



TODD FULLER
Letters to Theo

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18 April - 10 May 2020



Letters to Theo

Lorraine Kypiotis. December 2019.

Chairs loom large in Todd Fuller's most recent work as they do in Vincent's paintings.

Six months prior to his admission into Saint Paul de Mausole, a small asylum on the outskirts of Saint-Rémy-de-Provence, Vincent wrote to his brother Theo describing his two latest studies: two chairs – his own and Gauguin's. Both chairs, simple and functional, were empty but redolent with the presence of both artists. They were pieces of furniture in Vincent's house at Arles in which Gauguin was staying – the daily meeting place where Gauguin and Vincent would sit long into the night and discuss, debate and quarrel. It was this sojourn of Gauguin's that led to a breakdown from which Vincent would never recover. When Gauguin left, he left Vincent's dreams of an artists' community in ruins. He also left the shattered remains of their friendship. The empty chairs then also must have triggered in Vincent a deep mournfulness at the absence of his friend.

Only a month after painting the chairs, Vincent painted his *Self Portrait with bandaged ear*. Gauguin had stormed out after a heated argument and that evening Vincent cut off the lower part of his left ear with a razor and delivered it to a prostitute in a near-by brothel. He then went home to bed. He was found the next day close to death and, after hospitalisation and several crises, he decided of his own free will to go to the Asylum at St. Remy.

And so, on the 8th May in 1889, aged 36, Vincent Van Gogh voluntarily admitted himself into Saint-Paul de Mausole. It was a stay paid for by Theo, who arranged for two small rooms—adjoining cells with barred windows. The first a bedroom, simply furnished with a bed, two chairs and a writing desk. The second room was to be used as a studio and Vincent began painting almost immediately: scenes of his room, scenes from his window and scenes of the surrounding landscape. It was here that he would paint *The Starry Night*.



After spending a year at Saint-Paul, Vincent checked himself out on 16 May 1890. He was yearning for new landscapes to paint. After a final burst of creativity, during which he painted *Wheatfield with Crows*, he died within two months – 36 hours after shooting himself in the stomach while out painting in the midsummer fields.

Theo never visited. How could he? He was recently married and expecting his first child in Paris as well as running his art dealership. He couldn't come but he was kept informed of his beloved brother's condition by a stream of illustrated letters and on the birth of his nephew, also named Vincent, received a painting of some branches of almond in blossom for the child's nursery.

Theo never visited Vincent when he was in the asylum but he returns in Todd Fuller's work to walk through the hauntingly lyrical spaces that Vincent inhabited: he takes up Vincent's empty chair – solid and palpable, in a room where the feeling of his brother's presence is so intense as to seem almost tangible. It was a period of Vincent's life where he felt much anguish but he also great calm and we sense, in Todd's animation, the mournful longing of Theo.

We follow Theo as he contemplates this late period of his brother's life. Indeed we move with Theo through the reality and the memory that the site still conjures. We stand where Vincent stood, initially filling his days by painting the grounds seen from his room.

Imbued in Vincent's yellow hues, the spaces simultaneously evoke an absence and a haunting presence of the artist: walking through the corridors of Saint-Paul, in his chair, at his desk writing his letters to Theo.

Todd Fuller invokes both Theo and Vincent. His drawings and animation construct a narrative which is drawn from an empirical experience: through this fictional hand-drawn reality, Todd, like the virtual Theo walked through Vincent's spaces - his room, the corridors, the grounds of Saint-Paul. It is easy to imagine the presence of Vincent in the scapes which Fuller creates and one feels the anguish of Theo as he searches for memories of his brother, always looming just slightly beyond his vision.

Theo occupies Vincent's chair, sits on Vincent's bed, looks outside the window at the scene which has remained largely unchanged. He reads his letters and inhabits his worlds and his works.

In a moment of prescience, Theo watches as crows explode from the *scrivoire* in Vincent's room just as they must have burst up and out at the sound of the self-inflicted gunshot which mortally wounded Vincent a year after he left Saint-Paul. *Wheatfield under Threatening Skies with Crows* Vincent's final painting, becomes real.

Finally, Theo watches as Vincent leaves the sanctuary of St Paul and moves towards his inescapable destiny. His grief is palpable.





TODD FULLER Letters to Theo

Transcript from interview with Gabriella Beaumont, January 2020.

Preparing his first solo international exhibition, Todd Fuller's multi disciplinary practice and passion for drawing is exposed through his hand drawn animation 'Letters to Theo.' Fuller's recent spell at NG Art Creative Residency in Eygalières, France, enabled Fuller to submerge himself in the rich historical and diverse cultural landscape of Provence. 'Letters to Theo' is a direct response to Saint Paul de Mausole Monastery, where Vincent Van Gogh was hospitalised, and painted many of his greatest works. Fuller's new work plunges audiences into explorations and questions of human experience through visual storytelling and immersive narrative.

As a multi disciplinary artist, you have integrated drawing, animation, performance and dance into your practice. What themes does your diverse range of disciplines and creative outputs enable you to explore?

The variety of disciplines I work in allows me to pick and choose the artform that is right for the theme I want to explore. Utilising a breadth of mediums, I often explore the human condition and am interested in life and death, creation and destruction. Animation is about creating, documenting and destroying through erasure, so it makes sense to deal with those themes through animation.

