



Drawing and Visualisation Research

Published in *TRACEY* | journal

Presence

July 2016

[www.lboro.ac.uk/microsites/](http://www.lboro.ac.uk/microsites/sota/tracey/)

sota/tracey/

tracey@lboro.ac.uk

PRESENCE AND DRAWING: DRAWING IN AND DRAWING OUT

Stuart Reid

OCAD University Toronto Ontario Canada

stuartmckreid@gmail.com



FIGURE 1

The brain does not live inside the head, even though it is its formal habitat.

It reaches out to the body, and with the body it reaches out to the world.¹

I have drawn almost all my life.

Drawing has informed almost all my creative practice, whether directly doing finished drawings, or as a vital part of painting, architectural glass or architecture.

I have used drawing as a communication tool for talking with architects, contractors, fabricators and students. I have used it as a presentation tool for juried submissions. Mostly though, I use it as a means of *making creative thought and intuitive perception tangible and visible*. As Pallasmaa has observed, we have a connection with the world that is *direct*: “In artistic works, existential understanding arises from our very encounter with the world and our being-in-the-world – it is not conceptualised or intellectualised.”² Yet drawing itself helps us to articulate, to express our conceptual understanding of the world.

Even simple drawing helps you notice things, like the shape of an ear, or the way the leaves cluster on a branch. By ‘drawing it out’ you clarify as you illustrate. Of course drawing like this leads to drawings where you figure out how things might work – semi-scientific or diagrammatic drawings...and this kind of drawing helps me in both the understanding and creation of architecture and architectural details.

Another step along this path is using drawing to figure things out that are less objective and more immersive. Drawing helps me think about and make sense of physical phenomena like rain blowing in the wind or water’s movements (e.g. waves, rivulets, rivers). It helps me understand the landscape I am surrounded by as well as its specific trees, plants, flowers, sand and rock formations and how these all interconnect. Or why and how cities grow by rivers, and the kinds of street patterns and cityscapes that are afforded by this organic process.

Drawing quickens my perception of human gesture (identity within movement), of sensibility and connectivity, of the boundaries or ‘outlines’ that define and separate ‘entities’ for us. All drawing is physically drawing across a surface, but this physical action, while always present as material reality, offers few clues into the depth or adventure of

¹ Wilson, F. (1998). *The Hand: How its use shapes the brain, language and human culture*. New York: Pantheon Books, p. 307.

² Pallasmaa, J. (2012). *The Eyes of the Skin*. Chichester: Wiley-Academy, p. 28.

drawing. Drawing has metaphoric meanings – *drawing out* – like drawing water from a well – and *drawing in* – like being pulled by a magnetic force. Drawing our dreams, drawing our memories, drawing our connectivity or isolation, even drawing our hopes...we draw *into* and we draw *out* these ephemeral aspects of our private selves.

Over the last twelve years I have gone from using drawing as silent partner in commissioned, handsome works of architecture and architectural glass, to doing work where drawing the human presence has become a much more soulful focus of my transparently narrative and personal work. This paper discusses a series of works from the latter end of this spectrum, in which the act of drawing has ‘drawn me into’ relationship with my own psyche, and to connectivity with humans I know, and those I don’t know.

My earlier drawings borrow from the modernist drawings of le Corbusier, Klee, Picasso and Matisse, the pre-modern architectural drawings of Piranesi, and postmodern visions of Aldo Rossi – and I have an abiding interest in forty years of calligraphic marks and scrawls by Cy Twombly. The artists whose drawings now haunt my memory are much more figuratively based and span a deep range of time: Giotto to Michelangelo, as well other pre-modern masterworks by Leonardo, Rembrandt, Goya, Blake, Van Gogh, Degas, Munch, Klimt, as well as the war-ravaged works of Kollwitz and Moore, and the more contemporary but also dark drawings of Beuys, Kentridge and the Canadian artist Betty Goodwin. Human presence is writ large in the works of all these artists.

As a practitioner and not a theorist, critic or curator, I spend more time doing and considering my own drawings than I do exploring the drawings of peers or mentors and much more time looking at, lingering with and remembering their drawings than reading about them, so my response to *drawing and presence* has to be qualified within those parameters.

