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To cite this article: Paul Uhlmann (2021) Lines of doubt, fear and tenderness in the work of José Luis Cuevas and Tommi Parrish, *Journal of Graphic Novels and Comics*, 12:1, 57-72, DOI: [10.1080/21504857.2020.1718172](https://doi.org/10.1080/21504857.2020.1718172)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/21504857.2020.1718172>



Published online: 12 Feb 2020.



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ARTICLE



Lines of doubt, fear and tenderness in the work of José Luis Cuevas and Tommi Parrish

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ABSTRACT

How is it that within the graphic tradition particular images, often composed of only lines and washes on paper, can convey complex states of being and speak to questions of existence? For the philosopher Søren Kierkegaard (1813–55) to exist is to face uncertainties and commit oneself passionately to a way of life, which emerges only through the acting-out of that commitment. This paper considers the work of two very different artists and aims to illuminate the common philosophical ground and expose significant differences. José Luis Cuevas was a Mexican self-taught artist who made drawings of human suffering. He began drawing fallible images of humanity at a very young age after a prolonged illness. He worked in opposition to established works of art in his home country. Tommi Parrish is a contemporary Australian transgender comic book artist whose work often traverses gaps in human understanding, sexuality, identity and anxiety to convey tenderness and humour. The work of Tommi is noteworthy in terms of how sequenced imagery builds on often wordless tension between awkward individuals and the situation they find themselves in. I seek to reveal an alternative narrative layer for each artist by considering gestures within their work.

ARTICLE HISTORY

Received 17 October 2019
Accepted 25 November 2019

KEYWORDS

Drawing; imagination;
gesture; comic Book Art;
phenomenology

Introduction

How can it be that within the graphic tradition certain works, often composed of only lines and washes on paper, can convey complex states of being and speak to questions of existence? For the philosopher Søren Kierkegaard (1813–55) to exist is to face uncertainties and to commit oneself passionately to a way of life, which emerges only through the acting-out of that commitment (Kierkegaard cited in Mautner 2000). This paper is a meditation on the work of two very different artists and aims to illuminate the potential common philosophical ground and in so doing expose significant differences. José Luis Cuevas was a Mexican self-taught artist who made drawings of vulnerability and human suffering. He began drawing at a very young age after a prolonged illness and made early drawings of mentally ill patients. Emerging themes in his work conveyed humanity as being frail and fallible. He agitated political ground for his work by working in opposition to established

works of art in his home country. Tommi Parrish is a contemporary transgender¹ Australian comic book artist whose work often traverses gaps in human understanding, identity and anxiety to convey tenderness and humour. The work is noteworthy in terms of how sequenced imagery builds on often wordless tension between awkward individuals who attempt to comprehend each other and the situation they find themselves in. Competing realities and narratives unfold within the slow time of the story so that the reader momentarily enters into the lives of others. I seek to reveal an alternative narrative layer for each artist in order to comprehend what attitudes might inform their drawings of life and humanity. My approach is to consider how acts of the imagination performed through drawing for Cuevas and through drawing comics for Parrish leap boundaries of place and country to embrace questions common to humanity. This issue has a focus on Australian comics and one might wonder why I have chosen to also consider the work of a Mexican artist who did not make comics? The answer is that in order to find a way to consider the work of Tommi Parrish I had to in the first instance engage with drawing. I was first made aware of the work of José Luis Cuevas in 1980 in my first year of Art School; I was fascinated and began to wonder at the power of graphic lines to inform and puzzle over the nature of our existence. Therefore, I enter this paper through the portal of questions that I have wondered over for many, many years. In this paper, my method has been to select key themes, which act as aesthetic qualities and attempt to illuminate new understandings of how these qualities perform vital imaginative acts to enlarge on the role of the forming narrative. The themes are: waiting, smoke, place, flesh and the human face. I may or may not find that I have drawn out a particular quality which might emerge for Parrish which is a particularly Australian representation, however, that might occur almost as an afterimage of this mode of enquiry.

