Project Report

A TRICK OF THE LAND

Hannah Joynt

Figure 1. Hannah Joynt, detail of *Te Araroa Drawing Expedition*, 2013, eighty-five drawings (selected), coloured pencil, 170x235mm.

This article will present an overview of my 2017 MFA project, "A Trick of the Land." In my studio research, I developed a practice of drawing the landscape from an experiential position. Drawing the landscape is an active engagement with my subject, and the images I make are embodiments of my experience of being in the land rather than representational portraits of a place, scene or view. A key aesthetic that underpins my way of drawing is alluding to perspectival depth by textural variations rather than through a traditional linear perspectival formula. It is the texture that I ultimately see as the foundational, primordial building block of my drawing language.

Figure 2. Hannah Joynt, *The Reservoir Samples*, 2015/16, ten drawings, pastel on paper, 200 × 200mm.

Aesthetic diversity in my practice is due to many reasons including material, environmental and sensory considerations and my desire to explore, as broadly as possible, my experience of the land. Thinking through drawing is a key studio methodology, and realisation is achieved through repetition. The abundance of work generated from such process prompted me to devise a typological framework to categorise what I was doing. In my dissertation, I considered my studio work through a four-part typological framework. By examining my work in this way, it became apparent that there were drawing systems that I was working with for each typology that favoured particular techniques, methods and aesthetic qualities.

Figure 3. Hannah Joynt , *Travers Wetlands Series*, 2017, three drawings, pastel on paper, 500 × 500mm.

Figure 4. Hannah Joynt , *Dart Swing Bridge*, 2016, charcoal on MDF, 2.4 x 2.4m.

The four typologies were defined as follows:

Sketch – a quick spontaneous notation

Render – a long, careful study

Sample – a detailed fragment

Vector – a transformation from one form to another

In the final exhibition, "A Trick of the Land," I curated the gallery to correspond with the structure of the dissertation in that each wall was dedicated to a different typological way of drawing. The exhibition comprised: A series of 85 (selected) 170 x 235mm landscape sketches titled *Te Araroa Drawing Expedition*, which I made *en plein air* during a long-distance walking journey (Figure 1), corresponding to the typology of *sketch*; *The Reservoir Samples* (Figure 2), a group of ten 200 x 200mm pastel *samples* made by drawing *en plein air* very small fragments of particular scenes at a local lake, corresponding to the typology of *sample*; *Travers Wetlands Series* (Figure 3), a series of three 500 x 500mm pastel *renders* made in the studio, derived from photographs and sketches of the Travers Wetlands, corresponding to the typology of *render*; *Dart Swing Bridge* (Figure 4), a 2.4 x 2.4m laser-cut drawing made using vector graphics and laser cutting, corresponding to the typology of *vector*; and the 5 x 2m charcoal drawing titled *Views from a Sacred Mountain (Mt Wakefield)* (Figure 5), a work that blended methods from all four typologies.

I developed the framework to give structure to the abundant and diverse products of my studio practice, which in turn informed a discussion around 'drawing as language,' with specific regard to landscape experience.
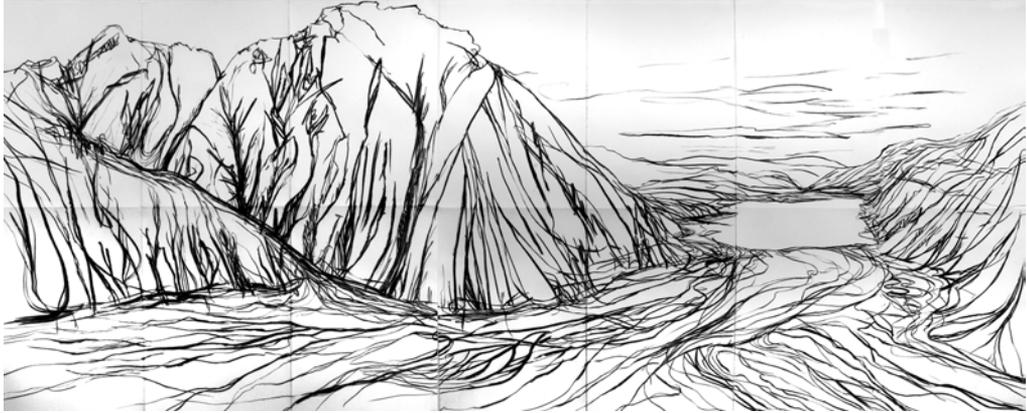
Figure 5. Hannah Joynt, *Views From a Sacred Mountain (Mt Wakefield)*, 2016, charcoal on paper, 5 × 2m.

The combination of phenomenological experience and systematic method is structuralism in embodied practice. Structuralist thought evolved alongside linguistic theory – hence my enquiry into how drawing functions as a language.