When I am drawing, the physicality of the paper and ink, charcoal or graphite, friction or glide of the hand’s movement seems all important – when the process is going well the mark or line seems to dance with life and I can feel something almost like a pure connection from the mind to the hand. The image is clearly the result of the action, which is itself the result of the ‘brain reaching out through the body to the world’. When, however, I’m looking at someone else’s finished work there is a less sequential mix of seeing, thinking, feeling, and conscious dwelling. Reflecting on the idea of how we dwell with drawing – “*think with the senses, feel with the mind*”³ – I sometimes wonder whether it is the image or the materiality of the marks on the ground, which has engaged me more...even in the extreme case of holding the original studies for Leda by Leonardo or the crucifixion drawings of Michelangelo in my hands at the British museum – and what

³ Storr, R. (2007). *Think With The Senses, Feel With The Mind*. Venezia: Fondazione La Biennale di Venezia.

poignancy! – I felt that these works were already embedded in my memory and imagination from looking at printed plates. Drawing is such a direct language – so transferable into printed form – and in these works as printed images, the evidence of the aliveness of the vision as well as the mastery of the composition of form, line and light was already evident, though the physical presence of ‘witness’ was not.

‘exiting: a requiem’

The cathartic shift in my work from a broad reaching exploration of material phenomena to an in-depth, primary dwelling on the human condition started halfway through a (2004) residency at the Banff Centre on ‘informal architecture.’ I began to draw on the four walls of my 20’x20’ white rectangular studio: nine scenes of my father slipping from life to death in the grizzly atmosphere of a fluorescently lit hospital. This environmental work came as a response to the residency’s proposed theme/topic of ‘abjection’.

‘exiting’ was a series of large-scale vignettes, roughly based on a cross between Ingmar Bergman’s *six scenes of a marriage* and the traditional Catholic 14 scenes of *the Stations of the Cross*. These drawings were done from memory – not the kind of memory that one has to try to retrieve, but the kind of memory from which one cannot escape – it was not someone else’s story – it was mine, it was my father’s, it was his death. He was utterly beloved and his death for me was shattering. This is still a difficult piece to talk about but my experience is far from unique: the fall, the visits, the recovery, the rehab, the relapse, the slipping away, the vigil, the death, the white curtain...the atmosphere of fluorescent lights and the smell – a mixture of urine and bleach particular to hospitals. This is often the way we lose the ones we love, and this series of drawings gave witness to it – though it took its toll.



FIGURE 2



FIGURE 3

Dwelling with this work as it slowly emerged around me, I was myself an embodied presence both within and outside of the spaces and scenes I *drew out* of my memory, and *drew into* the room/space/place.⁴ I was observer and participant. Embedded in the imagery and the location of making/viewing, for me (and for viewers who themselves had experienced such places, such scenes), a collage of sounds and smells, sensations, moments of touching, feelings of compassion and revulsion, hope and despair and love was present.

The creation of this work was not only a telling but also a reliving of this experience. This is what made it both disturbing and cathartic. The acts of drawing familiar faces, hands, bodies, gestures, expressions...and the ever-present 'privacy curtain' (so generic, so personal, so formal in the end)...these acts occurred in the moment, in the studio, in the act and residue of drawing, and in the memorative narrative. I find Merleau-Ponty's 'flesh of the world' an apt expression for the strange and complex interweaving of self, other, spatiality, environment, action, being, feeling, knowing that I encountered through this experience/work.⁵

⁴ I have always had a very strong visual memory, which I understand to be not as common as I might have thought.

⁵ Merleau-Ponty, M., & Lefort, C. (1968). *The Visible and the Invisible: followed by working notes*. Evanston: Northwestern University Press, pp. 144-145.



FIGURE 4

The working process was very private, though I was in a residency situation where people often visited each other's studios. The 'opening' was a ceremony. Voice recordings of family emails during the time depicted were played in the space. The drawing (seven weeks' work) was rolled over with white paint. The studio was returned to 'normal.' The remaining artifacts are photos of the process and a videotape of this conclusion of the work. All 'presence,' made present by the drawing, went back to its invisible state of being, in this room of art-making, de-physicalised – hidden under a layer of white latex paint – put back into the 'closet' of my mind/body.

