

SHANE CAMPBELL GALLERY

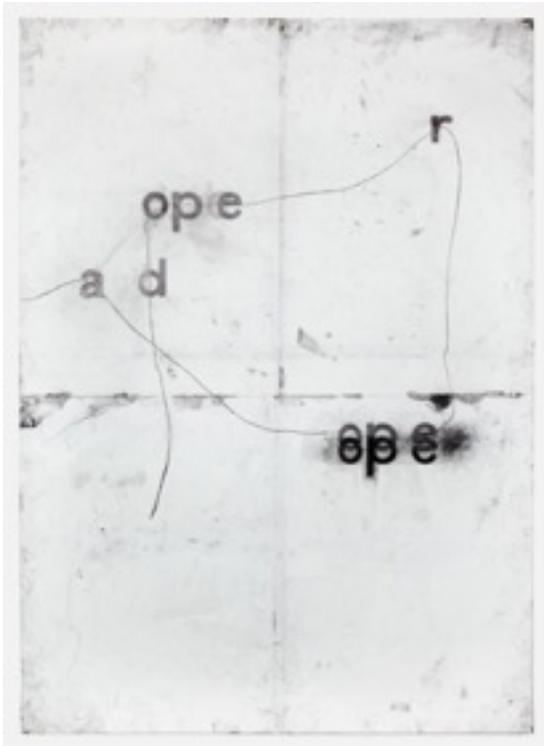
Bad at Sports
April 2014

DRAWING LINES OF COMMUNICATION: A CONVERSATION WITH TONY LEWIS

April 2, 2014

By: Kevin Blake

It is perhaps impossible to communicate the meaning of anything within the boundaries of language. Without a guide to offer intention, language simultaneously has too many variations and too many limitations, most of which are well defined. Images have the same issues, and within the context of fine art, images carry even more baggage than words. When the words are the images, and the images are the words, the scope of what is readable becomes blurred. Tony Lewis explores these impossibilities of



Tony Lewis, „deroloc color dna peopled elpoeP,
2011 84" x 60" Pencil and graphite powder on
paper

communication by deliberately leading and misleading his audience through the authority of language and the power of images. He draws from the well of established language-oriented conceptual artists while quickly developing an aesthetic grammar that feels genuinely intuitive but earned.

Kevin Blake: Text is scantily deployed in your drawings in what seems like quadrants of equally infinite space and is often connected by a thin line that lassos the letters together. The text reads as a play on words that implicates the viewer, as if the viewer could only know certain letters together as one phrase, or only having one possibility. I think the drawing, “dope repoa” 2012 is a perfect example of this strategy. The viewer sees the words “rope-a-dope” when reading the text from left to right, top to bottom, and this phrase immediately recalls Muhammad Ali and his strategy against George Foreman. There are many implications in this particular

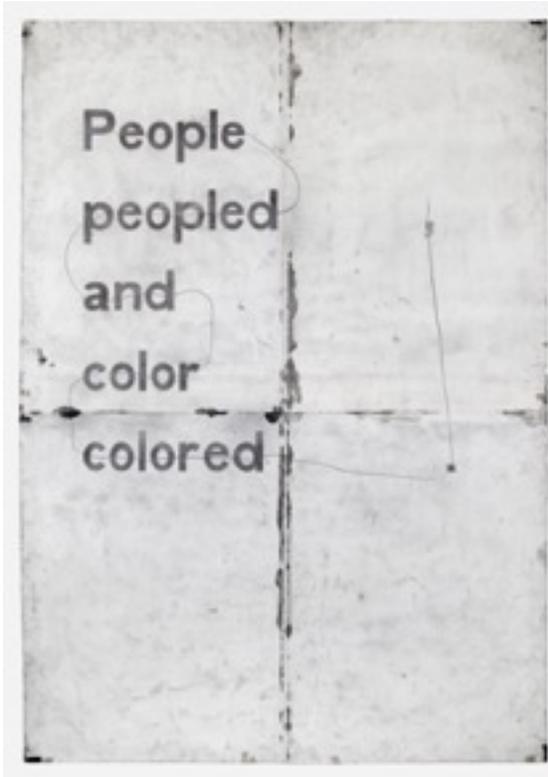
drawing, as with most of your work. Can you talk about how you think

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about the way people see, or the way people read, and how that influences your images?