Waiting

There is an art to waiting; it is something we do everyday which can be utilised in a valuable way or squandered.

Both Cuevas and Parrish work through waiting to consider it as a site where humanity is tested and revealed – where aspects of the self and others can be discovered. Human relations become known through interactions or through a representation of a denial of interaction, through isolation. Cuevas began drawing at an early age as he says he was often ill and had recourse to drawing as a way to fill the hours. Paper was always on hand as he was brought up in the vicinity of his grandfather's paper mill (Jose Gomez-Sicre p.10). All types of paper were available but – rather than high-end art papers – mostly the paper was utilitarian in nature such as Manila paper or newsprint. From his sick bed, he drew the passing world; the world he brought forward was, in the main, neglected by Mexican post-war artists. Artists at the time created pictorial subjects such as idealistic views of the countryside or they worked on large political murals where the figures were idealised political symbols rather than actual individuals who led their own lives. In opposition to this Cuevas sought out a new humanism and ventured into the subterranean world to reveal beggars, prostitutes, cripples and vagabonds. Later, he filled his hours drawing the mentally ill at the psychiatric hospital La Castañeda to study the inmates (Fulton 2012). His world-view was shaped through European ideas by a number of exiled artists and poets from the Spanish Civil War (1936–1939). These experiences left

a profound affect on his world of images and reverberate through his practice; in images such as these, we see the manner in which waiting is performed. In the work 'Familia Vasca (1980)' [Figure 1] from the 'Intolerance' series (Cuevas & Tasende 1983) there is a quality of heaviness which hangs around the heads and fills the space for these individuals who all appear to be affected by an unknown existential weight. Invisible bonds bind the group together in a mutual suffering.

In the work of Tommi Parrish many images in their recent books 'Perfect Hair' and 'The Lie and How we Told It' unfold as temporal sequences with sparse dialogue which is reminiscent of early silent movies. However, a noticeable difference is the inclusion of text as a guide to ambient noise. In 'Perfect Hair' for example, there are a series of images where a girl sits alone at a station waiting for a train, the train comes and goes and the platform becomes flooded with people moving; however, when the cloud of people pass, the girl remains stationary and seated. Within this sequence there are a few panels drawn as faint tentative pencil lines, so faint it is almost as if the subject will become invisible, will disappear. This aches with beauty and loneliness. Through email correspondence, I asked them about this and how feeling can be conveyed through drawing.

Creating emotion through a fluid unity of words and image is what cartooning is all about. The artist makes a decision about how best to create emotion with every mark made. why not express a feeling of stillness or inner quiet by changing the style of drawing? as the artist your the boss, you can do what ever you want. Its worth understanding the intention and effect behind every mark made. (T. Parrish personal communication 30 April 2018)

It seems as if waiting here creates a sense of purpose for the girl as she hugs her legs and travels inwards [Figure 2].



Figure 1. *Familia Vasca*, (1983), José Luis Cuevas, ink and watercolour 31 3/4 x 47 1/2 inches from Intolerance series. Image courtesy Beatriz del Carmen Cuevas.

