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ENACTING MODERN SPECTATORSHIP: WILLIAM DOBELL'S TELEVISION DRAWINGS

In the late 1950s, Australian artist William Dobell began drawing from television using a ballpoint pen. Combining to new technologies, this conservative portraitist found himself engaging with new, televisual orders of movement, bodily performance, attention and annotation. Dobell's drawing practice combined residual elements of modernism; as a sedentary *flâneur* he sought the Baudelairean heroism of modern life on TV. Dobell's abstract ballpoint doodles also hinted at an emergent postmodernism, their fluid, rolling line emulating the mobilised flow of the televisual field.

Drawing was fundamental to William Dobell's conception of artistic practice. When a younger artist asked him for guidance, his answer was simple; "Draw and draw" (Bevan: 315). He practised what he preached; in his studio, one visitor reported, "There were just drawings, drawings, drawings" (Bevan: 315). Dobell's drawings ranged from the elegantly finished, reflecting his admiration for Ingres, through to quickly captured notations [*Study for Portrait of Margaret Olley*, 1948, NGA 76.105]. The twenty-five Dobell sketch books held by the National Gallery of Australia (NGA), spanning four decades from the mid-1930s to the early 1960s, are filled with such quick sketches, often many to the page [NGA 76.185.21.42].

The sketchbooks reveal Dobell's classical foundations as a draughtsman. Typically (and especially when drawing the human figure) Dobell surveyed the motif *in toto* before hunting down fragmentary elements in adjunct notations of gesture and expression. But in his constant, fluid activity Dobell sought an energetic informality, as if pursuing a state described by the musician Duke Ellington as "skillapooping;" the capacity to make something very difficult seem easy and natural. [*Skillapooping, Duke Ellington, c. 1950s* [NGA 76.185.11.14]]. In spite of the primacy of drawing for Dobell, and his diligent pursuit of his craft, there are other curious paradoxes and anomalies in Dobell's practice.

Observational sketches made in public—in streets, cafes and bars—drove his art [NGA 1985.2038]. But Dobell felt a certain shame at his own inquisitiveness: it "embarrassed him to be caught sketching in this way," wrote his first biographer, James Gleeson (Gleeson: 32). Drawing could be a guilty transaction, pursued somewhat on the sly.

Dobell privileged drawing but conceived of it in terms of other media, as if it were subsidiary or preliminary to more robust practices. He characterised figure

drawing as essentially sculptural in character. “I move around the head to get the profile,” he said. “If I only draw a full face there is nothing to tell you how large the nose really is, so I like to get a sculptor’s view of the head.” (Gleeson: 196) He sought a “general impression” of the figure but worried at the “blurry” result; he wanted “a good, solid, sculptural” drawing (Freeman: 78) [NGA 1985.2035].

Drawings underpinned Dobell’s portraits but were also an impediment to their realisation. He made numerous sketches in preparation for a portrait, then set them aside when the painting was commenced. “I never work with them in front of me”, he said, “it constipates me” (Gleeson: 197).

Most curious, to me, is a campaign of drawings made in the late 1950s and early 1960s. Dobell, Gleeson wrote, was a “traditionalist” (13) who had “failed to meet the challenge of his time”. (10) And yet he embraced a new medium, the ballpoint pen, in perhaps the first sustained engagement by an artist with the now-ubiquitous writing tool. Even more surprisingly, around 1959, Dobell began making portrait sketches from television broadcasts [NGA 76.185.23.16]. Ensnared in his Wangi lounge room, denied the teeming streets of London and Kings Cross that had previously fuelled his art, Dobell turned to the television, becoming perhaps the first artist to reflect on the part-public, part-private encounters with celebrities and politicians on offer in the new televisual realm.

In a final paradox, the experience of television and the properties of the ballpoint pen propelled this figurative traditionalist into the domain of abstraction [NGA 76.185.21.4]. “When there was nobody on the television screen I found interesting”, said Dobell, “I would doodle away and began to find interesting patterns” (Adams: 276). An artist whose sketchbooks had been propelled by a constant alertness to the world now reversed direction—drawing now emerged

in moments of inattention. And out of this inattention came Dobell's first abstract paintings [*Pavane nuptial*, 1969].