Tony Lewis: It's important to say the work you're describing is a specific project in the studio, delineated conceptually (but not spatially) from others drawings. That is to say, although I make different types of drawings, I hope they all have a strong, collective sensibility that is considerate towards how people read, look, and think- I guess this means I assume a lot about people. More importantly, I assume to know the difficulty of language (and words and letters) and understanding in conversation. This functions the same way in the work- the speed at which you absorb ideas or material, the longevity of the dialogue, and development your own ideas are all variable. As you say in regards to implications, I would hope there is more than one possibility when faced with the work, as I am concerned with making images that are working through several things at once. But I won't be surprised, or disappointed with such a read, as some other the drawings within this project are arguably, and justifiably one-dimensional.



Tony Lewis, „deroloc color dna peopled elpoeP,
2011 84" x 60" Pencil and graphite powder on paper

KB: In terms of the implications for the viewer, I should say that I agree there are most definitely more possibilities than one, per drawing, or phrase, or collective grouping of words within any particular work. I suppose that I was trying to get at the idea that in each piece, there is one in particular that rises first and foremost as the one that feels most intentioned. It feels, for instance, that “rope-a-dope” is the phrase that is colloquially known, and that it has implications of its own. The text seems to be rooted in groupings of words that have some sort of social affect or commonplace amongst us and it is that phrase in which the work is situated and then abstracted from. Multiple possibilities arise in this way. I'm curious as to how much of knowing the implications of

deploying a very definite grouping of words or letters inform your beginnings and how much of where you begin is maintained in the finished product

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TL: The ability to begin with colloquial phrases, or familiar terms is one way to approach the selection of letters from the larger pool of letters made from the original sentence (60 characters). I also select non-words, punctuation, or single letters as viable characters to use in order to make a drawing. All of the selections of characters have historically been based upon my own sensibility and inclination- whether finding humor, sadness, nonsense, direct references to people's names, or in the case of rope-a-dope, a historically famous fighting style, which also describes the process of seeing and reading of the drawing(s). Sometimes, linguistically they begin with something that makes sense, like "the fool eloped" then progresses to "op ed" in the process of drawing. The past few years the attitude, and motivation toward this template sentence has shifted quite a bit- from breaking it down, finding new language (and all the different ways to do that), and eventually finding new ways to simply make a line.

KB: I saw a couple of your drawings last night at the Hyde Park Art Center, and in one of the pieces there is a piece of appropriated text from a calendar pasted to the drawing. It acts very differently than your more formal arrangements spatially, but seems to create the same sort of conceptual trajectory. Can you talk about the chronology of mark-making in your work or how you set up these drawings? Does the text come first? Do you begin with a phrase? Does the phrase arise from the drawing? As your motivations towards a template sentence shifts, how do those changes affect the way a drawing is executed?

TL: The drawings at HPAC were commissions through the NJAPF program, so they're more about conflating patron desires with studio sensibilities. I'm not very good at talking about those, as they are more a result of compromise and conversations with specific people, and more like collaborations. I hope that makes sense.

The mark-making begins with the condition of the studio where the drawings are made. For the past few years, i've had a healthy amount of graphite powder over most surfaces, mostly the floor and walls. Naturally, objects in the space immediately display evidence of their surroundings. Beginning on the floor, I take four sheets of loose stonehenge paper, tape, and rubber cement, and begin to bind them together, using a previous drawing (to maintain the correct scale and shape). From there I move to the wall where I usually have a 5' by 7' sheet of paper ready to work on- a sheet of paper with a heavy dose of loose "bruises", scuffs, rips, and smudges. Afterwards, I usually begin outlining the framework (or guidelines) provided by the original drawing/template to find the position of the letters chosen from the larger sentence which has been put into a visual framework to visually fit the page (or sheet of paper). I proceed to draw the letters, words, or phrases that will be a part of the drawing, and will finish with drawing a

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line (or some variation) through each of the letters, words or phrases, I've just drawn. At that point I move the drawing to another location in the studio-mostly more than once, and will most likely use that same drawing to provide the correct dimensions and size to create another new drawing. There is variation at each stage of mark-making, but I've ultimately come to understand the project as one viable way to make a drawing.



Tony Lewis, *olo*, 2012 84" x 60" Pencil and graphite powder on paper

Considering the motivational shifts toward the template sentence, at one point it was about breaking down the perceived meaning of the template sentence people would have about the subject matter. Then I became interested in finding new words, which pointed to more interesting conversation. After a while, I was concerned with language that would give me the most interesting line. I've also been interested in creating subgroups of drawings within the larger project- drawings with similar language that come from the same source. Lately I've been understanding the project conceptually as the reality to speak with a dangerously limited vocabulary. Having focused on the same letters, phrases, and words for so long, I can't help but look to my own creativity to say something, anything just to be heard, and to understand the limitations of what I can say. It's like only having 10% of the dictionary to work from, and still

having to find ways to express anger, confusion, happiness, The Simpsons, hatred, Che Guevara, the Irish Potato famine, race, Muhammed Ali, Richard Serra, color, Pope.L, Colorado, the letter o, and Kid Cudi (among others). All of these elements influence the way the drawings have been executed, and have shaped the future of the project.