This work with its nine scenes transformed my creative practice.



FIGURE 5

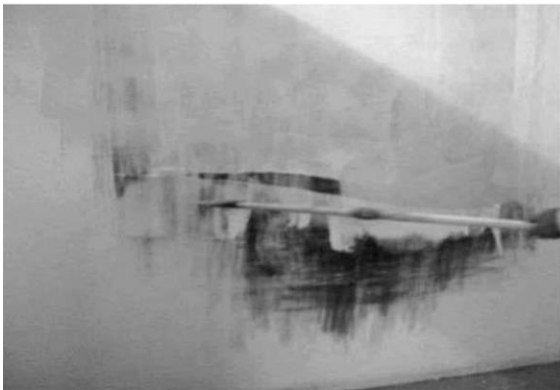


FIGURE 6

The two following works discussed are related to each other – the first is a major commissioned work in glass, entitled ‘zones of immersion’ and the second is a series of ink and graphite drawings related to that commission...the series is entitled ‘in transit’.⁶ They involve drawings made in a public place, of strangers seen fleetingly, and they explore human presence – both my own presence (as ‘drawer’/‘artist’) and the presence of the ‘subject’ who I drew...and the relationship (in that present, lived moment) between the two.

‘zones of immersion’

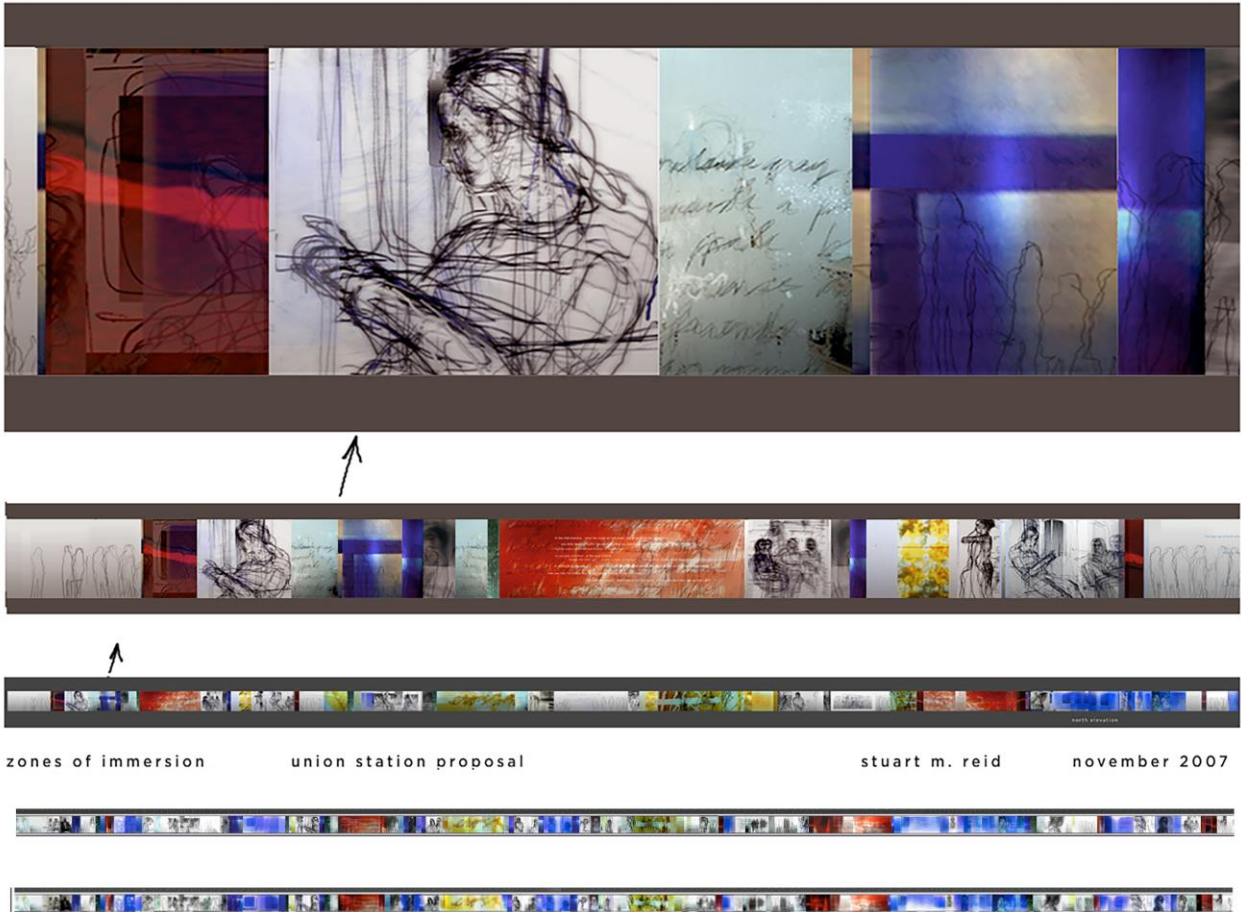


FIGURE 7

⁶ Exhibited at Gallery Gevik in Toronto April 4 – April 30, 2015. <http://www.gevik.com/exhibitions/2015/3-stuart-reid/>

‘zones of immersion’ is my recently completed drawing-on-glass mural for Toronto’s central transit hub, Union Station.⁷ It is an enormous project, a full city-block long – 7’ tall x 500’ long – a glass wall (visible from two sides) between two subway/underground station platforms. Perhaps it is the city’s largest and most viewed artwork in a public space. It is startlingly intimate and its reception has been very mixed – acclaim and notoriety – with many people loving it and many finding it disquieting.

The project began as an international public competition with few parameters: the creation of something that could withstand wind currents; allow the visual permeability required for security purposes; be reasonably ‘vandal proof’; and meet very tight budget limitations. I wanted to use the project to challenge both the neutrality and banality of most of the public art that I was surrounded with. I also wanted to make *art in a public place* rather than ‘*public art*’.⁸ I wondered if art in this place and of this scale could create a living relationship with the viewer – could afford to be something raw, transparently subjective, emotionally present and unapologetically narrative. I thought drawing was the perfect vehicle for images this vulnerable and this human, but images nonetheless with their own form of aliveness and visual richness...even beauty.

