

DRAWING AND LONGING: READING THE RELICS OF PRACTICE

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WHEN I was invited to contribute to the Sixth International Conference on Literary Juvenilia, held in Durham, UK in July 2018, I wondered how the concept of “juvenilia” would apply to a visual artist, if at all. Most children produce drawings, regardless of epoch or culture, but depending on the child’s environment these early works are usually either treasured as cute or simply considered funny, and then, eventually, discarded. My own attitude towards my early work was similarly dismissive.

However, the process of accepting the invitation provided me with a new lens on my practice. Revisiting my own childhood drawings became a means of considering what it is to make images, to think and feel through picturing. It also became a means of reflecting on my visual practice in relation to narrative, performance and archaeological process, from the perspective of childhood rather than, as in later life, through practice-based research.

In this short essay, based on the Durham conference presentation, I offer what I have called elsewhere a *paratext*, that is, a text-with-image piece that serves as “a means of drawing out subject matter by presenting meta-material through pairings or clusters of text, or text with image” (Bowen, “Drawing and Longing”). I want to give some idea of my current practice, which comprises images and, often, words. I want to do this in relation to childhood and early life imagery, and to demonstrate how, in researching for the conference presentation (which was accompanied by a small display of “early works”) I have thereby made connections I might never have otherwise made. I offer, therefore, images (photographs and drawings) alongside brief written reflections.

With this paratext, I invite you to peer through the juvenilia lens onto a particular visual practice.

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WHERE to start? Imagine here an array of pictures that, collectively, represent fragments of a person's lifetime.

Looking

I CAN'T help thinking of the vast archive I recently itemised, that of my late father, an archaeologist who died six years ago, leaving in his underground study workshop a “substratum of traces—maps, books, drawings, slides, notes, all collapsed into a disorder that would have saddened but not surprised him” (Bowen, “this is that has been” 154).



Fig. 1. *Archive*, photograph by Eleanor Bowen.

My father drew by “looking.”¹ As a field archaeologist he “unraveled relict landscapes” (Taylor 87), apprehending partially obscured traces on the ground, making rapid diagrams and sketches as reminders.

Resistance—how to draw my father's space, how to look at all
(in this place from which order is given—Derrida 1995:9)

*a collapsing order of gestures (gesture upon gesture over the years) of focused thought,
placing, positioning, fastening, fixing
a flow of time evoked by one man's inhabitation²*

The conception of the archive as a “substratum of traces” is in itself an archaeological perspective, and my systematic itemisation of Dad's archive was also a kind of tracing, a process of documentation through photographs and handwritten notes in increasingly untidy columns, interspersed by rapid diagrams and sketches. It was an attempt to make something visible, a reanimation—as when tracing with a pencil you bring your own weight to bear on something already there, making it appear again.

Thus “between an originating present and the moment of marking, the archive (as monument and ruin) is performed, not represented, in an act of retrieval” (Bowen, “this is that has been” 154).

Finding

AMONGST the archaeology (becoming archaeology), where the big categories were by epoch rather than subject matter, I discovered pictures for and letters to Dad, often combining words and pictures, telling stories. From my current perspective, these are “found images,” parental relics.

