

'Susan Hartnett - Grass Drawings'. Skulpturenmuseum Glaskasten, Marl (DE). 1999.

Susan Hartnett
Grass Drawings

There is a de Kooning story. Someone says that the 20th century is no time to be painting women. So, of course, why not do it, de Kooning said. Ditto grass. I've always drawn plants; for wages work, to see better, out of curiosity, feeling, to concentrate when screwed-up. To be out-doors, paying high attention. Those earlier drawings often contour or illustrative.

A lot of knowledge of Chinese and Japanese ink painting and calligraphy had to be thoroughly assimilated before the "stroke" could be applied. Large leaves need a supple brush, whereas grass or twigs could be done with strokes of different thicknesses of charcoal. I've made charcoal supple.

Got irritated by Dürer's beautiful little patch of grass, its outlines. Wanted to do him one better. Also egged-on by Leonardo's and Matisse's plant drawings and those of numerous Chinese and Japanese painters. Also, to make finished drawings that worked but were not symbolic in Chinese sense. Yes, symbolic in sense that all drawing is. But drawing is a real-life, real-time activity for those who do it. And a real-time effect on whoever sees/feels it. Not symbolic at all. A contradiction.

Chinese characters are composites of strokes, assembled in a certain order to make a picture/word concept. The calligraphic "whole" of the character is important to them. Calligraphy is a "piece of the heart".

So each grass drawing has its own look, own character. They are almost written sometimes: start at one edge and end up at the other. No erasures. Like jazz, one has to get it done right on the first go. All the knowledge present and ready to play at showtime – a coherent whole – emotionally complete.

They are species-specific. Submitting to species teaches me new configurations of space, new strokes. Look really closely at other species. Listen to surroundings – cows or sea or singing birds, leaf-rustle, wind, brooks. Done at all seasons in front of the plants. Just not in rain or wind or below 32 degrees Fahrenheit or noon-sun (wind rearranges the plant parts, rain gets on paper, below 32 F freezes my fingers, sun burns me and hurts eyes). Keep watch on patches nearby on foot and in 100 mile radius. Drive car slowly along back-roads and pull over when I see promising grass patches. Drawing materials always in car. Walk up and down, find new configurations, shift left or right a bit. Do 3 or 4 or 5. High attention. Go home exhausted but thrilled. Hopeful I caught something solid. Life on the fly. Much later, often I look at drawing and think "what the hell is that", surprised. Many thoughts and moods reflected; many complex feelings engendered.

Grass-writing is a mistranslated English expression for a wild cursive Chinese script that greatly attracts me. Watching grasses rearrange themselves in breeze, I think maybe ancient calligraphers were affected by watching them. Also Arabic and Hebrew writing like grass.

Grass is hair of the earth. Ubiquitous. Mercifully covers all our graves. Holds earth in place. Where are all the Indians buried who lived here 10-20 000 years ago? All the little babies who died the first winter. Thousands and thousands of people silently under the grass. And all the birds and foxes and deer. We eat grass – oats, barley, corn, wheat, rice. The animals who eat grass feed us – cows, goats, sheep, deer, buffalo.

Not all charcoals are grass species. Some are woody plants. Majority are grass because I like the straight lines and curves, the variety given me by a large number of supple plants that radically change through a year. In Maine, the miracle that plants totally sheared-off by a snowplow regrow. Beauty of its different stages. Challenging. Interesting.

The mathematics, the forms that cells have to make such curves. Resilience of its stems. Grace. Particularity.

Drawings' space is Chinese space. Tao-glowing void is full, out of which life comes. One mark on a blank page is like a thousand marks, the manifestation of something. Drawn as plant grows (Chinese), up from base, out from stem to leaf-tip. Get the "Chi" right (life energy). "Become the bamboo" as a long-ago Chinese painter put it. Matisse's "pretty whiteness of the paper".

Hold contradictions:

slow – fast
flat – deep space
raw – cooked
clean – messy
active – still
considered – immediate

Not figure on ground in western sense, but they are "western" drawings, even American 20th century. Each time I get one, I wonder, whose heart will that one reach? Whose soul or psyche will match up with it? Odd business. With my heart on my sleeve. Drawing reveals what you know and what you don't. Full exposure. They are finished works in themselves, not sketches or prep for bigger painted drawings.

There is the mystery of life on Earth, the mystery of this or that species as a temporary, satisfactory solution in an evolutionary sense, the mystery of myself attracted to/involved in this activity.
One makes art because one has to.

Feeling –> thought –> touch (draw) –> form (drawing) –> feeling –> thought...

Shakespeare (paraphrased, misremembered) "How is fancy bred, how begot, how nourish-ed. It is engendered in the eye, by gazing fed."

Mystical experience, revelation, eros if art/craft/need is up to it. Freshness, ecstasy, purpose, practice. Common as grass. Signalling dry places to lie down while hiking. Sweet hay in barn to sleep in. The scent of cut grass goes deep into lungs and psyche and gives pleasure to our old, OLD animal selves. And silhouettes, shadow-like, attract our old animal vision, when one's life depended on knowing what was around as one moved, scavenged.

The drawing's subject is not grass, but feeling, unnamable. Grass is a vehicle and I'm a conduit, making marks in a 30,000 year old tradition.

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