KB: I recently read an essay by the artist Liselott Johnsson entitled, "Painting beyond Painting: From Pensiero Debole to an Expanded

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Practice,” in which she used Roland Barthe’s “Death of the Author” to situate her investigation into creating a relationship between her images and the viewer. Barthes writes, “à€|a text consists of multiple writings, issuing from several cultures and entering into dialogue with each other, into parody, into contestation; but there is one place where this multiplicity is collected, united, and this place is not the author, as we have hitherto said it was, but the reader. Can you elaborate on how you decide to set up these parameters or boundaries that limit the scope of what is usable in terms of text in the drawings, and how those impediments reflect the viewer’s capacity to digest or grasp the conceptual framework within each work? How important is the reader’s comprehension to you? At what point does text and image become one unit, one conceptual and formal investigation?

TL: I decided to limit the boundaries of the text in the drawings when I wrote the template sentence, and whatever can come from that structure to help make a drawing- the language is undoubtedly subservient to the drawing. At the same time, the language is confounding, easily forgettable, yet explicitly, and vaguely refers to the past, present, and future of the color line in the US, and other places. It still feels like a great place to begin making drawings because of the reality its grounded in- the reality of poetic quotations, and the platitude as a way to continually describe a brief history of color, or race. From the beginning, I’ve had a distinct feeling that the statement is written as though it’s only been spoken to in platitudes, which in turn is how it learns to speak. I feel for the sake of the project, it’s important to note that I wrote the sentence, and it’s crucial that it feels like a quotation, because it essentially is. I usually need the help of a structure, diagram, or appropriated framework to combat the anxiety of making a drawing. For this project, it was my epigrammatic statement, Microsoft Word, and the very loose reference to Arial Bold.

I’m not sure I see the limitations as impediments against the viewers capacity to grasp the conceptual frame work. They are pragmatic in a sense that they allow for a more succinct way to arrive at what the viewer is faced with. I’m committed to the idea that the variety of the reader’s comprehension should rival the variety within the drawings. The project is bunk without a diversification of “responses” to the original sentence- by “responses”, I mean drawings. As I’ve pointed to earlier, each drawing that is made is a viable, physical reaction to the original platitude, and the authority it implies. With each drawing made, comes the expansion of possible positions to understand, support, disregard, disavow, worship, or forget the source. Each drawing is an individual object, as well as part of a larger conceptual collective who’s purpose at this point, may be to create a plethora of possibilities for people to be overwhelmed by. Maybe not. For viewers to fall into a single drawing, and go insofar as the paper, character, and the graphite smudge, I would hope it can find the same level of humor

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or seriousness (latent as it may be) as when sardonically bombarded with the drab, historical narrative of the platitude implicitly presented here.

Admittedly, there's a bit of dark humor at play, alongside the occasional slapstick, which keep this project light in a way that allows for a space for play, and a darker laughter.

I would hope that the drawings are always one unit; text and image as components along with others, to make a drawing happen all at once. Whether or not drawing can successfully contain the conceptual and formal investigations is something I'm looking forward to learning.

KB: I think when an artist is eager to learn something, he/she often finds themselves in a vulnerable position. When the solutions to the problems or questions we pose to ourselves are unknown, it seems the objects or images made in light of that inevitable anxiousness can be free of any exactitude forced upon it by solutions to known quantities or qualities. I think some level of vulnerability is an essential element to making new discoveries, and interesting work for that matter. Can you address the idea of vulnerability in your practice and how it may or may not manifest in your work?

