

Drawing and water: Recent artworks by Ed Pien

There is our encounter, up close, with an artwork. Then there is everything we read about art (in catalogue essays, reviews and histories) or have been taught about it. And then, if we are fortunate to speak with artists, there is what they themselves will tell us, face-to-face, about what they do. Quite often, these three accounts of art are at odds with each other.

This seems particularly the case with drawing. For the majority of commentators and educators, and also many artists, drawing has a precise definition: it's provisional in nature and associated with the early workings-out of an idea. And, in particular, it's an activity in which a hand-held implement leaves pigment of some kind on a surface that's usually flat. However, since 1985 when I started out as a curator, artists have said things to me that are contrary to this. For example, "my drawings are my final outcome", "my painting/sculpture/performance/video is a drawing", and, more curiously perhaps, "I draw by placing objects in space", and, "I draw with my camera".

Since the 1980s, the idea that a drawing can be the finished object or "main event" has steadily gained traction. Indeed, it now seems odd that works by artists such as Nancy Spero (1926–2009) and Miriam Cahn (1949–) once came across as novel in this respect. On the other hand, the idea that paintings, sculptures, time-based works or photographs can be drawings remains very much in the hinterland.

Ed Pien has for several decades exhibited drawings that he's created with brush and ink on paper. These have been presented not as preparatory works but as major, finished pieces. More recently, he's taken it all a stage further, by creating photographs and videos that explore the act of drawing. He seems compelled to make this leap, out of a sense of what he's engaging with as an artist, contemporarily and historically. As he explains:

My take is that if I just "draw" I would take what drawing is for granted and I would be doing an injustice to all the artists who pushed drawing, making it a vital and engaging practice. It would be akin to having received an inheritance (the history of drawing) and just spending the

inheritance (by drawing without thinking what drawing is nor its potential).¹

In terms of art historicism, the division between drawing and video or photography remains firmly in place. A recently published 500-page tome about drawing does not even mention the new moves that are afoot.² But what happens if we accept that the DNA of drawing may indeed have evolved? What if, in contemplating photographs by Pien we marshal drawing's terms of reference and put the rich vocabulary of the medium—sketch, trace, smudge—to work? This essay begins with a discussion of two of Pien's photographic series as drawings, contemplating what he's said himself and bringing into the frame what other artists have in recent years asserted about drawing as a medium.³ It includes, too, one or two of imaginary and literary allusions, and makes reference to some of the emotions that drawing engenders. The second part of the essay contemplates how these photographs-as-drawings are linked thematically with other key works in Pien's oeuvre.

Breath

Ed Pien: I was in Dawson City, in Tr'ondëk Hwëch'in First Nation territory, in 2012, and it was minus 45 centigrade. I wanted to be outside to make something but it was simply too cold. I ended up sporting a camera because pressing the shutter was the easiest option.

Drawing is foremost about expediency. It's a response that's made using what is immediately to hand. This might often, in the past, have been a pencil and notepad, but we're now far more likely to have a camera or smartphone with us. And secondly, drawing is

¹ All quotations by the artist are from e-mail correspondence with the author and conversations during studio visits, April-June 2018.

² Deanna Petherbridge, *The Primacy of Drawing: Histories and Theories of Practice*, (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2010).

³ My frame of reference includes six drawing residencies and exhibitions I curated at the Centre for Drawing at Wimbledon School of Art in London (2000–2003), in particular with Lucy Gunning, who explored performance and the placing of objects as drawing, as documented in *What Is Drawing?* (London: Black Dog, 2003). A booklet edited and published by Alison Carlier in 2013, *The Drawing Attitude: Transcriptions of Conversations with Five Artists*, explores issues raised during Gunning's residency.

fundamentally about speed. In the case of *Breath*, the camera was a means of working quickly with fingers that would soon be numb with cold.

EP: When I started shooting, the flash always came on because the nights are long during winter and my breath was always in the way, causing everything I shot to be foggy and blurry. I decided, spontaneously and intuitively, to deliberately incorporate my breath into the shot.

One of the fascinations of the hand-drawn line as it emerges is that it will inevitably stray, however subtly, from what was intended. As a consequence, each successive mark will have the quality of an on-the-spot response to what's emerging, to a greater or lesser extent unbidden. In the cold and dark of the night just south of the Arctic Circle, things went differently to plan and something else presented itself, and it was this new occurrence that the artist became engrossed by.

