

BROOKLYN RAIL

CRITICAL PERSPECTIVES ON ARTS, POLITICS, AND CULTURE



MAILINGLIST

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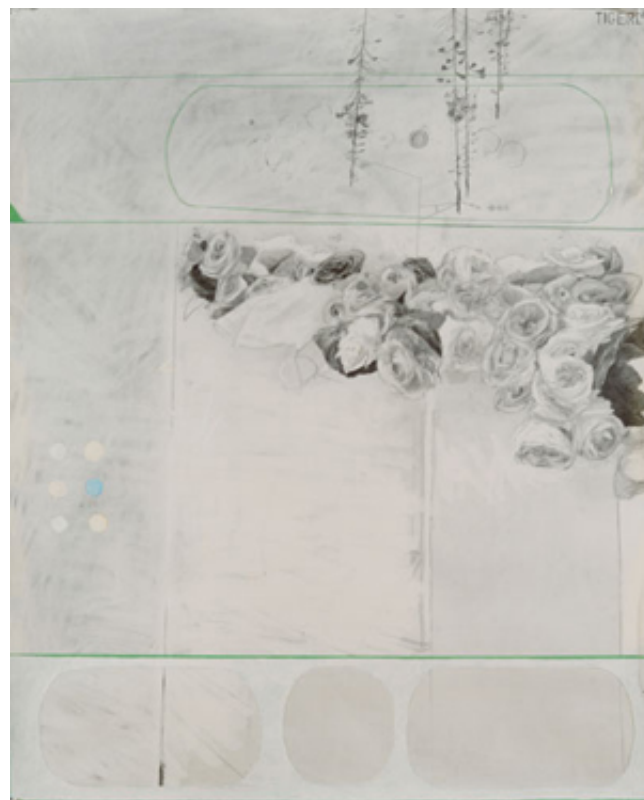
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Chris Domenick and Anne Pearce: Drawbridge

by *Becky Brown*

WORK Gallery, August 1 – September 1, 2008

The first place the eye lingers in Chris Domenick's pair of drawings, "Tiger Roses" and "Postcard from Isthmus", is the floating, sideways bouquet of roses. This horizontal pile-up of expertly rendered floral membranes becomes an anchor, a familiar form that restores confidence in our perceptive powers. The information presented in these works is consistently contradictory in form and content; the roses offer a precarious moment of clarity. The sensitive, patient precision with which they are drawn lets us know that Domenick is both committed and compelled to representing the forms of nature. Yet roses are more commonly associated with domestic settings than natural landscapes, and it is this kind of double identity that the artist thrives on—straddling numerous traditions, leading us down one road, then veering into another. The bouquet is both natural and artificial, an emblem of landscape and still life at once. Despite its internal equilibrium, this image is its own paradox: caught between contexts, hovering within the borders of its own sovereign state.



Chris Domenick, "Tiger Roses," 2008. Graphite and collage on paper. 42.5 × 52.5 in.

Relishing the beauty of these roses is a fleeting pleasure because here, they are alien. As the eye drifts away in any direction, inexplicable things begin to happen: a woman's legs emerge from a skirt hidden in the bouquet; a pale yet precise (and slightly tilted) streetlamp seems to grow from the flowers; several darkly drawn, too-straight—as if made with a ruler—leafy branches jut down from the top. These sharp,

prominent lines serve an important compositional function, but in Domenick's world, this does not justify their presence; they must be integrated into the landscape, so he imposes a disguise (however unconvincing) of leaves and shrub.

There is enough evidence of landscape in these works for the viewer to try to match every mark with a reference from the visible world, to identify the totality of marks as some sort of real space. But this effort always fails. Instead, we are held in a sustained, and highly potent, state of tension—eyes darting from one zone of rule to another, brain struggling to synthesize parts. The laws governing these drawings change from inch to inch, and instead of getting lost in an attempt to figure them out—a futile task—Domenick invites the viewer to get lost in the variation of marks, the clever turns of phrase, and the surprises hidden under every shaded blur, inside every porthole and behind every cut-away section.

