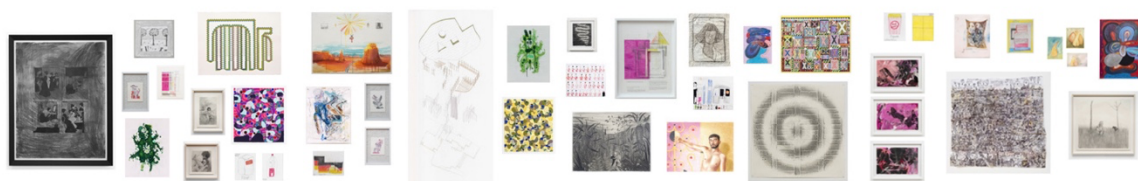


## *The Erotics of Drawing:*

On the Occasion of Western Exhibitions 2021 Drawing Biennial

By Shannon Stratton



I think my favorite word in English is “draw.” In part for its simple phonaesthetics (I’m not that partial to cellar door, and words like loquacious are too fluffy for me, whereas *draw* just kind of slides out of your mouth like a moan), but primarily for the ways we use it. We draw things towards us and behind us, we draw things in and out and open and shut. We draw things through one another. We draw out time, we leave things behind us, trailing. *Drawn*. It is a word about energy, about force that can be muscular, gestural, magnetic, and supernatural.

I might simply have crushes on transitive verbs – words that move other words around - and “to draw” does so ever so elegantly: it pulls gently, guides, traces in a slow and steady way. It is especially lovely when we speak of cloth: “they drew back the blanket” and “should I draw closed the curtains?” manage to be both languid and anticipatory at once. And who hasn’t watched at least one person slowly draw on a cigarette and been somewhat aroused? (And if you can’t bring yourself to admit that, then, I’m assuming that hearing a lover draw breath, short and sharp or long and rough, *has* moved you.) Perhaps that is how one can identify the sensuous? Something that is effortlessly, even lazily, suggestive.

Of course, one also draws to delineate, whether straws or boundaries or even one’s weapon – drawing can be a method of establishing one’s position. But even then, the pace seems at half-speed – in our mind’s eye we see the line in the sand emerging, not appearing in an instant, as we establish our limits.

And as we arrive at making a mark, that other kind of drawing, I think it is fair to say that all of the ways described above, of moving energy around, of establishing, apply to the unfurling of a line from our hands. I’ll be upfront and admit I am absolutely indiscriminate in my use of “drawing” to describe that work. I love to look at line-making of all kinds as drawing, whether it happened on paper or in space, with ink or thread or metal or any material that allows itself continuity. I often find myself imagining one of two things when I reach for the word “drawing” to describe the object that happened: a spider pulling silk from its body, or beautiful, loopy handwriting that is barely legible.

What if us humans are just pulling lines from within ourselves like silk? And they spill out into world as messy tangles or jagged hatching or neat stipples? And why do we make distinctions between writing and drawing, when writing is itself symbols that stand in for language? We extrude from ourselves – utterances, yarns, reveries – and sometimes, we are hoping to make meaning, at other times we just need to express: wring out our souls in order to make room.

Western Exhibitions' inaugural – and therefore, hopefully first of many – drawing biennial(s), celebrates an artform that the gallery has represented steadily throughout its history. As the gallery itself notes, the core concerns of its artists tend towards “identity and gender, personal narrative, sexuality, pattern and exuberance and an attention to materiality.”<sup>1</sup> If we take drawing to be an extrusion of self, many of these themes – particularly those around identity, gender and sexuality are particularly well rendered in this form. Drawing is space to make visible the contents that make us, to make material, and then examine, those qualities that are much more complex than the linguistic code applied to them. Similarly, exuberance – a dynamic affect perhaps more readily associated with action painting – finds a place in drawing as a more solid manifestation of the energy that courses through us. That exuberance might exceed description – a vibration that can't be summarized as ‘happy or ecstatic because...’; rather, I like to comparatively imagine certain sound visualizations that capture the physics of resonance.

I'm going to bumble through an intentionally messy expansion of “physics” to pose the possibility that drawing captures the physics of the erotic. Or maybe I can dial that back to libido, more widely? (And yes, I'm sure there are many people who would say – what art *isn't* that? To which I say, sure – but the reason I'm putting this out there about *drawing* is to gather up all the ways we mean *to draw* and therefore, it can show up as painting, or lithography, or textile arts or other ways lines emerge from bodies).

Libido, in the Freudian sense, is that instinctual psychic energy that drives our desire onward – not only sexual energy, although that basic instinct is part of the whole. Our id reins in our libidinal urges, keeping us from flagrantly reaching for everything and anything we want; but what if we needed to discharge those urges more gently, more frequently, like releasing carbonation or helium from containment? Drawing pours off the excess – sometimes tenderly with the softness of pencil shading, other times vigorously, elegantly or even brutally with broad strokes of ink, tight loop-de-loops of graphite or deep, dark smudges of charcoal made with the whole hand, perhaps clenched in a fist.

When drawing we trail ourselves out onto the substrate, the most basic of instincts – like pissing in the snow, smearing our cum or watching our saliva spill off of our pout, and stretch into a long thread of spit, as gravity pulls it down to earth.

- Shannon R. Stratton, Saugatuck, MI. December, 2020

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<sup>1</sup> As stated by Western Exhibitions' founder and owner, Scott Speh, in his initial invitation to artists to participate.