observations based in, but radically departed from, reality, is what immediately strikes the viewer when confronted with Helen Farrell's latest body of work titled 'Fetter'. Although the works which comprise this collection are majoritively painted canvases executed in an abstract mode (five square oils accompanied by two more diminutive pieces on paper), the guiding principle for the artist here is the practice of drawing. Thinking and meeting these pictures as such is useful when attempting to ground the experience of looking in this particular instance, as seeing here — if to see something is to look at and ascertain knowledge of it — is not immediate. Instead it is slippery and convoluted, overflowing with half-suggestions that collapse into oneiric obfuscations. The painted canvases each depict scenes and movements that seem to oscillate rapidly between panicky restraint and a more unbridled dynamism, with the sequencing of these partially recognisable forms delicately attuned to towards a state of *incompleteness*. As right-of-access to any clearly defined sense of meaning is disbarred, the viewer is left to wallow in an ocean of chthonic formal relations that encourage the construction of fictive realities.

Unlike the clinical purity of geometric abstraction — which demarcates itself from the experience of everyday perception through a strict linearity and rigidity based in the empiricism of mathematical laws — or even more expressive abstract styles — that would ruthlessly isolate and expunge any figures which could potentially signify a real object — the structural arrangements on display in Farrell's work quite overtly gesture towards the formulation of *things* that are grounded in some visible reality (of this world or an imagined other). Many of the outlines are reminiscent of André Masson's Surrealist experiments with automatic drawing, and in a similar,

although much more subtle, manner the charted movements reveal the trace of identifiable references. Yes, these figures are strange and unnerving, more *formless* than *formed*, but *enough of something* is here to be explicitly suggestive of an otherworldly creature or entity. It could be proposed, to borrow a phrase from philosopher Vilém Flusser, that what is shown and depicted here are a series of *non-things*; chimeric apparitions that are "*in-formation*".² Indeed, the conceptual apparatus surrounding the work is indicative of such, with the artist emphasising as a central theme, "the human need for myths and legends, gods and monsters". Ergo, things that are decidedly *unreal*.

However, even that seemingly mundane proclamation (that gods and monsters are unreal) is problematic, being in actuality rife with complications that would seek to delimit the horizon of aesthetic experience. If I state that Farrell's scrawly and skeletal-like mutations are *unreal*, the implication is that they, or any other image, could or should be able to depict something that is *real*. And that term *real* here, within art and aesthetics, is often taken as a naïve synonym to signify a specifically defined purpose or meaning. The meaning of a representational painting resides in that scene to which it strives to imitate. A drawing's meaning in its orientation towards the completion of some future goal, project, or idea. That kind of *real meaning* is, and by the artist's own account, frustratingly absent here. Instead the modus operandi is firmly rooted in the presentation of unfinished circuits; emergent systems of line and form that have been momentarily interrupted and crystallised as disfigured illustrations.

References:

1. Mark Fisher, *The Weird and Eerie*, Repeater Books, 2016, 12.
2. Vilém Flusser, *The Shape of Things: A Philosophy of Design*, 1999, 86.



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