Contemporary artist Stephen Farthing has described how drawing with a pencil is about being in the middle of things, and about the capacity for actions to become involuntary or unexpected:

Where the eye is driving the hand and it doesn't stop, it pauses to re-calibrate and know where it is but it does not allow you to stand up and step back ... [It's] where the idea and the image become confused between the two ... you can become so involved that you lose yourself. You are lost in your thoughts.⁴

And so in the case of *Breath*, in exactly this way, with his eye "driving" the camera in his hand in some "unstopping" way, Pien paused to register a discovery—that his condensed breath, obscuring the landscape he'd gone out to photograph, had become central to the work—and was then carried along by it.

Remember that it is only relatively recently that we've been able to view, immediately, the photographic images that we're making. With the shift from one-hour film processing at best, to the immediate presence of the digital image, photography's terms of engagement have altered, fundamentally. We can be present to the photographic image during its making, wholly responsive to it, then and there: reacting straight away to what's happening,

⁴ Carlier, op. cit.

experimenting with a new angle or emphasis, or erasing and beginning again. And notice that these are, precisely, the terms of drawing.

In the *Breath* series, the artist's condensed breath smudges across each picture, obscuring details of the landscape and yet also conjuring some kind of mysterious presence. It seems almost too simple to add that it's all in the light and shade and the gradations between; in the straightforward absence and presence of pigment in its final form, printed on paper. And to observe that the series is monochrome, except where colour intrudes almost incidentally, in the way that colour might sometimes glint on the surface sheen of graphite.

EP: I would take deep breaths and exhale for as long as I could. My warm, moist breath, mixed with the utterly shocking cold air articulated itself as momentary lines, shapes and forms of drawings. I was focusing on pushing out line-like air, throwing my breath out and hoping it could come back as an image.

Drawing is particularly lived within, and discharged by, the body. The location of the impetus of the drawing can shift around the body, from the hand, to the brain, to the viscera, and (as in Pien's case) to the diaphragm. Here is writer and theatre director Antonin Artaud's description of his bodily experience of drawing:

I despair of pure drawing
I mean there is in my drawings a sort of moral
Music that I have made by living my strokes, not with the
hand only but with the rasping of the breath of my
Trachea and the teeth of my mastication.⁵

We might picture, from his description, Artaud hunched over his drawing, slightly cramped and breathing shallowly, his breath coursing across his knuckles and down into his pencil. By contrast, in the *Breath* series we can imagine the artist holding his camera low, in order not to obstruct his breath as it exited from the deeper reaches of his lungs; the flow from Pien to the image beginning in his midriff, passing through his elbows and then his lower arms, hands, fingers and finally into his camera. (It puts me in mind of previous brush and ink drawings by Pien, called *Image Bank*, of

⁵ From "Mes dessins ne sont pas de dessins ..." (Rodez, France, April 1946), quoted in Petherbridge, op. cit., p. 412.

undersea monsters, that were made by diving down into his unconscious for three minutes at a time, the artist switching between holding his breath, or exhaling fast, or gasping for air. In those works, similarly, Pien's breathing has seemed to travel from somewhere in his thorax and then along his arms and into the drawing itself.)

EP (again on *Breath*): The extrusions, akin to ectoplasm, floated, shape-shifted and then dissipated. What was interesting is how the camera captured an instant of these moments and compressed the spaces between my breath in the foreground with the middle and background. This compression gave way to the illusion that my breath was gigantic and took up ample space in the landscape. The resulting work is also in keeping with my interest in the notion of haunting, trace, and transformation.

Pien shifts here from the particularities of what he did (whether understood, finally, as drawing or photography) to qualities beyond the materials and how the series was made. In ways he had not anticipated, it occurred to him that he had "haunted" that place with his human presence; and that his impact, his momentary trace, was disproportionate and disquieting. Alluding perhaps to the invasion of First Nations' territories, *Breath* escapes his immediate intentions and also his materials and means, and this will always, finally, be the point with art.

RainForest

EP: *RainForest* is a set of only four or five images. They are difficult to capture and conditions have to be ideal. There is no digital manipulation. The images look like Chinese ink and brush work. The distortion is due to torrential downpour over my rental car windshield. The thick layers of water created a lens that distorted and seemingly bled the images, and I made it more blue-green to suggest water and forest.

