



Master of Ceremonies (detail), 2010, charcoal on paper, 149.86 x 203.3cm. All images this article of work by Lorene Taurerewa; images courtesy the artist

The Dealer's Hand:

Traditions of Representation in Drawings by Lorene Taurerewa 2008 — 2010

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Wit is one of the human race's saving graces, one of the few human things that is totally positive. It is sharpness of mind with largeness of heart, comedy in the understanding of tragedy. Wit lifts us out of the limitations of the fearful, little point of view.

Wit is the main actor at work in Lorene Taurerewa's recent large charcoal drawings. The titles of her shows – *Eccentrics*, *More Eccentricity*, *Sleight of Hand*, *The Company of Fools* – let us know there is more happening than what we see; and elements within the pictures nod to us, asking us to bring what we know of our world beyond the obvious. It's a narrative device familiar from theatre. Just as conspiratorial relationships between playwright and audience work across the stage above and around as well as through the actors, so with these drawings are such contracts negotiated between paper and viewer. Central to this negotiation is the relationship we allow between fiction and truth. Because getting to truths is not the same as showing the obvious; when the truth is veiled you need devious feints and fictions to get to it. This can be dangerous, however, because it assents to any potential turning of the tables so that the viewer may suddenly become the viewed, judged rather than judge.

In trying to separate the creases in the way these dramas are folded, we should first define two basic traditions of

representation. The first is an ancient staple but an oddity in the modern age, which has named it Surrealism. This modern genre has its roots in the ancient tradition of allegorical representation. Paintings by Renée Magritte or Salvador Dali are illustrations of the subconscious mind whose doors had been opened by Sigmund Freud and Karl Jung in their studies into psychoanalysis in the early 20th century. In their writing, the subconscious was a world wherein we cage everything we inhibit from exploration in our lives, a 'fantastical' or 'surreal' world of alienated, dissociated, fractured meanings, beyond logical interpretation. The modern viewer will read paintings by Hieronymus Bosch with the same preconception, as fantastic visions of a disturbed mind. But to the audience of Bosch's day his paintings were completely legible depictions of a very real world; their intricacy was necessary to illustrate the complexity of that world. The Medieval and Renaissance audience knew their universe as a kaleidoscopic, utterly symmetric, perfectly harmonious, extremely complex unity; one which only the human being's shrouded perception could limit to incompleteness, imbalance, unfairness and irony. The art of this culture was always an attempt to lift the shroud of local human perception to reveal the universal concept.

This 'revelation' took part in a still more ancient and global tradition. All pictorial representation used to be tasked with



1/ *Ringmaster*, 2010, charcoal on paper, 149.86 x 177.8cm

2/ *The Case of Jimmy Somerset*, 2009, charcoal on paper, 149.86 x 203.2cm

explaining to the public truths much wider and more universal than those of the here and now: truths of such a scale either great or small as to be invisible on the human plane. For images of that universal plane you had to use recognisable figures. The human being was the most versatile for this job, a creature both infinitely complex and intimately known. The animal world, too, enacted roles which in their diversity and complexity proved their universal interrelationship. Thus, on the wall of the burial chamber in the Great Pyramids, a dung-beetle pushes the sun out of a woman's vagina and onto a barge, to be hauled by a human team, directed by characters with human bodies and animals' heads, across the Nile. What on earth does that represent? The sunrise and the death and rebirth of the king and the unity of human life with the whole animal world and the greater universal law?

In the Renaissance we find alchemical illustrations showing a man and woman in various stages of sexual intercourse in the bottom of a test tube. It was no problem to the Renaissance viewer to see this as a representation of the stages of chemical process in the alloy of metals. A century later, Rubens portrayed the Queen of France (Marie de Medici) receiving her education from Apollo, Minerva and Mercury. For contemporary viewers, this represented no actual scene but an allegory of the French Queen's competence in the arts, in government, and in diplomacy. The translation between human image and universal abstract representative was natural and effortless.

In the centuries since Rubens painted that picture, the discoveries of science unveiled causes for the world's phenomena utterly different than had been imagined through the preceding millennia; and accordingly, as belief in the ultimate truths of the past cracked, so did belief in the allegorical tradition's ability to represent truth. The role of representation changed. A thing could be trusted now to have just one, unique, individual appearance in the actual world, and could represent nothing else. This was realism, the second of the two traditions Taurerewa utilises in balancing her dramas.

