

## **Early John Wayne meets German Romanticism**

A Discussion between Laura Bruce and Andreas Schalhorn

Andreas Schalhorn (AS): *Laura, you have been an artist recognized internationally for many years, especially in drawing and installation. When did you begin to focus so intensely on drawing? Was it a conscious decision made during your studies or did it come later?*

Laura Bruce (LB): I started to concentrate on drawing about 6 or 7 years ago. I first studied painting and received my Bachelor of Fine Arts in 1983 in New York, then took a long break from making art and traveled to Europe and Africa—which is why I began my Master of Fine Arts degree (in sculpture) at the Slade School of Fine Art in London much later than usual. That is also where I first worked with video, which resulted in a series of multichannel video installations. Story telling and story listening have always been a fascination of mine, regardless of narration form (oral, film, literature, etc.). So, it was a natural step to work in video, but at one point I felt the video story came to an end.

Drawing was always a fundamental medium for me, but I gradually moved further and further away from drawing, only to return to it again. Nonetheless the video work, the installations, and paintings have all filtered into the drawings, along with the fascination for narrative and the eventful.

The decision to return to drawing was made gradually: I began to draw figures from stills taken from my videos. Then I had a residency in the countryside in Brandenburg at Schloss Wiepersdorf in 2004, which is when landscape became more specifically important. I made the first landscape drawings there using colored pencils. Reducing my practice alone to drawing was the result of a wish to simplify things, to return to my roots, and to work in a more direct manner. I liked the apparent restrictions of pencil on paper and black and white. It is like Haiku, the Japanese poetic form that is restricted thematically to nature and can have only 17 syllables on three lines. It is incredibly strict. I like the simplicity of this technique and the need to find a solution without leaving the parameters. To develop, for example, from the inside to the inside. Drawing is also the medium that most interested and challenged me. Especially compared with painting. Because, for instance, if I need a striking area in the composition, I can't reach for bright red or orange. I have to create this area using the medium I have available, which is a graphite pencil. When I was studying painting I wanted to do more drawing. That was impossible then because you had to study "real" painting. But I often worked with a dry brush and even cut it shorter to make it stiffer. I liked the resistance of the stiff brush against the canvas and that the structure of the stroke was visible. Applying oil or acrylic paint as a mass onto a canvas was less interesting for me. Painting also needs more material.

AS: *What is your subject matter? The recent work consists mainly of landscapes. But I know you have done a series of portraits. I would also like to mention that you sing in a country-punk band.*

LB: I think my work, in the broadest sense, is about conflict and balance. Nature and landscape are more like a vehicle or a type of headspace. Whereas the portraits are more conceptually rooted. "Landowners" is a series of large-scale portraits of landowners in Georgia, USA. I am interested in the difference between American landowners and their relationship to land and house compared with European landowners. I also wanted to draw a connection to the genre of painted portraits of European landowners from the 18th and 19th centuries, where the focus was more on wealth, property, and inheritance rather than a direct battle with the elements.

Another portrait series deals with American Country Western Stars from the 1970s. It is a drawing-based installation that was developed in collaboration with Loushy Art and Projects in Tel Aviv. It consists of ten portraits mounted on the wall, each with a plinth placed in front with headphones on top. The viewer can listen to a song made famous by the depicted country singer. But the song is covered by my band "Dangerpony." The band was actually founded for the project and we eventually released a limited edition of picture vinyl disks with all ten cover songs.

AS: *What role do the casual, one-word titles play? Am I correct in assuming that you develop the titles spontaneously and intuitively after finishing a work—in order perhaps to evoke a certain mood in the drawing?*

LB: The titles develop while I am working on a drawing or after it is finished. They describe in the broadest sense a type of quality. For instance with “Blanket.” I showed this work to a friend who said it looked like in a comic when the night rolls in and lays like a blanket on the earth. I thought, yes, blanket, that’s a good title. It has something comforting but also inhibiting. And “Blanket” has something to do with quietude, at least for me, maybe because I associate it with nighttime, or sleeping, and childhood. Nonetheless, the word alone has an ominous tone.

