

raphael pepper

tbc

There are places, just as there are people and objects and works of art, whose relationship of parts creates a mystery; an enchantment, which cannot be analysed. John Nash

Drawing is unique. It links directly to the brain, its scritch, scratch process, bypasses planning and communicates directly. Although generally a preliminary process leading to a final work, increasingly its impulsive incision is being used as a means to an end. This directness is the key to Raphael Pepper's choice of the medium. He cuts out the initial delaying and muddying thought processes to engage immediately with his work – laying himself bare on the paper.

Pepper's highly charged drawings are often mistaken for paintings but are in fact created with coloured pencil pigment, which he smudges, scratches and rubs to make areas of intense luminosity. His work hovers between figuration and abstraction by combining immediately identifiable imagery – trees, the moon, a hedgerow with swathes of imagined colour. The imagery allows the viewer a way in, a doorway through which they can enter before becoming lost in swirling pinks and shimmering yellows.

Emotion is the dominating influence on Pepper's work but is often linked with a very tangible and mundane reality. *At the Beginning of Love* (2004) shows a lilac pink pool surrounded by vegetation, the

eponymous *Budgens* (2003) features a detail from the shop's logo infused with more depth than it surely deserves. *Love in the UK* (2003) is a textured map, the landmass almost lost in a pulsating deep red sea. *The Sea, Dymchurch* (2004) compares with definitive minimalist interpretations of the sea by Sugimoto and LS Lowry. A velvety midnight blue mass is split by a Newmanesque zip of light which sharply defines the heavy sea before melting into a stormy sky. The deep resonance of this image communicates the pent up frustration of a childhood holiday separated from the sea by a looming grey concrete wall.

The work is infused with intense velvety pigments: deep cobalt blues, sunset oranges and above all pink in all its guises, hot, baby, fleshy and dusty. Drawing on his Jewish roots he compares the ambiguously emotional pink to Yiddish, a bartered language belonging to no particular country. Pink he explains is not its own colour, merely a drowned out red, despite this it signifies deep emotional zones of both love and sadness. Each of his pink pencils matters to him, like individual people, the degree to which they are sharpened indicates particular traits in their characters.

Pepper's working process starts with an emotionally charged image, either real or photographic, although he notes that when he draws from life his drawing appears



Four Trees London Bridge

photographic whilst when using a photo as source material the resulting image is much freer. One work, *Four Trees London Bridge 2* (2003), was inspired by the view from his south London council block. Transposed by Pepper's tropical palette this ordinary grouping of scrubby trees and bushes develops a quality of otherworldliness, bringing to mind Blake's visions of angels over Peckham Rye.

Pepper's work has a lineage that can be traced back through British art history. Blake, Palmer and in particular Paul Nash (with whom Pepper shares a common interest in the bleakness of the Dymchurch sea wall) connect with Pepper through a visionary depiction of the British landscape. His cited influences are not however limited

to landscape artists and Joseph Conrad, Balthus, Munch, Caravaggio, Raymond Briggs, Rembrandt and Frankie Goes to Hollywood are all somehow filtered and combined to create unique, mysterious but contemporary versions of the visionary.

Currently working from a small east London flat, his room is by necessity neatly ordered. Cupboards are filled with jam jars of pencils, colour graded and sharpened to different specifications, drawers reveal rows of film canisters containing ground up pencil pigment and framed and rolled works live on top of cupboards and under the bed alongside neat sheaths of textured paper. In the corner of the room is his workstation consisting of a desk, a light box and an angle poise lamp. Drawings in progress are secured to the top of the light box and then small



At the beginning of love

areas are masked and unmasked as he works across the paper. Working methodically and concentratedly, a fine pointed mechanical rubber removes unwanted marks and the dusty excess pigment is cleared away with a vacuum cleaner to avoid smudges.

In the manner of Leonardo Da Vinci, intense light is introduced above the work in addition to the light from the box beneath. This accentuates light and dark so that when the work is viewed in a softer light the shaded transitions are delicately subtle. Often areas of finished drawings are intensely overworked causing the paper to desiccate, adding a tantalizingly delicate depth, a feeling of being almost at the point of disintegration (*Burgess Park*, 2003). These meticulous working methods may seem to be at odds with the previously stated direct communication of drawing – however the paper records evolving thoughts, the marks and shades and rubbed areas are a precise, direct communication, a thought in progress.

A recent diagnosis of degenerative disc disease means that Pepper must mediate his labour intensive periods of drawing with other concept based projects. These have including a residency at Peckham Library where he drew portraits of library goers. The original works were given to the sitters leaving behind just a carbon copy trace. A collection of these diaphanous blue facsimiles fills a sketchbook and Pepper can

recall particular characters and their moods from the scribbely silhouette remains. As part of the Residue project at firstsite (2006), he addressed the idea of home. Gallery visitors were asked to send in photographs of their home, which he made into drawings during the show. The drawings were then mailed back to the people who submitted the images leaving the gallery without a trace, not even a smudge of coloured pigment.

Pepper talks about his work having an aftershock, an emotional presence conferred on it during the act of making which is then felt by the viewer. This aftershock is the most important aspect of his work shifting the emphasis of involvement away from the artist and on to the viewer. As he says, ‘for me all art matters only when it is felt’.

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cover image: Full Breath (detail)

