

DRAWINGS AND OTHER OBJECTS WITHIN REACH

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The drawings of John Beech speak to a world that is close at hand. They capture an environment that is known through touch as well as through sight, one that is proximate, familiar, anodyne—and insistent in its thereness. A recurrent presence in these drawings is the place where they were made, which they record in all its rich and unvarnished materiality: they expand on the life of the studio. They touch on its surfaces, on the activities that animate it, on its clutter, its practical topography and rhythms.

Beech dwells on the properties of paper but also on what happens to it as it lies around in his workspace. Some drawings are stained, presumably by liquids used in the making of other works, the stains becoming formal actors in their own right (*Untitled*, p. 16). Some, with irregular outlines, appear to have been made from the residues of other projects (*Untitled*, p. 169). *Untitled* (p. 91) spent some time in the studio in an earlier incarnation before it was torn and one half, rotated by 90 degrees, was glued over the other. These works seem to have emerged from a process of constant experimentation that is also a scarring.

For Beech, drawing is a noun, yes, but also a verb in the present continuous. His works on paper capture the passing of time in the studio. Many of them seem to have been made over several sittings, with layers of scribbles and blocked-out shapes that testify to shifting moods or formal impulses, to the accretion of marks and motifs over time. The studio, in these works, is a place where time is passed and occasionally wasted—or, more precisely, where the distinction between working productively and time-wasting can melt away at any moment.

Beech's reflections on the life of the studio are close in temper to Bruce Nauman's in his *Mapping the Studio* video installations of 2001, which show night-time surveillance footage of the artist's workspace, its stillness interrupted only at long intervals by the passage of a mouse, moth or cat. For Beech as for Nauman, the studio is a place where activity is not opposed to inactivity but latent in it, and where the conventional hierarchy of objects and events worthy of attention is suspended.

Beech's drawings attest also to moments of doubt and frustration. One recurrent motif is the X, which can be read as a mark of error or as a sign of elemental presence (as in: X marks the spot), even a kind of signature (*Untitled*, p. 90). In other drawings, the line is more jagged and restless, like the flightpath of a fly in a jar (*Untitled*, p. 142). In others still, the marks are so densely applied that they appear to assert and

cancel themselves in the same movement (*Fez*, p. 107). In some of these pieces, Beech uses paint to describe battered, unstructured shapes, rendering them in strokes that become scratchy and faint as the brush dries (*Untitled*, p. 48). All of these drawings stage pictorial events that show intense graphic energy but remain precarious all the same—precarious in their resolution, their mastery, their sense of themselves as whole.

In a couple of relatively recent works, Beech draws in raking parallel lines using meat-pounding hammers, the lines echoing the cross-hatching of traditional figurative drawing while also forming denser patches and so, in places, blotting themselves out (*Untitled*, p. 167). In works such as these, expression apparently proceeds from a kind of freeform curiosity and expansiveness as well as from moments of control and so flirts constantly with erasure, or inarticulacy. It is this tension that gives so many of the drawings their sense of urgency.

Beech's works on paper record the pulse of the studio. They also incorporate the street, which figures as a continuation of his workspace in pieces that are coloured by the light industrial neighbourhood in Brooklyn in which they were made. Street furniture and detritus regularly intrude on his compositions. His "Constructed Drawings" are made up of discarded packaging, scraps of coloured paper and cardboard that have been flattened by the artist in the studio or by cars or passers-by in the street. (Not all the packaging was found in Brooklyn—some of the "Constructed Drawings" consist of materials collected and pieced together on trips to India.) Skips, fences, rubbish bins and scaffolding feature in his "Works on Photographs". Some of his brushstrokes look like skid marks (*Untitled*, p. 129).

It is in these drawings that his works on paper most clearly resemble his sculptural constructions, with their dual references to artistic precedents and urban configurations. In sculptural pieces loosely modelled on skips and parking lot barriers, for instance, he employs a spare formal idiom that recalls the work of Robert Morris and Carl Andre, among others, while recasting their concerns in terms that demonstrate his investment in the exploration of the city as a site of constant production, disposal and renewal. In the works on paper too, pictorial manoeuvres yield compositions that hint at urban spaces and fixtures, as the lattice patterns do in the drawings made with perforated metal sheets and rubber mats, for example *HDK Solothurn #1* (p. 150).

