



THE GREENHOUSE EFFECT

by Juli Carson

What would it mean to take up drawing as a serial operation? In her essay, "Some Kinds of Duration: The Temporality of Drawing as Process Art," Pamela Lee noted, "nothing could seem more obvious than the way in which drawing registers the process of the artist's making." Taken alone this is an ambiguous statement. Should we overdetermine the possessive subject position – *artist's* – we arrive at a referential, museological model of drawing, an umbilical cord to the artist's genius. However, should we instead emphasize the present gerund – *making* – we come closer to drawing conceived as an intellectual, serial operation. Sam Watters' *Greenhouse* project, a series of watercolors that collectively represent the palindrome "Live not on evil," rendered as individual topiary letters, aims at the latter proposition.

That botanical watercolors could formulate a critical operation would seem to contradict Walter Benjamin's famous assertion that mechanical reproduction was revolutionary in brushing aside the aesthetic tropes "creativity and genius, eternal value and mystery," tropes typically associated with drawing and painting. These ideas were central to a branch of 1980s art photography that took up his claim that as things – be they artworks or remote places – were mechanically reproduced, serialized, and mass distributed, the distance between that thing and a viewer collapsed. And along with the collapse of such distance came the deflation of an object or a site's singularity or originality – the conceptual foundation of authenticity or "aura." It is equally important, however, to note that the seminal essay from which this theory came is titled "Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction" [my emphasis], such that what Benjamin described was an epistemic *condition*, whereby once *anything* became reproducible, *all* things – reproduced or not – became mediated by the very concept of reproducibility. Within this condition, we experience the uncanny state of déjà vu upon arrival at a given site that we, in fact, have never been to nor seen reproduced. In a post-80s age, could this same effect now be achieved through drawing? Or does drawing inherently return us to the mythic fetish of the artist's *singular* gesture?

Previously trained at the herbarium of the Royal Botanical Garden at Kew and more recently a graduate of the conceptual-minded Otis Fine Art Program, Sam Watters has embarked

upon a paradoxical art practice. His 'masterfully' rendered watercolors simultaneously and incongruously reference the pictorial legacy of botanical drawing vis-à-vis the conceptualist legacies of Sol LeWitt and Mel Bochner. And yet, the coupling is not as incongruous it seems. Botanical training, a mechanically uniform process, attempts to eliminate the singularity of the artist's mark in favor of science or verisimilitude, in a word: photographic accuracy. In this way, botanical drawings are deeply codified: all must be rendered to scale, presented in watercolor, and the specimens must be measured within millimeters of difference. In the end, the judge of a drawing's success is the botanist, not other the art critic. The conceptualists similarly embraced the affect of scientificity, rejecting the pictorial tradition in an attempt to rid their work of aesthetic subjectivity. In Sol LeWitt's own words, from "Paragraphs on Conceptual Art," "To work with a plan that is pre-set is one way of avoiding subjectivity ...[t]he fewer decisions made in the course of completing the work, the better. This eliminates the arbitrary, the capricious, and the subjective as much as possible." In this context, Watters' reassertion of his hand in these botanical drawings, i.e. the tragic-comic critique implicit in his caricature of horticultural tradition, is therefore as much of a perversion as is his displacement of watercolor – the most pictorial mode of drawing – onto the conceptualist strategy of indexical operations.

On the subject of indexical strategies, the viewer will note upon reading the palindrome, which wraps around the four walls of Room Gallery's cubic space, that there are frequent ellipses in the sentence "Live not on evil." Wherever an architectural or industrial obstruction presents itself in the gallery space, a 'lost' drawing in the series is indexed by negation. To discern this operation, however, one must first derive that there



Above left: *L*, 2005, watercolor on paper
 Above right: Salomon van Til, *Garden of Eden*, 1719
 Cover: *Plan*, 2005, marker and pencil on paper

is a palindrome within what appears – *at a distance* – to be a conventional exhibition of watercolors. However, to move closer to the work, to put one's face right up to the watercolor in order to bask in the fetish of the mark (a manner of viewing that drawing elicits), is to lose the fetish through the indexical distraction of banal architectural error, on the one hand, and linguistic pun, on the other. What we have then, is a willful inversion of drawing's auratic hegemony over mechanical reproduction: just as background becomes foreground in the drawing's exhibition site, the pictorial becomes structural in the drawing's so-called interior space of the mark. In short, to move closer to the drawing, to *collapse* the distance between you and it, is simultaneously to be *distanced* from the pleasure of the artist's singular mark one seeks in this move.

And yet, this 'greenhouse' of topiary watercolors that spell out an ominous warning is more than aesthetic play. Taken together the topiary theme and the moralist adage evoke the pre-Enlightenment colonial pursuit of paradise lost in Mesopotamia and the re-presentation of this paradise in the Botanical Gardens in Europe from the Middle Ages through the 18th Century. It is here that Benjamin returns. For the underlying operation of European colonial exploration, read through the explicit religiosity of Botanical culture, is the very same operation Benjamin critiqued: the *distancing effect* of mystical places and things. This effect is the colonial condition of which Edward Said spoke: the demarcation of an Orient (over there) and an Occident (over here), at once an ideological myth and a materialist reality. But as much as colonialism operated upon a presumed distance, it was at once a complete collapse of it. If Watters thus brings back the outmoded tradition of Botanical drawing in the space of neo-conceptualist tactics, he does so within the context of an uncanny contemporary condition: the return of an outmoded neo-colonial, pre-modern attempt to *distance* the Middle East while simultaneously occupying it. Watters seeks to comment on this condition. Look closer, not for the gesture of Watters' hand but for the gesture of his critique; just beneath the surface lies a series of critical, visual puns. In the end, Watters' drawings may indeed be consistent with the parable aspect of the original Botanical culture. However, refashioned as they are into a revisionist-conceptual practice, an implicit critique of recent tendencies towards neo-colonialism, grand design architecture, and theocratic utopias is waged in the most unexpected aesthetic form.

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Sam Watters

GREENHOUSE

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