What lies behind this apparently paradoxical passage from traditionalism to modernity, from the street to the lounge room?

Dobell himself answers anecdotally. In 1958, he was diagnosed with bowel cancer and underwent successful surgery in January. In gratitude, Dobell painted a portrait of his surgeon Dr Edward MacMahon, a work that went on to win the 1959 Archibald prize. So far so good; a story of redemption, both in the defeat of the cancer and the exorcism of the controversy surrounding Dobell's 1943 win.

During his long post-operative recovery, Dobell found that his "nerves were all to pieces" but refused to take drugs to alleviate pain. Instead "to keep occupied" he sketched incessantly (Adams: 276). This practice commenced in his hospitable bed and continued on his return to Wangi. By early 1960, when Dobell visited Canberra to sketch prime minister Sir Robert Menzies for a commissioned cover for *Time* magazine, the ballpoint pen had become his preferred tool, dominating the pages of sketch books, including those used in trips to Vietnam and Hong Kong [NGA 76.185.21.40].

And although drawing had always been the foundational stage in Dobell's practice, he appears never to have invested substantially in its materials. Most of the NGA sketchbooks are common exercise books, of the kind sold by stationers and newsagents [cover of NGA 76.185.23.16]. This disregard for fine art materials extended to medium. Pencil and pen and ink prevail in the earlier sketchbooks, with no sense of either being more than run of the mill quality. So

the convenience of a ballpoint likely won out over any negative connotations arising from its everyday, non-art status.

The increasing momentum of the mass media age was forcing Dobell out of his comfort zone. Previously, he had measured the preliminaries of a portrait in weeks. He liked to get to know his subjects, to develop an intimacy with them over dinner or a few drinks, execute multiple sketches and preliminary painted studies. In his parliament house office, Robert Menzies gave Dobell only forty minutes for a sitting. Dobell recalls dashing off some watercolour sketches, Gil Docking (director of the Newcastle Region Gallery) spoke of “little pencil drawings” [Bevan: 395]. but the sketchbooks reveal ballpoint sketches [NGA 76.185.21.40].

Dobell grasps hurriedly at a statuesque, hieratic pose befitting a prime minister. Quick but sculptural, with those breakout notations capturing the telling contours of Menzies’ patrician, headmaster-like expression. Heavily worked too, as if Dobell’s unease at drawing in public (his agoragraphophobia, to coin a phrase) returned in what he described as the “frightening” atmosphere of Menzies’ office (Bevan: 395). The result was at best, in Dobell’s own words, “a fairly good job done in the time allowed” (de Berg) A lukewarm assessment, even from the artist himself.

Significantly, drawing at home from a television set resolved Dobell’s fear of drawing in public, who could survey the realm of current affairs, entertainment and everyday life behind closed doors. But there was more to Dobell’s television drawings than the resolution of a psychic unease. Television allowed him to recover the modernist impulse underpinning those earlier street sketches and to reinvent the character of his spectatorship.

Dobell's earlier street sketches embody the Baudelairean imperative that the artist engage with the heroism of modern life, capturing latter-day versions of the urchin, the street vendor, the café sitter and the busker. They are shaped by a wry, occasionally acerbic curiosity inherited from the Baudelairean *flâneur* of the nineteenth century. And in their manner, especially in that loose, circulating line that seems to accompany (in the musical sense) rather than contain form, they echo the street sketches of Constantin Guys, Baudelaire's exemplar of the observer of modern life.

