

Fred Douglas
WALK IN THE RAIN

“Giving Painting Lessons to the Aliens”

BY JERRY ZASLOVE

Artist’s Statement (1996)

FRED DOUGLAS

Afterword “Picturing”

BY LIANE DAVISON



“Giving Painting Lessons to the Aliens”

by Jerry Zaslove, 2004

“The more he understands, the more he suffers. The more he knows, the more he is torn. But his lucidity is the reflection of his sorrow, and his tenacity that of his despair.”

- René Char

Fred Douglas
Walk In The Rain, 1995

graphite pencil drawing on
paper
(30.5 x 22.8cm)
SAG 1996.11.01

Photograph by Cameron Heryet



Fred Douglas, *Walk In The Rain (detail)*, 1995 graphite pencil drawing on paper SAG 1996.11.01 Photograph by Cameron Heryet

“Siftings” from *The Dog of Hearts* (1973)

I

The enigmatically beautiful “caption” that I use as the title of these notes about Fred Douglas are his own words - he wrote them as a caption to one of his illustrations to his un-novel *Menu for Sunset: An Apparent Story Illustrated with Pictures* (Surrey Art Gallery, 1996). The drawing shows an artist and easel, a grinning reclining model and a third figure prone on the floor. We can’t make out the image on the easel. The caption suggests several ways to understand his drawings, which for me are like a gift from some alien horizon where image and text mingle happily. We, the spectator of the event of the drawing, are like the aliens who receive lessons in art. This reciprocity of art and viewer-listener becomes the breeding ground of the drawings and how both we and the drawings can be understood in the present and are, ourselves, object lessons for a future.

We “regard” the drawings as sensually alive lessons in optics. We don’t know where they come from or where they are going. They hover yet they are anchored to the earth. They seem to be both lessons about the love of drawing, in the way of Goya’s late drawings, and a way to ground images that we know we have had before but don’t know from whence they came. For me this is the essence of great images: we return to them again and again even though they have no names, or the place of their origin may be obscure. They seem to have a place because they emerge out of time and space, born fresh and nameless. Yet the captions, which also are little joking gestures of naming, become like the playfully ritualized animals in the caves of Lascaux. Or in another genre related to this: the astonishingly

precise images a child might study in Winsor McCay’s *Little Nemo in Slumberland* or George Herriman’s *Krazy Kat*. These are all episodic constructions that are like fairy tales, but create a world of perspectival thinking that astonishes us because the world inhabits the ruins of memory that will not die out. This world is pleasurable and entertaining and informative at the same time, and like the drawing skills of early Picasso or Paul Klee we are reminded of the mantic skills of the hand and eye.

This kind of image provokes what I call an image of “reciprocity”. It gives us something familiar and asks us to think about it and work with it. In this fine sense we learn about how artists think. They think in images and the ideas come out of the images, and in the case of Fred Douglas’ delicate, floating images - which are much like his prose - they move.

II

The images are animated by the lines, the shading, the way they “bloom into pictures” (Fred Douglas’ words). How is this possible? The images ask this very question - how is it possible? Is the art of drawing a magical ventriloquy that comes from some other world? The picture emerges slowly out of the paper because the artist’s mind is, in itself but not for itself, a paper-thin translucent surface that emerges as if a phantom object emerges into reality. However, this is an optically precise emerging. At the same time the images in the process of becoming real shape the bodies that are embodied in the picture. The genie is out of the bottle. Some seem to have described this activity of Fred Douglas’ drawings as evanescent. Fred Douglas uses many words to describe the consciousness-forming process that he is interested in and sees in objects through his word “fluttering”, as the movement from flatness to depth and escape



Fred Douglas, *Walk In The Rain (RECTO)*, 1995 graphite pencil drawing on paper (30.5 x 22.8cm) SAG 1996.11.01 Photograph by Cameron Heryet

from geographical boundaries, even as his writing and images are embedded in exact Vancouver locations and neighborhoods. Using a teacherly language one might speak to aliens, he once wrote: "I think that the method I used and teach [from sense to image to abstraction] is a method of bringing to light 'subjugated knowledge'." I see this as well as a chronicling and illumination of objects in their once-upon-a-time enslavement to the owners' property; but the objects are released, "fluttering" into autonomous existence and liberation. The drawings seem to show humans who are always in transition from one state to another, tenants on earth carrying their belongings with them exactly because they have an "economic reality," a transaction in space. The drawings are like adventures in space; they are objects of exchange: they give us something and we must give back to them in return, in a transaction, before they settle down somewhere else than where they are in that moment we see them.

