

Drawing, space & mind

2005

Don Eddy

Little girls, little boys, teddy bears, dolls, dogs, rabbits, birds, plants, toys, tricycles, planes, tanks, swords, skulls, and architectural ruins. These are just some of the subjects that populate Nils Karsten's recent drawings. And the drawings are awash in psychological qualities and feelings. They are funny, coy, creepy, salacious, sinister, playful, sad, noisy, silent, elusive, and confrontational. Further, the drawings are perplexities in that neither the images nor the attributes wholly fixed in character or space. That is, one senses radical fluidity in the work. The images, one suspects, could move around the boundaries of the paper. They might change places with one another. They might get larger or smaller. It is not even a given that the images present in any drawing are the necessary images. Others might do. In a reversal of classic argumentation, the information in the drawings seems sufficient but not necessary. All of this is radically unsettling. How are we to understand this Heraclitean fluidity?

One path in our attempt to unravel this perplexity is to investigate the nature and function of the paper on which these images reside. The first thing to note is that "on which" is the wrong choice of words. This paper is far from a classical modernist flat surface on which items sit. Rather, the paper is best understood as an underdetermined mental space in which images move. I think of the space as unencumbered field of consciousness. It is as if a door opened and we suddenly had access to a mind (Nils Karsten's) at play. The paper, then, could be called a mind/space. Is it like the dreaming mind in sleep? Not really, because in sleep the dreamer is unconscious—and in these drawings the mind at work is clearly conscious. Is it like the daydreaming mind, which is conscious but submits to the free flow of information? This too seems insufficient because, startlingly, in drawings we experience conscious at play but the will at work. What is astonishing is that we would encounter a focused and active will in the midst of the Heraclitean flow. It seems paradoxical, but it is in the midst of this paradox, I believe, we gain access to the brilliant heart of Nils Karsten's work.

Let's begin again. On the one hand, we have a field of consciousness unencumbered by the values and norms that habitually govern, modify, and edit our mental landscape. This mind/space is occupied by a wealth of images that are not fully fixed in space, and that generate a bewildering array of psychological feelings. On the other hand, we sense the presence of a willing agent, not so much in the mind/space, but just offstage, covertly directing the apparent free flow of information. It is somewhat like a play, but not entirely. Imagine that you came across a piece of street theater and mistook it for life in progress.

All the while, it was a theater piece in which the actors were, indeed, improvising their parts, but the structure was set by the writer/director. This seems to me to be a fitting analogy for Nils Karsten's drawings. If so, we might then modify our characterization of the space in these drawings: It is not so much a mind/space as a mind/space/play. There is an intricate exchange between the characters that inhabit the drawing space and the agent directing the activity. One wonders whose dreams are being dreamed. Are the little girls and boys dreaming their own dreams or Nils Karsten's dreams? And who is dreaming Nils Karsten's dreams – Nils or another agent? What is happening here? It seems to me that, consciously or unconsciously, the artist is addressing one of the most vexing issues in the discipline called the philosophy of mind.

A perennial problem in the study of the nature of the mind is the question of whether we have free will or whether our thoughts and actions are determined by other forces. A grossly simplified version of the debate goes something like this: One position suggests that the mind is an emergent property of the brain. The brain is a physical object. All physical objects are subject to the laws of physics. Those laws are fixed and therefore our thoughts and actions are determined. Another position holds that this can't be true because it does not preserve appearances. That is, we feel as though we can make free decisions. We act though we are free to choose. We look around and see that others seem to be acting freely. And even if we were to concede that our actions might be determined, we can't live that out. Moment by moment we are making decisions about one thing or another and "know" we could decide in any number of ways. Open a menu at a restaurant and try to imagine that the laws of physics predetermine your decision to order one dish rather than another. It seems absurd. In this area of philosophical inquiry then, we are stuck in the middle. We can't ignore the laws of physics, but neither can we shake the sense that we have freedom of action and thought. I would contend that we are in much the same position when we are in front of Nils Karsten's drawings. We have an intense sense of an unencumbered, fluid, free mind at work, a mental Heraclitean river; and yet we experience the distant but real presence of a director – a willing agent at work

- determining the rules of the game. There is a tension between the two that cannot be resolved. Nils Karsten implicitly acknowledges this issue in his own writings on his work. He contends that the drawings evoke a “world where everything is possible,” but in the same paragraph he suggests that the drawings are “about the interplay of good and evil.” One phrase suggests freedom, while the other suggests a bounded, dualistic structure. I believe that it is this paradox that makes us feel so ill at ease in the presence of these drawings. It is not, then, the psychological oddities floating through the drawing space that generate discomfort; it is the dimly conscious realization that the very premise of the drawings push us up against a fundamental human dilemma. We may be like those little boys and girls: Are they free to dream their dreams, or are they dreaming Nils Karsten’s dreams? And Nils, is he free to dream his dreams, or is he dreaming through the laws of physics? And what about us? Do we live in a “world where everything is possible”? Or are our thoughts and actions determined by an agent other than ourselves?

