

# B L O O M S B U R Y

\*an excerpt from a chapter in the book *Sensory Arts and Design* available to read below:

Casey, S & Davies, G 2017, **Drawn away from vision: encounters with the unseen.** in I Heywood (ed.), *Sensory Arts and Design*. Bloomsbury Academic, London.

<http://www.bloomsbury.com/uk/sensory-arts-and-design-9781474280211/>

British artist Peter Matthews' 'ocean' drawings further synthesise multi-sensory information. Matthews has developed a graphic script that works as a *lingua franca* capable of rendering information from an array of senses and sources into a common language and onto a shared surface, so that they can be grasped simultaneously. Unlike Heath's practice, these are not controlled experiments, testing out the capacity of a particular sense against another; his drawing practice is a contingent activity open to the vagrancies of weather and tidal forces in which his entire body is immersed.

Matthews travels widely from the Pacific to the Atlantic to draw in the ocean for hours on end, tracking and transcribing phenomena experienced, such as temperature, tidal patterns and the pull of waves. This information is encoded and laid down in glyphs and ideograms. These are mixed and overlaid with observations of events and occurrences such as the passing of sea birds, clouds and flotsam, some transcribed as recognisable images some as non-representational gestures, others as text. His drawing observes the natural environment as it moves and changes. He says 'There's a constant interplay between what one feels physically and what one observes visually' (Matthews 2015). His drawing is a form of perceiving with the whole body, the eyes supplemented by the other senses into multisensory perception. Alongside physical and environmental forces his drawings include graphic notation of his sensing of time, both internal and charting the passage of the sun across the sky.

Working at the margins of what is possible alone in demanding environments, Matthews is acutely aware of a "synesthetic and kinaesthetic relationship with body in the landscape", when utterly immersed his drawing is transformed. He says it is 'at that point of visual and visceral arrival that a completely new visual mark making language is created and it's often done in a state of trance so I'm not thinking at all or seeing what the marks on paper look like.' (Matthews 2015)

The drawings are combinations of chance and accident, of intentionally directed drawing and drawing intentionally freed to be a graphic stream of bodily-ness and stream of consciousness. The mark-making is at turns ecstatic and sonorous. Tipped instruments trace lines and tracks, points jab and stab to leave, dots, flicks and ticks. Busy, nimble lines

wander off alone, while others enfold and mass together or assemble into patterns and zig-zags. Alongside these marks we see the ocean has played its part; liquid ink and pigment diluted with sea water swell into softer, larger forms and tone and colour bleed together. If we were in any doubt, saturated paper, erasures, tears and the rust marks of nails attest to the environment and origin of these drawings.

Alongside gathering information about his surroundings he is also sensing himself as a recording instrument; immersed as he is for long periods of time he measures the cold, his waning strength and tiredness. Matthews describes his practice as 'Experiencing the observable and observing the experiential' (Katchadourian, 2010: 7). Submerged and engrossed, Mathews draws for extended periods of up to fourteen hours gradually becoming more attuned to the environment and its forces. He is, in effect, drawing through his physical body. Sight, skin, musculature and the sense of proprioception join to form a conduit for a wider sensibility, permitting him to 'observe' his holistic sensory experience.

Expanding his engagement Matthews sees the drawing board as an active prosthesis for extending touch beyond the body. He says 'the drawing board becomes a highly sensitive extension of my body when in the ocean...the board becomes a way to remain buoyant and in tune with a physical and visual sensory relationship with body and ocean, ocean and body, body and universe.' (Matthews 2015)

The sensory engagement presented in Matthews' drawing practice is one in which drawing not only extends the reach of the senses, but somehow becomes fused with them. The boundaries between bodily organ, drawing and the world become blurred, a grey area of interaction. The senses are not only an intermingled bouquet in themselves but there is an intermingling beyond the bodily limits, in which we might be prompted to ask where does the sensory organs of sight and touch stop and the world begin. Art historian and theorist Norman Bryson describes drawing in general as 'an interlacing between inside and outside' of the body (Bryson 2003). While Bryson's essay refers to cognitive activity in drawing, how thoughts and ideas are brought into an external world, his observation could be equally relevant in terms of the body and senses: drawing as the interface between body and world. An idea we find readily articulated in Maurice Merleau-Ponty's concept of the 'chiasm', the meeting point between two entities, at the moment of touch which is reciprocal and reflexive. (Merleau-Ponty 1968).

In Matthews the status of artist and subject is redefined. The artist's relationship to the object of study is reversed. The sea, no longer an image to be depicted, is now both an active agent in the artwork and a physical force to be contended with. In his drawings we see enacted the interrelationship between artist and subject, touching and meeting; Matthews sensing the sea, the environment in turn reflecting Matthews' waning strength and emotional state. The drawings embody and make visual the chiasm.

#### References

Katchadourian, N. (2010), *Sea Marks*. New York: The Drawing Center.

Merleau-Ponty, M. (1968), *The Visible and Invisible*. Chicago: Northwestern University Press.