

Tom Nicholson

Paris Desktop Drawing Afterword



Traces of everyday living - its shopping lists and telephone numbers, its odd recollections and pissed-off thoughts, its longings - are everywhere in Greg Creek's Paris Desktop Drawing. They alternate between studied expression and scrawl, extended over a single sheet of paper eighteen metres long and marking a period from late 1997 to early 1999 in which the artist lived and worked in Paris. The drawing lay on Creek's working table for the duration of his stay, rolled up at either end. The segment which covered the surface of the table moved as he made his way along the scroll. This was an inclusive and heterogeneous kind of drawing, without the stricture of synthesis, selection and design which characterises the Renaissance tradition of drawing, or *disegno*. Yet for all its indications of daily existence (we learn, for example, that Creek ate steak and veg. only twice during his stay), the Paris Desktop Drawing has the strangeness of an apparition. Unexpected faces and glimpses emerge and recede as we move across the drawing, and even the hugely distended display table seems marvellous, as if from a dream in which tables are as long as the time spent thinking at them.

The desktop format of Creek's drawing demands an eccentric way of looking. The drawing does not face our bodies, like a window to be looked through. Instead, we scan the drawing like a landscape from an aeroplane, an experience which both draws us to the physical surface or topography of the drawing and also alters our sense of scale (as if each mark on the drawing contains the concentration of living we imagine within each speck as we fly over a city). As we move along the drawing, our looking moves in and moves out, like some irregular breathing motion. The surface of the paper and its accidental marks give way to illusionistic spaces - views and odd faces and bodies and buildings - only to be interrupted by the literal surface of the drawing - an incision made with a scalpel or some caustic observation about Australian politics hastily written in pencil.

The effect of this alternating proximity and distance recapitulates an important part of Creek's activity. His work swings between drawing in which vision functions at the same range as our touch (like Creek's drawing of his newly born son Marco in which the model was held in one hand and drawn with the other) and drawing in which vision extends well beyond the reach of our bodies (like his exquisite drawings of the view from the window of his Paris studio). Often his drawing is simply equal to its touch, like the myriad of ink blotches or the recurrent hand tracings, which declare no more than the process which was their cause. Much of Creek's vitality as a draughtsman stems from the verve of his speculation (through making) about the relationship between these kinds of drawing, about how marks become imaginary forms and spaces. Our interpretative

perception, our reading into marks an imaginary space, recapitulates this process, moving as watery paint, pushed around by the artist's brush in search of a form. This reading into is also a 'lifting off' from the surface of the drawing, a kind of flight through looking which echoes throughout the Paris Desktop Drawing with angels, clouds, hovering bodies, and, overall, the silvery quality of the drawing's tonality. It is a thematic of drawing: the relationship between, on the one hand, tactility or being grounded in materials, and, on the other, imagination or the loss of sense of place (literally, ecstasy). It is also one of broader significance, addressed to the relationship between the full sense of our bodies and the longing for what cannot be reached, like the infinity of the sky, or even recollection itself.

Dislocations in time provide a governing structure for the Paris Desktop Drawing. They are signalled directly in some areas of the drawing, notably near the right edge of the drawing, where one skyline is dotted with multiple suns, mapping the course of a sunrise one morning. The spatial proximity of forms in the drawing which are, in lived experience, temporally, and often spatially, far apart highlights the process of compacting sensation, a process central to the logic of drawing. For Creek, it is one of the major ways in which meanings are generated. For example, a slight shift in position by a life-model is mapped on to the original drawing, creating a four-breasted woman; or, a life-long relationship with his father is condensed into a written list (the extent of its brevity overlaying the systematics of drawing with the reserve of Australian masculine relations). This recurrent use of dislocations is very often humorous as well as speculative, no-where more so than the three beautifully executed academic drawings of a Neo-classical French bust, each drawn from a different position. Whereas the skyline of multiple suns (immediately above the three heads) posits drawing as always belated, a death-mask of the world, the three heads seem to vivify their subject Lazarus-like. However, this sense of a lyrical resurrection does not last long. We notice that the three heads have been joined to the body of a dog through an act of self-graffiti by Creek, the haughty expression of the right-hand (and more unfortunate) head suddenly intelligible in terms of its close proximity to, and excellent vantage point upon, its own poohing.

Drawings from French colonial expeditions are dotted throughout the Paris Desktop Drawing. They were copied by Creek from nineteenth-century publications found in the State Library of Victoria on his return from Paris. These drawings indicate a kind of empirical drawing, a visual collecting related to the mentality of colonialism. They also point to one of the drawing's major subjects: the relationship of the non-indigenous Australian artist to his or her cultural heritage. It is largely through this subject that Creek engages the problems of drawing which I have described above, both structures of dislocation and the tension between the physical and the imaginary. Towards the left hand end of the drawing for example, a charcoal study of the Pantheon by night is juxtaposed satirically with an architectural drawing of a would-be Australian Pantheon, absurd and Kennett-like with its overly-tall dome. The relationship between the empirical and the imagined is framed in terms of being away from and 'remembering' home: both the Australian traveller thinking of home, and European Australia hankering (laughably) after its cultural origins. These kinds of relationships in the

drawing insist on remembering as integral to perceiving. It is an insistence, firstly, related to the legacy and reality of colonialism. It is a way of drawing in which the proprietorial impulse of colonialism is disturbed by an insistence of memory, a colonial expedition in reverse. Secondly, it is related to drawing. Memory is logically necessary to drawing because of the impossibility of looking at a model and a drawing simultaneously. (Similarly, it is impossible to see both the full extension of the Paris Desktop Drawing and its detail simultaneously, so that we necessarily look at the work in parts, as it was drawn, beholding its entire content only through an act of memory). In Creeks' work, the nexus between memory and perception in drawing is embodied with relish through a wealth of graphic and textual modes, visceral and imaginary. It is an embrace of memory that extends to the historical. It codes his visual language politically. And like Camille Pissarro's pointillism and his commitment to anarchism, it locates the political most forcefully within the systematics of perception itself, through a language of accumulation, expressed as joyful and dense visual experience.

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