French literary theorist Ferdinand De Saussure, a seminal figure in the development of structuralist thought, saw language as a system of basic units that when used together infer meaning.[2] Basic units, which he termed phonemes, constitute sounds, letters and words. For language to function, it ultimately depends on the relationships between the phonemes when used together. When I apply this idea to drawing, it seems relatively logical that point, line and tone are the phonemes of drawing. Line is as fundamental to the typology of *sketch* as tone is to *render*, as colour and texture are to *sample*, as point is to *vector*.

An example of assembling basic units to represent a scene is evident in Figure 6. During my work for the *Te Araroa Drawing Expedition*, I made a drawing of a tree-clad valley wall. The trees were a mix of endemic native species, naturally ordered in a very complex, irregular pattern. Therefore, I approached the scene in a systematic way and used a different type of mark (that had a likeness to the form) for each tree (Figure 7). The drawing is an assemblage of signs rather than a realistic approximation. I had codified visual phenomena and took notes in a text-like way; a drawer's shorthand.

Later in my MFA project, "A Trick of the Land" (2016), I began to enquire more deeply about drawing as language, and made a small series of graphic interpretations of trees, *Tree Glyphs* (Figure 8). I derived the tree glyphs from a sketch made during a trip up the Dart Valley in 2015 (Figure 9). Sampling from the drawing fragments that depicted beech trees, I redrew the marks as individual characters or signs. I didn't pursue this line of enquiry directly, as it seemed like another project entirely. Rather, I was mindful of the way that I was making text-like marks as glyphs.[2]

French anthropologist Claude Levi-Strauss further developed the notion of language systems and applied it to cultural phenomena such as myths. He found that while myths differ between peoples, there are basic themes and components that are universal. He proposed that the common themes were due to the fundamental workings of the human mind.[3] Thus, linguistic systems can be applied to a wide range of phenomena.

For example, Capability Brown, a father of English landscape design, understood landscape composition from a linguistic stance. In an interview with the writer and philanthropist Hannah More, he described his grammatical approach to how trees, plantings, water and meadows worked together. "Now there," said he, pointing his finger, "I make a comma, and there, pointing to another spot, where a more decided turn is proper, I make a colon; at another

Figure 6. Hannah Joynt, *Mixed Forest in the Taramaku River Valley*, 2013, coloured pencil on paper, 150 × 210mm.

Figure 7. Hannah Joynt, sampled from *Mixed Forest in the Taramaku River Valley*, 2013, coloured pencil on paper, 150 × 210mm.

part, where an interruption is desirable to break the view, a parenthesis; now a full stop, and then I begin another subject."[4] Brown regarded the different elements involved in landscape design as basic units of his landscaping language.

As my project concerns drawing the land, the question, "Is there a drawn language of landscape?" must be considered. It seems logical to understand the language of landscape by first examining its most fundamental units – for example, foliage. In his drawing manual *The Elements of Drawing,* John Ruskin discusses the procedure for learning to draw foliage.[5] The first step is to practice drawing individual leaves from many different angles, then begin to draw them in clusters, "sprays of leafage," finally working up to a full bush. Units (leaves) form bigger units (trees) that are part of a whole drawn ecology.

We can further consider mark-making, particularly of foliage and trees, by comparing a drawing by Pieter Breugel (the Elder), *Mountain Landscape with Ridge and Valley,* 1552, (Figure 10) and *Landscape* (date unknown) by William Gilpin (Figure 11). In *Mountain Landscape with Ridge and Valley,* a small pen-and-ink sketch, marks of dots and lines get smaller in the background to create a convincing depth. The foreground tree on the left, positioned next to small-scale plants and fields, promotes the high viewpoint and elevates the viewer above the scene. Single hatched lines describe the vertical planes of distant mountains. Similar, more heavily inscribed lines describe and bring forward the vertical terrain just below the foreground tree. Puffy

Figure 8. Hannah Joynt, *Beech Tree Glyphs,* from 2015/16 sketchbook, pen, 150 × 210 mm.

Figure 9. Hannah Joynt, *Dart Lake Drawing,* 2015, pencil on paper, 150 × 210mm.

circular forms, representing shrubs and trees in the mid ground, graduate to dots and flicks in the background. If the dots and flicks of the background were considered in isolation from the rest of the picture, then they would just be abstract texture, but it is in the context of the rest of the image that they make sense. Basic units of dots and flicks gain meaning because of context.

In Breugel's sketch, the foliage of the foreground tree is made as a series of loops resembling a repetition of the number 3.[6] Bunched, loopy foliage is interjected by vertical strokes of a sectioned tree trunk. It is believed that the ink was a later addition to the drawing made in the studio, while the initial *plein-air* drawing was done in chalk.[7] Thus, the tree was rendered by repeated glyphs.

