It Is What It Is: Roni Horn's Drawing Exhibition at the Menil Collection

by Kathleen Forrest

Else 4, 2009, powdered pigment, graphite, charcoal, colored pencil, and varnish on paper, Glenstone Museum, Potomac, Maryland

Roni Horn is difficult to pin down. She works in different mediums and utilizes diverse subject matter. Art Historian Briony Fer offers the best introduction when she says, "Much of her work, as is well known, revolves around Iceland, as if art could be a long series of travel notes…"

Horn's interest in Iceland, her sense of place, and her connection to nature is the easiest entry into her practice. It's pleasant to engage with her there. The drawings in her recent exhibition at the Menil Collection in Houston, *When I Breathe, I Draw,* however, don't appear to be about nature at all. Instead of dark photographs of water or expressive sketches of rocks, we get elusive lines and abstraction.

In these drawings, Horn lays down lines of intense pigment on paper, which she then cuts into pieces and reassembles again in a totally new configuration. The fragmented lines *en masse* create forms that dance, swarm, and twist. The patterns they create, full of rhythmic interruptions and equally significant negative space, are light—they float within the frame in a sea of soft white paper.

There are two ways to look at the work. The first is to step back and see delicate drawings of abstract and organic shapes, like looking at the shape of a knit sweater draped over the back of a chair. But look closer, and the form dissolves while individual lines appear—you notice the threads, start studying the way they are woven together and the texture of the strands. But unlike the neat threads of a sweater, the arrangements in Horn's drawings are complex and messy, going in all directions at once and full of abrupt breaks. Sometimes they echo each other---the repetition of shape and line suggests some logic or pre-determined design which disappears when you try looking for it.

As you look closer, the breaks also become lines—cutting clean and straight through the organically drawn curves. They emerge like a Cartesian plane mapped over the drawn elements, as if hinting at order which they ultimately cannot impose. In a traditional drawing line delineates form; in Horn's work, the lines and the breaks are helplessly arranged into one.

Horn leaves small marks in pencil that hint at her process of re-assembly—like registration marks—all over the final drawings. At the same scale, she scribbles words like musical notations in and around the other lines that confuse rather than explain, words like Yellow, Luck, Knot and Phooey. Almost as soon as you see them, they dissolve again into abstraction, offering us no assistance in understanding the arrangement, serving us better as noise and texture. Confronted thus by the inaccessibility of the detail, you step back again to take in the harmony of the whole, where the form takes shape again and floats serenely on the surface of the picture.

Her drawings are beautifully composed, but they are *interesting* because of the tension between the work as a whole and the detail. They push and pull you close and far away again as you try to hold on to both views simultaneously.

In Briony Fer's analysis, this push and pull is explained as the tension between our phenomenological response to the work and our experience of it. "One striking feature of Horn's work is the double action it sets in motion: at once invoking a solitary monologue, like a particularly intense inner-thought train, and at the same time a bodily sense of the situation. The experience of her work is what it is like to be caught in the crossfire between these two things."

As we struggle to hold on to both views of her work at the same time, "it is as if experience is pitched against phenomenology."

By *experience* she means constructed experience, the idea that our thoughts and feelings are the sum total of previously encountered things. Things, such as events that have shaped our identity, our education, and societal conditioning, inform the way we understand the world around us. On a semiotic level so does our language—our ideas are the effect of the words and meanings we learn. The constant inner monologue that puts the experience of our day to day lives into words—that shapes our experience more than the reality itself.

Constructed experience drives us to "understand" a work of art. (Constructed experience is noticing the cinematography because the film does not hold our attention.) Constructed experience is trying to make sense of the arrangement in Horn's drawings.

Detail of Or 7, 2013/2015 Powdered pigment, graphite, charcoal, colored pencil, and varnish on paper, Glenstone Museum, Potomac, Maryland

Looking at them, we can almost imagine what the originals, pre-deconstruction, might have looked like. Horn calls them plates—large sheets of paper upon which she applies thick pigment in the shape of spirals, waves, concentric circles and scattered horseshoes. Each drawing is repeated in sets of two, three, or four. It can take over a year for her to deconstruct then reassemble a drawing, and her process is thoughtful—there are usually very little leftover scraps when she's done.

