

Interview: Ghislaine Fremaux and Catherine Prose

Ghislaine Fremaux and Catherine Prose are artists working in drawing, painting, and printmaking. Ghislaine Fremaux is an Assistant Professor of Painting at Texas Tech University in Lubbock, Texas. Catherine Prose is a Professor of Printmaking at Midwestern State University in Wichita Falls, Texas. Both artists have exhibited widely, both nationally and internationally.

The act of drawing is a means to an end or a masterpiece, and oftentimes something in between. Its charm lies in its versatility and economic adaptability. Artists Ghislaine Fremaux and Catherine Prose reflect on freedoms associated with the act of drawing that distinguish it from painting. The artists share the details of their process in choosing particular drawing media to guide their approach to their subject matter. In addition to other topics, the artists also describe the anomalies in confronting the historical canon that an artist working in drawing faces rather than painting.

Page: What separates drawing from other traditional media such as painting and sculpture?

Fremaux: Drawing precedes all other art forms. I mean not simply that a drawing might prefigure the work of another medium (e.g., a preparatory sketch, the embryonic iteration of an idea), but rather that it is a person's first means of visual language. It is primordial. Contemporary drawing capitalizes on its own historic relegation, so long deemed ancillary to painting and sculpture. Painting can "hardly breathe under the weight of its own history", Elkins (2004) wrote. Drawing is not encumbered in this way, and given its economical and materially adaptable process, it permits spontaneity, experimentation, and integrity. There is a humility to the drawing tool, which might be a pen on a notepad or a stick parting sand, such that

the drawing can be un beholden to intention or the endeavor to 'make art.' So abetted, drawing can be a singularly earnest and intrepid enterprise.

Prose: I have great respect for the act of drawing because it is the origin of communication...the genesis of genius if you think about it. For me, the essence of drawing represents the artist's first gesture of describing sight; this description of sight can be from observation or from my mind's eye and imagination. Either way, drawing is my first attempt at describing or communicating what I see or imagine. I think the quality of drawing being both immediate and sustained makes it unique from other acts of making. Along with it being my first reaction in art making, I can also adapt drawing into a more sustained action of clarifying or even resolving what is observed or imagined. So, in other words, it can be first impressions or intimate knowing.

Do you feel a sense of freedom to experiment when you draw versus when you work in other media?

Fremaux: There is a practical dimension to this. Drawing asks so little with regard to supplies and prep work — no canvas assembly and treatment, no scaffolds or armatures — that it can circumvent the admission of purpose and objective altogether. I saw that play about Mark Rothko (*Red*, John Logan, 2009), and however apocryphal, this fastened itself to the lining of my memory: "Courage in painting isn't facing the blank canvas. It's facing Manet, it's facing Velasquez". The very enterprise of painting might be so fraught that it impedes or suppresses the painter. But drawing is innocent of itself — or at least, it can fake it. If I can convince myself that I am only making marks on a page, I am not held accountable to, and thus stifled by, art history. I am absolved, unnoticed. This is tongue-in-cheek,

of course. Drawings are answerable to a canon, to discourse, and to historical context. It is absurd, too, that in drawing I might feel that I evade scrutiny, because drawing exposes me. I testify there, and all the things I dare to look at, and become concerned with, and be seduced by, register on the page. But in order to begin, such conceits are unfettering and mobilizing.

Prose: Making art in general gives me a great sense of freedom like no other action I take. As an artist growing older, I've learned to referee my experimentations so I don't fuck everything up. Drawing is more accessible than my printmaking or mixed media work. All you need is a charcoal stick and surface to make a mark. This is not to say you can't draw with India ink and a brush; it's just to say drawing doesn't take a lot of preparation to get right to describing the subject. In printmaking, I take that initial description and dissect it through tracing and separation. Then I align it back together again. I think I approach my mixed media work in a similar way. But for me drawing is a much more direct and immediate response.

With the physical aspect of your relationship to drawing in mind, how does your relationship to the drawing media you use dictate your level of engagement with the subject matter as you are working?

Fremaux: One's chosen tools orient one's thinking. Pen, pencil, and pastel each facilitate a different sort of inquiry, and plumb different answers. Vine charcoal is an ungainly and imprecise tool, and so I employ it in the macro-level work of seeing and constructing the body en masse. I use it to service presumptions and generalizations, to tether a shoulder to a hip to a toe. It favors risk. It is too blunt to be meticulous, and too

impermanent to count on. It lets me make unrepentant errors, reckless proclamations, and wring out a bodily frame on which to hang the flesh. This gives way to the micro-level work of the chalk pastel. The pastel renegotiates the findings of the vine charcoal and assigns new exactitude to bodily contours and features. It is administered tenderly with the fingers. I use it to treat localized ecosystems of color and volume.

In drawing, I am acutely cognizant of the subject. This is owed principally to the medium's capacity for line. Line is the palpation of an edge; a line records the eye as it feels along the contour of something. This is terribly intimate for me. And because the line is the work — rather than a simple bedrock for later effacement — I remain responsible for what I saw and how I gave my account. For the fact that it is unhampered by a drying time, and because lines so instantly organize our perception, drawing can make things appear rather suddenly. This is sometimes alarming, as when a face materializes on the page, and one negligent mark furnishes it a mouth, and another an eye, 'impertinent' to the visage of the subject. Now I am seized by my desire to amend the drawing, to make it true. If something (someone) has begun to live in the paper, it (they) must be cared for.

