

Drawing still central to all art

MARK AMERY



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From an early age many children draw, copiously. It's an immediate and direct way to own and communicate a distinct place in the world – to let your inner life rub up against what you see around you, to think, plan and express.

For professional artists drawing remains a great leveller. For all the concerns about art education accentuating the conceptual and theoretical over technique, drawing remains the principal way of communicating. And so it is with the eclectic 116 works in the inaugural Parkin Drawing Prize exhibition.

For those conservatives who might demand of contemporary charlatans: "show us your pencils", there's plenty of accomplished work by leading new generation artists who work in a range of less familiar media.

Approaches to line are varied, as are the materials used. Alongside the styluses you might expect are nails and coloured cotton (a smart if somewhat empty work by painter Elliot Collins),

sticky tape, thread and recycled window frame (Elisabeth Vullings), neon (Paul Hartigan), chicken wire (Erika Husselmann) and ballpoint and correction fluid (Stephen Ellis's highly commended drawing of Meccano structures in a stormy sea).

Drawing can no longer be defined just as work with pencil, pen or crayon rather than paint. For me, it's about immediacy, of plans laid bare, and generally defined by the use of line. Its boundaries are fluid (photographers draw with light, sculptors with form), it remains central to all art practice.

The Parkin steps in after the demise of the National Drawing Award, last awarded in 2008. It was no less varied. The Academy of Fine Arts continues its recent verve (under departing director Warren Feeney) in bringing many facets of the contemporary art scene together under one roof. An impressive national selection panel somehow trawled through 800 entries and final judge Heather Galbraith, head of Massey School of Art, makes special mention of six works of excellence.

My favourite of these didn't win: John Ward Knox's tiny ballpoint drawing of the side of a man's head, with a focus on his ear, drawn on the back of a receipt. (Ward Knox took away the 2008 award.) Touching with its material off surveillance, I loved the lightness and gentleness.

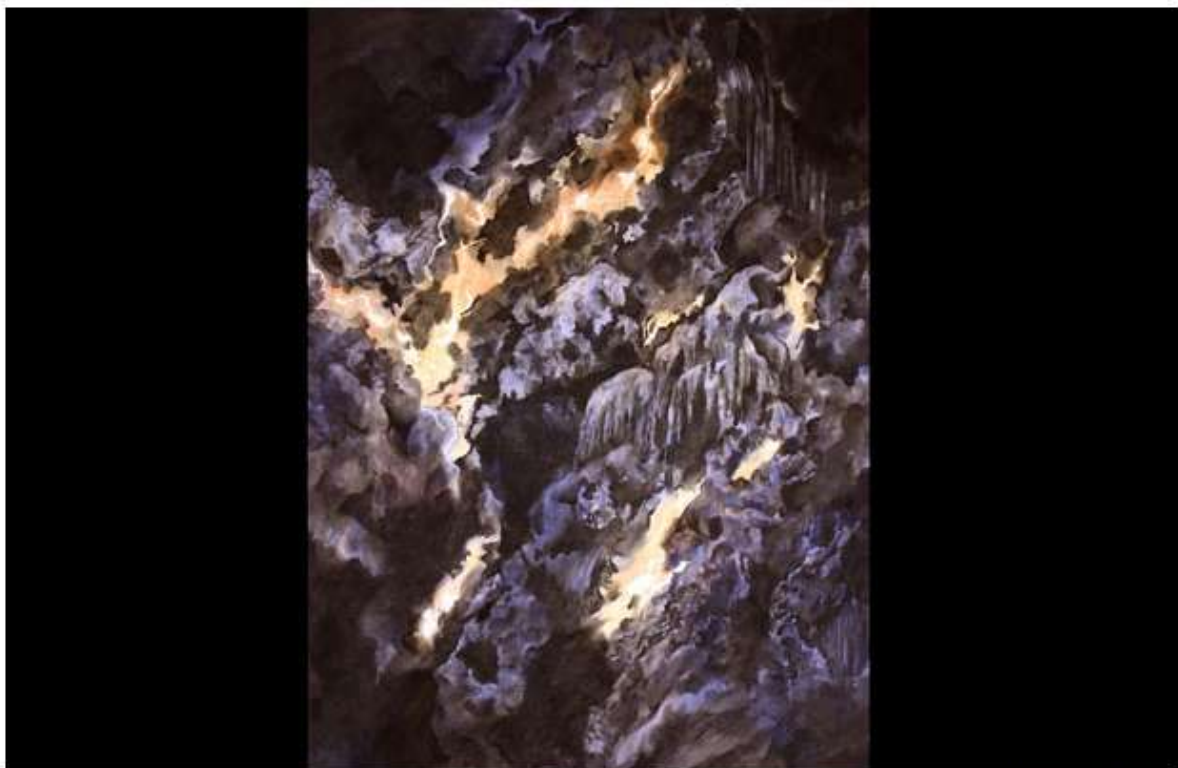
What interested me most about Monique Jansen's winning work was how it worked better as a small digital reproduction in the newspaper than at a large scale on the wall – a folded mesh in the digital fabric of our media world.

As the event grows there will be better Parkin Prizes. For all its variety, many small joys, and peppering of great work, the show still feels overlaid by obsessive but empty pencil markings on paper. Dullness threatens to smother the crackle and spit of new ideas. academy space with quantity over quality, as seems the tradition with drawing awards, doesn't help.

It would be great to see more of the exciting extensions of drawing we're seeing internationally, activating rooms through projection, moving image and performance. Wall and window works by Robert Whyte and Thomas Hinton respectfully feel like re-creations, rather than being alive in the moment. Then there is the whole explosion of digital media and mapping, and the potential they offer the artist.

Sometimes here drawing comes across as a safe, insular and abstracted place for artists to doodle in, rather than a place of connection. Works by Heather Hayward, Bronwyn Holloway-Smith, Douglas Stichbury and Joe Bleakley impressed in being more engaged with the world.

Perhaps in this respect the prize might best have gone to David Cauchi for his wit, frankness and visual punch. In an elegantly designed poster work a hand passes a titbit to a dog. The words "art prize" circle the exchange between fingers and snout. Every artist has to eat.



HANNAH BEEHRE

TAKING THE LINE: Hannah Beehre's Postcard to Victor Jouet shows the variety of styles and mediums in the 116 works in the exhibition.