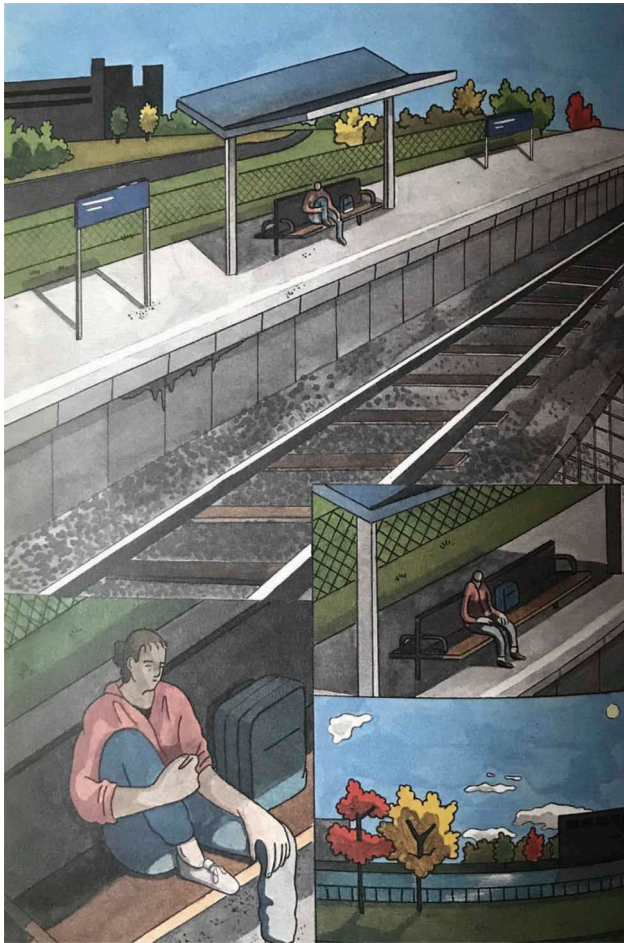


Figure 2. *Perfect Hair*, (2016), Image courtesy of Tommi Parrish.

Smoke

Banished from the world of the today is the art of smoking

Whereas once it was common to see characters smoking in films and in daily life now it is frowned upon and questioned. Today's smoker must seek alternative back alleys for their regular comfort. They must walk off the grounds of universities to have a leisurely time to reconsider their vice and not emit bad air to others. The images of cigarette packets which formerly carried coded messages of transcendence; such as the pyramids on Marlboro² and Winfield (inverted) or of joy; such as the night silhouetted dancer on Gitanes³ or on Camel⁴ cigarettes of erotic allure; such as the girl (or man, as the sex of this suggested figure is disputed), hidden inside the leg of the camel. These images are today withheld from view behind locked cabinets. Moreover, the packets, which were the subject of idle musing in bars, work-breaks 'smokos' and so on, are now disfigured by images of cancered toes, blackened lungs⁵ and diseased eyes. This paper makes no claim for or against these images rather these are observations sampled from the experience of the author. Something that is waiting to be developed is the curation of an exhibition on

smoke. For the power of such images and their association with leisure and human relations with easy communication is now forever broken: now forever linked with an uneasy miserable death. Artists of the early-twentieth century explored smoking as an extension of a way of life. We see smoking in the work of Fernand Leger,⁶ for example, where smoke issues from the burning rolled cigarette like a dream of industry, confident and powerful.

For the painter Philip Guston,⁷ it seems that the smoker embodies the act of thinking of meditating on the pure potential within the creative act itself. Smoking bridges thought and acts as an extension of the body into the atmosphere. In a filmic sense, one can almost pan-out to see the artist smoking as he, in turn, paints a figure of the smoker.

Contemporary twenty-first-century comic artists such as Daniel Clowes and Oliver Schrauwen embrace smoking as a necessary taboo of modern life as the lives they speak of are real and uncensored. And this is something that is shared by Tommi Parrish as they create vignettes of everyday life unfolding in all of its curiosity, awkwardness and wonder [Figure 3]. When I asked them by email for their view on the image of smoking within their comics Tommi replied:

I just love giving the characters something to do with their hands, I think the act of smoking is beautiful. (T. Parrish personal communication 30 April 2018)

Their answer opens these comics up to be observational narratives similar to film, snapshots of everyday encounters and nightlife. However, there is a linked image of smoking to breathing and to air as a life-giving substance reoccurring within their work. In 'Perfect Hair' a character 'Cleary' must take a moment to resist a panic attack, sitting naked in the bathroom after being confronted by an unwanted act of intimacy she plays a recorded meditation of a soothing voice repeating "breathe-in, breathe-out, breathe-in