I began to draw this underground world, the rhythm of its trains arriving and leaving, the layers and reflections of light and faces through windows, its swelling and disappearing sequences of crowds, and the ‘interiority’ of the commuters as they waited, sat, stood, read and slept. I wanted to create this artwork for the city’s commuters, I wanted it to act as a kind of visual journal and witness of their world.

As I rode the trains or sat on the subway’s platform benches, I sketched anyone that I found interesting, whether only a quick gesture drawing, or, if time afforded, a more detailed study.⁹ I glanced up, took the view in, and drew. When I glanced up again, if they were still there, I developed the drawing further. Some people that noticed that I was drawing them got up to leave, others glared at me, still others posed and smiled, many people didn’t notice at all...and some people were asleep from the exhaustion of a long hard day of work. Whatever the situation, I kept drawing. When one sketch was finished, I began another. Sometimes I would write down my thoughts in a semi-poetic or lyric way – noting anything and everything from the rumble of the trains to the intimacies of conversations overheard.

⁷ Officially opened on July 2, 2015. see <https://www.canadianarchitect.com/architecture/zones-of-immersion-unveiled-at-torontos-union-station/1003728126/>

⁸ Momus interview with Sky Goodden at <http://momus.ca/public-art-has-to-be-art-first-and-public-second-a-conversation-with-stuart-reid-on-union-station/>

⁹ These initial drawings were done in pencil, in a series of notebooks.

I was aware that the whole enterprise was a little transgressive, a bit like spying, a bit like prying, and that even in a glance, these peoples' private stories were perhaps far more transparent than they imagined...but I continued. I drew for hours and days on end.