In the West, art historians commonly assert that drawing and writing are entirely separate entities.⁶ However, looking further afield, this is simply not the case. A great many Mandarin

⁶ In her Introduction, Petherbridge, op.cit., makes this point in a single sentence.

characters are pictographic—and indeed the word for drawing (畫 in Taiwan, and simplified in China as 画, or huà) is the same as for writing. It includes the components 聿 and 田, and these denote, firstly, the hand in the position of holding the brush (by the side of the implement rather than over it), and secondly, a cultivated landscape. Many Mandarin characters similarly involve references to the landscape and those for trees and forests are very visually evocative, especially in relation to *RainForest*:

The character 木 (mù) represents simultaneously “a tree” or “trees”. 林 (lín) = trees clustered together. 森 (sēn) = the clustered trees are luxuriant. If we just want to describe the situation that trees grow together, we will use 林 or 林木. If we want to stress that trees grow thickly and strongly, we will use 森 or 森林.⁷

In the series *RainForest*, trees in outline are massing overhead, in looming and hallucinatory outlines and blurs. They have inky-looking down-strokes and rapidly sketched and blotted horizontals and diagonals. As 森林, these trees could be conjectured as having been written as much as drawn.

Note that Pien refers to “ink and brush work”, mentioning the implement used interchangeably in the East for writing and drawing. He once described to me his experiments in which he sought to understand how Eastern artists made their characteristic marks. He discovered that they might, for example, first plunge their brushes into water, then squeeze them out, then dip them only a certain distance into the ink, before finally discharging a specific kind of mark. Also, the paper could be wetted to different degrees so that it distributed the ink in particular ways. In *Breath*, water from Pien’s breath, condensing in the air, was the substance by which the central motifs emerged. In the case of *RainForest*, once more it is water, as it courses down and is blown across the windscreen, that functions as a crucial medium, blurring and splaying the lines of the trees.

⁷ All information about Mandarin characters is from e-mail correspondence with cultural historian 古筱玫 (Ku Hsiao-Mei), May 2018.

The Giant

As mentioned earlier, drawings using brush and ink on paper are a mainstay of Pien's art practice. Latterly these have become vast in scale and *The Giant* is no less than 3¼ metres wide and 2¾ metres in height. This work was created using processes Pien has evolved over several decades. Firstly, the artist will draw rapidly in ink on sheets of A4, and he often makes a print of a drawing onto a second sheet while it's still wet. Secondly, he attaches some of these A4 sheets together, and frequently incorporates drawings that were worked in this way many years before, if they bring something to the dynamic. Third, he draws into and over the original images, using bright colour and later, black. And fourth, he obscures certain areas with Flashe and collages over parts of the drawing using sections of further A4 drawings. I have been there while he's working and it's all extremely energetic and intense.

So, what connects Pien's ink drawings to photographic works such as *Breath* and *RainForest*, so different in appearance and manufacture? For Pien, the link is water. In *Breath*, water occurs as vapour and in *RainForest* it's as precipitation. In the case of the ink drawings, water comprises their essential yet transient ingredient, as the medium that transfers the different pigments onto the paper. (And Pien has created further artworks, including sculptures, in which water plays a crucial part, both as subject matter and as physical substance, two of which are discussed later.)

What Pien calls "the sentience of water" is his strongly recurring theme. To him, water is both active material and creative partner. It will assert the whole direction that an artwork might take and also its more detailed appearance (as we've seen with *Breath* and *RainForest*). In the case of brush and ink drawings such as *The Giant*, the liquidity of the ink confers an important kind of difficulty. Even after decades of using it almost daily, Pien is astonished at how the ink will defy his intentions, gathering in pools, or forming sudden rivulets, or resisting leaving the brush.

While making a drawing such as *The Giant*, Pien regards himself as "a host to a practice that remains slightly mysterious". As he says, "I end up drawing things I couldn't draw intentionally". Over the initial drawings and monoprints of figures on A4—created in

bursts so rapid that he has “no time to ponder”—he will wrestle thin coloured ink marks on to the paper, in stark cobalt blue, emerald green, cadmium red and lemon yellow. He’s observing how the characters in the newly attached A4 drawings react to each other, and “seeing if the figures I’ve clustered together will yield new figures”. Later, “the black ink picks up a motif and uses it as a refrain”, creating multitudes of further, composite characters that gradually increase in scale, while “the brightly coloured under-drawing becomes the chaotic anatomical detail of the black upper drawings”. Then, “new heads are collaged on and these give strong pivotal points” and many eyes are added in outline: “the eyes are about fixing the heads”. Throughout the whole process, the ink is a kind of sparring partner and he grapples with its wateriness almost as one would an adversary. Indeed, Pien does not perceive himself to be a drawing’s sole or conscious author.