Prose: I certainly choose drawing media based on how intimate I think I'll get with the subject. And by intimacy I'm talking about time spent with the subject. So, suppose I've never drawn the subject before and I have very little time to document my first encounter. I'd want to pick drawing material wide enough that it can cover a large amount of space and also be turned to its side to gesture small details. I would also want

to choose drawing material that best complements how I'm interpreting the subject. For example, using bright colored pastels which tend to lighten the mood verses heavy wide charcoal lines that tend to be more oppressive. With experience the seasoned artist will understand inherent qualities of the fine graphite line verses the expressive charcoal line and how they interplay with each other on the same surface.

What role does the drawing tool(s) play in your decision making when you are assigning values, types of line and levels of frequency or energies to different parts of your subject?

Fremaux: To speak on this, I must distinguish the behaviors and maneuvers of pastel from those of other media. The readiest comparison is with paint. Pastel is utterly unlike paint, principally because it is dry, and thus not given to truly "mixing" color. Each pastel has a distinct color, and it has to be placed contiguous to another in order to conjure form. In this way, its color works by relationships — precarious and mercurial relativities, really — rather than by amalgamation. This circumstance essentially informs my method of parsing and building skin (and it doesn't work in paint). And unlike paint, which can be loaded onto a brush of any size, charcoals and chalks can only issue marks as broad as their own edge. This means I cannot make a mark so fine as the hair that shoots from a mole. I cannot seal up a leg in three terse motions. Perhaps this constraint confers more importance onto the astuteness of a line. A drawing's marvel cannot come from great expansions and contractions of brushstrokes, struck from single-hair bristles and mop heads, just as it will not come from the physicality of paint. The mark

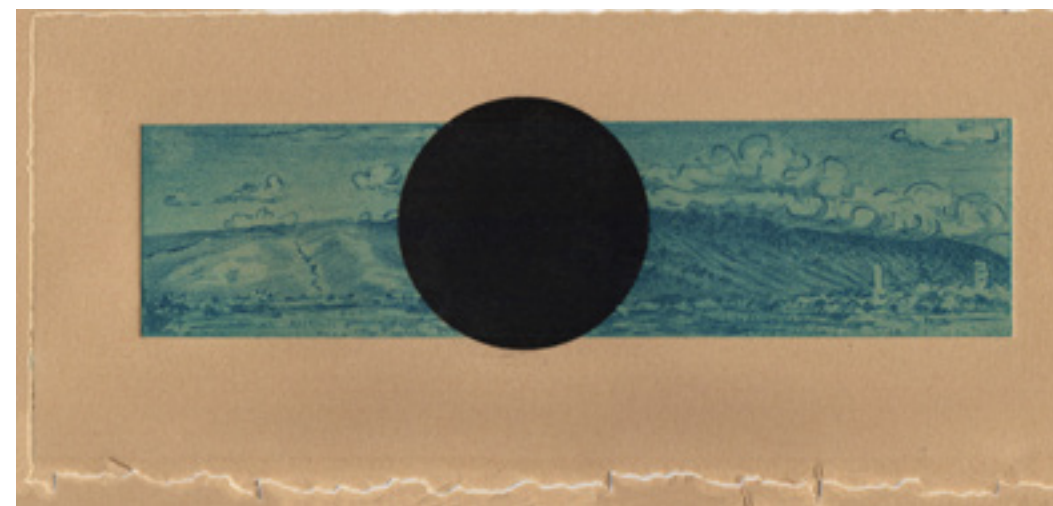
itself must contain such volumes and versatility. And drawing does not promise that a body and a likeness can truly be simulated. I believe in that, very much, and I love drawing for what it will not do.

A painting can elide its own process of becoming. To edit a painting is to cover something up. You can even gesso over it and begin again. A drawing cannot be camouflaged this way. Drawings with heavy editing are closer to palimpsests — even if well erased, they often show grooves and ghosts. It is important that in drawing there is not the intermediary of a brush. There is a hand, with fingers, and what is incised or deposited by the tool. The resulting thing is composed of residues that begin and end the drawing at once. Even in a deep and labored drawing, it has only one layer, whereas a painting buries whole civilizations between linen and varnish.

Prose: Drawing has the advantage of being both permanent and impermanent. If I choose a Sharpie to draw my mark with, it can't be taken away. It will forever be on the surface unless I cut it away. But if I use vine charcoal, I can easily conceal or reveal my mark-making by how much I erase away. When that happens there's this dance that begins between figure-ground relationships, and it's fun to resolve. In drawing you have to resolve that without any preparation. In printmaking having your figure-ground relationships somewhat resolved before you print an edition is important. Making monotypes is the closest to drawing in that your figure-ground relationships might not be totally resolved. Once again, it's not to say that you can't draw with a paintbrush.



Ghislaine Fremaux, *Lover/Extend*, 7.5' x 12', 2016 pastel, resin, paint on paper. Image by Victoria Marie Bee



Catherine Prose, *Landscape From Maui*, 4" x 10", 2017, intaglio KM plate, screenprint.



Ghislaine Fremaux, *dis/embody [Kirsten]*, 7' x 10', 2016, pastel, resin on paper.



Catherine Prose, *Truth or Consequences, New Mexico*, 4" x 10", 2017, mixed media.