The drawings are also like "outtakes" from a larger project. We land here and land there and we take up shelter and temporary residence in the drawings that want to ground us with them. That is their fate - to be part of a chronicle, a serial existence, and figures torn from pages. This is an artist who works by analogy and correspondences and affinities, in order to undercut the dangerous illusion that we live in an "organic" totality in the world. The thought that some think about the world as a totality is sad and melancholic and makes us, if we are alive at all, think about suffering because we are enclosed in an organic world that acts like nature. At some profound level this contains a political lesson. The lesson is that we tell stories to someone who cares to listen or who cares to look at the drawings and draw power from them. The illustrations to Fred Douglas' 'un-novels' are stories within stories. Yes, the stories

are told, there is a "teller" and it seems they are anecdotal. But the drawings are authorless. They tell another story of a relationship of object (the drawing and its shape) to the frame of the prose meditation, often comic and askew. "Frame" is a psychoanalytic concept in the way I use it: it means the process of transference where we carry something over a threshold to another "framing" place; we project feelings into an inanimate object in order to animate it. The drawings frame this process and in doing so the obstacles to consciousness either vanish or they return in another shape. Thus the sketchbook images of an arch, a doorway, and entrances promise a better place. We build in this way, a surplus of subversive knowledge that the reader or spectator of the images can draw on for the future. In this sense the images are "utopic" because they are what the philosopher Ernst Bloch calls "anticipatory illuminations". They promise a better world, a quickened lighter step, by recognizing the obstacles that have to be overcome in order to understand a promised world that can only be imagined. Like another artist-writer, Bruno Schulz who combined his graphics with his writing, there is no promised redemption in these drawings.

In this way the very small drawings in this exhibit touch the world and caress it. The world falls away in a shambles of clothing and ruminating distractions to return again in another drawing which will "flutter" into the nooks and crannies of memory and in the public secrets of lovemaking under an umbrella that is erect and kind against the weather - "Walk in the Rain" (1995, Surrey Art Gallery Permanent Collection). The loving recollection of cars. Their admirers dance toward the cars on a street full of memory and houses with windows facing the street.

Such drawings that accomplish this feat of consciousness are not about specific memory-



Fred Douglas, *Walk In The Rain (VERSO)*, 1995 graphite pencil drawing on paper (30.5 x 22.8cm) SAG 1996.11.01 Photograph by Cameron Heryet

images or about specific recollections sheltered in collective memory. They are about the process of remembering and recovering what I can only describe as “the childhood” of memory. Memory returns again and again to a location of an image and works with it, transforms it as a child would combine and recombine the left-over images in some almost divine ritual of friendly astonishment toward the floating reality that we live in. This is the work of a trickster who is at home in the archaic as well as the would-be modern.

If you look carefully at Fred Douglas drawings they are like engravings without a plate. There is nothing like a hard surface to contain them. This is terribly unnerving, especially as many drawings lean to the left and try to escape their “loosely executed” (his words) scenes of melancholy. Optically precise and metaphysically unmoored, they are of this world and no other. I would use them, if I could, to illustrate Franz Kafka’s stories or Samuel Beckett’s prose fragments that turn our quixotic thoughts about an “organic” world into stories and images grounded gravely and lightly in this world.

III

In the time I have come to know Fred Douglas’ writings and drawings, photography and installations, I have come to believe that he has a coherent vision of the world in which the art that he makes is related to a wide range of information that the ordinary person might know, but does not know that he or she knows. This “information” shown as an artwork is turned into information about photography, drawing or constructions in galleries in a series of diverse forms which are in essence “utopic” - “news from nowhere” - that do not alienate the spectator from being imprinted on the world. The work comes to the

viewer in a strange combination of the commonplace, which the artist magically knows as both reality and the conventions of art and ordinary life. Framing this process turns us upside down and inside out because empathic qualities suffuse the images as might happen in an intaglio print. This can be seen as the beautiful sense of the awe of the future by our roving nomadic consciousness. These unusual objects or common drawings are not in themselves beautiful but become beautiful by influencing others to look at the lightness of the image in the light of the heaviness of their earthy behaviors.

Fred Douglas (1935 - 2005) was a Vancouver, British Columbia artist whose installations of photographs, tableaus, bookworks and printmaking have been exhibited and collected at galleries throughout British Columbia and Canada. His drawings and photography are often accompanied by prose excursions. He taught at the University of Victoria since the eighties and completed his major work - a tableau-like bookwork, “Flutter” that has been shown in part at Access Gallery in 2004 and the Helen Pitt Gallery in 2005, both in Vancouver.

Works by Fred Douglas important to this essay:

Fred Douglas, *Menu for Sunset: An Apparent Story Illustrated with Pictures*, Introduction by Willard Holmes, Afterword by Liane Davison, Surrey Art Gallery, 1996 (Out of Print).

A Day of Art, DaDABaby Enterprises, North Vancouver, B.C., 1999.

