

Pin-Up: Contemporary Collage and Drawing,

Tate Modern, London, 4 December 2004 – 30 January 2005

*What materials qualify at a particular historical moment to be subjected to a newly enforced fragmentation in the paradigm of collage, materials of emerging technology or those newly evacuated, obsolescent ones?*¹

In 2003, the Museum of Modern Art's *Drawing Now: Eight Propositions* ambitiously surveyed the field of contemporary drawing through a series of thematic investigations. On the whole, the exhibition posited drawing as an autonomous practice, as a reversal of the process-oriented art of the 1960s, free from the burdens of materiality and systems. At the beginning of the twenty-first century, 'drawing is not a verb but a noun.'²

The inherent simplicity of the mark-making process and the long history of drawing position it as a kind of counter-position to room-sized sculptural installations and immersive multi-media environments. Collage, on the other hand, has been complicit in just such assemblages, installations, and environments, in the works of Thomas Hirschhorn or Tomoko Takahashi for example. *Pin-Up: Contemporary Collage and Drawing* explores a middle ground between these two techniques through the work of nine international artists. While working within the autonomous definition of drawing established by the MOMA exhibition, their work demonstrates a more traditional approach to collage: for a start, these artists all engage with paper as a medium.

All of the artists are emerging in their careers, with nearly half of them recently represented by galleries at the 2004 Frieze Art Fair in London. Although each artist's practice is fairly diverse, a coherent body or specific series of work has been selected to fit within the context of the exhibition. The title *Pin-Up* refers to both the literal attaching of paper to the wall and to the gender politics explored by many of the artists.





Steven Shearer, *Untitled poster works*, 1999-2004, window installation at Tate Modern, 2004-2005.

The exhibition announces itself from the outside of Tate Modern with Vancouver artist Steven Shearer's *Untitled poster works 1999-2004*. In contrast to the muted brick façade of the building, his multi-coloured poster display fills the ground-level bay window with photographs reproduced from 1970s teen magazines. Like a shop window display (the window is actually Tate's old shop window), Shearer's closely-fitted layout assumes a commercial presentation which is undercut by a strange sense of unfashionable nostalgia. Images of bell-bottoms, psychedelic designs, and a young David Bowie are enlarged and reprinted onto poster papers implying the more intimate space of the bedroom interior. The specificity of each image becomes lost among the jarring and seemingly arbitrary assignment of colours – as if Shearer's formal arrangement of the work references a completely different and contradictory set of early modernist aesthetics.

Untitled poster works holds memory and nostalgia on the cusp of sentimentality, but is ultimately concerned with accumulation and the archive, a kind of anthropological survey of rock culture. Inside the gallery, Shearer reinforces this interest with *Guitar #5* (2002-3), a large inkjet print which consists of hundreds of pictures of people posing with or playing their guitars. These redundant yet endlessly variable thumbnails are presumably only a sample of what Shearer has been able to mine from the internet. The sense of voyeurism and disembodied vision usually associated with internet imagery is noticeably absent from *Guitar #5*. Instead,



the apparent pride and happiness of each person (most are male) contributes to an overall celebratory tone also found in his poster installation.

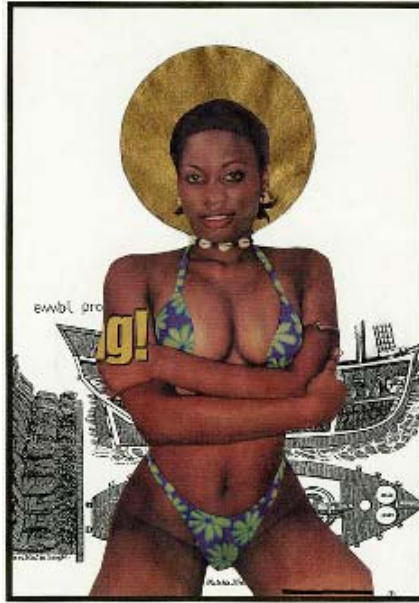
If this survey of guitar players is of a primarily male-dominated experience, then works by other artists counter with a consideration of contemporary gender politics. Kenyan-born artist, Wangechi Mutu assembles mismatching body parts from magazine glamour girls while maintaining elegant, statuesque poses. The portraits are misshapen, elongated, grotesque exaggerations of beauty comparable to Hannah Höch's Dada collages. But where Höch's photomontages involved a broad political critique of the bourgeoisie, Mutu focuses specifically on the effect of European ideals of beauty on African women. On a formal level, this is realized through the use of vibrant watercolours derived from African colour schemes. The aptly titled *Alien Awe Series* (2003) thus becomes both a post-colonial feminist investigation and a beautiful aesthetic reconfiguration; these portraits float gracefully on their transparent mylar backings with a monstrous elegance.



