Drawing eyes: A search for the real

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Drysdale was one eyed; He looked out at the world with his right eye only.

Indeed it was this 'blindness' caused by a detached retina in his youth that led him to draw seriously. During his convalescence he was introduced to ideas and people that would enable him to use drawing as a new and personal way of seeing. This resonates with Daphne Du Maurier's short story *The Blue Lenses,* where Du Maurier writes of a woman who lies in darkness after an eye operation. She is told that once her bandages are removed she will see 'more clearly than before.'[1] This prediction comes true in a disturbing way as all the people whose voices have been so familiar to her over the months of recuperation appear to her in the guise of the animals that their personalities resemble; a cow; a terrier; a snake. Through a period of blindness, the woman has gained a type of vision that cuts through the surface of specific personalities, perceiving underlying and hidden traits that are at once generic and revealing.

Derrida also associates blindness with seeing, specifically in relation to drawing.[2] For Derrida it is the failure of representation itself to see, to contain the actual. When drawing works to encapture the observed world, by its very nature of being a two

[1] Daphne Du Maurier, *The Blue lenses* Science Research Associataes, Inc., 1988
[2] Derrida, Memoires of the Blind

dimensional translation, it is bound to blindness. Drawing can embed the moment of its making into its materiality and yet it is impossible for it to ever fully encompass the changing world that is seen. This happens on several levels. For instance at the moment of making a mark, the record of an actual moment, a drawer usually needs to look away in order to look at the paper. However speedy or quick the drawing, there is always some small distance between brain, eye and hand. This is part of the constant tension between mark or trace and the element of illusion. One must always disappear for the other to be seen.

As he engaged with representation and vision through drawing, Drysdale does seem to have been on a mission to address these issues. He sought to make images that went beyond the depiction of appearances; he wrestled with the significance of his drawn marks in ways that are much less clear in his paintings and he did this through a complex engagement with his subjects that is not necessarily visual. His objective seems to have been to articulate an essential rather than a surface representation of people in places as a way of engaging with a modernist project of unpicking the limitations of representation's relationship with actuality. This engages blindness as a purposeful tool. It plays on his significant capacities of visual memory. In lengthening the period of time between his experiences of the things he described and the making of the marks he used to evoke them, it is what he forgot, what he no longer saw and what he left out that often makes for the power of his drawings.

According to Lou Klepac, 'Drysdale did not work from the model. Nor did he, except in rare circumstances, make sketches.'[3] Drysdale's relationship with his memory as a way of bringing the past into the present through a process of reconstruction is at the heart of the way his drawings function. He claims that his reliance on memory rather than direct observation harks back to his education with George Bell who encouraged him to learn to draw from memory so as to grasp the essentials. He learnt to "memorise essentials of anything; a form; a landscape … an object or a person."[4]

While this reflects his education with George Bell, it is also derived from a basic philosophical point of view. On the one hand is his reluctance to produce illustrations which, as he says, do not 'reveal the quality of character that exists in the individual and in the landscapes.'[5] On the other he had a deep attachment to the specifics of people and places. This combination enabled him to make images that always seem familiar; that convince us that we have met those individuals before, been in those spaces.

The advantages too, he says, are that "You travel with very little baggage. You keep it in your mind… if you know your area and you know the individual and you know the type of environment … in which these sort of things exist or these sort of people exist…". This suggests that Drysdale was drawing from knowledge that is not necessarily visual. Indeed there is an anonymous type-written text in the State

[3] Lou Klepac, Russell Drysdale, Sydney: Bay Books, 1983 p 59
[4] Russell Drysdale, *Russell Drysdale,* Melbourne: Australian Film Institute, 1975.
[5] Drysdale, 1975

Library of NSW which comments that 'his imagination will be more often seized by a phrase or an intonation than by a visual detail.'[6]

Most artists, like Turner and Bonnard who have worked from memory as a way of either distilling experience or capturing fleeting moments have been inveterate keepers of sketchbooks; They at least use drawing as a way of fixing an impression in the mind, if not as a direct reference. This does not seem to have been the case with Drysdale. While he obviously drew compulsively, it was most commonly an activity for the comfort of his studio rather than out in the field.

However, the roles of Drysdale's drawings in producing equilibrium between a perceived actuality and a convincing distillation, despite the rarity of direct observation, are vital. While the paintings have a reasonably consistent balance between specific detail and generalisation, the drawings range across the full spectrum from specifically observed to imaginatively remembered.

The spectrum of drawings then, ranges from sketches from life, to synthesised drawings and watercolours made as works in their own right and studies for paintings. The studies themselves range from information gathering notes to full-blown, grided up compositions. There are tiny doodles and carefully planned lithographs, formal experiments and informal notes. Given the liveliness and clarity of the drawings they can all tell us a lot about the ways that Drysdale was seeing and how he approached the evidence of his senses. The more substantial drawings like

[6] Anonymous Biographer, Drysdale's papers. State Library of NSW.

Soldiers on Albury Station (Check scale) which tend to speak more to an engagement with British modernist languages are explorations of ways of encapsulating, in deceptively simple vocabulary, a complexity of perceptions. At the same time the most slight little drawings, which were drawn purely for his own information, can give great insight into his perceptual processes.

In the State library of NSW's collection there is a group of tiny little diaries.[7] Most of them are filled with addresses and dates, but there are a couple which have small drawings in them. Significantly these are all portraits or caricatures. This is not unusual. I know that my diary has pages of portraits, usually scribbles to entertain myself in boring meetings. However, these quick sketches of Drysdale's seem to be very purposeful. With concise lines they seize at the strength of different characters. They give the impression that a personality type had caught his eye and like pictograms, scattered amongst maps, to-do lists, addresses and dates, he had jotted them down as information to remember.