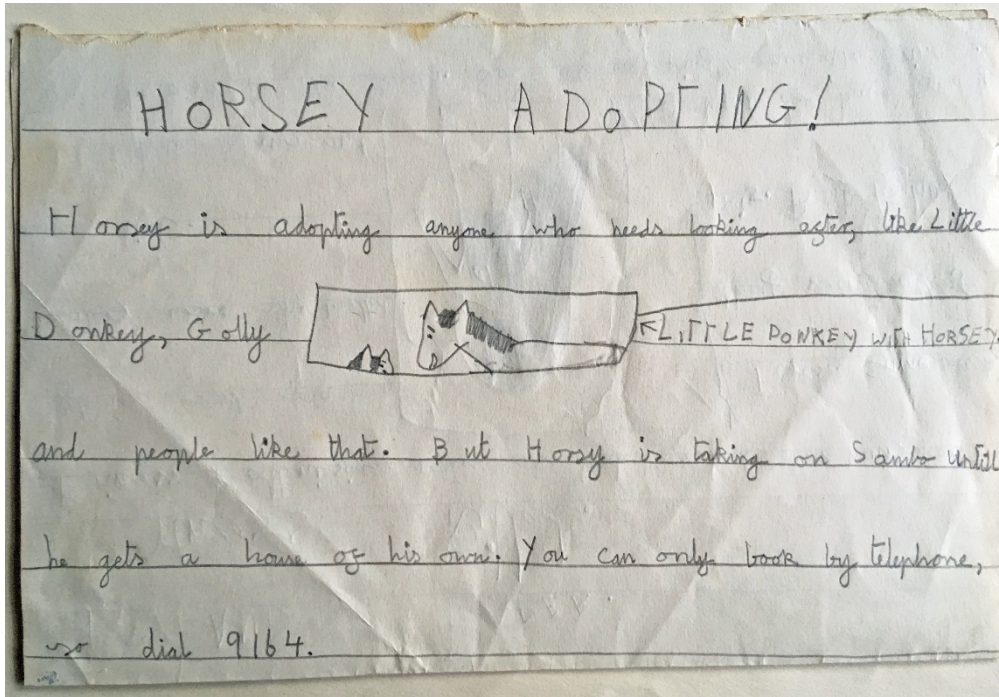


Fig. 2. The Toyland Paper (*Horsey Adopting!*), by Eleanor Bowen.

For example, here is a detail from *The Toyland Paper* that I produced at the age of eight years and one month. Portraits of toys illustrate a layout that is loosely influenced by the newspapers my parents took and, in terms of content, on “Page 1,” by Princess Margaret’s wedding on our brand-new television set and, on “Page 2,” by Mum’s job as a child care officer with a case-load of adoptions.

This is the only piece of juvenilia I found that can be read overtly in terms of cultural context. We’d never had a television before, and Dad had bought it in order to watch the first man go into space. This also meant that my sister and I (being obsessed with princesses) could watch Princess Margaret’s wedding—in fact I think the school gave us a half-day holiday to do so as most families by then owned TV sets, or could access one. However, our diverted attention had disastrous results for our own Princess Polynesia. “Princess Polleniesia, after she had washed her hair, was put in front of a heater, w(h)ere she melted and died.” Tough for her but, as my sister and I then felt we “ought to have somebody on the air to the Queen,” I announced then and there that we “were going to have a new Princess,” although I do remember genuine tears for our poor melted doll. Then over the page is a wonderful offer for readers, possibly influenced by contemporary girls’ comics such as *Bunty* and *Princess*. Here my beloved Horsey (a

cloth horse) is offering adoption, for “anyone who needs looking after,” with a phone number (four digits) to call if necessary. Horsey’s friend Little Donkey was included in the list of possible candidates, along with “Golly” and “Sambo”—no such thing as PC in those days, and we children were completely colour-blind.

Pointing

IN THIS letter, written to my father in hospital, it could be said that the arrow element (*I THINK!*) points to something that can be identified later within my developing practice.