With “Solid” I wanted to create a different type of composition that would be very ground heavy. The concept of a horizon, that is the horizontal, is always an issue, as it probably is for every artist who deals with landscape. I do not always want to have a line that creates a horizontal division through the composition. With “Solid,” however, I wanted to do exactly that and emphasize the ideas of ground, earth, and weight. So, it is called “Solid.” With “Rebel,” I wanted to do exactly the opposite. Meaning, break up the horizontal axis. The title was chosen after the work was finished. I looked at it and thought that the large plant with the young shoots that rises upward through a broken landscape somehow looked rebellious. It dares to thrive despite everything.

The fact that the titles consist mostly of one word has to do with the beauty of one word alone. It is somehow sober. The title also seems less literary and more like a matter-of-fact naming.

AS: *Let’s talk about landscape, or more specifically, forests: some of the works hint at the existence of people or civilization, by means of a house or a car. But the surrounding nature is always more dominant, rampant, and unpredictable, and is where your drawing force really unfolds. Are you working through a personal experience with landscape or nature? How do you experience landscape, and, do you ever draw from a concrete encounter with nature?*

LB: Nature is for me a wonderful and flexible vehicle, a type of performance stage, and the main protagonist of the drawings. Everything else is subject to it. But I am not only interested in landscape or nature in itself. I am fascinated by this subject because I believe that nature and its immeasurable beauty and violence is the only thing nowadays that is truly awe inspiring. Science has already discovered, tamed, and decoded almost everything, but not nature. It is more powerful than we are, never predictable, and can, especially where I come from, be very hostile. I remember as a child we had to help our parents tape the windows to secure them in a hurricane. I once experienced a tornado in the suburbs of Atlanta. I am not religious, but after this experience I understood why people back then spoke of the wrath of God. I truly cannot think of anything more awe-inspiring than that force.

There were more figures, houses, and cars in my earlier landscapes from around 2004- 2006 or so. It was important to me in these works to compare a world built by humans and the world of nature. These “props” are subjected to the force of nature and are precarious and powerless. Attempts to tame nature and rein it in are futile. Maybe this choice of subject has something to do with where I come from. Where I come from, it was not originally vital for a house to be absolutely solid. It was more important to get the house built fast, before the rains or snows came, using the materials at hand. Then you needed some type of vehicle to travel to a store that was often miles away to buy provisions. This history is still deeply rooted in the American mentality. And I like these unpretentious houses that look like they would blow away with the first strong winds, like the house in *The Wizard of Oz*.

The drawings sometimes refer to actual landscapes. Especially that of the state of Georgia where my family live. There is still real wilderness in the United States, thank God. But the landscape in Brandenburg and the forests of Rheinland Pfalz also inspired much of the imagery in my work. I had residencies in both places, and was able to work directly with forest imagery.

Another source of inspiration are the fairy tales that are so loved in Germany, such as those produced in the 1970s in former Czechoslovakia or the GDR. I like the historical and fairy tale relationship to forest

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here, where the notion of forest has a complex and deep-rooted significance. It is a place where magic can happen, where nothing is safe or predictable, that is dark and eats little children, and where wolves and witches live. Although nowadays the woodlands of Rheinland Pfalz are more populated by synchronized Nordic Walkers, they nonetheless always possess a fairytale level made of magic and fear.

That is why I like for the drawings, here I mean the landscapes, to be right on the edge of real and fairytale. Sort of like a bit of early John Wayne meets German Romanticism with a touch of Walt Disney.

There are only ever one or two elements in my work that originate in a specific landscape, maybe a certain tree or a horizon line that interested me. Sometimes different landscapes merge, like in "Rebel." The rest develops during the work itself. Like a process of check and checkmate. Balance and counterbalance mixed with "where the hell am I now"?

*AS: It feels like there has been a development in the landscapes regarding style and the temperament of the line you use. The impulsive, gestural line that was prominent in the hatched forms and surfaces of the earlier work now at times makes way for a more delicate and "controlled" use of line. This is particularly true of "Rebel." How did this come about?*

LB: I think it is the result of a natural process of further development, which comes from making this work for several years. There are forms in the work now that are derived from the earlier smoke, tree, and shadow forms. For example, the two, gray upward swirling shapes at the left and right side of "Rebel" are related to the smoke forms in the earlier works. But this was the first time I used a quieter surface shape, rather than the powerful hatched lines. It also allowed for a "third" color, a flat and matt gray, in addition to the black of the usual lines and the white of the paper. I also thought it was exciting to emphasize the contrast between large, still areas and elements that seem to be in motion.