From these gestured drawings I composed the mural design, with writings and large colour field areas interspersed with them. In the final mural, sometimes they are virtually life-size, sometimes dramatically shifted to larger scale, as they become a rhythm of black-and-white and coloured sections, with poetic texts as counterpoints throughout.

Looking back at the experience of drawing people on the subway, with the strange vulnerability one feels within oneself and regarding the person one is seeking to 'capture', I find Merleau-Ponty's words strikingly poignant and clear:

The visible about us seems to rest in itself. It is as though our vision were formed in the heart of the visible, or as though there were between it and us an intimacy [...] things we could not dream of seeing "all naked" because the gaze itself envelops them, clothes them with its own flesh [...] How does it happen that my look, enveloping them, does not hide them, and finally, that veiling them, it unveils them?¹⁰

'in transit'

After I had submitted my presentation boards, and had then actually won the international competition, I was ready and eager to begin – but such major urban developments have difficult trajectories, and the project went into a long hiatus. I decided to create a series of very large drawings from the initial sketches. I thought that through these drawings I could both develop the richness of these initial portrait studies as well as produce drawings that could stand on their own as a body of work.

I went back to riding the subway to do even more drawings. I digitally enlarged these into very low-resolution blow-ups. I placed frosted Mylar on these enlargements and then made very wet, very free gestural drawings in India Ink on a sprayed watery surface, loosely based on my initial sketch. Afterwards I pinned the dried ink drawings upright to my large studio 'drawing wall' and drew into the Mylar and ink with graphite sticks. By the time I had

¹⁰Merleau-Ponty, M., and Baldwin, T. (2004). *Maurice Merleau-Ponty: basic writings*. London: Routledge, <http://www.tandfebooks.com/isbn/9780293502532>, p. 249.

finished sixty of these (42" x 84") drawings, and I felt the 'in transit' series was a complete entity unto itself, the commission, serendipitously, was given the go ahead.



FIGURE 8



FIGURE 9 A,B,C,D



FIGURE 10



FIGURE 11



FIGURE 12

These large drawings delved deeply into the terrain of portraits. The issue of the 'likeness' reared its head. Who and what am I drawing? Is it a 'likeness'? If it is not, what kind of 'portrait' does it present? Georg Lukács states: "In front of every portrait the question of likeness always forces itself...the really significant portraits give us, besides all other artistic sensations, also this: the life of a human being."¹¹

To me there are three interconnected clichés regarding likeness in drawn portraiture. One is that the artist, as savant, channels the line of our inner being like a poet forms a line of words; another is that the talented draftsman delineates the line of our outer being through acute precision; and a third (coming from the world of caricature), is that something semi-recognizable is amplified and then used for narrative effect. There may indeed be some combination of these approaches in my work, but I am not interested in subjective sentimentality, disinterested exactitude or one-dimensional readings.

In these works I wanted to attend, even through a glance, to some understanding of the 'other', and to give this 'seeing' drawn form. The glance itself is important because it is stolen – it is not composed, it is not prepared, it is not agreed to, it is not arranged. The glance does not allow exactitude. The people I drew did not pay for and could not control the 'likeness' – its objectivity or subjectivity, tenderness or brutality. There was no motive for flattery and no agenda for mocking or abuse. These people were simply the ones that surrounded me on this passage and all who were selected, were selected because there was something in each of them that I found compelling.

Following completion of the series of sixty drawings, I began to rework the 'zones of immersion' glass commission, this time armed with the 7' images which themselves were now digitally enlarged or collaged. I translated these into drawings-on-glass in an industrial studio. I worked with wet glue, redrawing the now highly familiar subway riders onto the 7' tall glass panels. The glue provided a sandblast resist, the drawn image remaining transparent. I painted on these panels again with black ceramic paint, fired it into the glass, sandblasted again and then drew with graphite obsessively into the pitted glass.

When laminated with another protective sheet of glass, these panels formed the black and white drawings that alternated with and complemented large colour-field panels, to synthesise into this subterranean city-block long piece of public art.

