



Article

Sketchbooks from Covid and Beyond: Exploring the impetuous, improvisational, and deeply felt musings about life, politics, and the function of caricature.

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Abstract

The closing shutter of lockdown on our sense of normality, routine and freedom had a profound effect on how we see the world and evaluate meaning and value. We quickly realised that our orientation towards life itself was distorted by demands from work, socialising, and a sleepy comfort in the status quo. Through drawing, I sought to examine this new reality by visually realising some of the insights which had been prompted by both a lack of freedom of movement and, a growing realisation of the limitations of political, social, and cultural institutions. A satirical language that had developed throughout my artistic career took a turn towards the improvisational, experimental, and provocative. My visual language was becoming refined and through a 'no strings attached' drawing without planning or sketching, the moves of the drawing were closely matched to movement in my own thinking. The detail I was able to provide in these drawings came from years of observing and drawing and observing and doing, as Causey calls, 'after drawings' from memory. (2017) This built a capacity for remembering forms drawn and drawing from mental images has enabled a liberation from reference, and with that the ability to manifest almost any pictorial reality convincingly. These drawings utilise the function and effect of caricature to deliver personal and political messages and are consciously indulgent, stylistic, and share the features of mannerism. Ernst Kris noted of the origins of caricature and it's overriding contribution noting 'caricature seeks to discover a likeness in deformity; in this way, so runs the theory of the time, it comes nearer to truth than does reality. This settles the nature of its achievement; it serves the purpose of *unmasking* another person, familiar to us as a technique of degradation.' (Kris, 1964, p.175) Kris makes a distinction within caricature between the 'comic' effect and the more transformative qualities of caricature and notes that 'pleasure' is the unifying effect of the two. (ibid) This description resonates with the drawing below which asks small and large questions of the viewer through their propositional, caricatural language and delights the viewer in the satisfaction of a reality re-rendered for consideration of its flaws and folly.

The work below reflects moods, thoughts, full and half realised ideas, experiments and developed concepts which captured something of my conscious and subconscious world during lockdown and beyond. In many ways, the end of lockdown was not marked by any discernible shift in the tone or surrealistic content of the work. There was no overt aim to explore political or social themes but it seemed a time when those ideas felt more urgent. A time to rethink and re-look at society and culture. For many artists like myself it was a rich time of experimentation and renewed creativity. Without over thinking it, I chose my

most comfortable means of expression in drawing to start to unravel my thinking. I intended to share this work via Instagram and Facebook and to promote a dialogue with friends. The most succinct images were the most successful and it didn't matter how provocative they were. Like the evolution of the caricature, it is the effectiveness of the summative power of drawing that is the hallmark of success. More involved or nuanced pieces often acquired less 'likes' but often had greater artistic content for me. Although I have drawn all my life, this work had a kind of self-imposed rigour to it that forced me to be responsive

on a consistent basis and to attend to my inner world.

The approach to the work was heavily inspired by Tomi Ungerer's underground sketchbook. (Ungerer, 2020) In this work of improvisational and often simple drawings, Ungerer explores a range of surrealist fantasies which move from the sexual and subversive to the political and perplexing. Ungerer manages what few can achieve. He reduces and reimagines human characters into pure and evocative symbols. Unlike the reportage artist, there is no discernible individual drawn here. Ungerer's characters are universal symbols of all people; sometimes reflecting the absurdity of existence and even, quite subtly, the folly of drawing itself. It was this freewheeling attitude that I found most appealing and after seeing the film about Ungerer called *Far out isn't Far Enough: The Tomi Ungerer Story* (2012) I noticed that he went straight into the paper with no preparatory sketches. This is true of many artists such as Ralph Steadman, Quentin Blake and William Kentridge. I wanted to try this and counter my typical methodology which involved multiple sketches and working out drawings prior to committal in final art.

