

NEW WORK

Nic Plowman - James Makin Gallery

Dr. Jonathan McBurnie, 2016

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There is an art school fallacy that takes place in every first year life drawing class, called the blind contour drawing. The process involves the artist looking only at the model, avoiding looking at the paper, instead letting the form of the model guide the drawing. The fallacy is not in the process, which is a valuable training method that builds discipline and keen observational skills. The fallacy is in calling it the 'blind' contour. It is, in fact, the only drawing process that does not require some kind of blindness. One cannot look at the subject and one's own work at the same time. One can only look between the two, working from memory in a very fast and basic sense. Nic Plowman's New Work demonstrates this basic tenet of drawing clearly; memory is just as important as sight.

Those familiar with the Brisbane and Melbourne art crowds will know of Nic Plowman and his work and its rugged, warts-and-all beauty. A hard-working artist with a gift for composition, and an attraction to old-school media, Plowman has been exhibiting— frequently— for the last decade. Blending a personal narrative with a dedication to working from life, Plowman's work bypasses any art school cool for a blistering sincerity that moves the heart and punches the guts. Life drawing is considered by many contemporary artists as obsolete, even arcane, preferring photographic reference. But they can't draw like Plowman, if at all. 'Life drawing is the hardest thing in the world. It can be meditation, but it is continually challenging and demanding of your complete attention. The skills and language developed in its pursuit, provides artists with the ability to communicate visually,' says Plowman. 'It is, I believe, the most difficult and most useful apprenticeship for those attempting to understand the world visually... Plus, there is nowhere to hide with drawing, and in particular Life Drawing. The gloves are off, your magic tricks are useless and it is you against the elements'.

No wonder Plowman is drawn to the human form. 'The human condition is all we have to talk about really and the human body is smack bang in the guts of all those stories - whether you're discussing death, life, fear, triumph, sex or magic... it all comes back to us in one way or another. In essence, my work discusses the very real experience of being human'. Often using recurring imagery that draws upon symbols of masculinity, religious iconography and the odd pop culture reference, Plowman's work presents us with images of internal conflict, especially in contrast to his more serene life drawings. 'I do have a fascination with iconography and great religious works of art,' Plowman responds. 'The gravitas that is associated with religious works is mesmerising - my musings have always been about how do you attempt this, when my inherent beliefs have been challenged and my very real experiences with death hold no great 'other' knowledge'.

Plowman's most recent series, now being exhibited at James Makin Gallery, scales back the iconography in favour of a much more observational, and nuanced, perspective. It is as if in spending time with each model, the artist slowly teases out traces of their character and temperament. Figure 17 (Robert) is a series of wiry line work, coalescing to form the figure, seemingly over time, mapping the figure's movement, a little bit of its time spent in the studio, moments that are gone now, committed to canvas.

'I think most of my work contains a duality, from the materials used, the construction, the underdrawings and multiple views to the intentional meaning in the work ... Nothing is black and white, life is complicated and so are people and relationships and therefore so is art'. Underdrawings remain, leaving traces of the thought process in action, mapping out and constructing each figure with care. Even after Plowman has so sumptuously rendered the flesh in watercolour, work continues, as we see in the devastatingly beautiful Figure Drawing no.7, in which a rough white overdrawing is made across the seemingly finished work, spontaneous and gestural afterthoughts to calm visual passages of poetry and clarity. Perhaps the traces of underdrawings present this duality between sight and memory, but somehow that seems too contrived, verbal Viagra, a contemporary over-explanation for something that needs no explanation. Good drawing doesn't need the aid of my words to justify its existence, and Plowman's work is indeed good drawing.

Just look at it.