Excerpts from Cars, Clothes, Houses and Weather Conditions, Redeemed Plates, Illingworth Kerr Gallery, Alberta College of Art and Design, 1999.

Quotations from Fred Douglas’ writings in W.F. Garrett-Petts and Donald Lawrence, *Photographic Encounters*, Edmonton, University of Alberta Press and Kamloops Art Gallery, 2000.

Fred Douglas' "Flutter" shown at Access Gallery, Vancouver, B.C.
in 2004 and fragments from this work courtesy of Fred Douglas.

Artist's Statement (1996)

My stories and pictures emerge out of arrays or lists. They are a condition of compilations. I add one thing to the other until a kind of catastrophe occurs. The catastrophe is a picture or story. Of course stories and pictures can be invented, for once a model exists variations can be contrived from it. But this is not the process I refer to. What I'm interested in is the condition that existed before the picture and story emerged and how this emergence occurs.

There is a point in the accruing of experiences where the simple concatenation of pieces somehow convolutes and reappears as a picture or a story. It amazes me as the separation between the pieces almost disappears. Before the picture and story emerges the pieces are a collection of discrete bits. Then it's as if the pieces swarm and form a cocoon into which much of their identity disappears. The picture and story form a kind of cocoon and this new form holds experience in a way that a series cannot. The picture and story in this way, save the pieces from dwindling on infinitely, but only to dissolve them into the atmosphere of the cocoon.

Fred Douglas, *Menu for Sunset: An Apparent Story Illustrated with Pictures*, Surrey Art Gallery, 1996.

Afterword - "Picturing"

by Liane Davison, Curator of Exhibitions and Collections, Surrey Art Gallery

What if a picture really had a thousand words?

Fred Douglas has written a series of descriptions of imagined situations which, when they are linked together as chapters, form a kind of novel. He has also described these imagined scenes in small pencil drawings. Together with the text, they tell a story, not only about the experiences of two people, but also about how we read pictures.

Douglas thinks that the word "picture" is less useful as a noun than as a verb, an act of creation that can occur at any time, out of any situation. He believes that "pictures can grow out of almost any activity: stains, smudges, movement through a crowd, clouds." He says "we draw pictures, paint pictures, photograph pictures, and we also make pictures with real things in the world. Utopias, gardens, restaurants, boats and love-affairs are some of these real-life pictures. We appear to each other as pictures - a certain stance or gait, a costume, a mode of grooming and gesturing may form a picture."

In thinking about why we create pictures, Douglas says "I believe that we create such pictures out of a desire to bring things into a settled state." However, he doesn't believe this to be possible. He doesn't see pictures as fixed entities, rather he finds images to be fluid, with stories flowing from them. Rather than focussing on reaching a conclusion or an end, Douglas' pictures and stories are a "buzzing of voices and images."

In a recent artist's statement, Douglas wrote about his methodology. "My stories and pictures appear out of arrays or lists. They are a condition of compilations. I

add one thing to the other until a kind of catastrophe occurs. The catastrophe is a picture or story. The picture and story are kinds of cocoons which hold experience in a way that a series cannot." In another statement, Douglas wrote about his passion for making work, and his intention. "I'm just interested in work that enchants me, but I've only been able to approach my own work through irony. I want to make something simple and innocent, but it will not form that way for me. I believe Blake is right when he says, "Human love brings to birth a new consciousness in nature. Redemption is the humanizing of all things... the animating of all sensible objects." I believe that we contain reality and that there is a reality in us that doesn't need the bulwark of irony to protect it. I wish that I could be more unguarded in relation to the reality that I am. I wish that I didn't have to feel like rationalizing it, but I do, and it is because of the times we live in. We have become detached and disinterested. We dare not look at things except from afar and through the leveling process of reason. I believe that we have lost something or are losing it - call it imagination, innocence, love - whatever it's called, it is the ability to humanize an area of the world."

"There are excellent reasons for feeling as we do and so I'm torn between two mind sets that have no

ability to compromise. I can't give myself up to reason and scientism and I can't claim to be innocent, yet I realize that our systems leave an enormous amount not just unsaid but unsayable and so we are, in fact, innocent - but any attempt to become innocent must be cynical."

"So my work is an outcome of this situation. Its aspects are jangled. Any roots it develops, it tears up and fashions into oddities. I've tried to make an optimistic art, but I can see that it is melancholy. If my work is different from other work with similar concerns, it is because it takes form as something between a quandary and a dialectic. I think that two aspects are set against each other in my work, they could be called symbol and allegory, or apparition against history, or synchronic against diachronic, even metaphysics against apparition, but the most general terms that have occurred to me are life against death."

Menu for Sunset: An Apparent Story Illustrated with Pictures, Surrey Art Gallery, 1996.

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