Wangechi Mutu, *Untitled (Classic Profile Series)*, 2003, ink, collage on mylar, 55.6 x 40.3 cm. Collection of Larry Mathews, San Francisco. Courtesy of the artist and Susanne Vielmetter, Los Angeles Projects. © Wangechi Mutu.



Recalling some of the earliest collage techniques, Godfried Donkor uses pages from *The Financial Times* as backgrounds for his *Madonna* (2000-3) variants. Onto these, he layers on eighteenth-century etchings of slave ships, Trinidadian models, and golden haloes, bringing a variety of images from different world economies into a classical *papier collé* critique of colonization and the objectification of women. The Ghana-born Donkor selects the imagery he juxtaposes to keep the historical remnants of colonization raw and fresh. Like the first collages, this textual layering opens the work to a contemporary semiotic reading that gauges the meaning of these symbols and signs.



Godfried Donkor, *Black Madonna I*, 2001, mixed media collage on paper 50 x 38 cm. Courtesy of the artist. © Godfried Donkor.

Dutch artist Amie Dicke also works with the depiction of women in magazines. Using a single or double-page spread of supermodels from fashion magazines like *Vogue*, she carefully incises the figures, forming anti-idealized skeletons of lattices and webs. In addition to her scalpel, Dicke uses a marker to further inscribe a gothic aesthetic of heavy black outlining. The resultant image is an ugly decimation of hair and vacant eyes, yet is also a beautifully resolved sculptural object. *Explosion* and *Isabeli* (both 2004) are her first enlargements on a gigantic scale (1.8 x 2.5 meters), allowing the paper to bow and flex under its own weight. The works thus cast deep shadows of outlines on the wall, reinforcing their imposing presence over the viewer.





Amie Dicke, *Isabeli*, 2004, cut out, ink on paper, 248 x 174 cm. Poju & Anita Zabłudowicz Collection. Courtesy of peres projects, Los Angeles.
© Amie Dicke.

German-born Nicole Wermers seamlessly collages images of perfume bottles cut from magazine advertisements. Meticulously arranged, these become autonomous sculptural glassworks, punctuated by shadings of liquid colour and hyper-reflective edges. Wermers neutralizes the fetishized object into architectonic studies of light and forms. Her video installation of a similar bottle composition, *Notre Dame* (2002), casts a pinkish hue on the surrounding gallery walls, recalling the glows of both a stained glass window and a Dan Flavin installation. Like Shearer, she begins with the problem of consumption and provides a response that recalls modernist abstraction.





Nicole Wermers, *Untitled (Glass collage)*, 2003, collage, magazine pages, 61 x 44 cm. Courtesy Produzentengalerie, Hamburg. © Nicole Wermers.

In appropriating media imagery and disintegrating originating forms, Mutu, Donkor, Dicke, and Wermers rely on the inherent ability of collage to disrupt the visual narrative. In particular, the work of Dicke and Wermers recalls collage of the 1960s where 'the collagist's source materials are not simulated wood grain or stencilled commercial lettering, but photographs themselves, treated on the one hand as material thing, on the other as disembodied image.'³ These artists transform paper as the image's material support into paper into a sculptural object.

It is this tension between medium and narrative that the work of Swedish artist Jockum Nordström explores. When figurative, Nordström creates interior domestic scenes and whole developments of suburban housing out of tiny bits of craft paper and pencil; when abstract, the same bits of paper form patterns of shapes and colours with decorative overtones. By blending both together, he suspends the formation of a coherent narrative. Instead, awkwardness prevails over his characters who are either frozen in moments of posturing in formal dress or plainly engaged in illicit scenes of sex. Nordström's homely and cartoon-like characters have been described as folksy, but this quaint notion soon gives way to an eerie sense of alienation that is reflected in the suburban architecture and the domestic *mise en scène*.





Jockum Nordström, *The Order of Things*, 2004, mixed media on paper. Collection of Pontus Bonnier, Stockholm. Courtesy of Galleri Magnus Karlsson, Stockholm and David Zwirner, New York. © Jockum Nordström.