Realism has always allied itself with humanism's belief in the exceptional (rather than representative) quality of the

individual. It is strong in Hellenist and Roman art, and then again in the Renaissance. It became supreme in the 19th and 20th centuries. While its task – to represent faithfully individuals in individual time – is a job of ennoblement, it conveys a cold and lonely quality because we have to read it among the ruins of our forefathers' beliefs. Towards the end of the 19th century, we were post-Darwin, post-Nietzsche. God had died and a monkey replaced him as 'man's father and creator. With the crashing in of 'reality', the assumption of an intimate bond between God's creation and the human being, as its finest, most eloquent expression, collapsed completely; its wreckage lying around us, in temples and paintings, is evidence of a great betrayal.

Lorene Taurerewa's drawings are well familiar with this heritage of loneliness: they are steeped in the feeling of alienation from meaning in our larger universe, our post-19th century existentialism. Lying around within the drawings we find vestiges of symbolic connection to the wider and deeper universe, not exactly as ruins of belief but more like neglected toys. Children pick them up and are trying to remember what the special quality of that toy was, and how it connected with special feelings of ancestry and empathy, to relationships deeper, bigger and longer-lasting than one's self. Realism's ultimate weapon was photography – alongside its undeniable testimony to the actual facts, the allegorical tradition was exposed as effete, groundless, only achievable in the collusiveness of painting. In the first photography, the Victorian photo portrait, you still see the ruins of the allegorical imagination, lying around as costumes, props, and backdrops.

If a single time and place had to be determined for the scenes in Ms Taurerewa's drawings, the evidence would draw us to a photography studio of the mid-19th century, the shaky, imminent time of steamships and cameras, of quick escape to who you might be, of eternal capture as who you are. The characters in these works are the jetsam of the 19th and 20th centuries: the debris of internal emotion, hope, tie, loss and regret tossed in the mix of incomprehensible shocks that propelled us on our epic and pitiful quests along the unending circle of refuge. Along the path they have collected the costumes of the colonial centuries; the



colonisation of society, and of class, and of culture, race, and mind. On this path they have learned that leading and following are the same; bullying and humiliation, manipulation and empowerment, cruelty and caring are the same act.

Sexual identities and power constructs are formed in Taurerewa's drawings through untraceable moves on their board-game motifs, tracing a chase of personal fears and silent instincts, choreographed by the unseen hand of the past. They have re-assembled there like aged children ultimately drawn back to the scene of their parents' murder. From the intervening years they return forged as a circus-troupe of world-damaged fakers and posers, refugees without refuge, without option but to team up with other orphan misfits to form a family; living by their wits, making the best of the hand they are dealt.

Taurerewa shifts scales and frames the way Shakespeare would set a play within a play, to structure different layers of fiction and thereby invert the relationships of cause and effect. Are the small people controlled by the big people? Do they represent the big peoples' thoughts, in which case do they control the big people? When the big people come out onto the stage – get up on the table – are they puppets or puppeteers? The viewer is invited to separate the layers of feint and fiction to reveal the path of cause and effect. But these are not layers to be separated, rather roots hopelessly knotted, tangled from trying to grow in the inhospitable soil of our era, or perhaps of our human nature.

Physically, and therefore sensually, we are put together as tubes of skin with holes; and so defining where we begin and end, where inside becomes outside, is as arbitrary as the placement of a mark upon paper. As our skin which, Möbius-like, loops and re-enters itself, paper both contains no space and intimates the presence of spaces when its sensitivity is called to respond to marks.

The connection between sensation-motivated mark on paper and sensation-imprinted mark within ourselves is heartfelt, direct and undeniable. This is the final level of fiction, one where viewer can no longer place him or herself independent of the artifice; and so in the end the very direction of the pursuit is in question. The crime is undeniable, the wound is open, the cruelty is bare; but if we are to move on and away, the case must stay cold.

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 Lorene Taurerewa recently exhibited with Warwick McLeod in their exhibition of paintings and drawings, *The Sugarbread House*, at THE END, New York, 27 January to 24 February 2012.

Taurerewa was also part of a group show, *The Influential Female, Drawings Inspired by Women in History*, curated by Randall Harris and shown at the Kentler International Drawing Space, New York, 3 February to 25 March 2012. New Zealand-born Taurerewa is currently based in New York. www.taurerewa.com

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Warwick McLeod is an artist and writer, who teaches at Victoria University School of Architecture in Wellington.

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 1/ *The Swing*, 2010, charcoal on paper, 149.86 x 180.34cm

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 2/ *The Wonderful Toy*, 2010, charcoal on paper, 149.86 x 203.2cm