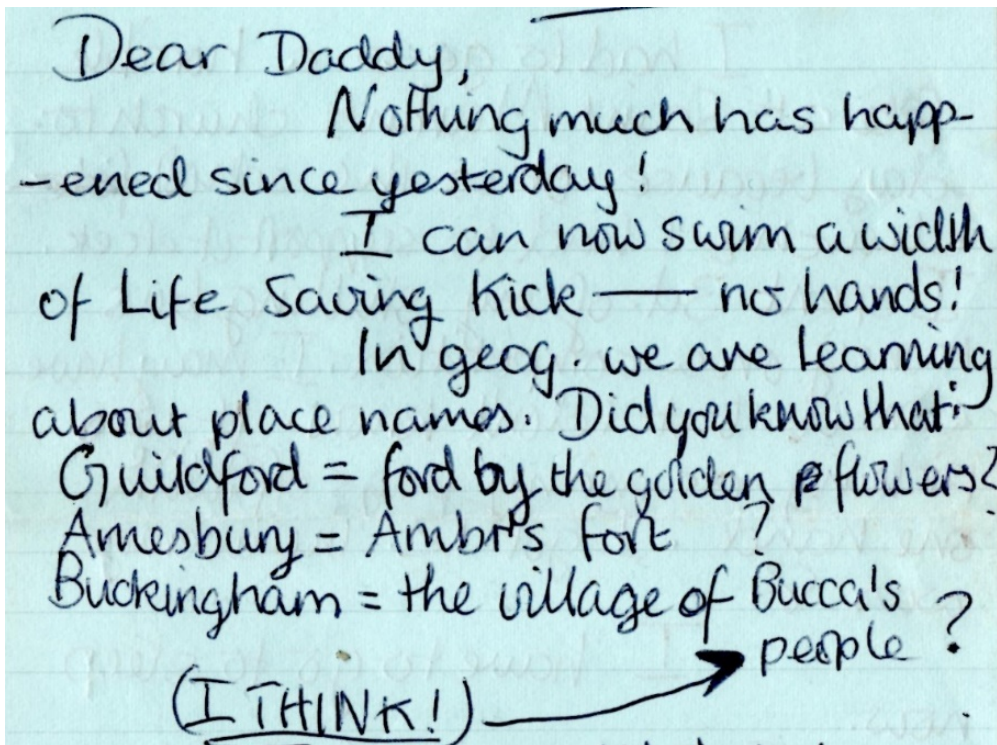


Fig. 3. *Arrow*, by Eleanor Bowen.

Semiotically an arrow is the simplest kind of sign, an icon, the ultimate indicative and here also a command — *follow me!* The indicative mark, the one that indicates a boundary between possibilities, can be referred to within the remit of drawing as “mark-as-action,”³ a deictic act that, rather than depict, “possesses a logic that aims ... to draw attention” (Bowen, “Drawing the Borderline” 24).

In relation to this somewhat cocky ten-year-old’s letter to Dad, that might sound a little pretentious, but I see in this arrow the seeds of an approach, the desire to point towards alternatives, a practice that insists on a present moment layered with past and future, thoughts and asides, drawing the viewer to respond by leaning in, looking harder, following. Taking the eye round corners.



Fig. 4. Still Life with a Poem, by Juan Gris, 1915 (courtesy Norton Simon Art Foundation).

Such layering can be seen in the crystalline approach of Cubism, as for example in this still life by Juan Gris, which incorporates “outside” elements (a playing card showing seven of hearts, pieces of textile) that make the image coherent while at the same time introducing for the viewer a sense of other times and places. Perhaps we see, as in an archaeological excavation, the interface of *now* and *then*, *here* and *there*, a structure that acknowledges the relativity of one thing to another, a sense of the simultaneous.

Drawing Time

TIME AND the simultaneous (I have noticed since looking back through the juvenilia lens) is a subject that has manifested within my developing practice in different ways. Simon Shaw-Miller and Charlotte de Mille, the curators of *Time Unwrapped: Out of Time*, an exhibition I took part in, remarked in their commentary how my drawing *Vanity of the Maker's Girl*, a self-portrait drawing with collaged elements, resonated with and bridged their themes of “Memory” and “Alternate Time.” On their assessment, my drawing both “examines and reflects a sense of (self as) present in absence.” Although it is not possible to analogically link the properties or structure of an artwork to “meaning,” perhaps

one could say that a drawing characterised by juxtapositions of material and multiple perspectives could evoke such a response.



Fig. 5. *Vanity of the Maker's Girl*, by Eleanor Bowen.

“Self-portraiture presses the case for the temporality of art: it extracts a momentary view of the artist and their current environment; it looks simultaneously subjectively and objectively—or both inside oneself and at oneself from without ... As a self-trace the self-portrait can pick up psychically on what it is to be here now” (Shaw-Miller and de Mille).

The impulse to depict “what it is to be here now” motivated *Myself Where I Am Not*. I have described this outsize student drawing on canvas (10 ft x 7 ft) in terms

of “an inventory of responsive marks made and remade over a period of time, marking the movements of people, objects, light, and my own trajectories up, down and across a canvas surface that was larger than my physical and visual span” (Bowen, “Parergorn” 22). Here I layered my own present (a sense of being there) with marks (lines, patches of colour) that indicated the traces of my own movement across a vast surface.