¹¹ Lukács, G., Sanders, J. T., Terzakis, K. & Butler, J. (2010). *Soul and Form*. New York: Columbia University Press, p. 26.



FIGURE 13



FIGURE 14

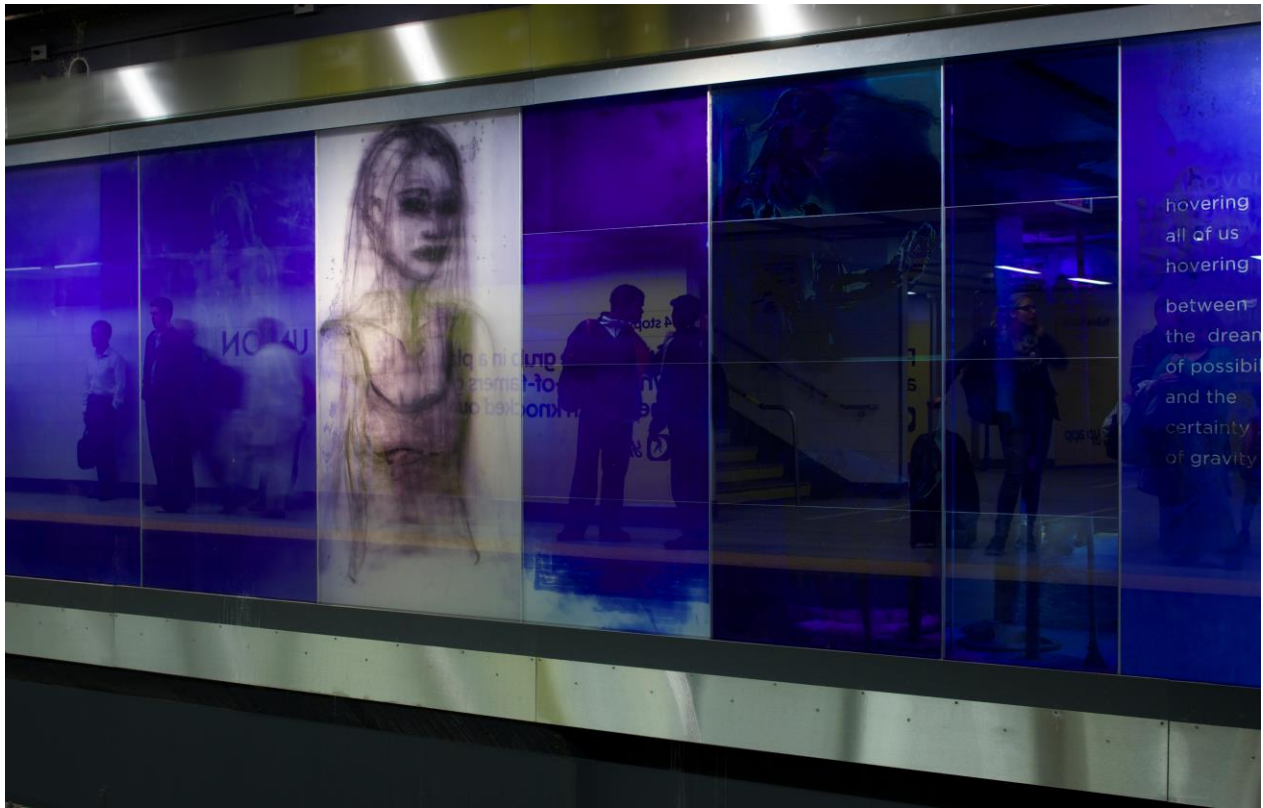


FIGURE 15



FIGURE 16



FIGURE 17



FIGURE 18

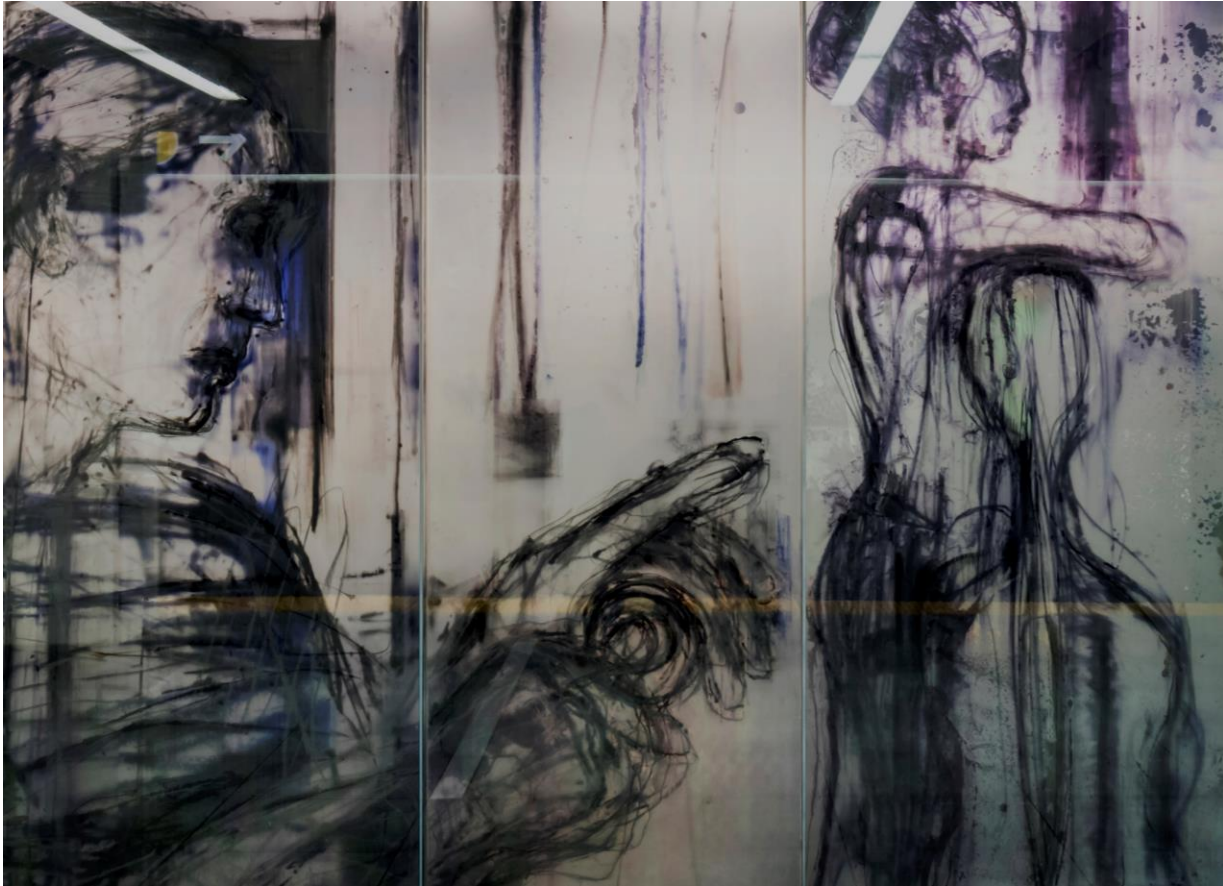


FIGURE 19

The intimacy of this urban artwork may seem out of alignment with the usual expectations/parameters of public art – but I felt that the presence of human intimacy was necessary in the increasingly neutral ‘numbing down’ of our urban social space. This intimacy was given shape by drawing... now not drawings of ones I knew and loved, but of those I did not know – the nameless ‘other’. I could not know if my drawn gestures and ‘portraits’ from glances were in any way true to the persons portrayed...but they felt resonant. I realized they were true to my seeing, and that *seeing this relationship* was the intent of the work – not the exactitude or caricature of likeness. The relationship or *interconnectedness* between us was at the heart of the act of drawing I engaged in.

I find this meaning, this ‘interwovenness’ of experience, expressed in Merleau-Ponty’s notion of reciprocity between my self/my body and the world (environment, other beings): “My body is made of the same flesh as the world...this flesh of my body is shared by the world”; and, “The flesh (of the world or my own) is...a texture that returns to itself and conforms to itself”¹².