A similar mark technique and approach to foliage is recognisable in William Gilpin's drawing. Light in pencil pressure, rapid in mark-making, Gilpin has framed the mountains in the background by trees with thick leaf clusters. While the foliage is more loosely scribed than in the Breugel drawing, the loopy number 3 gesture is still evident. It is my guess that the tree appearing in each drawing is of a species that has a similar visual pattern. If, for example, it were a variety of pine, where the foliage forms dense needles, the marks would have been made quite differently. The number 3 mark scribing the texture of foliage could be seen as a basic unit (such as a letter), the bunching of foliage interjected by vertical trunks is a level higher (such as a word), becoming an entire tree (a sentence) and spreading out and diminishing into the distance (as a paragraph).

Both Gilpin and Breughel have used a common hierarchy of landscape drawing language to depict a tree. Yet a drawing language is also artist-specific as a result of facture, which is affected by many variables including materials, educational influences, subjectivity and the physiology of the artist.

In my studio practice, basic units (individual marks) are affected by materials, surfaces, scale and the forms of objects represented. The basic units of each typology are particular to that typology, which generates a distinctive aesthetic. For example, in in the typology of render, tonal layering is a basic unit, making drawings soft and atmospheric (see Figure 12).

However, there is more to the language of drawing than simply shading, dots or lines, as a linguistic system can be identified in my work and my typologies can be seen as different vocabularies. Part of the reason I imposed strict typological separations on my work was to aid my practice toward achieving technical mastery. By the end of the project, having achieved a level of fluency with each vocabulary, I indulged my artistic licence and began to blend the typologies towards new and more unexpected dialects of drawing.

Figure 10. Pieter Brueghel the Elder,
Mountain Landscape with Ridge and Valley,
c.1552, pen and ink on paper, 204 × 295mm.
Image sourced https://commons.wikimedia.org

Figure 11. Gilpin, William. *Landscape*.
Date unknown, graphite on paper; 154 × 225mm.
Image sourced http://www.tate.org.uk/art/artworks/gilpin-landscape-t09536, CC-BY-NC-ND (3.0 Unported)

"Structures aren't some kind of universal, timeless truth waiting to be uncovered. Rather, structures are fictions that we create in order to be able to interpret the world around us."[8]

My drawing language is my fiction – there is absolutely no guarantee how the viewer will read it. French philosopher Roland Barthes discussed the poststructuralist idea of the "death of the author." He said: "It is language that speaks, not the author; to write is … to reach the point where only language acts, performs and not me."[9] Communicating with my viewers relies on them having a pre-existing knowledge of drawing conventions. I argue that despite facture, there is a universality at all levels of my drawing language, from the basic phonemic level (e.g., dots, lines and shading) to glyphs and motifs to a whole constructed scene, and this makes my drawings accessible to a wide audience. By exhibiting drawing that spans a wide typological spectrum, I invite viewers to expand their own fictions as ways of considering landscape representation.

I have more control over the effect of scale on the viewer than over any other aspect. Each typology has a specific approach to scale. For example, *sketch* made *en plein air* is small, creating a more private and intimate relationship with the viewer. *Render* made in the studio is a domestic size (up to one metre wide) and can be viewed comfortably from a middle distance of several metres. *Sample* is intended to build a sense of an overall whole by presenting small bites, asking the viewer to travel between them and to imagine the absent parts for themselves. *Vector* is large and intended to provoke a sense of embodiment, a mark-making trajectory. While I don't have control over how the *content* of the works might be perceived, scale is one aspect I have more control over.