These sheets and mats must have been scavenged from streets near Beech's studio. The patterns he creates with them point both to the grids of modernist (and later) abstraction and to the fences, grates and railings that pervade urban space, particularly in areas like the one in which his studio is located. So the drawings establish a continuity between the clutter of the studio and a larger environment shaped by the car, the decline of artisanal labour, the relocation of industrial work out of cities, and the dilapidation and repurposing of old warehouses and workshops. They picture the studio as a recycling station for objects collected in the street and the street as a barometer of larger shifts that are then unavoidably registered in their own material fabric.

There is a distant echo in these drawings of *Automobile Tire Print*, which Robert Rauschenberg made with John Cage in 1953, covering one of the rear tyres of his Model A Ford with paint while Cage drove the car over 22 feet of aligned paper sheets on Fulton Street in Manhattan, outside the artist's studio. In this as in the early combines, Rauschenberg was intent on recreating the motion and shocks of the street in the most immediate and literal terms. Something of the same effort to work the spaces of the studio and street into the artwork, to impress those spaces directly onto the surface of the artwork, is discernible in Beech's drawings. These pieces are not representations or simple products of the studio or street as much as they are pieces of them, extensions of them; they are surfaces that are continuous with the studio floor, the pavement and the blacktop.

This accounts for the emphatic horizontality of the drawings. Where the Albertian image, conceived as a window onto the world, is upright, the easel giving way to the wall of the home or gallery and the picture creating a vertical opening onto a space that is remote from the viewer, Beech's drawings hold to the axis of the desk or ground. When he pours ink or paint, it does not run down the surface of the paper—it gathers in blots and stains. In those drawings that most look like architectural sketches, he seems to be tracing plans, not elevations (*Perimeter #1*, p. 204), and in a more attenuated sense, the same is true of other drawings. He uses maps as his base layer in a few works (*Kannur, India #1*, p. 101) and old reproductions of the surface of the moon in others (*Chart #1*, p. 72).¹

The world the drawings describe—or, more often, instantiate—is one that has to be understood as made up of surfaces on which objects fall, settle, sit, spread themselves. It is this horizontality that pins the drawings to the street and studio floor, that keeps them there and foregrounds the material specificity of Beech's gestures. Even when he seems to tilt the picture plane up to the vertical, as in his "Works on Photographs", you sense an urge to point the camera downwards, to focus on what is close, what lies on the ground, like a parking lot barrier (*Bumper*, p. 272). And where he shoots an object that stands upright, a crane or fence for instance, he overlays it with painterly marks that upset its verticality and return it to the horizontal spread of the artist's work surface (*Quai du Hainaut, Brussels, Belgium*, p. 275).

To view these drawings is to enter Beech's workspace, to stand alongside him as he operates on his environment, exploring materials, using studio leftovers, engaging in experiments that are marked by the possibility of failure but also by the value of courting failure, that is to say, of initiating processes without determining their outcomes in advance. To view these drawings is to experience the ebb and flow of activity in the studio, to observe the passing of time gathered up on paper in all its unevenness. And it is to situate the studio in a broader urban matrix, where the materiality of objects and forms resonates with expressive possibilities but also with a recent history of waste and neglect.

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¹ These comments are inspired in part by Leo Steinberg's notion of the "flatbed picture plane". Steinberg detected a shift in the 1950s from an age-old conception of painting as facing an upright viewer to a new horizontal orientation in line with that of "tabletops, studio floors, charts, bulletin boards—any receptor surface on which objects are scattered, on which data is entered, on which information may be received, printed, impressed—whether coherently or in confusion." See Leo Steinberg, "Other Criteria," *Other Criteria* (Oxford, London and New York: Oxford University Press, 1972), 84.