Figure 3. *The Lie and How We Told It*, (2017), Image courtesy of Tommi Parrish.

breathe-out“. This transforms the next page to be dominated by enlarged text which hovers over a sea of writhing entwined bodies [Figure 4]. In later panels when Cleary visits her Grandma in the hospital, she exchanges pleasantries sitting by the bed of her elderly relation. Her Grandma enquires about her breathing exercises and Cleary replies that she is still in the regular habit of doing this to which Cleary asks her Grandma about her hallucinations. A slippage occurs between the world we inhabit and the world of dreams as Grandma says that yes ‘today . . . everything’s covered in flowers’ [Figure 5]. Graphically, a universe of abstracted flowers swells to cover the figures and page.

Place

Is it possible that place can be evoked through images?

In many of the images by Cuevas figures occupy and are crowded into an enclosed room often suggested by a cursory line or the inclusion of a small rectangle which stands for a window, and further, many times through such windows, a head will be squeezed

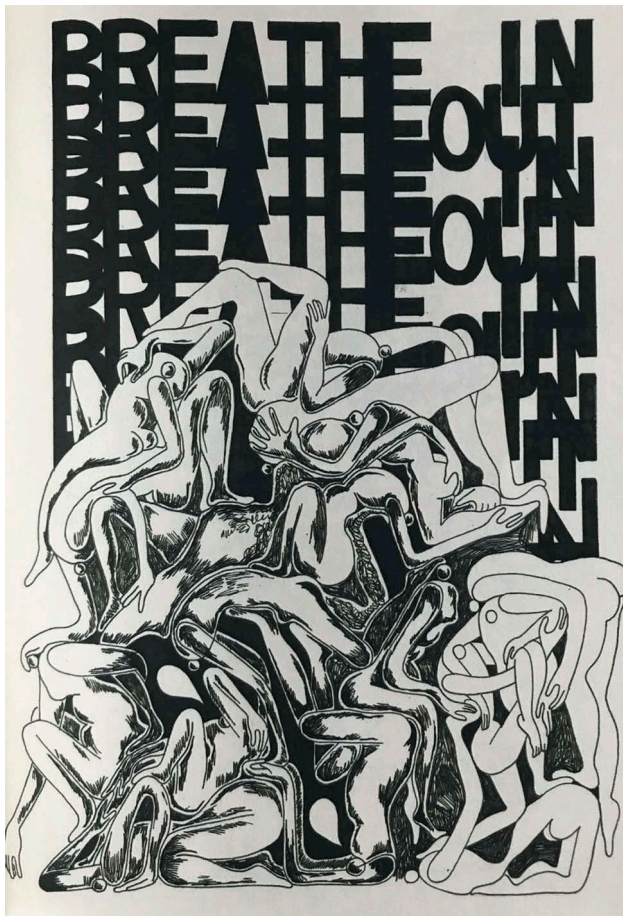


Figure 4. Parrish (2016), Image courtesy of Tommi Parrish.



Figure 5. Parrish (2016), Image courtesy of Tommi Parrish.

through observing and participating in the parade of the carnival of human flesh. A sense of claustrophobia is part of the ambience of the room in 'Pagina de Estudios' [Figure 6]. These images with their strong flowing ink lines and the washes of ink or watercolour are reminiscent of Francisco Goya who in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century as



Figure 6. 'Pagina de Estudios' Para 'Intolerancia', (1983), José Luis Cuevas, ink and watercolour, 31 3/4 x 47 1/2 inches. Image courtesy Beatriz del Carmen Cuevas.