For Pien, “the imagery is about violence to the body”. On the right of *The Giant*, a hideous and alarmingly top-heavy figure looms over a fragmenting mass of other figures to its left. But it is hard to describe, in part because the drawing picks up on your mood. On a bad day, the dark, towering figure is oppressive in the extreme. While on a better day, the bright colours and sense of carnival crowds in the underpainting prevail, but still with a marked feeling of volatility. Pien recognises his figures as being double-edged: to him, they are “menacing and frightened” and “about anger as well as pain”. As a child in Taiwan, passing by a temple and fearful of the spirits swirling in and around it, his mother comforted him with the idea that “the scarier the spirits, the more able they are to ward off evil spirits”. In other words, the trick is to think of them as being on your side.

Pien acknowledges multiple influences: there’s the *Gaki-zoshi*, or *Scroll of the Hungry Ghosts*, from late twelfth-century Japan and almost 27 metres in length, depicting the menace and misery of hideously emaciated ghosts. Also, “the bug eyes come from sculpted deities in Chinese and Taiwanese temples, from demon masks, and from prehistoric pottery from Xi’an”. Historic and contemporary West Coast First Nations’ art, with its powerful depictions of spirits composed of the parts of different animals, have also become a source of inspiration. In the maelstrom of figures on the left of *The Giant*, for example, there is a lizard-fish-boy seemingly spawning a squid, and one of the giant’s hands has

clenched fingers and yet also carries the suggestion of a bird in descent.

When asked about the meanings for him of *The Giant* and other, similar drawings, Pien points to his deep-seated anxieties about world events, and especially racial oppression and the damage being done to our ecosystems. He sees racism as a nexus in which “victims can easily be constructed as perpetrators, and you have to shield yourself but people overdo it at the expense of other people”. To him, the drawings are a way of asking questions. How can anyone be sure they are not implicated in the gross injustices suffered by particular individuals or social groups? And what of our complicity, in terms of our consumerist life-style, in the environmental damage wrought by conglomerate “giants”? A drawing such as *The Giant* erupts from deep in the unconscious—that great realm of the double-edged and paradoxical, containing psychic material described by psychoanalyst Bruno Bettelheim as “both most hidden and most familiar, darkest and most compelling.”⁸

Kainai Water Drawing

In the case of *Kainai Water Drawing*, Pien took his concept of “the sentience of water” a stage further and “asked water to do most of the drawing”. Mary Fox, a Kainai (or Blood Tribe) Elder, provided Pien with water from her land in Blackfoot territory, Southern Alberta, where the water supply is significantly substandard.⁹ He poured 15 litres of this water onto a 3 by 4¼ metre sheet of Tyvek¹⁰, which he had laid on the floor of his studio with its edges slightly tipped up. Pien then “dropped ink on, covering the water with black”. Following that, he kicked the inky water around with

⁸ Bruno Bettelheim, *The Uses of Enchantment: The Meaning and Importance of Fairy Tales*, (New York: Penguin, 1991), p. 63.

⁹ “Only about one-third of the Alberta First Nations population is served by a public water system. The rest are served by private wells or cisterns, with major issues of maintenance and monitoring. The impacts of sub-standard wastewater systems on reserves are also of importance. Treated water is a service that can only be accessed by a fraction of the First Nations population. Even where treated water is available, a 2011 National Assessment of First Nations water infrastructure found significant numbers of facilities to be high to medium risk.” From *Rights and Reconciliation* (Toronto: Water Canada, 2015), <https://www.watercanada.net/feature/rights-and-reconciliation/>

¹⁰ A brand of synthetic paper used in the construction industry.

his feet: “I was angry, having learned from students at the Kainai Middle School that they must only drink from bottled water as the tap water is not potable”. And then he waited to see how the Kainai water would interact with the ink on the paper.

