



Richard Penn

...and to that sea return

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Alexander Pope (1688-1744) published his philosophical poem, *An Essay on Man* about the character of the human being in 1733. It consists of four Epistles, letters addressed to his friend, Lord Bolingbroke, and a passage from Epistle III holds:

Look round our world; behold the chain of Love  
Combining all below and all above  
See plastic Nature working to this end,  
The single atoms each to other tend,  
Attract, attracted to, the next in place  
Form'd and impell'd its neighbour to embrace.  
See matter next, with various life endu'd  
Press to one centre still, the gen'ral Good.  
See dying vegetables life sustain,  
See life dissolving vegetate again:  
All forms that perish other forms supply,  
(By turns we catch the vital breath, and die)  
Like bubbles on the sea of Matter born,  
They rise, they break, and to that sea return.

This Epistle deals with the place of human beings in society. (Epistle I is concerned with people's place in nature; Epistle II, with people as individual human beings; and Epistle IV with the human pursuit of happiness.) These lines make the point that nothing is wholly for itself, nor yet entirely for another, but for mutual benefit and pleasure. The poem is deeply representative of the thought and feeling of the time. The traditional concept, characteristic of the Middle Ages and the Renaissance of a 'chain of being' according to which humans are midway between God and inert matter, is combined with Newtonian science of Pope's own day, concentrating on human beings as they are 'knowable' in themselves and as social beings.

Richard Penn's drawings seem to be examining the concept of matter, the other end of the chain, in a new way. He changes the axis of normal horizontal vision, of the viewer standing in front of an artwork and looking straight at it. He 'tilts' the viewer's perspective by affixing some of the drawings perpendicularly to the wall, compelling the viewer to look down vertically at the work, or, in the case of the images above, of photographing them from a horizontal angle of approximately 30°, thereby creating the uncanny effect of seemingly disengaging the graphite from the paper. The pencil marks become floating matter, freed from the paper surface, defying/reinforcing what Pope portrays in his Essay as the interdependency of everything in nature.

Isaac Newton (1642-1727) published *Philosophiæ Naturalis Principia* in 1687 in which he applied mathematical calculation to explain the force of gravity in its operation through the solar system. It is rational harmony that Newton saw reflected in natural order. He considered thought and reason as indistinguishable from feeling, each prompting and reflecting the other. It is therefore ironic that Newton had little regard for poetry, for art because his insights inspired the poets and artists of his day, no less so Alexander Pope. In an age when inner revelation was generally distrusted, it was some relief for poets and artists to turn to some form of physical evidence of a higher being in nature. It provided them with something vast and sublime to contemplate.

Richard Penn disengages thought and reason from feeling in his drawings. Little rational explanation seems to exist for the detailed images and fragments of images that evoke such intense feeling when looking at his work. Only when considering a lesser-known work of Newton's, his *Opticks* (1704), does one begin to get a sense of what Richard Penn's work is about. In that work Newton expressed his fascination with the play of light and colour in the landscape and his metaphysical interest in the symbolism of the colour spectrum. He dared to revel in the purely aesthetic delight of the natural world.

In a similar manner Penn establishes a heightened sense of the aesthetic by disengaging the marks of his drawings from the paper. The graphite marks, the bits of matter become free-floating particles. He explains the marks on some of his prints in the following manner: "We have easy access to images of deep space taken by numerous telescopes and cameras which depict objects spanning hundreds, thousands, even millions of light years across and millions even billions of light years distant. Aspects of these spectacular images are often visible to the human eye captured as they are by infrared, radio, or x-ray telescopes. The colours assigned to them are also a balance between scientific accuracy and aesthetics as raw data is always received in black and white. We don't know what our universe looks like. The sub-atomic world also throws up impossible visual models of our universe.

"It was thought that the best way to understand atoms is the famous figure of an orange representing the nucleus placed in the centre of a rugby field and marbles representing electrons orbiting it from the distance of the try line. So against our better judgment, we have to come to terms with the fact that matter is mostly empty space. To make it more problematic, the whole orange and marble analogy is nonsense. Electrons are actually collapsing waveforms of some sort and it is a physical impossibility to simultaneously predict the position and speed of an electron. It was Niels Bohr who said something along the lines of 'Anyone who says they understand quantum dynamics has not understood quantum dynamics'." The bubble swells out of the water, bursts and is subsumed again in the mass of the water. What does it matter?

Images scatter into data, data gather into images. A sentence that is highly applicable to the drawings of Richard Penn, is in fact the title of another famous 'essay', this time by Peter Galison in the catalogue, *Iconoclasm: beyond the image wars in science, religion, and art* (2002) of the seminal exhibition at the Centre for Art and Media,

Karlsruhe, Germany and the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, Cambridge, USA. Galison argues that images are needed in order to confirm intuition, to generate real knowledge, leading to new discoveries in science. Pictures, according to him, are pedagogically, epistemologically and metaphysically indispensable from the goal of science itself. And yet, he argues, we cannot have pictures because they deceive. Convention holds that logical reasoning, unambiguous proposition leads to abstraction, not images or pictures. Truth it is believed is something wider and deeper than the pictorial imagination can ever hope to encompass. We want to know with our eyes open, yet we want to verify what we know with our eyes closed.

The following passage from Pope's Essay on Man captures the visual/verbal, or rational ambiguity of images and of nature raised by Galison:

All nature is but art, unknown to thee;  
All chance, direction, which thou canst not see;  
All discord, harmony not understood;  
All partial evil, universal good:  
And, spite of pride, in erring reason's spite,  
One truth is clear, Whatever is, is right.

Pope challenges the reader, the viewer to make something of an imaginative leap, to put themselves in something of the frame of mind of his contemporary readers and the contemporary poets of his age. The leap entails a form of 'imitation', the art of re-creating in strictly one's own contemporary form, something that had been written, something that had been painted, by a poet, by an artist of an earlier age. Richard Penn re-creates that effect of the vastness of space, of the emptiness of matter in his drawings. His images scatter into data only to gather indefatigably into images again.

Wilhelm van Rensburg

Image verso *Intersect I* (detail) 2010 pastel on paper 2090X1473mm

**Richard Penn** is a self-taught animator. He received a BA(FA) and an MFA (with distinction, 2009) from the University of the Witwatersrand. He was the overall winner of the Sasol New Signatures Art Competition (2004) and received the Everard Read Art Award (merit prize, 2006). He has co-animated two short films, and directed and animated three short films of his own. In 2010 he started STRANGE Blue duck, which offers stop-frame animation workshops to children and team-building animation workshops to corporates. He has a studio at the Bag Factory, Fordsburg, Johannesburg.

www.richardpenn.co.za

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GALLERY AOP

44 Stanley Avenue  
Braamfontein Werf  
Johannesburg  
T +27 (0)11 7 26 2234  
F +27 (0)86 510 0970  
info@galleryaop.co.za  
www.galleryaop.co.za