an integral part of his practice made drawings on paper often employing Japanese brushes with varying tonal ranges of ink washes. These images were highly political and wrestled with matters ranging from sarcastic acerbic insights into the abuses of the Roman Catholic Church to the brutalities of the Franco-Spanish war and its high cost to human suffering, and rampant superstition (Schrauwen 2015). They were not personal accounts but rather articulated complex human follies in a metaphoric manner, which reveal the dark complex psychology of the human heart. In this sense, they were highly political and stand as images of witness and protest. The place or location of these images is often implied or theatrically absent, conjured only by long cast shadows. Cuevas inhales this tradition and breathes it forward to create images of human folly which also impart something of the difficulty of being human. He insists that these images are not political in intent (Cuevas & Gómez Sicre 1983) rather they are observational and drawn from the overlooked lives from the streets of impoverished Mexico. The images he depicts appear to be volatile versions of ourselves as we shape-shift through life. They are very much drawn from a place near his own backyard but they are also internal images of the soul.

The place for Parrish appears to be alternatively inner-grunge city life with pubs, night clubs, sex clubs, supermarkets or the never-ending ubiquitous sameness of the suburbs with comfortable living rooms or messy share-houses. In 'The Lie and How we Told It' a chance encounter with an old friend Tim leads Cleary to hook up with him just after her shift finishes at the Supermarket. As they stroll through the back urban blocks, they

smoke and talk and share a cheap meal in a park to collectively re-imagine their past-shared friendships and experiences [Figure 7]. In the middle of these musings as Cleary waits for her friend she finds by chance a discarded book which, in turn, echoes her own life. This exchange occurs as a book within a book; the paper changes texture and colour so that one's fingers sense a change of place occurring within the haptic qualities of the paper itself. We journey inward into the mind of Cleary as she reads and dreams scenes which look almost the same as her current life – however with a difference – here the graphic lines are pure and minimal, skilfully realised in black and white with occasional blocks of black-shaped tone set against shapes of absence to provide a stark reality. This graphic shift contrasts with the scenes of the real life of Cleary which is painted with opaque colour. The graphic opening page of this book within a book shapes a vista of infinite sameness where suburban houses march into the distance as objects of desire [Figure 8]. The houses are beyond the desire for most young people of today as the rising costs of housing within the Australian market set the benchmark as being almost impossible to obtain (Frisby 2016). Within this unfolding narrative, a young woman tells her story of meeting an older man. The older man has a house and kids and apparent



Figure 7. *The Parrish* (2017), Image courtesy of Tommi Parrish.

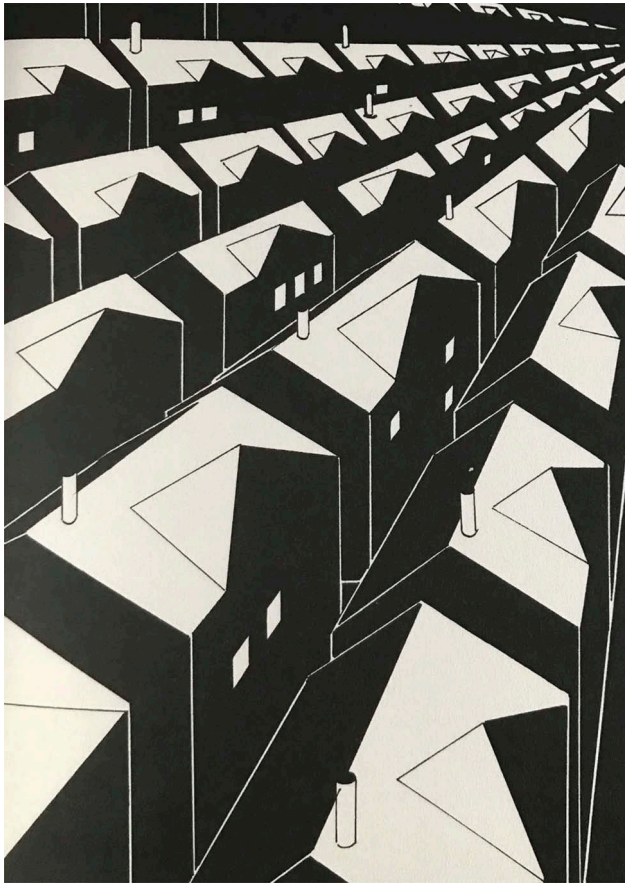


Figure 8. *The Parrish* (2017), Image courtesy of Tommi Parrish.