¹² Merleau-Ponty, M., & Lefort, C. (1968), pp. 248 and 146.

Conclusion

Juhani Pallasmaa cites Rushdie opining, “Literature is made at the boundary between self and the world, and during the creative act this borderline softens, turns penetrable and allows the world to flow into the artist and the artist to flow into the world.”¹³ Drawing, like writing, tells its own stories, and a line, a mark, a gesture, like a word or phrase or sentence, can speak to our human conscious being, can delineate boundaries or can penetrate them. In literature or in drawing there is, sometimes, something almost universal that is revealed, when we dwell with conscious attentiveness to the particular aspects of our world.

Drawing, if it explores rather than defines, has the capacity to unlock the subconscious. It is a deeply human activity. I believe both the act of drawing and the conscious viewing of drawing afford our human connectedness and our capacity to explore human intimacy, human depth, human soulfulness and ultimately human worth. Lévinas’ words resonate for me:

The question who? envisages a face...The face, preeminently expression, formulates the first word...as eyes that look at you.

*Meaning is the face of the Other, and all recourse to words takes place already within the primordial face to face of language.*¹⁴

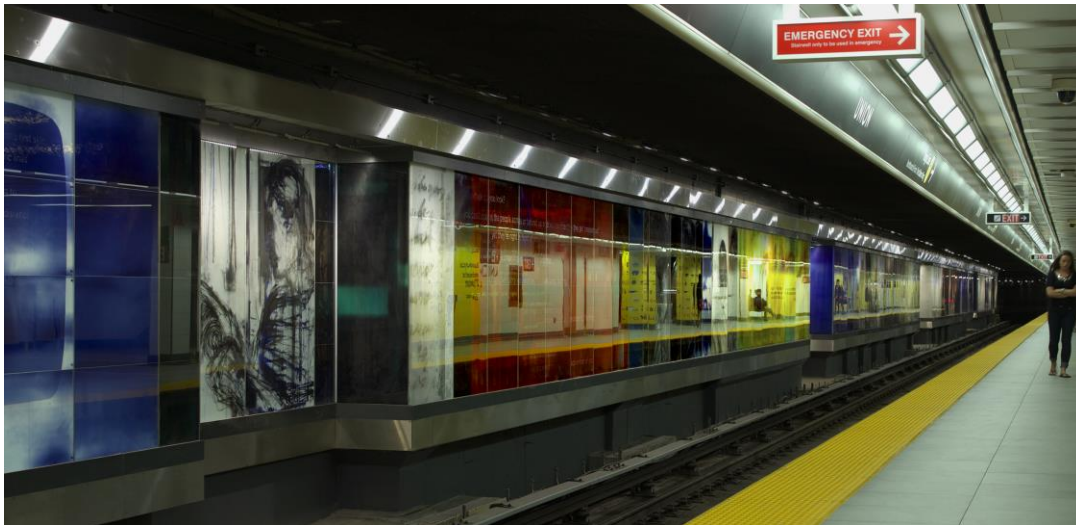


FIGURE 20

¹³ Pallasmaa, J. (2010). *The Thinking Hand*. Chichester, U.K.: Wiley, p. 19.

¹⁴ Lévinas, E. (1969). *Totality and Infinity: an essay on exteriority*. Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania: Duquesne University Press, p. 152/p. 206.

List of Figures

Figure 1 Union Station north platform (detail) 'zones of immersion,' installed 2015

Figure 2– 6 'exiting: a requiem', Banff Centre, 2004

Figure 7 'zones of immersion' design progression, 2007– 2013

Figure 8 'in transit' series: 'a different beauty' (detail) (2011)

Figure 9 'in transit' series: 'A) 'security brief' B) 'disappearing train' C) 'invisible D) 'leaning'

Figure 10 'in transit' series: 'life over lifestyle'

Figure 11 'in transit' series: 'tiny nap/big man'

Figure 12 'in transit' series: 'reading music'

Figure 13 –16 Union Station south track side, 'zones of immersion'

Figure 17–19 Union Station, north platform side, 'zones of immersion'

Figure 20 Union Station, south track side, long view