Anne Pearce also demands an act of synthesis from her viewer as she merges two distinct vocabularies—abstraction and figuration. She too builds a patchwork of diverse marks: crosses, capsules, dots, lines and dotted lines made with every conceivable drawing tool—markers, pens and paints, from blunt to fine-tipped; from hot pink to gold to purple. There is tremendous energy in these accumulated marks, yet Pearce uses them as filler for the interior spaces of contour figures. There are two separate things happening here: a series of silhouetted bodies, often distorted or dismembered, suggesting some symbolic or supernatural narrative; and a potent abstract language composed of mysterious signs and symbols. Why are the two conflated? Do they nourish or distract from one another? Gustav Klimt and Chris Ofili both incorporate intricate abstraction into a primarily figurative vocabulary. The abstract elements, akin to pattern and decoration, seem to grow naturally in and around the figure, forming the substance of clothing (Klimt) or flesh itself (Ofili). For these artists, the two languages no longer feel distinct because they have been effectively fused, integrated into a single story. Somehow, the two sides of Pearce's practice feel autonomous; they seem to present two separate stories that might flourish if given the space to grow on their own. Nonetheless, the hybrid language she invents is an ambitious attempt to blur the boundaries between traditions.

Drawbridge is an appropriate title for a show of two artists who carve pathways between traditions, connecting one system of image-making to others. The drawbridge offers a safe crossing some of the time, but not all—an apt metaphor for the links between landscape, figuration and abstraction. Sturdy but shifting, these intersections demand a new assessment of the relationship between artwork and viewer. This relationship is clear when we can easily identify landscape or figuration as the only system in place. But when they are introduced at once, along with others—to peacefully cohabitate or to butt heads—the terms of that relationship are called into question.

The resulting state of tension is written out in *Postcard from Isthmus*, where Domenick has populated certain regions of the drawing with the stenciled phrases DRAW FLOWERS HERE and PRINT OR ERASE CLOUDS HERE. FLOWERS (the text) crops up just as actual flowers might: densely from the

bottom, dissolving into a background or sky, obscured by objects in the foreground. But unlike actual flowers, the text creeps along the edges of the drawing, an arbitrary framing device that further interrogates how decisions are made in pictorial space. Jasper Johns used the same stenciled text a half-century ago to falsely label the colored sections of an abstract painting. In both cases, what we read conflicts with what we see—RED appears over yellow, FLOWERS appears where there are none—and the artist has revealed a slippage in his own process. Each performs a critique on the very system of image-making he employs: Johns incriminates abstraction as arbitrary, formulaic, mechanical; Domenick places landscape under similar scrutiny, with more ambiguous results. He shows that this longstanding tradition is still alive, that its signature motifs can be provocative, dynamic and visually rich—under the right circumstances, with the necessary provisos. Landscape the artistic tradition must not be confused with actual landscape: it is not a means of representing nature; it is a category of image-content (mountains, flowers, birds in flight, etc.) and a framework for composing a picture.

Landscape, the artistic tradition, is Domenick's primary reference point. But it does not act alone—abstraction (the artistic tradition) is a stealth partner, adding a structural framework and a layer of meaning to "Tiger Roses" and "Postcard from Isthmus." Anne Pearce also pairs abstraction with another artistic tradition—figuration—which seems to be her primary focus. Both these artists build drawbridges (and draw bridges) as a means of checks and balances—because no one method can be trusted to tell the whole story. Each has its shortcomings, which Domenick and Pearce investigate and expose. Any artist who draws or paints landscape is building his or her own landscape that may have nothing to do with nature. John Ashbery reminds us: "It is we who make this / Jungle and call it space, naming each root, / Each serpent..." The hovering flowers, broken mountains and shaded shrubs of Chris Domenick are embedded with this understanding, and it somehow heightens their beauty.

CONTRIBUTOR

Becky Brown

Becky Brown is an artist and writer based in Brooklyn.

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