status within society; however, he desires nothing more than to escape. He voices his sense of imprisonment:

'I hate this place' he tells me on the first night.
I'm going to buy a penthouse in the city, would you like that? Or maybe I'll sell everything and live in my van, that way we can wake up to a different beach every morning. (Parrish, *The Parrish* 2017)

The desire for escape is created in varying ways in this inter-leaved story and in the main narrative pages [Figure 9]. In the musing of Tim and Cleary, they skirt around the possibility of a missed relationship, which could have led to a yet-to-be-known happiness, which now escapes them both. Whilst in the black and white story, the female narrator has more awareness of the bad choices she is making and the impossibility of happiness for her if she follows the conventional life of the stifling clean sanitised suburbs. We sense that if there can be a way out of such situations and such cul-de-sacs of place that the portal for this exists through the imagination, Cleary and the narrator of the novella can transcend their circumstance of place through creative acts of day-dreaming or clear insights into bad choices. The phenomenological philosopher of the poetic image Gaston Bachelard considers the imagination to be an active force, which

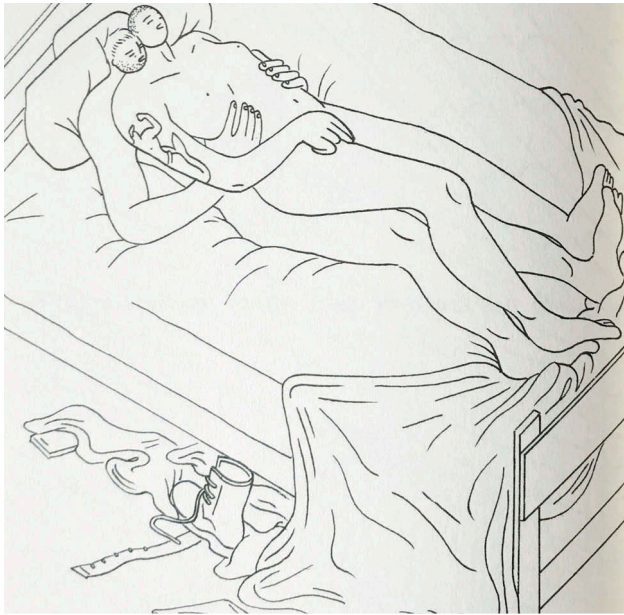


Figure 9. *The Parrish* (2017), Image courtesy of Tommi Parrish.

moves beyond the conventional assumptions of being a *forming* image. Rather, for Bachelard, within the mind of the reader, one image gives rise to a multitude of images and in this sense, the process of imagination sets off a chain reaction, which engenders a veritable explosion of new images. For Bachelard, the imagination creates a *deforming* image which he understands as being an active agent of change. If there was not some kind of active agent occurring within the mind of both creator and viewer then there is no imaginative act (Bachelard 2002). Imagination then is revealed as a powerful force, which draws on active reflection to inform actions that ultimately potentially lead to new ways of being.

Flesh

In the twenty-first century, there is no limit to the amount of representations of flesh and sex through media, cinema, TV, the internet, and advertising. It forms part of the foreground and background of our everyday lives and appears to be now a form of commodity culture which can be seemingly purchased without responsibility, and can be glossy, seamless and guiltless. The work of Parrish appears to involve a deeply reflective process revolving around key questions of being and becoming as a forming identity which moves against these stereotypical representations. What is powerful in Tommi's work is a raw honesty within the subject matter. For example, it often appears that sex is confusing for the main characters – it is filled with fear, doubt as well as pleasure as the main characters navigate queer and heterosexual desire – forces which often appear to be beyond the understanding or control of the characters portrayed. Humour also plays a role as characters confront the oddness of each others' bodies or catch themselves in a reflective moment in the process of encounters through sex or masturbation. This is

truthful and common in life but rarely seen in the way media portrays what it is to be human. I asked Tommi if it is possible that the medium of comics is the perfect vehicle to convey complex states of being and human tenderness and vulnerability?