The resulting drawings below fall clearly within caricature and as such, rely on an understanding of the visual vernacular for the conveyance of meaning. Rawson saw this kind of language as a relationship between 'units' and that a strategy to form (visual language of the artist) corresponded with the meaning rendered from the image. (Rawson, 1969, p.222) Rawson notes 'the thematic ideas are inconclusive statements, full of implications. Development consists of amplifying, varying, combining, and resolving these ideas in relation to one another, using to the full the repertory of formal categories of relationships.' (Rawson, 1969, p.223) In much caricature, this occurs within an abbreviated visual language which is both highly symbolic and highly refined, creating a new space in which the central idea is thrust into prominence for consideration. Incidental details that pertain to contextualisation of the idea are indicated to the extent that they contribute to the larger idea. Like the highly refined drawings of Thurber, some cartoonists aspire to the minimum lines and marks for the maximum, seductive effect.

To establish some context to the images below it is important to connect them to the wider tradition of political

cartoons. Before the political cartoon was in fact named, a close relative existed which was less overtly political (although sometimes was) and covered a range of subjects including social inequities, poking fun at powerful people and the ruling classes, the theatrical, reportorial narratives, and an exploration of recognisable character types. Lambourne notes that because of Hogarth, largely through his popularity and the subjects of his prints, 'caricature is given a new and profound dimension that was to transform it from a minor branch of art into a weapon of universal application against the abuses of man by man.' (Lambourne, 1983, p.10) Although Hogarth is clearly significant for the ambition of his ideas and the facility to render them, Gillray is perhaps closer to a modern understanding of caricature and provocation. Gillray, significantly, broke from the tableau imagery of previous caricaturists and went closer, often very close, to look at demons biting feet representing gout, a toadstool portrait of William Pitt implying he was grown from faeces, and the infamous image of John Bull eating battle ships. Gillray had a vivid imagination and dramatically expanded the vernacular of the popular graphic image. He was exceedingly popular in his day and is regularly re-purposed by contemporary caricaturists. (1983) When I first saw the images of Gillray I was struck by how contemporary they felt, largely because the fantastical and 'over the top' treatment of subjects is both so contrasting with his contemporaries and, feels like it emerges from a modern sensibility. Drawing in the form of etching and engravings were an important part of popular entertainment in the 17th, 18th and 19th centuries and these drawings shaped public opinion and debate in a way that artists and illustrators today would be envious. Additionally, because the public was regularly consuming graphic artworks, they were receptive to drawing and visual language and often making sophisticated leaps of imagination through visual symbolism, metaphor and suggestive content. The work of Ungerer and my own work is an outgrowth of this expansive imaginative approach to imagery and this orientation privileges concepts over artifice. Contemporary caricature has evolved towards a refinement of the reductive line towards succinct provocation. This is certainly true of Ungerer and I hope in my own work.

Paul Klee is another artist which typifies the improvisational, wildly imaginative mind of the caricaturist and

satirist. Like Ungerer and to an extent myself, Klee was interested in purging his drawing of contrivances. A true artistic misfit, he was often claimed by differing movements and yet didn't fit neatly in any of them. (1955) Howard Read notes of Klee's unique approach to making images as 'what we may do accidentally in the course of our conscious thinking, an artist may do accidentally in the course of drawing. But Klee does not wish to bring this world of the preconscious into consciousness. Rather he wants to suggest the exclusive nature of that subliminal world – to dwell there, and to forget the conscious world.' (Read, 1955, p.166, 167) This is perhaps the best way to describe what is happening in the work of Ungerer, myself and Kentridge below. What Read is describing is a mining of the subconscious through a lack of predetermination. Although nearly impossible to achieve fully, I have found that a lack of premeditation and planning can result in surprising and desirable outcomes which get close to the wellspring of ones innate imaginative origins. John Berger saw something very similar in the work of Klee and noted 'ideas flowed through the lead of his pencil onto the paper and he pursued them upstream back into the circuits, the galleries of the brain, and it was in those networks that he got close, very close, to the forms and rhythms of nature.' (Berger, 2008, p.60) Although Klee's work is not associated with the political, it can be seen as aligning with many of the tenets of Dadaism which although often nonsensical, was implicitly political. Of course, mining the subconscious world of desires, thoughts and feelings would suggest the subversive which is always considered political (or at the very least counter cultural).