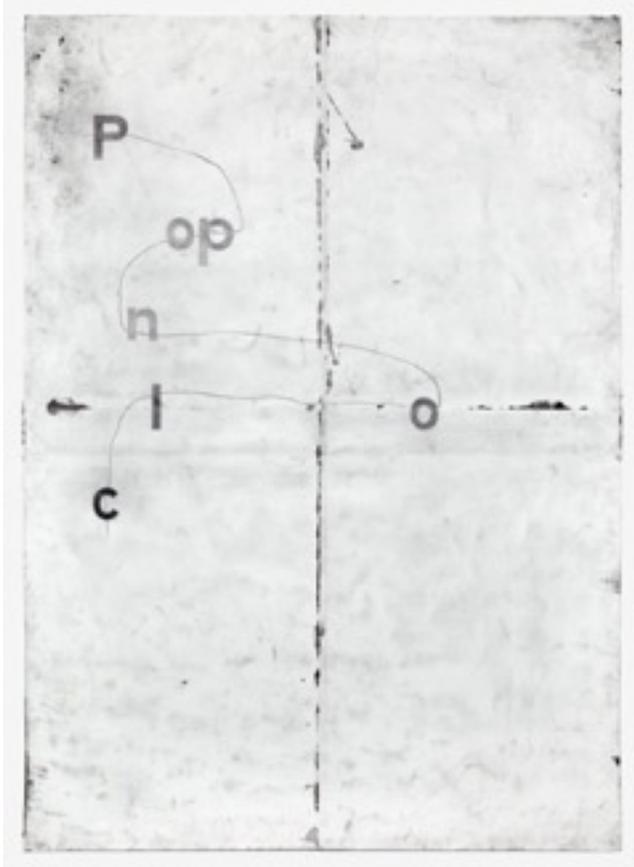
TL: I agree, vulnerability in making can yield work that is impenetrable or "free", if that's what you mean. I make drawings on paper which are physically vulnerable- very easily ripped, and not fixed. They're handled roughly in the studio. As weak as they maybe, they do carry the scars of that treatment well, I think. I've felt vulnerable about many things for most of my life. I can say making drawing has become a way to transcend my own shortcoming, and make something that enters into an authoritative, invulnerable realm which has only been occupied up until this point, by a grand narrative that existed before me, and the audience, yet also has the power to tell my story to both me, and the audience at the same time. I'm interested in having a drawing occupy the same space- turning the narrative onto itself in a way, so as to simulate this unreachable space using the conversation around the perceived content of the drawings. The work on one level, is a way to fight against that seemingly untouchable, historical world, or at least point it out to the viewer, without claiming myself as a victim, to say, "does this happen to you?" It's hard to expand on that without having the right words.

I'm the type of thinker to find one hundred ways a new idea won't work, and after I've proven myself wrong one hundred times, I feel there's a chance it's valid enough to take a risk. I hope this makes me some kind of optimist. There a strong relationship between vulnerability and being an optimist, both require a level of trust in something unknown.

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KB: On the subject of vulnerable materials, I'd like to know more about the Cartesian format of the pieced-together papers. The quadrants do not read as strictly a method for creating large scale works on paper. They feel more purposeful and the line that runs through the text further illustrates this format as having a graphed spatial dynamic. Is this happenstance, or does this methodology carry specific conceptual weight?



Tony Lewis, clon opP, 2011 84" x 60" Pencil and graphite powder on paper

TL: It's great for me to use it purely as a method to build a sheet of paper by binding smaller sheets together with rubber cement and tape. Although the quadrant also works well as a physical, and visual parameter to work within. The need for making the paper this way came from previous work, and that studio rhythm continued into this project- I guess that is happenstance. The quadrant helps me to understand character positions spatially, which influences the way words and marks are read in relation to each other. It's vital that people can read left to right, top

to bottom as you said earlier, and I'm interested in how far apart things have to be before they can no longer be understood together. I like the quadrant. It provides a sense of focus when approaching the paper, as if there is something already present holding it together. I'm indebted to the grid because of the way it helps me see space (or emptiness). In the drawings there is a real place for play, and fields where I can run my arms across the paper without flinching- real space to carry all of the conceptual weight of whatever language, mark, or process; and whatever authority or lack the drawings might have, hinges on this space to breathe, and see nothing with, or next to everything. I hope that's not as romantic as it sounds.

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KB: As the Whitney Biennial comes to a close, where will you be concentrating your efforts? Do you have exhibition plans in the immediate future?



Tony Lewis, n f pope.l, 2012 84" x 60" Pencil and graphite powder on paper

TL: Through the next month, I'll be relaxing a bit, and in the studio focusing on new work hopefully. Right now, Nate Young and I have a two-person show at Room East in New York, which I'm very excited to be apart of- Nate is a close friend, and a great artist. I'm also reading Eleanor Roosevelt's autobiography at the moment, which is nice. The main focus is preparing for solo exhibition in London near the end of May. It should be fun, and hopefully it's a chance to recreate an exhibition installed in Chicago at Autumn Space in 2011.

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