



Eاون Heng, *Hypnotist*, 2006, pencil, pastel and gouache on paper, 101 x 57 cm. Courtesy the artist.

EUAN HENG: CONJURED CONSTRUCTIONS

Reading these drawings by Euan Heng is to give oneself over to the frisson of our paradoxical age. In responding with uncanny sensitivity to the formless continuum of critical painting practice and popular graphics, art-historical academia and contemporary theory, Heng is master-craftsman, gymnast and magician rolled into one. Most important in this conjuring, however, is the delicately preserved sense of a charge, sometimes erotic, sometimes tragic, generated between these various perspectives. As Heng explains: 'It is not my intention to express thoughts... but [to] incite thought'. Heng's drawings present mechanisms for excited imagining, or 'advanced juggling', to borrow the title of a recent work, in which the influences of Patrick Caulfield and Juan Gris sit alongside those of Hokusai and Hergé.

Despite an exquisite sense of touch, it does not seem inappropriate to describe these drawings as machine-like. Heng has developed a respect for line to the point where drawing templates such as French curves and protractors are used to create his images. Like Piero della Francesca, Heng constructs subtle formal rhythm in his narrative scenes, establishing an abstract order of narrative that underpins and often directs the pictorial story-telling. We are reminded that Western mathematics was founded upon drawing, as first geometry and subsequently algebra arose from the investigation of volume, shape, fields of relation and points of intersection. Similar foci bristle within Heng's drawings, mapping visible and invisible coordinates of correlation.

Importantly, however, these mathematical strategies are tempered by lapses and slips; perhaps better considered as melody in relation to the rhythms alluded to above. Modelled tonal passages contrast with the rigid authority of line; brilliant pinks, yellows, turquoise flash within small pockets of black-ringed space; occasional free-hand gestures wobble and pulsate with *tremolo*. Also an amateur banjo-player, the musicality of Heng's work is more akin to Django Reinhardt than Bach. His terrain is the *pizzicato* of simply patterned ballads: variations on families of closely related chord sequences, given nuance through the improvisational techniques of left-handed chord shaping; deft accompaniments to the telling of love stories, comedies, legends and tragedies.

Narrative is of primary importance to his practice. While aware that his work is closely related to modernism in this regard, he is quick to qualify his approach as:

imbued by a desire (or conceit?) to retrieve the image and to harness it with an individual vision and experience of the world, somewhere between what is seen and the imagination and hopefully – a poetic dimension.

This interest in poetry and the poetic has characterised Heng's career and suggests a distinction between the conditions of narrative in poetry and prose in relation to his work. The fluid 'poetic' narrative of Ovid, Pope, Kafka or Borges, characterised by crystalline forms describing riddle and paradox (highly influential on theorists such as Kristeva, Baudrillard and Barthes) is perhaps the mode closest to Heng's. This approach is also comparable to the game-playing of contemporary post-modern writers such as Paul Auster or Haruki Murakami (as well as the filmic devices of Charlie Kauffman, the Simpsons and, arguably, Walt Disney), wherein the author, the reader, as well as the novel form itself are incorporated into the conceptual parameters of the work. Heng does not (or very rarely) labour over grand rhetoric or political commentary ('I have always felt a strong allegiance to and admiration for work with a certain stillness/silence'), associated in the distant past with genres such as history painting and more recently with the resurgence of narrative-driven figuration but, rather, the more supple, intimate, epistolary world of personal events and enigmatic anecdotes, expressed in a manner comparable to Borges' 'voluntary dream which is artistic creation'.

This poetic rather than prosaic approach allows for extraordinary flexibility in the conceptualisation and visualisation of Heng's motifs; a quality also found in the sculptural approach employed in constructing these works. It is often possible to trace the cut edge of sections of his drawings, where images are cropped and altered, insertions made and forms re-composed, sometimes late in the working process. These almost invisible traces (Heng has developed a technique where the insertion is near-perfect, like marquetry) witness, on the one hand, a modernist confidence in the painting as object (indeed, his barely modelled drawings flirt with a flatness and a-pictorialism redolent of modernist

abstraction) as well as an engagement with the condition of his images within 'the real'. His drawings approximate objects through their ontology, rather than the imaginary. This is perhaps most apparent in regard to how Heng has developed his latest series. An initial drawing was taped to a glass wall of his studio. This was overlaid with additional motifs, while the original drawing could still be seen against the light, through the semi-translucent paper. Subsequent alterations were made by moving these elements in space in a process comparable to installation; located somewhere between collage and film-cell production, drawing strategies that perhaps most closely approximate real-time and real-space.

Heng acknowledges that, since art school, he has never kept a sketch-book, preferring a loose-leaf approach to drawing, each image existing in isolation rather than a bound format, however peremptory. This distrust or 'deconstruction' of the authority of a journal, even of the most personal kind, again points to Heng's innate tendency towards critical, broken or 'poetic' narrative methodologies. These poised fragments emphasise the space and silence of the page, so important to Heng; voids that also echo Chinese and Japanese landscape traditions, as well as Indian Mughal and Kalighat painting, in which empty space was considered the most difficult and most important part of painting: a dynamic absence, a site of potential. Heng eloquently draws upon this pregnant field of the blank page, at the same time as the lucid authority of the diagram as schema. In this, as with all of his 'games of adjustment', we are left spellbound by the sleight of hand.

Kit Wise

Kit Wise is a Studio Coordinator of Drawing and Bachelor of Fine Art Honours Course Coordinator, Faculty of Art & Design, Monash University

¹ Borges, Jorge Luis, *Labyrinths, Selected Stories and Other Writings*, ed. D.A. Yates and J.E. Irby, Penguin Books, London, 1970, p. 220.

BIOGRAPHICAL DETAILS

Euan Heng was born in Oban, Scotland in 1945. In his youth he worked in various occupations and travelled widely as a merchant seaman. In 1975 he completed studies for a Diploma and Post Diploma of Art at Jordanstone College of Art in

Scotland. In 1977 he came to Australia and has since exhibited extensively in group and solo exhibitions. He was awarded the Australia Council Residency in London (2006) and the British School at Rome (1999), and in 2004 he was the recipient of an ACUADS Distinguished Research Award. He has had many solo exhibitions and his work has been included in a large number of juried and curated group shows both here and overseas. Earlier this year Stonington Stables Museum of Art, Deakin University, Melbourne exhibited *Tuning for Sheller - Euan Heng Print Survey*. His work was also featured in *Academici* at Plimsoll Gallery, Hobart (2006) and *Australian Contemporary Art* at De Recourt Art, London (2005). He has been commissioned to produce prints for the Print Council of Australia and the Australian Print Workshop. His work has been collected by public and university collections in all states of Australia, including the National Gallery of Australia, the National Gallery of Victoria and the Queensland Art Gallery. Heng lives and works in Melbourne.

LIST OF WORKS

all works courtesy the artist

Hypnotist, 2006
pencil, pastel and gouache on paper
101 x 57 cm

Alchemist, 2006
pencil and pastel on paper
101.5 x 57 cm

Magician, 2005
pencil and pastel on paper
124 x 57 cm

Advanced Juggling, 2005
pencil and pastel on paper
113 X 71 cm

Comic Capers, 2004
pencil and pastel on paper
112 x 89 cm

Simulacrum, 2004
pencil and pastel on paper
112 x 76 cm

Backwards, like the moon in a dream, 2005
pencil and pastel on paper
92 x 57 cm



Euan Heng, *Magician*, 2005, pencil and pastel on paper. 124 x 57 cm. Courtesy the artist.