Because of their experiential origin, my drawings risk simply dissolving into self-centred, gratuitous mark-making that disregards the viewer. Deanna Petherbridge articulates the difficulties faced in a sketch:
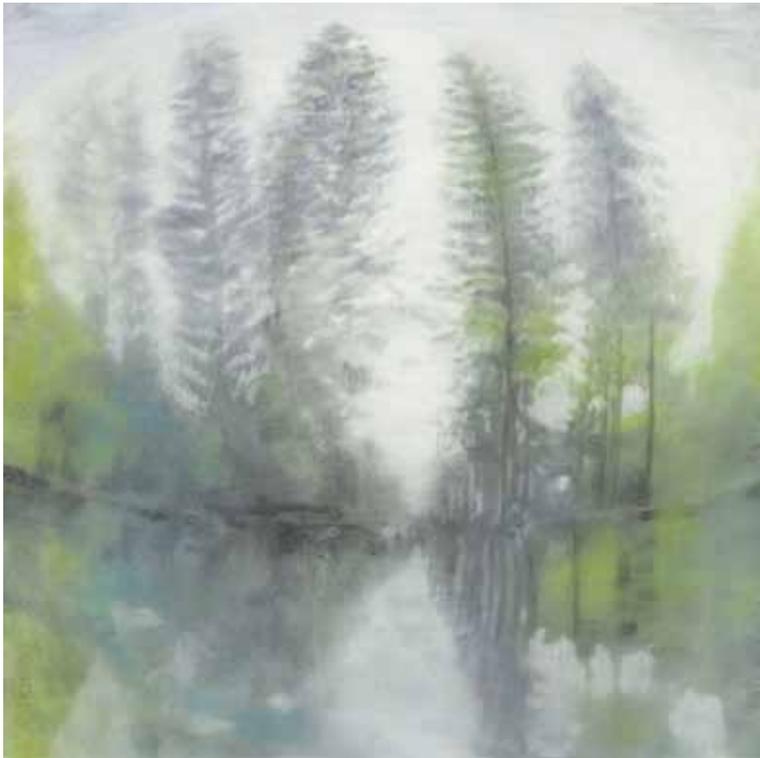

Figure 12. Hannah Joynt , *Grey Pines*, 2015, pastel on paper, 710 × 710mm.

Attention has been constantly turned to sketching by artists and theoreticians alike, whether applauding its agile unfinished spontaneous and revelatory qualities or challenging it as a dangerous sloppy and indulgent practice, particularly hazardous for students. What fluctuates within the erratically swinging historical pendulum of ideological affirmation and condemnation is not the rejection of the sketch as such but a discussion of the degree to which the ideas developed from rough, initial drawings should be reworked or finished.[10]

I extend this difficulty to all forms of drawing, for any method is in danger of being only artist-centred and disregarding the viewer. I have come to realise that my goal is to establish something that resembles the Hegelian idea of art, for myself and the viewer: a landscape drawing that sits somewhere between intellectual understanding and sensual experience.[11]

There is a persistent tension aroused by the pressure to publicly exhibit drawings that derive from private experiential beginnings for the development of a drawing language. Language evolves "from certain occasions or activities."[12] Merleau-Ponty points out that language emerges from relating to a world to which our bodies are inevitably tied.[13] My drawing language actively develops as I explore new places, in new ways and draw with new, different and unexpected materials. My drawing is a manifestation of being embodied in the world.[14]

Hannah Joynt has been working in the School of Design at Otago Polytechnic since 2007 and is a lecturer in creative studies. Her teaching practice is informed by her art practice. Since graduating with a BFA from the Dunedin School of Art in 2006, Hannah has been building her reputation as an emerging artist in the South Island of New Zealand. In 2009, she won the COCA Anthony Harper Contemporary Art Award (Christchurch) and, in 2010, the Edinburgh Realty Art Award (Dunedin). Hannah will graduate with an MFA with distinction from Otago Polytechnic in December 2017.

1   Anne D'Alleva, *Methods and Theories of Art History* (London: Laurence King Publishing, 2012), 126.

2   In archeology, a glyph is the term for a carved or inscribed symbol, including pictograms, ideograms or symbols that are part of a writing system such as a letter, syllable or ideogram. In typography, a glyph describes the typographic variations for the representation of elemental symbols, letters or characters.

3   D'Alleva, *Methods and Theories of Art History*, 126.

4   Quoted in Peter Willis, "Capability Brown in Northumberland,".*Garden History*, 9:2 (Autumn 1981), 158.

5   John Ruskin, *The Elements of Drawing: In Three Letters to Beginners* (London: Smith, Elder & Co., 1859), 81.

6   Manfred Sellink, "The Dating of Pieter Bruegel's Landscape Drawings Reconsidered and a New Discovery," *Master Drawing*, 51:3 (2013), 314.

7   Ludwig Munz, *Bruegel Drawings: A Complete Edition* (London: Phaidon Press, 1961), 3.

8   D'Alleva, *Methods and Theories of Art History*, 131.

9   Roland Bathes, *Image – Music – Text* (London: Fontana/Collins, 1977), 143.

10   Deanna Petherbridge, *The Primacy of Drawing* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2010).

11   Howard Riley, "Drawing: Towards an Intelligence of Seeing," in *Writing on Drawing: Essays on Drawing Practice and Research*, ed. Steve Garner (Bristol: Intellect Books, 2008), 153.

12   John McNorton, "The Choreography of Drawing: The Consciousness of the Body in the Space of a Drawing," unpub. PhD diss. (Royal College of Art, London, 2003), 26.

13   Maurice Merleau-Ponty, "The Body as Expression and Speech", in Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, trans. Colin Smith (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1962), 26.

14   Ibid.