

SLOW DRAWING, ANOTHER VIEWING

Michele Beevors

Your truth, my truth and what really happened.

Robert Evans: from the movie *The Kid Stays in the Picture*¹

A discussion of Quentin Tarantino's film *Reservoir Dogs* seems like an odd place to begin an essay on slow drawing, since the pace of the film is fast and the director is known for his love of action films of the seventies.² But there are many things in the film that one fails to notice at first sitting, being so caught up in the pace and moral dilemmas of the characters, and these things one fails to notice become haunting signifiers of real life:

- like the difference between implied violence and enacted violence
- the settings that give secondary meanings to the action
- the use of props (as in theatrical productions) to allude to the direction of the action
- the fact that none of the characters have names, only colours – Messrs White, Orange, Brown, Pink, and Mr Blonde. Mr Brown and Mr Blue are both played by Edward Bunker, a real criminal and crime writer.

In *Reservoir Dogs*, a simple jewel heist gone awry is the premise of the story. Mr White and Mr Orange arrive at the warehouse rendezvous to await the other Colours. Mr Orange has a belly wound and is bleeding profusely. Mr White attempts to comfort him. Mr Orange passes out. Mr Pink arrives and declares that there is a rat among them.

At the warehouse are a set of strange large boxes (my guess is coffins) covered in plastic and standing on their ends; a big brown one stands in front of the other two. When Mr Blonde arrives he sits on a hearse, also covered in plastic sheeting. These signifiers of death add to the anxiety of the audience – all of this is going to end badly. The film editing also adds to this feeling, since the audience has to think on their feet. The story is not linear or laid out for us. It turns out that these coffins and the hearse are real, and not Hollywood props – the warehouse where these scenes are filmed was at one time a mortuary. Tarantino lets the real world into the movie to highlight and enlarge the rupture between the real and the make-believe.

The most famous scene in the film is of course not seen at all. Mr Blonde is dancing around to “Clowns to the left of me, jokers to the right, *stuck in the middle with you*” by Stealers Wheel. The scene in question sees Mr Blonde cut the ear off a policeman after torturing him – 80 percent of the audience believe they have witnessed this scene. Instead, what they see is a blank green wall with the graffiti slogan, “watch your head” – another instance of real graffiti replacing and indicating the implied violence of the scene. This is a nod to the time-honoured tradition of cutting away from the depiction of violence to appease the censors.

The implied violence in this scene, the almost blank wall where we project our imagination to conjure up the worst torture, is crucial for understanding *Reservoir Dogs*. The characters in it are morally conflicted stereotypes: Mr White, Mr Pink, Mr Orange and Mr Green represent different aspects of this conflict. But Mr White or Mr Blonde aren't that far removed from Mr Whippy, Mr Softy, or the likes of John Wayne Gacy.

TOM FOX

Violence is also implied in the recent drawings of Tom Fox. Fox presents us with large-scale drawings set out in a grid. Fragments of faces, on first inspection some of these drawings seem quite loose in the way they are drawn. Perhaps you notice that they are fragments of men's faces, older men. Then it occurs to you that they in no way represent anyone's benign grandpa, that somehow they are glaring at you. They seem to be menacing, grotesque. You look from one to the other for some relief, but there is none to be found. The sheer quantity and scale of the drawings creates problems in the way that they (the fragments of faces) seem to stare back at you. Some of these drawings are only mouths and stubble. They scare me and at first I don't know why. They are ugly and confronting. They are compulsive. I go and see them again and again over the course of the exhibition. Some are better than others. I decide that the human face drawn to scale is difficult to understand, let alone render, and yet there is something extra-compelling here. The faces occupy a lot of space, yet they force you to move in close to the surface of the drawing.

Eventually, the faces dissolve into a series of marks. So distracted was I by the mesmerising effect of these scary men staring out at me that I failed to notice this trope in Fox's work. The drawings are made with the fingertips – fingerprints, to be exact – applied to charcoal, then pressed into the paper. Depth is built up, the surface rubbed raw, or rubbed out. Here erasure becomes important; what is implied but is never stated is violence. As I turn to leave the exhibition room, I notice on a pillar a small framed line drawing of a child's face – not much more than an outline. I realise the depth of what I am witnessing and am powerless to do anything about.

The large fragmented portraits are of predators, the kind that prey on small children. They are unnamed, but if one cared to one could easily find out their identities. But who would want to? Who really wants to know Mr Blue or Mr Blonde in real life? And it's just this that the drawings are really about – the fact that for so long society turned a blind eye to paedophilia. These drawings are important and, dare I say, brave. Not because they can't have been easy to draw, but because the subject matter isn't easily talked about or digested by the public, who just want to be entertained.

To return to the coffins as anchors in the plot of *Reservoir Dogs*. Blank and empty. They stand in for the missing bodies of Mr Brown and Mr Blue and the soon-to-be Mr Orange. ... They underline the moral dilemmas presented by Tarantino here. Honour among thieves. To keep quiet or to speak out – that is the question.

PHILIP MADILL

The drawings of Dunedin artist Philip Madill are also set in an imagined collision between future, past and present. The scene is urban, industrial and populated only by men. These men are doing things at a distance – obscure things, many things, fixing things that are broken, peering into holes in antiquated and obsolescent machinery. They wear overalls, or boiler suits as they are sometimes called – cotton garments like the ones that hang in the hallway in *Reservoir Dogs*: white ones, like those butchers wear, or left over from the undertakers. Madill's overalls are grey, like everything else in this bleak world, seen through the lens of black-and-white fifties TV.