The conflicting tendencies of drawing as an immediate trace of authorship and collage as disrupting narrative collide in work of Sebastiaan Bremer, Dr Lakra, and Matt Bryans. Abstraction creeps into Bremer's enlarged Polaroids via a plethora of tiny coloured dots that form swirling clouds of patterns, sometimes coalescing into objects or faces. The photographs themselves are dark or out of focus with only hints of people or objects. Bremer meticulously hand paints each dot, sometimes following the shape of the underlying photograph and sometimes refusing it, but always responding to it. The instantaneous time of the photograph is put into play against the laborious painterly time of inking the surface.





Sebastian Bremer, *Sister Sister*, 2004, ink on C-print, 94.6 x 102.2 cm., Courtesy of Galerie Barbara Thumm. Berlin and Roebbling Hall, New York. © Sebastian Bremer.



Dr Lakra, *Mosquitoes*, 2003, ink and paint on vintage magazine, 30.5 x 25.5 cm. Courtesy of Kate MacGarry. London. © Dr Lakra.

Like Bremer, Dr Lakra modifies readymade images by intricately drawing over them. Dr Lakra is a practicing tattoo artist from Mexico, who gave permanent tattoos to visitors at the 2004 Basel Art Fair. Turning his skin technique to pictures of 1950s pin-up girls, he covers them with a complex network of sexual and often degrading tattoos and graffiti, which include gangland imagery and Mexican slang. Their inscription on these half-naked women might read as a second textual layer of male desire inscribed over the first. Yet the fact that his pictures are not solely limited to women and include cartoon-like devils, serpents, and insects, allow the drawings retain a dark sense of irony and humour.





Matt Bryans, *Untitled*, 2004, erased newspaper, dimensions variable.
Courtesy of the artist and Kate MacGarry, London. © Matt Bryans.

For *Pin-Up*, Matt Bryans has designed a site-specific work that covers most of the gallery's end wall with newspaper photographs. The pastel shades of off-whites and yellows combined with the work's sheer size give it the feel of a fresco. But unlike Dicke's large-scale work, which emphasizes linear form, Bryans' papers naturally fade at different rates creating a subtle patchwork of shifting tonalities. He has rubbed-out each clipping, leaving only eyes and the occasional mouth, the most communicative parts of the face, as traces of his obliteration. His eraser leaves a visible brushwork of patterns in the newspaper ink, giving each individual clipping a painterly texture at the micro-level. Erasure here has a democratizing function as Bryans reduces individuals to a minimal set of shared traits.

Bryans' and Shearer's accumulations derive from apparently limitless sources and yet both have a sense of finite boundaries determined in response to the installation space. In fact, all of the works in *Pin-Up* are composed as discreet objects; none has the sense of expansion beyond its frame or betraying an information overload. Rather, the concerns are specific and overwhelmingly social – Donkor, Mutu, and Lakra all bring issues of non-Western cultures to the fore and nearly everyone (save Bremer, who redoubles abstraction) questions prevailing constructions of identity.

While organized on principles of technique, there is a clear contemporary aesthetic shared by the works. Most of them are glossy and shiny; the works are simply beautiful, attractive, and self-enclosed. They are resolved without being elusive, critical without being disorienting. The subversive nature of collage has inevitably softened since the 1910s, when the cubists were radically challenging the conventions of painting, and since the 1960s, when the commercialized appropriation of the technique became mainstream in advertising and media. Greenberg's claim that 'after classical Cubism the development of collage was largely oriented to



shock value⁴ could not predict post-modern economies of circulation and consumption. The work in *Pin-Up* can only be but subtle in its approach and yet is active in its refusal to include three-dimensional objects as a part of the pastiche. If these artists return to the seemingly 'evacuated, obsolescent' material of paper at this particular historical moment, they do so in order to establish a relational position opposite to that of installation and sculpture in the expanded field.

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¹ Benjamin Buchloh, 'From Detail to Fragment: *Décollage Affichiste*', *October* 56, 1991, p.107.

² Laura Hoptman, *Drawing Now: Eight Propositions* Museum of Modern Art, New York, 2003, p.12.

³ Brandon Taylor, *Collage: The Making of Modern Art*, Thames and Hudson, London, 2004, p. 176.

⁴ Clement Greenberg, 'The Pasted-Paper Revolution' (1958/1961), John O'Brian (ed.), *Clement Greenberg: The Collected Essays and Criticism Vol.4*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1993, p.65.