I dont think comics are necessarily the perfect avenue, all honest representations of the complexity of intimacy are so so important. There are so many glossy examples of what sex and closeness are supposed to look like, which only adds to the collective feeling of shame when a person's experiences dont match these impossibly reductive expectations. Everyones trauma coms out during sex, why not be honest about that? (T. Parrish personal communication 30 April 2018)

Intimacy, fear and uncertainty within relational attitudes to sex also occur within the work of Cuevas. At first glance in encountering the series (Self Portrait with Model', 1983) by Cuevas of over ninety-six drawings created in 1981 in two sittings over two days, power appears to be always on display within these works and a politics of male dominance in sex. The artist appears as a hero in the guise of a new Picasso who is clothed and often stares intently at the naked model. However, after some time contemplating these images, subtle shifts occur, for the vulnerability of human nature is also interrogated. At times through this series, the male veil of confidence falls so that a shared vulnerability is conveyed. The magnetism of erotic impulse is charged and at times the sensitivity of doubt and uncertainty within human relations is tenderly explored. The trembling of the hand in this series often connects to notetaking or letter writing and this is something which occurs again and again in his work (Cuevas, 1978). Cuevas who encouraged a public image of being a womaniser is often locked within his time and macho culture; however, even so, complexities of sexual desire and the rawness of what it means to be human are communicated through the immediacy of his mark-making. Like Goya, his brush and ink nib manages to chart a sense of wordless feeling which is open to fresh interpretation with each successive viewing. Perhaps this has something to do with the paradox of the fragility and strength held within the medium of the paper itself? Perhaps it is possible for the paper to record the nervousness and fallibility of the maker like some kind of seismic truth machine?

The human face

The human face conveys emotions, which perform as signs which can transcend language and cultural barriers to be instantly read by others.

Often in drawings by Cuevas, the human face is disfigured or deformed or conversely shaped as if according to rules of Cubism where multiple angles of a face are on display all at once. In 'Judge' the face appears as if the skin has been peeled off; we see a transparency which reveals the brain while a naked figure hovers in the corner of the image. [Figure 10] In another drawing by this unusual graphic artist, a sense of palimpsest is at work as we peer into the heads to see earlier versions of the drawing process; other beings and hovering heads inhabit the forms so that each head in fact represents multiple versions as to what the personality is or may be [Figure 11]. It is what the philosopher Gilles Deleuze might call a 'becoming head' (Deleuze & Guattari 1988) emerging through trail and error of drawing on the page, so that it becomes a pure oneiric image which can be dreamed again and again. We need merely follow the lines of the drawing to discover various



Figure 10. *Judge*, (1983), José Luis Cuevas, ink and watercolour, 35 x 31 inches from Intolerance series. Image courtesy Beatriz del Carmen Cuevas.



Figure 11. *Maria De Lekunberri Y El Inquisidor General*, (1983), José Luis Cuevas, ink and watercolour 31 3/4 x 47 1/2 inches from Intolerance series. Image courtesy Beatriz del Carmen Cuevas.

versions of the making. This is reminiscent of the accidental process employed by the artist and writer Victor Hugo who used to write with a pen and ink nib and keep a blotting paper under his current manuscript; occasionally he would become distracted and draw an image which appeared to him from a suggested blob of ink (Hugo, Rodari & Philbin 1998). It appears that Cuevas employed a similar approach working from chance and spillages on the page to create new images beyond the scope of his immediate imagination. This kind of imagination relies on working through the process of drawing itself – one line follows another and the work is built through intensive scrutiny. The unconscious seems to shape the outcome.