Dobell valued rapid execution. A dynamic line spoke of the life and energy of the street; the unfinished subject spoke of a mobile, mutable world and the exigencies of representing it. I want to picture Dobell, in his lounge room in Wangi, quickly sketching entertainers and talking heads from the screen, as a latter-day Guys, reconfiguring Baudelairean spectatorship for the televisual age [NGA 76.185.23.11 Shirley Bassey]. The television set delivered public figures—politicians such as John Gorton, intellectuals such as Bertrand Russell and stars like Shirley Bassey. But it delivered them in a mobile, informal sense. It allowed Dobell to treat them as figures glimpsed or passing in the street. It heightened the spectatorial frisson, too. Not only was the televisual image new and curious (television having been introduced to Australia only three years before Dobell began sketching transmissions) it was populated almost entirely of performers, as if the Baudelairean consciousness of public display had become all-pervasive.

To match this new dynamic, Dobell appears to have adopted, especially in sketches of performers, a practice used by Rodin in the early-twentieth century. Fascinated by Cambodian dancers performing at an international exposition in 1906, Rodin produced dozens of rapid-fire sketches, some made without taking his eyes off the motif. Drawing practice was dictated by the performers' mobility,

leaving the artist to “channel” their movements onto the page with a corollary mobility of hand (which took precedence over formal representation). In the television sketches, especially those of performers, Dobell’s line loosens considerably, forms become unbounded and incomplete, proportion (especially in relation to gesture) becomes semantic rather than empirical. Dobell had always attributed a mnemonic character to drawings; they were *aides memoire* supporting, rather than determining a painting. Television’s acceleration of the motif—its exaggeration of gesture, its intercutting of multiple camera angles—made Dobell’s late-1950s drawings faster. The televisual image forced him to grasp more sharply at the essentials of the motif, to latch immediately onto what would be the key components of a painting.

And Dobell’s new medium, the ballpoint pen, contributes greatly to this effect. Increasingly, Dobell was caught up in the characteristics of the ballpoint itself. The roller ball glides fluidly across the page. The circulating line, previously suggestive of a hovering hand, is now a continuous web. This is most evident when television did not deliver figures of interest. Without a performer to pursue, Dobell lapses into uninterested spectatorship and produces unmotivated images; that is, images detached from the procedures of denotation and representation. Dobell began to follow the dictates of the ballpoint, allowing the pen to roll and loop across the notebook page.

Like other Australians, Dobell was learning to watch television. More than most, he was conscious of television’s distinctive visuality. Writing in 1974, Raymond Williams referred to the centrality of “flow” to televisuality. Image flowed into image, as it had done in the movies. But program flowed into program, genre into genre, entertainment into news, drama into advertisement, inviting a pure scopical drive, a condition of incessant, unmodulated watching.

Dobell's ballpoint television drawings, both figurative and abstract, emulate the new spectatorial arena of television broadcasts. The motif itself is less important than the flow. Dobell grasps after this conception when he refers to the doodles as abstracts. The doodle is the steady state, a kind of swirling test pattern, punctuated by moments of interest sufficient to demand figure and representation. Trying to pin down his approach to representation for an interviewer, Dobell spoke of a spectrum between "blurry" impression and "solid, sculptural" form, from the indistinct to the recognisable [Freeman: 78]. His television sketchbooks show his adaption of this thinking to a new, electronic medium.

There is a final sense in which Dobell, inadvertently, updates Baudelairean modernism. Baudelaire cryptically captured the momentum of modernist experimentation when he reassured the beleaguered Manet with the remark that he was "merely the first in the decrepitude of his art". Dobell doubles down on decrepitude. There is the ballpoint pen itself; a mass produced writing instrument which, it was feared, would lead to the corruption of handwriting. Education authorities around the world did not permit the use of the ballpoint in schools until well into the 1960s. And sheets in the NGA collection show Dobell practising writing with a ballpoint [NGA 1985.24.03].

Then there is the televisual image, disseminated by the so-called "idiot box" and soon to be blamed for declining health, imagination, critical intelligence, visual acuity and political discourse. In his Wangi lounge room, Dobell, drawing from his television set, became a new Baudelairean spectator, celebrating the marriage of reason and squalor, of the banal and the monumental. In a final paradox, this traditionalist was perhaps the first artist to recognise, and pursue, television's dramatic alteration of the visual field, which is redefined in terms of what Williams called "the continuity of the signal" [Heath & Scarrow: 374].

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