The contemporary artist William Kentridge also values the contribution of improvisation and serendipity in his creative process irrespective of the medium he works in. (animation, theatre, drawing and printmaking) (2010) Kentridge, unlike contemporary caricaturists, seeks something more suggestive in his improvisation and often starts with themes from literature or theory. His audience is that of contemporary fine art although the visual language and relationships (as per Rawson above) are still critically important. What we see in the totality of Kentridge's output is a consistent language (although across media) which creates a contemplative space to enter his thoughts, his world, his reality. Rawson elaborates on this noting '...drawing styles can be distinguished from one

another in that they represent each a different reality, a different set of *realia* related to each other by different types of structural function.' (Rawson, 1969, p.33) Through improvisational means, Kentridge establishes a rich dialogue with himself, and this intimacy is an important part of the sustained interest in his work. This intimacy is also important to my own work below which captures many of my most salient ideas during and after lockdown.

An important commonality between the work below and the wider practice of the caricaturist is the focus on body. More than just the body, caricaturists utilise the potential of the human form for expressive means through stretching, pulling, and pushing, an elastic approach to drawing. These new bodily forms excite, horrify, and perplex the viewer and become recognisable symbols of economic, personal, and political struggle. Frances Connelly, noting about the primary feature of the grotesque says 'this mutability of the seen and known is essential to how the grotesque works.' (Connelly, 2014, p.8) Additionally, the caricature exploits our preconceptions of the 'known' and subverts it, creating new symbolic meaning where it previously did not exist. This can be seen in some of the images below which conversely show mouths as both sexual and horrific and explore teeth as images of consumption, menace, and absurdity. Because the caricature is a construction of the artist, it functions through the union of graphic language and content. Connelly notes 'caricature has a pronounced singular quality, or self-reflexivity, meaning that the individual style and attitudes of the artist are as immediately recognisable as the subject being satirised.' (Connelly, 2014, p.92) This inherent linkage between subject and content or 'tenor' and 'topic' (1969) reflects a maturity of vision in which content is twofold; it resides in the depictive subject and, in the manner it was rendered. When we look at a work of caricature, we see one level of commentary when there is actually two. The viewer is aligning with the psychic world of the artist through the re-creative act of looking and performing the creation of the drawing, line by line, mark by mark. Like all drawing, the viewer is participating in meaning making. As Rudolf Arnheim notes, 'eyesight is insight.' (Arnheim, 1967, p.37) What the caricaturist is trying to do is create a new language with which to understand the world. Through drawing, a new iconography is established, and familiar motifs may be employed to ensure the rendered idea is equally ren-

dered in the viewer. Gombrich noted of the imperative of the artist to see the world anew saying 'art itself becomes the innovator's instrument for probing reality. He cannot simply battle down that mental set which makes him see the motif in terms of known pictures; he must actively try that interpretation, but try it critically, varying here and there to see whether a better match could not be achieved.' (Gombrich, 1972, p.324) This reflects the critical role of invention in caricature and the challenge for the artist to not only be inventive but to continually probe how their visual language corresponds to a rapidly changing world. Arnheim reflects a similar sentiment noting 'ornament is limited to making things look pleasurable...Whereas the ornament is a part of the world in which we live, the work of art is an image of that world.' (Arnheim, 1967, p.135)

The themes explored in the drawings below range from global warming, to colonisation, lockdown realities and a desire for the old world of decadence, social interaction, and normality. Through an acerbic line, the intention is to unflinchingly explore the human condition. Challenges to structures of power are a regular theme of my work and the wider contemporary and historical practice of caricature. While I don't mind the label of cartoonist, I aim to explore something which sits uncomfortably between art and illustration. A zone which utilises some the abbreviated language of the cartoon but elevates it with a more nuanced and harsh rendering. The world that I am interested in creating is hyper-inflamed, beyond or at the edge of breaking. It isn't far off our reality unfortunately and the fever pitch of many of these images can be seen a call for action (or at least attention). While the caricature operates on a reductive, symbolic plane, many of these drawings are indulgent, relishing the opulent decadence of the human condition. Caricature still has the ability to put reality askew and to utilise its visual vernacular to create a new contemplative space. Drawing is ultimately an abstraction and functions through the currency of motifs and visual symbolism that we collectively share. The key to making new symbols or associations is to carry your audience with you and make those innovations engaging but coherent. In a corporate and less literate world, the image is king but it is also banal. The caricature sits in direct conflict with mainstream culture and functions as an agitator. The ultimate desire of the caricature is to disappear, leaving the idea smouldering on the page.