"Whether or not you have seen the plates, there is always a sense in the drawings themselves that these configurations have traveled some way from their point of origin and in a fairly circuitous routes." As we study them, we try again and again to make sense of the complexity, using any and all information we can gather. The language and registration marks are no help. They suggest a schema, a plan or code that is imperceptible to us. "Try to break the code and you lose the rapture."

Our solace from *not understanding* is our reaction to the form.

Stepping back, the lines dissolve again and we can see the lightness of the shapes, the composition of the drawings. Fer describes the configurations as a vortex or centrifuge. "The scale of it places the viewer in an entirely different position from the small-scale drawings—you get sucked in by the force of the shattered field." Others have less of a center and instead float aimlessly with no ground to rest on, like a spider's web. From a distance there is nothing to make sense of.

Then there is the materiality of the pigment and paper. Mixed with turpentine, the pigment is applied in thick strokes—it sits heavy on the paper, three dimensional and irregular in surface. Some of them are coated in varnish, others remain matte, and all of them express the purest, most vibrant color. Fer says they have "presence." Michelle White, who curated the show at the Menil, talks about the "surface tactility" and "strong visual presence of her colors."

The paper itself becomes a drawing material as well. I had a strong reaction to the striking lines where two sheets came together. The perfection of paper against paper was stirring. As White describes,

“Meeting rather than overlapping, her cut edges—assertive, energy-filled fault lines—sit against each other.”

The sense of form of the drawings is a bit like gazing upon nature. We stop trying to understand when confronted by something with so much presence. One of the strengths of Fer’s theory is that it allows us to bring nature back into our understanding of Horn. It accounts for my impression of elements of nature when I study the drawings. There is nothing to suggest that *If #3* is based on waves or topography, things I immediately tried comparing them to, except that their form has some of the same content as images of water and earth. They’re interesting that way. Speaking about Horn’s earlier drawings from the solitary months she spent in residence at a lighthouse in Dyrhólaey, Iceland, Fer says: “The point is not that a pool of orange watercolor in *Bluff Life* invokes a watery landscape in any direct way; it is the larger idea that drawing does not represent a place, or even translate it, but drawing itself becomes a place that is as captivating as a lava field or an intricate pattern of pools that make up Iceland’s wilderness.” In the face of something like that, it’s easy to step out of the constructed experience and into a realm of pure bodily sense.

It’s difficult to step away from Fer’s reading of Horn’s work as a tension between two forces. It even accounts for the drawings’ elusive titles—*If, Else, Or, Such.* Words that offer a break from one thought and lead to a different thought while still holding the two together.

It’s hard to step out of both phenomenological and semiotic theory. Together they seem to explain everything we can sense, think, and feel, each theory filling in gaps left by the other. It seems possible to engage with almost anything in Horn’s drawings using these in tandem, especially considering the unknowable depths of our constructed experience, and the indescribability of phenomenological experience. Asking us to hover between these two ideologies is asking us to accept the ineffability of art.

But some questions remain unanswered. One of my favorite parts of the show is the way the drawings seemed to move. The quality of the lines and the repetition of shapes make them vibrate and swim. Horn uses fragments of line, breaks, negative space to “draw,” but what happens to gesture when the lines are dissected and re-assembled? What about the contrast between the quick pencil marks and the thick, heavy, slow strokes of pigment? The title of the exhibition compares drawing to something instinctive, involuntary. But Horn’s drawings are multi-step processes of disassembly and assembly, the opposite of something as un-meditated as breathing.

Perhaps leaving gaps in our analysis is fine. Fer characterizes Horn’s work as “complete, but with missing parts.” A theory, too, can be satisfactory even if it isn’t helpful in every instance.

Fer includes, not as an explanation but as an aside, a description from Claude Lévi-Strauss’s memoirs about a moment in childhood when he realized the lines in limestone marked a history of intense geological pressures on the earth. “It seemed to him to show the limits of phenomenology.”

The example with the rock reminds us that if we’re still searching for easy access to Horn, we can always return to nature and travel. We could look at these drawings—the forms built up with bits and pieces, the intricacies that have no order and at the same time a beautiful harmony—as if they were documentation of both reality and our memories. Our introduction to Horn that was provided earlier by Fer presents us with this hypothesis: “As if art could be a long series of travel notes… charting not only a journey in real time and space to a particular place but also inside her head.”

Bibliography

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