At the heart of everything I do is drawing. I feel like drawing is the most primal of mediums, it is a gift that we are given at birth. Drawing sits within the capacity of every human being regardless of race, gender, wealth or socio economic status. You can rub your foot on the floor and you're drawing, you're mark making. Drawing is implicit to the human condition, so when I am exploring themes about humanity, it makes sense for me to draw.



Your works have an understanding of place, history, narrative and context. What do you invite viewers to explore through your hand drawn animation?

Narratives are the way we understand and define ourselves, how we present ourselves to others, engage and create empathy. Storytelling is an integral part of being human. To me, drawing is the ultimate storyteller. In a place like St Pauls, these stories are etched into the very fabric of the building.

There are many layers in my animated works which suggest trails that audiences can explore. In the case of *Letters to Theo*, I worked with the characters of Vincent and Theo to try and make sense of Saint Paul de Mausole Monastery. This story presents many questions about what is to be human and to be either at one or disconnected with the world around us. In an age where mental health is such a big deal, these are the things we should be talking and thinking about. There is also a familial story that sits within the work, which questions how we connect with one another, and about brotherhood. I want to create a foundation that my audience can come to and fill in their own blanks. My way of structuring a story has lots of holes and space for interpretation and room to move and question.

How do your hand-drawn animations differ from other methods of filmmaking?

This method of animation is about trace and history. No matter how hard you try, the remnants of everything you do is captured on the page. There is this idea that every situation is the consequence of many other moments, choices, decisions and incidentals. Nothin exists in a vacuum, every second is the culmination of thousands of others before it. The remnants scattered across the page suggest the paradigm. It makes physics and history explicit. Similarly, stories are ephemeral. They don't exist as physical things. This way of storytelling makes it permanent, whilst still maintaining fluidity, as stories are fraught, fragile and susceptible to memory.





How did being in France at NG Art Creative Residency, impact your work, in comparison to working within the Australian landscape and Australian Art History?

My palette shifted so dramatically. Despite dealing with heavy subject matter, my palette was joyous at times, a tension I found really interesting. It was also informed by the environment. The colour of the light was different in Provence, so everything radiated with a warm, golden glow. That landscape is very hard not to be seduced by, and it instantly resonated through my work. And of course, how do you work with Van Gogh without that rich palette or sunflower fields.

You have undertaken residencies both in Australia and in Europe. Upon arriving to NG Art Creative Residency, how did you begin your creative process and was it different to how you had approached other residencies?

I think the biggest thing I have learned about residencies is if you procrastinate and don't immerse yourself in the landscape and draw every day, the period of time between when you arrive and when you find the kernel of inspiration to sustain you, is longer. I am quite militant on myself to arrive and start, making sure I have all my materials ready. There should be no excuses for why I can't get there and immediately get amongst it. That was a big learning I applied to my residency at NG Art Creative Residency. After three days stumbling I found Saint Paul Monastery and instantly knew there's my subject.





During your creative process in 'Letters to Theo', you used a trace and erasure technique. What evolution does this enable your hand drawn narrative to take?

There was one particular scene which was a breakthrough moment with my drawings trace offering the rest of the narrative. It is an interior drawing of Theo on the bed in Van Gogh's room and he almost has two versions of himself that get up and gesture around him. The trace took on a different element that wasn't just about physics or mapping motion, it was about a state of mind and state of place, almost able to depict multiple personalities. It was about mourning, loss, and a place of discovery all at once. In this moment erased figures suggested the complexity of the character in a moment.

What is your underlying interest in the power of animation and the artistry involved?

I always struggled that the things I drew on the page never matched the drawings in my head which could move, breathe, dance and react. In my head a drawing is rarely static. It felt natural to explore how drawings move through animation. Procedurally, I am addicted to drawing, and I am addicted to the process and its routine. It is a regimented process you have to commit yourself to. You become a slave to the act. There is an illogical addiction to this process and I need that structure to survive in the studio. The idea that my animations are drawings dancing is a very real thing and makes sense in the journey of my life, and the lessons that were taught to me growing up in a rural community as a boy who loved doing different things like dance. It is not surprising that all these things permeate and intersect. They are a part of me and a part of my life.

Cover: Todd Fuller
Letters to Theo (untitled 1)
Charcoal, chalk, acrylic and tape on
paper
75x151cm

Page 3: Todd Fuller
Letters to Theo (untitled 2)
Charcoal, chalk and acrylic on paper
57x75cm

Page 5: Todd Fuller
Letters to Theo (untitled 8)
Charcoal, chalk and acrylic on paper
56x66cm

Page 6: Todd Fuller sketching.
Image courtesy Belinda Fox

Page 7: Todd Fuller
Letters to Theo (untitled 7)
Charcoal, chalk and acrylic on paper
75x57cm

page 8: Todd Fuller
Letters to Theo (untitled 3)
Charcoal, chalk and acrylic on paper
57x75cm

Todd Fuller sketching en plein air at
the Mas Des Pelerins

Page 9: Todd Fuller
Morning study I
Charcoal, chalk and acrylic on paper
37x52cm

Rear: Todd Fuller
Letters to Theo (untitled 17)
Charcoal, chalk and acrylic on paper
55x75cm