Nils Karsten

2011

Don Eddy

It was my first visit to Saint Peters Basilica in Rome. I had done a good deal of research and the interior corresponded to the commentary I had read. I had expected the immense scale. I was prepared for the opulent and overwhelming physical grandeur. All that was as expected. Why then did I find myself disoriented, confused, perplexed and mysteriously elated? The reason was that I was having an experience that was nowhere mentioned in any of the literature I had read about the church. On the one hand, I was (as expected) overwhelmed by the physical force of the interior. On the other hand, though, I was struck by the fact that the place seemed to dissolve before my eyes. It appeared like a chimera or mirage. I found myself in the midst of a paradoxical experience in which the interior of Saint Peters was both overwhelmingly present and invisible at the same time. The putative content of the place was the objectification of the spiritual domain. You would think that the opulent and overblown degree of that objectification would destroy the spiritual component with it's massive physicality, but that was not the case. The opposite proved to be the true. Turning the spiritual domain into such an enormous physical edifice, paradoxically vaporized that physicality.

It's not a perfect analogy, but something like that happens when I experience Nils Karsten's current work. I am simultaneously struck by it being both very present and invisible at the same time. It's passing strange and mightily difficult to explain, possibly because paradoxes resist explanation by the very fact that they are paradoxes. I sense that the best way to start is the simple way, by just describing the work in question.

Karsten's new work are prints, very large prints. The core of the work are images taken from classic rock and roll album covers like the exploding zeppelin in the first Led Zeppelin album. Only the images from the album covers, not text, are deployed. These images are carved into enormous handmade woodcut blocks (about six feet square). The blocks are made from rough construction grade plywood that are held in place by a slightly larger cradle. Karsten uses dental drills to carve into the surface. The finished woodcut (it seems absurd to call them woodcuts) is printed onto very large, heavy, somewhat rough paper. Both the oversized woodblocks and the corresponding prints are almost overwhelming in their physical presence. Their size and weight is impressive. Their gruff (mostly black and white) graphic look is commanding. And the images themselves tend to have a certain rude power. This is not a rarified, minimal art that presents itself to us.

And yet, all that being said, I have seen these these works dissolve before my eyes. They are very much there and then they are not.

For sometime I was befuddled by this experience. Did I have an attention deficit problem? Did some part of me, at a certain point, recoil from the work and mentally shut it off. Intrigued and troubled, I committed myself to a careful examination of the nuances of my response to see if the mystery could be untangled. What I found was exhilarating. These works are the locale for an experience of the dynamic progression and dialogue between objectivity and subjectivity. It goes like this. In the first stage I find myself drawn to and attentive of these powerful objects. A connection and relationship is established between me and the woodcut. This is the objective, externalized aspect of the experience. Next I find myself engaged in the image and the image generates a flood of memories from the distant past. As I turn inward, the woodcut dissolves in a wave of subjectivity. I find myself no longer present to the work, but in another time and place, flooded with sites, sounds, and feelings. It appears that the images used are so culturally iconic that they simply cannot be experienced without activating a subjective response powerful enough relocate our attention from the external world of fact and object to an internal world of feeling, memory, and even longing. But it doesn't stop there. There is a third movement that occurs and that is that from within that subjective space there is an urge to reestablish a connection to the work. I find myself reaching out from the depths of those memories to reconnect with the woodcut but in a new, more nuanced and complex way. Just like life, I now inhabit a place that is determined by a dynamic and complex relationship between externality and internality.

With that realization in mind, a better analogy occurs to me that might illuminate the value of these works. This is something most of us have experienced in one form or another. Let's say that you are driving down the highway. You are being careful, attentive to the road, the traffic around you and the vehicle you are driving. At some point a favorite song comes on the radio. In a moment you are flooded by memories of another time and place, no longer truly present to the world you inhabited only a moment ago, but between or within two worlds, one external and objective, the other internal and subjective. The internal memory world is powerful and insistent, but it would be dangerous to allow that world to obliterate the world of driving the car. A complex dialectic emerges and the "total experienced world" becomes a dynamic dance between two worlds, one objective, one subjective. Herein, it seems to me, resides the lasting value of Nils Karsten's current work. These works generate a condition that is really a subset of the human condition. The work does not tell us, but shows us that we never, for long, live in a single world, but several worlds all at the same time. And these worlds do not, necessarily either destroy or dominate the other world/worlds. Rather, we drift, slide, shuffle, and dance within many worlds. It's a marvelous realization. There is no

need, no possibility, says Nils Karsten to be obsessively attentive to the Now or, contrary wise, to rule it out of order, seeking out the comfort of the past. The many worlds of our being can have a lively discussion with each other. It's all a song, a dance lodged in an album cover from long ago.

Just to tidy up, it should probably be mentioned that there are smaller satellite works that orbit around the large pieces. These works seem to me like supporting characters in a play. They are not the central protagonists, but still are valuable and even necessary players. And what has been said about the big works can likewise be said about the smaller pieces. They, also, call up the many worlds of our being. As an example, there are woodcuts with only the lyrics of songs carved into them. Like the aforementioned work they are rough and powerful pieces despite their smaller size. And a similar condition is generated by these pieces. Just begin to read the lyrics and the world of memory and longing is called forth. And the dance begins. They remind us that Proust's madeleine could be an object, an image, even a word will do.