All the images below are presented as they appear on the sketchbook page. There are no crops or alterations done to the images. This is a mere selection of the many images produced. Some had titles that I posted with the images. Where that is the case I included them.

Arnheim, R. (1967). *Art and visual perception: A psychology of the creative eye*. Faber and Faber.

Berger, J., & Savage, J. (2008). *Berger on drawing*. Occasional Press.

Causey, A. (2017). *Drawn to see: Drawing as an ethnographic method*. University of Toronto press.

Connelly, F. S. (2014). *The grotesque in western art and culture: The image at play*. Cambridge University Press.

Gombrich, E. H. (1972). *Art and illusion: A study in the psychology of pictorial representation*. Princeton University Press .

Kentridge, W., & Hecker, J. B. (2010). *William Kentridge trace*. The Museum of Modern Art.

Kris, E. (1964). *Psychoanalytic explorations in art*. Schocken Books.

Lambourne, L. (1983). *An introduction to caricature*. Her Majesty's Stationery Office.

Rawson, P. S. (1969). *Drawing*. Oxford University Press.

Read, H. E. (1955). *The meaning of art*. Penguin Books.

Ungerer, T. (2020). *Underground sketchbook*. Fantagraphics Books.





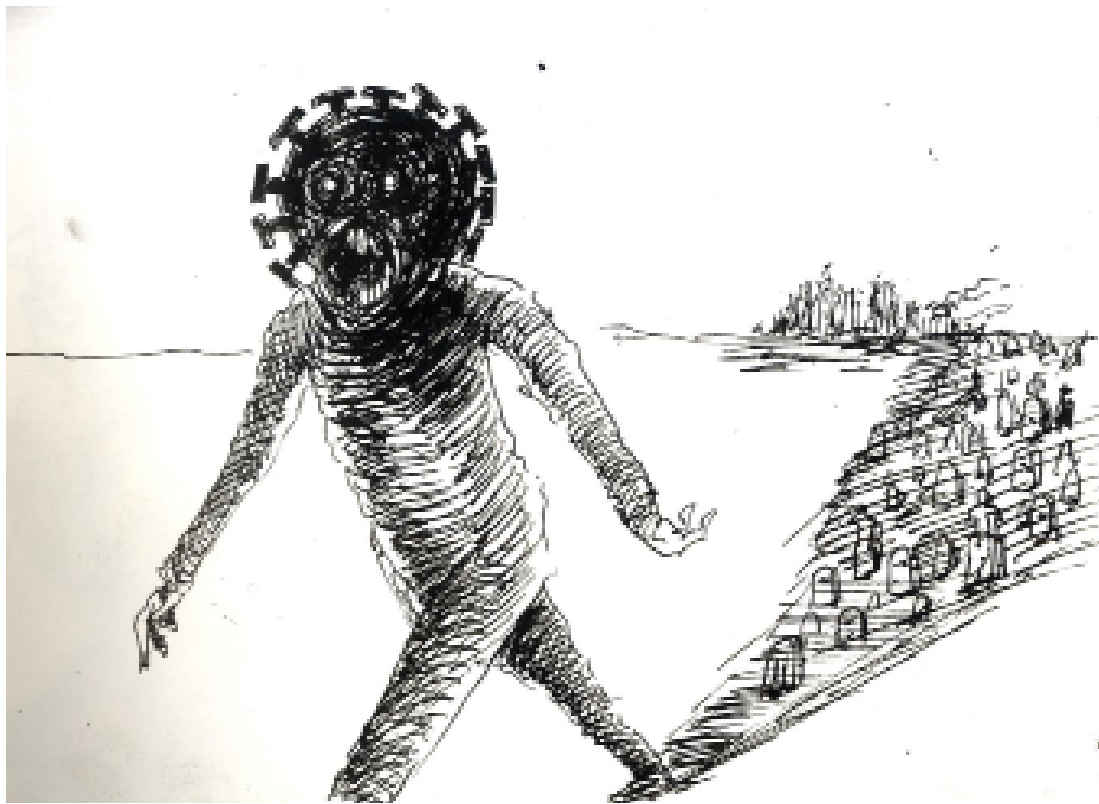
The Plague 1666



Plague screams



Lockdown love



Coronaman



Colonialism



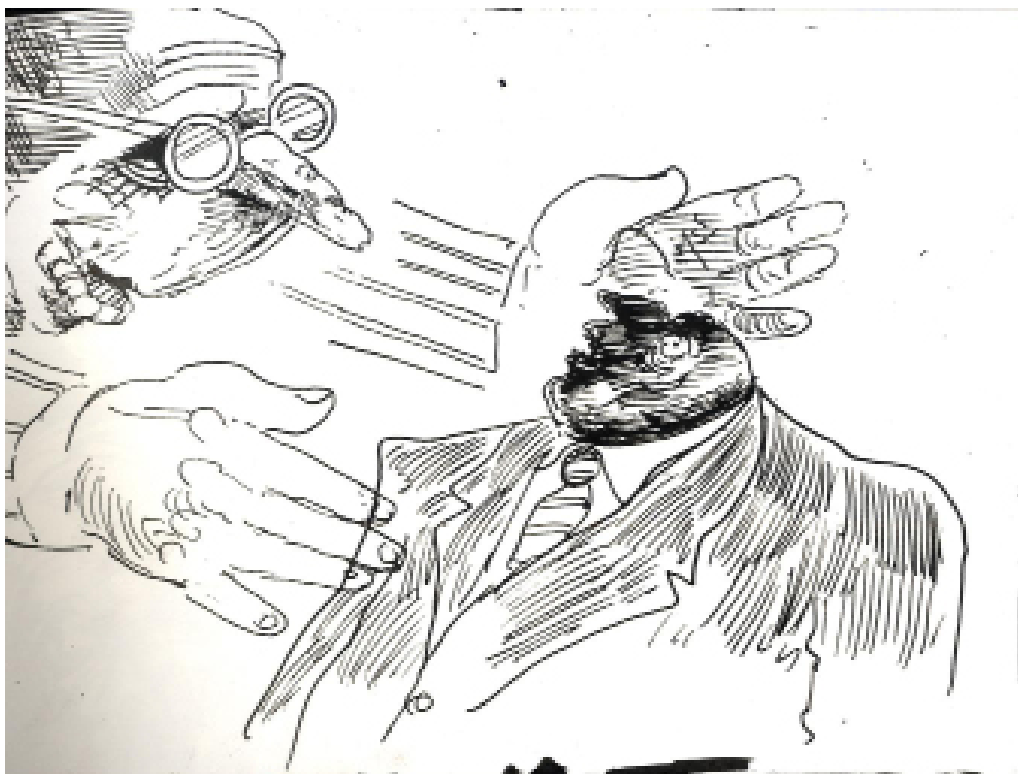
End the crown



Miss World 2050



The old world



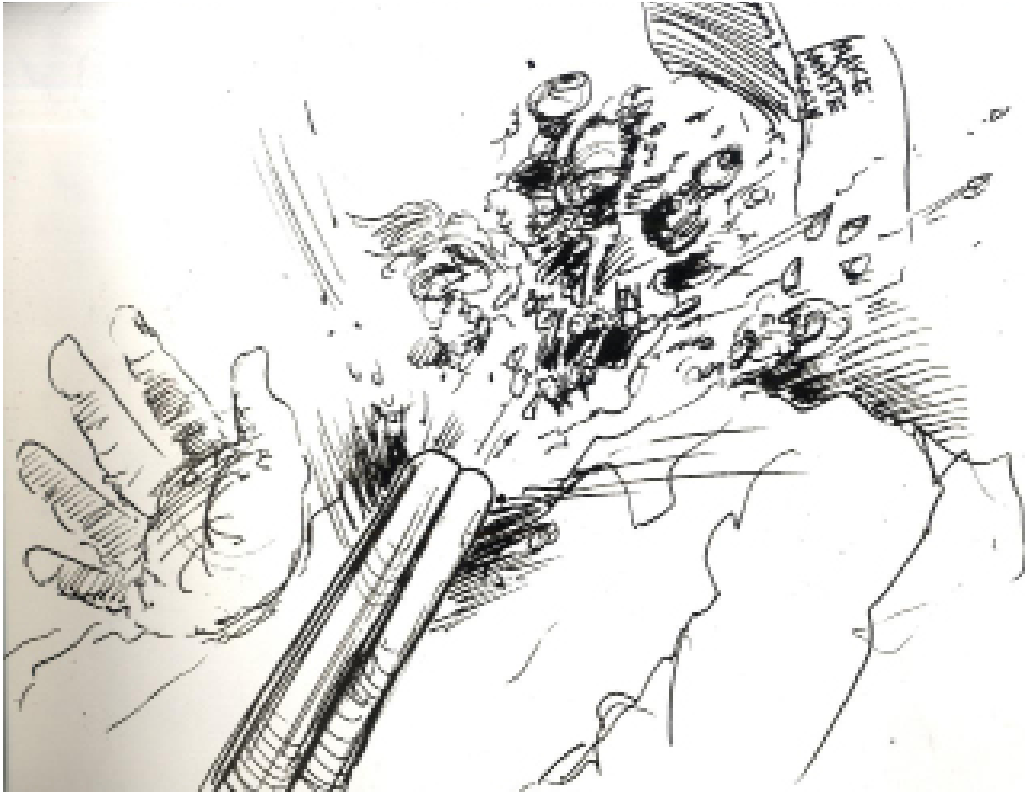
The Shrink



Suicide vest



The flies know



Trump supporter



Where do they put their tails



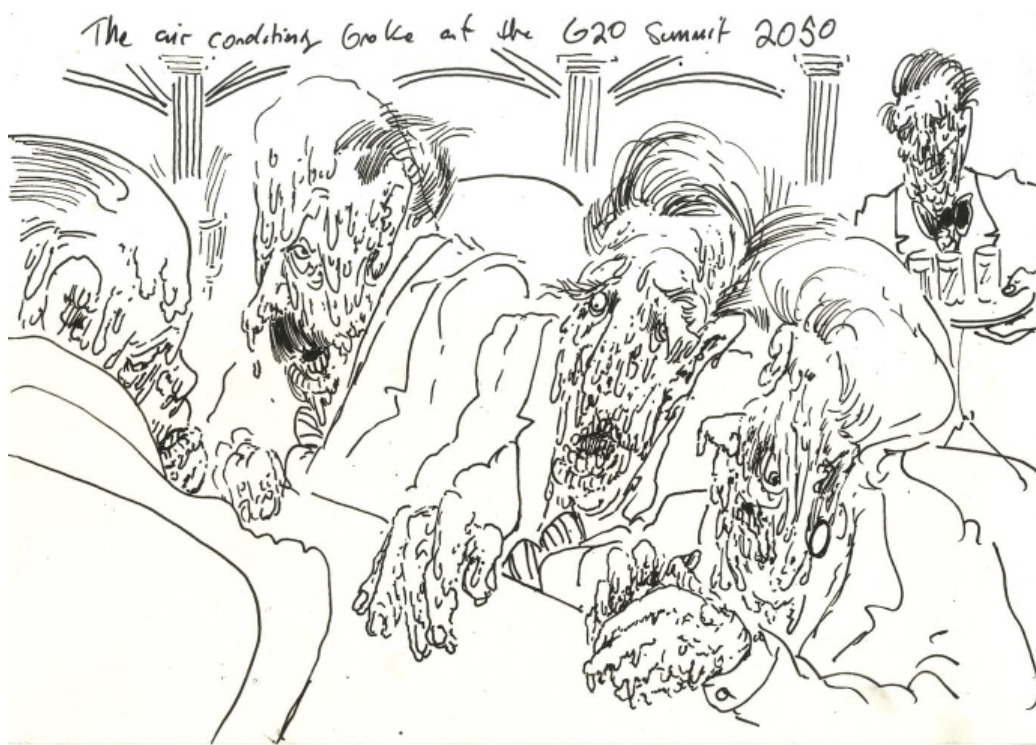
Summer in the park



The witch



The weak spot



The air conditioning broke at the G20 summit 2050



Racism



Tory party



Checking their dead



The Generals