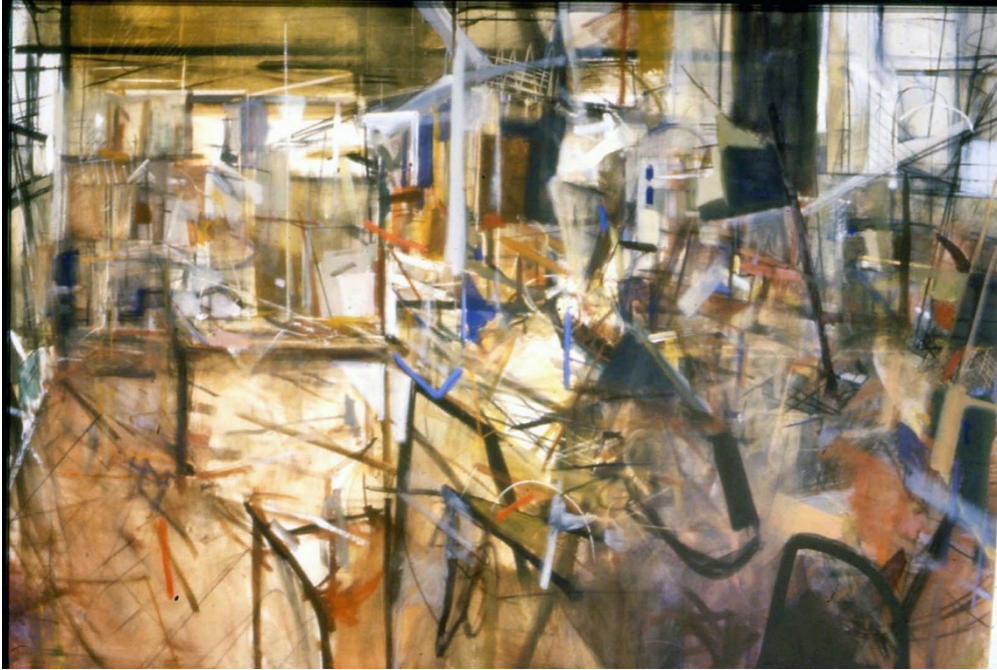


Fig. 6. *Myself Where I Am Not*, by Eleanor Bowen.

*how to make a drawing, not of a room but in it
how to draw inhabiting⁴*

This question, rooted in drawing as both image (*a drawing*) and performance (the *act* of drawing), resonates with much of my practice as it has developed, evidencing an ongoing struggle to reconcile reflection and action, image and text.

Performing Drawing

IT IS APPARENT, from the images I found in the archive, that my sister and I drew differently. Her drawings were more graphic and patternistic with a focus on colour, while mine were rooted in line and narrative.

The pictures I drew were often born out of stories I told myself, some relating to dynasties of people, arising mainly from the desire to *be* these people. They possessed and did what I most wanted to possess and do, for example they owned dogs, rode ponies, won prizes, and held royal status, and in my head they were beautiful.



Fig. 7. Dynasties, by Eleanor Bowen.



Fig. 8. The Sale, by Eleanor Bowen.

Many of the pictures illustrate my own long-forgotten stories, that I sometimes used to speak aloud to myself while walking round and round. Maybe *creating* the space? Drawing it out.

My sister and I were observant, like all children filtering the real world through recognisable ciphers. We were playing, enabling a suspension of belief by anchoring us in just enough *reality* (perhaps a more accurate term is *believability*), as does any effective story-teller, image-maker or poet. It seems that picturing in early years is a visualisation of the world as played with, or performed, by the child, a richly inventive world filtering the child's desires, and perhaps her aspirations.



Fig. 9. Drawing Time, by Eleanor Bowen.

Completion

ON 25 September 2018 the family house was sold. Completion happened at 11 a.m. and, armed with rolls of paper tape, brass rubbing wax and a camera I entered the house for the last time. It had been completely cleared, stripped back to the bare building we had moved into in the late '50s.

I went straight to the basement because I had limited time (operating in an interstitial space between two eras) and, dragging black wax along paper strips around the bare walls, then doing the same on two paper strips traversing the floor, making a large cross, I made my mark and left.



Fig. 10. Deixis, photograph by Eleanor Bowen.

How to make a drawing not *of* a room but *in* it?
The impulse was not to make a representative drawing but to mark the moment, to acknowledge a rite of passage, a passing.

*The marking of the room makes the drawing, like a shadow, not resemblance but a measure of physical presence.*⁵

Like the archive, my drawing was and is a trace, both of the past and for the future.

NOTES

¹ As a painting student at Camberwell School of Art I was taught to “look by drawing,” that is, to use drawing as a tool for rigorous observation, and vice versa.

² See Bowen, “this is that has been.”

³ *Mark-as-action* is my own concept, rooted in the work of Ian Alan Paul. See, e.g., his “Process, Movement and Action.”

⁴ Bowen, “Parergorn.”

⁵ Bowen, “Drawing the Borderline” 20.

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