Tides of watery ink shrank back in stages as it evaporated, leaving successions of fine lines and fuzzy edges. It also created configurations in the pigment that resemble different cloud formations. It flooded an area with a faint and flat plane of dilute grey. It ran down a crease to emphasize a fault-line. Tiny particles took off on their own and left trails behind them, and great patches of darker ink pooled into ugly contusions in the two upper corners. In an area on the centre-left of the drawing, some kind of handwriting has seemed to form in puffy lines and loops: Pien observes that “the water wants to tell us something, it seems to have its own language and rules and proclivities”.

In the manner of a diagnostic dye used in medicine, the ink in *Kainai Water Drawing* has been asked to reveal something. Yet the outcome, while evocative and affecting, is elusive, at least to begin with: if there is a message in the “handwriting”, it “disturbs us in its indeterminacy”.¹¹ But this is an artwork that demands a different kind of attention from us. Pien has made a shift towards a mode of art practice called “new organicism”, as advocated by philosopher Timothy Morton:

In the new organicism, genius is relocated outside the artist, who becomes the facilitator, the conductor. The artist establishes certain parameters, and then watches to see what will happen . . . Organicism values spontaneous generation . . . And it values an exact fit of content and form. The new organicism discovers a parallel between automated artistic production and ecosystems.¹²

In this vein, *Kainai Water Drawing* is borne of a simple gesture that liberates water to perform, in microcosm, something like weather in a landscape. Water has been facilitated to “draw”, with ink—to

¹¹ This phrase is borrowed from a collection of essays, written mainly by scientists, about creative and destructive aspects of the anthropogenic landscape. Anna Tsing, Heather Swanson, Elaine Gan, Nils Bubandt, Eds., *Arts of Living on a Damaged Planet*, (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 2017), p. G2.

¹² Timothy Morton, *Ecology without Nature: Rethinking Environmental Aesthetics* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2009), p. 190.

“explain” how it forms clouds, how it floods, how it evaporates. Wherein lies its inestimable beauty and value and meaning.

Source: Corridor of Rain

Source: Corridor of Rain is a large-scale installation in which myriad lengths of cotton rope hang from the ceiling to just above the floor. The strands of rope have been coloured blue or black, except for short sections left white which catch the light and, seen together, suggest the torrential fall of rain.

It transpires that every word of a book by lawyer Merrell-Ann S. Phare, *Denying the Source: The Crisis of First Nations Water Rights*,¹³ is represented in Pien’s sculpture, but obliterated or redacted and rendered as the short sections of blue or black on the lengths of rope. And so the whole of Phare’s treatise—which enumerates the devastating impacts of oil and gas extraction, mining, ranching, farming and hydro-development on First Nation water, and argues that First Nation treaty rights extend to their water at its source and not only after it reaches their lands—is denied, just as the rights she’s promoting have been.

Source: Corridor of Rain can be described in terms of “material ecocriticism”, a concept influenced by Morton’s work, cited earlier:

Material ecocriticism . . . is the study of the way material forms—bodies, things, elements, toxic substances, chemicals, organic and inorganic matter, landscapes and biological entities—intra-act with each other and with the human dimension, producing configurations and meanings and discourses that we can interpret as stories.¹⁴

Pien contemplates water and its abuse by humans, and also the violation of the water rights of people who are indigenous to the landscape that has been harmed. And he presents a configuration of forms that expresses a great outpouring, a lament from the heavens, a grieving for people and lands. As Pien describes his installation, “it shimmers optically as it moves in the air currents, or

¹³ Merrell-Ann S. Phare, *Denying the Source: The Crisis of First Nations Water Rights*, (Surrey, BC: Rocky Mountain Books, 2009).

¹⁴ From Serenella Iovino and Serpil Oppermann, Eds., *Material Ecocriticism*, (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2014), p. 7 (Introduction).

as people walk past.” Some visitors are compelled to walk through the installation, to feel the ropes cascading over their heads and shoulders and arms.

As a metaphor, *Source: Corridor of Rain* expresses the fantasy of absolution: the hope that redemptive forces can wash clean the lands and the people and ourselves. Made with hundreds of strands of rope, it is a kind of drawing in three dimensions. To return to the beginning of this essay and discussions of drawing, Pien has drawn by “placing objects in space”—in this case, strands of rope that describe a linear descent through the air. And, in a similar spirit to other drawings by Pien, including those involving photography, *Source: Corridor of Rain* challenges complacent thinking and corporate acts.

Angela Kingston, 2018

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