It appears that such an organic process of creating a form might also be at work with the drawing of Parrish and so I asked Tommi if it might sometimes occur that an image emerges almost unconsciously on the page that instructs them further as to how to construct a narrative:

Occasionally that happens, ill be absentmindedly doodling and the scaffolding for a really wonderful drawing will appear. But mostly every aspect of a comic is planned, the colours the characters the tone of the conversations. Comics are hard and really dont allow for a whole lot of exploration once the pencils have been laid down. (T. Parrish personal communication 30 April 2018)

Within the work of Parrish, the face is an arena which is often implied by simple means; with dots, dashes or circles with enlarged dots for eyes or fogged glasses which have no eyes or even more curiously the face disappears altogether to become round ill-formed balloons on human forms. The particularity of individual identity is lost in these works but so too a particularity to gender. Gender is momentarily discarded and the figures wrestle with the plight of being confined within the frame of being which is imprisoned by the human form.

Conclusion

To conclude: I have mused over a few different qualities that I find within the work of two artists in order to consider the odd realisation that a drawn line can convey human emotions and complex states of being and it can often do this without an over-dependence on words. Contemplating human nature can leap boundaries of geographical location, culture, sexuality, gendered stereotypes, place, language and time. It is interesting that for many artists, a drawn line has a pragmatic purpose – to describe a form or give shape to ideas. However, for other artists, a line is informed by a sense of philosophical absence, doubt or feeling of emotion which trembles within their being and is transferred through simple tools. For both Cuevas and Parrish, I believe their work falls into the latter camp – where the process of drawing is a search to know something, to inform the creator as well as the potential audience. It is fitting to end this paper with the voice of a living artist, Tommi Parrish – who unlike Cuevas, who has now lived out his whole life and whose remaining works can be assessed and interrogated – is still in the midst of the struggle to find their voice through their life and through word and image.

I asked Parrish to give me an opinion on this view:

I think like a lot of artists its just how I process the world, its how I get through each day, its how I make friends, feel fulfilled, make rent, find purpose. (T. Parrish personal communication 30 April 2018)

Notes

1. In an email correspondence of 2 July 2018, the author asked Tommi what the correct pronoun to use was and Tommi responded with 'they'.
2. <https://d3atagt0rnqk7k.cloudfront.net/wp-content/uploads/2016/10/10,162,516/marlboro.jpg>.
3. <https://www.flickr.com/photos/ravello1/4351409104>.
4. http://tobaccoexhibits.musc.edu/?page_id=149.
5. <http://healthland.time.com/2010/11/10/cigarette-warning-labels-from-around-the-world/>.
6. <https://www.studyblue.com/notes/note/n/test-3/deck/8161177>.
7. <http://deppapercuts.blogspot.com.au/2012/04/philip-guston.html>.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

Notes on contributor

Dr Paul Uhlmann is coordinator of Visual Arts in the School of Arts and Humanities, Edith Cowan University in Perth and is a practicing artist who works in painting, printmaking and artists' books. He is interested in philosophies of impermanence. He studied art in Australia, was the recipient of a DAAD scholarship to study in Germany (1986-87), an Australia Council Studio Residency grant to study frescos in Italy (1994), and an Anne and Gordon International Samstag Visual Arts Scholarship to study in the Netherlands (1994-95). His PhD was conferred at RMIT in 2012. He has exhibited nationally and internationally since 1983 and his work is held in many collections including the National Gallery of Australia, Art Gallery of New South Wales, Art Gallery of Western Australia and National Gallery of Victoria. He was one of the featured artists in *Batavia: giving voice to the voiceless* exhibited in 2017 at the Lawrence Wilson Art Gallery at UWA – a book of this project, where art intersected with science to give new perspectives of the Batavia shipwreck story, was published in 2018. His work is represented by Art Collective WA.

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