The cars that line the street are from the past, as are the men, who wear strange, clunky helmets that look like geometric houses or engine parts. The streets seem strangely familiar; but somehow cleaner than ours. I think that I might know the actual street – I might even be able to identify a building. But I'm not sure, because I have never really looked at those buildings as I am doing now, but recorded them out of the corner of my eye. Peripheral vision is the place where life lurks. In Madill's drawings, as in *Reservoir Dogs*, the space or setting alludes to life, while everything else alludes to a more fantastical world – in Tarantino's case, a more bloodthirsty one – where future and past collide in pastiche. *Reservoir Dogs* is fast, but also slow – not just because it references the past, but because it includes real-time and real-life moments.

There are two distinct kinds of sets that are used throughout *Reservoir Dogs*. First, the stage set is used to depict

a warehouse or an office. The second reflects the 'real world' – on their travels, the characters encounter sparsely populated suburbia, a classic diner, or glaring sunlight. Cutting back and forward between the two kinds of 'set' doesn't make for an easy transition from interior spaces to the real world, but rather emphasises the theatricality of the film, constantly referring to itself and other movies without ever breaking the fourth wall. We understand Tarantino's pastiche as being allegorical, yet containing some degree of truth: "A man's got to do what a man's got to do." The future as Madill depicts it is not addicted to speed, as FT Marinetti predicted in the Futurist manifesto of 1909, but to slowness – perhaps despite the speed of contemporary culture, perhaps as a consequence of it.³

KIMBERLEY McALEVEY

The drawings of Kimberley McAlevey present the viewer with another set of problems altogether and a further take on the idea of slowness. The general principle of her work is to present one's life alongside the impossibility of presenting one's life at all.

Her work takes its starting point from the definition of the word LIFE in the Collins English Dictionary. McAlevey's work expands out in all directions from this point. First, in a series of txt messages for her undergraduate degree; then in more convoluted strategies to extend and delay the reception of the work. The drawings are encrypted, inasmuch as they are printed neatly, as a child might write in a diary, but the printing is so small that it would only be legible using a magnifying glass of immense power, and the printing overlaps so that each mark is obscured by the next.

The first of these drawings was presented to the Theory and History of Art Department at the Dunedin School of Art as an essay, one that related McAlevey's work to her life. However, it was rejected as an essay and was deemed to be a drawing. While representing the world as a drawing McAlevey failed to contextualise the work, because apparently you can't do both these things at once. Consequently, McAlevey failed this part of the programme.

As in all of McAlevey's work, there is a massive backstory that happens to be her life. Her attempts to do justice to her subject, or to portray her life accurately or adequately, falls short at each turn, and with every attempt. Her art happens in the gap between the drawing (the representation) and the objects accumulated throughout one's life (the real world). There are failures at every level – whether seen poetically, descriptively, observationally, theoretically, historically, or philosophically – but nonetheless the attempt is doggedly and belligerently pursued, using a very particular set of aesthetic criteria.

Her drawings are always framed behind glass in a one-inch white frame. The quality of the paper varies because the drawings always end up being on the flipside of some 'important' document from McAlevey's life, and further embed the meaning of the work in the paper. Her drawings – along with all kinds of objects and documents from McAlevey's life, from a bus ticket to a teddy bear – are given away. But unlike the objects and documents, the drawings find their way as gifts to those people who have gone out of their way to support the artist. On the face of it, this is a nice gesture, but one can't help feeling an undercurrent of guilt associated with reciprocity.

Drawing on Cheap Paper, for example, was given to one of her supervisors for her Master's degree (the other supervisor got page 653 from the Collins English Dictionary). *Drawing on Cheap Paper* was drawn on the reverse of her undergraduate degree certificate. This work, which found its way into my personal collection, came to me via the local police station. It had been left in a Dunedin phone box, wrapped in brown paper, date-stamped, and bearing my telephone number and the name Olga Fiedo, an anagram of "a good life." This is the name that McAlevey uses to give her Life away. Represented by various documents and objects, it is given to people selected from the telephone directory.

None of this is evident on the surface of the works, since these 'stories' – for want of a better word – only describe fragments of her life and so are really only relevant to her. Where the work starts to gel is in the communication of the back story, the piecing together of a puzzle, one that the viewer could never fully understand or even

comprehend. Who would care to hear about the mundane, humdrum content of any of our lives? However, these narratives of McAlevey's life seem to function like Chinese whispers – they are enlarged or diminished depending on who is doing the storytelling and how much of the puzzle you already have.

What we are left with is a sense, not only of the impossible task of representing anything at all accurately or adequately, but a feeling that just maybe, out of the corner of my eye, I can see some indication that life will find a way.

Michele Beevors is the studio coordinator for Sculpture at the Dunedin School of Art and lectures in the undergraduate programme, specialising in the history of modernist sculpture. She also supervises postgraduate students in the theory and practice of art. Michele holds Masters degrees from the Canberra School of Art (Australian National University) and Columbia University (New York). Her research is driven by a concern for material culture, value and the commodity and by George Bataille's idea of the formless.

- 1 Nanette Burstein, dir., *The Kid Stays in the Picture* (USA Films, 2002).
- 2 Quentin Tarantino, dir., *Reservoir Dogs* (Miramax Films, 1992).
- 3 The Slow Movement advocates a cultural shift toward slowing down life's pace. It began with Carlo Petrini's protest against the opening of a McDonald's restaurant in Piazza di Spagna, Rome, in 1986 that sparked the creation of the Slow Food organisation and other slow movements across the globe, including Slow Art developed by Michael Kimmelman.