These little drawings while quick and personal are extraordinarily direct and subtle notes. Given their immediate notational nature, they feel as though they are based on people he has encountered, but they read as notes about character 'types' rather than specific individuals. It appears that he built composite personalities from the people he encountered in his day-to-day life as well as when travelling. These characters however are not caricatures, but result from a fascination and respect for the individuals that give rise to the palpably colossal monoliths of figures; heroes

[7] Drysdale's papers. State Library of NSW 1933

who populate his work. Two lithographs in the exhibition; *Ow Dan* and *Figures in Landscape*, are good examples of this distillation.

Both these works use the Drysdale strategy of posing his remembered characters 'as though they were standing in front of him.'[8] The ink drawing of a stockman, for instance, fully utilises the conventions of portraiture which place sitters in a traditional space in relation to the artist. This is usually due to the practicalities of being in the presence of both sitter and easel. However, Drysdale, technically free from those practical constraints, continued to utilise it as a device for encouraging the illusion that the classic characters actually might exist in the same space as the artist. They must be true. We must believe in them.

This passion for people in a way that circumvents portraiture is derived from a profound reverence for 'ordinary' people. When commissioned by Esso to record its activities Drysdale wrote that he found himself

> interested in the people who were making and working this colossal enterprise – Their expertise and their comparative youth, their confidence and camaraderie- and so I finished up with drawings mainly of people, of rough necks, of pilots, of radio operators, of gas plant engineers. I suppose every operation fundamentally is about people.[9]

[8] Lou Klepac, Russell Drysdale, Sydney: Bay Books, 1983 p 59
[9] Russell Drysdale, Catalogue for exhibition of drawings. Sale Regional Arts Gallery, 1975

This emphasis on the people never isolates them from their environments. Indeed while Drysdale does pose his figures as though they are in the studio, it is rare that he draws a figure in isolation. It is often the landscape which says most about the make up of the individual.

Drawings like *Evening Camp* and *Ivan Carnaby and Tim Drysdale watching flight of Birds, Geike Gorge* are more personal, having a diaristic quality about them as they record moments in Drysdale's travels. As images of friends and family, the people here are of specific importance to Drysdale. Significantly, the figures are integrated into the particular space that they occupy in special ways. The relationship between the figures and spaces speaks of these people as explorers in unknown territory, camping, watching, gaining insight, but not growing out of the very earth, as many of the more archetypal portraits seem to do.

Most of the landscapes do start as actual places that have been visited. These places are not merely seen or observed, but lived in, camped in, known from within, remembered and understood. Drawings of Albury station for example tend to operate on an autobiographical level, hinting at his concrete relationship with the town. On the other hand, the wonderful watercolour of Hill End explores the spirit of a place that was also very significant to Drysdale. This place is remembered, has been internalised by the blind eye, limited to essentials and extends far beyond a personal narrative.

These drawings allow us to observe a searching process of abstraction at work. Like Du Maurier's 'blind' vision they set in motion ways of discovering what might not actually have been seen but has a very concrete basis. In *Reality Hunger: A Manifesto,* David Sheilds writes that 'Every artistic movement from the beginning of time is an attempt to figure out a way to smuggle more of what the artist thinks is reality into a work of art.'[10] As Sheilds suggests 'The facts of the situation don't matter much, so long as the underlying truth resonates.'[11] These drawings constantly seek ways of incorporating what Drysdale considers reality into art in order to make sure that some sort of underlying truth sings.

Drysdale spoke to a question of what a particularly Australian 'reality' might look like. His imagery has a significant place in the evolution of the mythology of white Australian habitation of the vast continent. Like Patrick White's *Voss,* his images represent journeys, not so much into the outback, but into our representation to ourselves of who we are and how we inhabit this land. This iconic imagery - which, incidentally takes much technically from the slow layering of paint in traditional icons – results from his finely tuned balance between the seen and the un-seen, the remembered, imagined and forgotten.

Working from people and places as he remembered them smoothed out the specifics of an image so that it becomes not just iconic but also about memory and the ways that we experience the past. This is especially potent in drawing which, as a

[10] David Sheilds, Reality Hunger: A Manifesto, New York: Vintage, 2011 p3
[11] Sheilds p41

mode of art, has a particular relationship with the past where its directness records the moment of making through the powerful immediacy of the marks. Drysdale's drawings, then, have a threefold connection with the past; they are images of times in Australia which were current for Drysdale, but which have passed now. Secondly they were at the time of making already past for Drysdale as he remembered them. And finally they are a trace of the moment when the artist translated his memory into material form, bringing the past moment of making into the present.

On the whole the Drysdale's work is a constant juggling act. His slow, meticulous process, especially in his paintings, draws from his many approaches to perception. It creates a sense of stability out of the many threads that are evident in his drawing.

This balance, or tension hovers between 'reality' and an ideal. There is a constant pull between the specific and the general, the person and the place, the mass and space, the drawing and the painting that gives the images their capacity for generating a sense of mythology that announces a sense of actual and shared. There is a sense that Drysdale is looking both inwards and outwards at the same time. Perhaps the difference in the functionality of his two eyes, one looking out, one not, sets him at an advantage here. If not it certainly works as a metaphor for the role of vision in the drawing of Russell Drysdale.