From Alamo to Photo

Although drawn lines on paper have played an important part in helping both explain and design our world, it would be a mistake to imagine drawing is just about images made with pens, pencils and paper. Before introducing the twenty drawings and ten artists that are The University of The Arts , London’s contribution to this exhibition I would like to establish a starting point by looking at two radical and unconnected examples of drawing that took place on opposite sides of the Atlantic Ocean during the mid- nineteenth century.

On the afternoon of Saturday March 5th 1836 a twenty six year old Texan colonel, William Barrett Travis addressed the 180 or so clearly doomed defenders of a besieged Spanish mission “ The Alamo”. Travis outlined three possibilities: to surrender and be executed, to try to fight their way out and be butchered, or remain in the fort, resist every assault, and sell their lives as dearly as possible.

Towards the end of his address Travis first drew his sword then slowly drew a line in the dirt with its point.

"I now want every man who is willing to stay here and die with me to come across this line." [[1]](#endnote--1) All but one crossed the line.

Drawing a line to stop or start action to define or divide space, to initiate or conclude a dramatic pause, was clearly not Travis’s invention, history is a mass of drawn lines. The Alamo story however, serves to remind us of the degree to which drawing permeates almost every aspect of life.

Although every drawing is quite possibly the product of a desire to translated a multidimensional event into readable two dimensional matter, it may have two discrete but parallel histories .

The first is predominantly linear, organizational and as such conceptually closer to writing, mathematics and musical notation, this history I will call the Conceptual History of Drawing. The second is predominantly tonal and driven by a desire to convincingly render in two dimensions already visible things and places, this I call The Pictorial History.

Both histories developed tools and machines to assist the drawing processes. The Conceptual used: string then compasses to make circles and elipses , straight edges, chalk lines and rulers to draw lines and in the end computers to mediate between concept and image. The Pictorial, drew around cast shadows then used mirrors and lenses to produce projected and reflected images that were traced until finally they came up with the camera.

Just a year or so before the deaths of every one of the Texans who crossed Travis’s line the Scottish scientist William Fox Talbot gave up trying to draw the landscape with what he found to be a very difficult to use drawing machine the *Camera Lucida*, and went back to experimenting with the less portable *Camera* Obscura .

Putting the graphite pencil he had been using to mechanically capture the virtual and actual images he produced with his “ camera’s” to one side , he finally came up with the remarkable idea of giving paper a memory.

By positioning light sensitive paper where the projected image landed Fox Talbot discovered a process that later became known as photography, a name derived from the Greek **photos,** meaning lightand **graphein** to draw and write.

Thinking back to my starting point and the possibility that there are two parallel histories of drawing, I want now to locate within this very simple framework the twenty drawings that are the University of the Arts, London’s contribution to this exhibition .

In Avis Newman,s Infinity Doubled drawings its not just the serpent that’s centre stage, there’s also the line, and a horizontal figure of eight and the sign for infinity each of these components is of equal importance. Not long after completing the drawing Newman wrote “The serpent may only be a line, but it is a living line, what Andre Virel calls 'an abstraction in flesh and blood' [[2]](#endnote-0)

What Newman says about these drawings perfectly illustrates the space that exists between Conceptually and Pictorially driven drawings .

Chris Wainwright’s drawings will take some of us back into naval and military history, but more important than their historical reference is their ability to explain how writing can become drawing and drawing writing. Wainwright’s elegant drawings derived fromFlag semaphore take us conceptually to the place within drawing where writing starts . A place where , if you are in possession of the key or legend an exact meaning can be derived from any drawing, and if you are not you can still get the sense of a message being sent. Made during a marine expedition to the Arctic one drawing says “ Here comes the sun” the other “ There goes the ice “

Sigune Hamman’s drawings have no key, and as a result carry with them a sense of mystery, made with light , they were drawn with a camera in the Tivoli Gardens in Copenhagen. Unusual because they are made with a instrument normally associated with the Pictorial traditions of drawing they are firmly positioned within the conceptual traditions drawing.

Like pages torn from a massive sketch book they appear like horizons , as records of a landscape seen as a line , where the quality of the trace of what is observed is equal not subservient to the real thing . Hamman said of these drawings,

“I expose a whole roll of 35mm film in a continuous rewinding movement while I am moving (walking or turning) myself. Although the images are static, they contain the indexical traces of movement – of the film, of the camera and the person holding it and everything moving within the optical field. ……..The hand held camera as an extension of the body”

Also growing out of the unlikely connect that exists between the gestural and conceptual are Terry Smith’s   Spiral Left and Right HandDrawings. Left turning spirals are made with the left hand and right turning spirals with the right. These drawings are part of a series that Smith has been making. testing and demonstrating his ability as a draftsman by swapping between using his dominant and then less trained hand.

Although the stuff in Paul Coldwell’s drawings is recognizable , his stated intention is finding ways of representing his subjects as thoughts . Coldwell’s clearly conceptually motivated drawings are, for him, “a weaving process” that interconnect “ familiar things” by threads that prevent their isolation and establish a connecting narrative. By drawing familiar things , a comb, a suitcase, glasses, a ring, he constructs portraits by association. Each drawing, Coldwell wrote “ has a silhouette of a head to reinforce this reading” .

Brian Chalkley and Andrew Hall both work with subject matter more typically associated with the pictorial than conceptual traditions of drawing. Chalkley with interiors Hall the landscape , both come at their subject matter conceptually , both are focused on the trace they leave not the picture they construct. Their drawings are records of the thought processes that took place during the time spent with their chosen subject. As quite melancholy pictures of place and space they demonstrate two individuals quite different approaches to recording events with improvised marks.

While Chalkley works his way across hotel rooms like a scanner broken loose of its track, Hall spends a day with each of his subjects timidly shaping the drawings “ that represented a trace, a smear, of the view that (he) had chosen to record”.

George Blacklock and Posy Simmonds could very easily be mistaken for image makers working on the pictorial side of the tracks, they are however concept driven Posy Simmonds works within the narrative traditions of drawing combining image and text , within her world lines speak, think and do.

Blacklock’s Pieta Details are working drawings made to inform a series of paintings he made using the Four Pietas of Michelangelo as their starting point. Writing about these drawings he said “ They are neither transcriptions nor copies of the sculpture, the drawings are instead departures”. As “departures” they aim to neither present conclusions nor confirm appearance. Made less for an audience than the maker’s private consumption they have just two purposes, first to assist in the business of looking and then to review possibilities.

To conclude, just one sentence on my own drawings. Made with pen and ink on mulberry paper, they are the bi-product of a thought process that attempted to connect a few of art histories threads in a drawing, like each of the drawings I have written about in this essay they are- simply images of ideas.

Stephen Farthing: London July 2009

1. All but two walked across the line Jim Bowie, lying sick on a cot, asked some of his men to carry him across, leaving just Louis Moses Rose, a French mercenary on the other side. [↑](#endnote-ref--1)
2. Dictionary of Symbols by Jean Chevalier and Alain Gheerbrant  
   translated by John Buchanan-Brown pub: Penguin 1882 [↑](#endnote-ref-0)