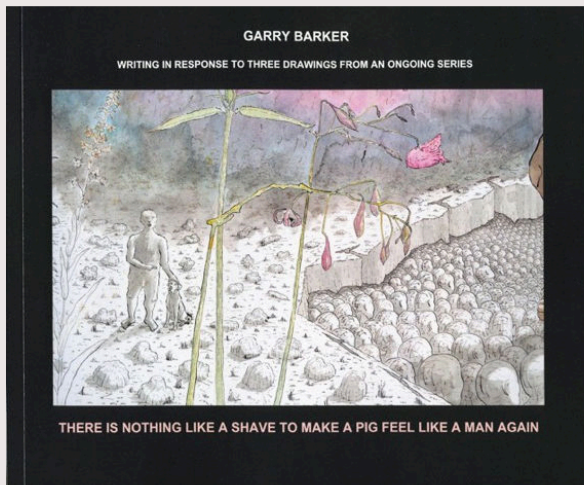


Garry Barker

THERE IS NOTHING LIKE A SHAVE TO MAKE A PIG FEEL LIKE A MAN AGAIN

Solo exhibition the Shed Gallery Ilkley 15th to 29th September 2013 Details of catalogue



THERE IS NOTHING LIKE A SHAVE TO MAKE A PIG FEEL LIKE A MAN AGAIN
Garry Barker - Writing in response to three drawings from an ongoing series
20 x 24 cms, 60 pages, softcover.

A record of an exhibition of three large drawings by Garry Barker
held in the Shed Gallery Ilkley between 15 September and 29 September 2013.

"If I had to boil down what these drawings are about it would be that they are childhood memories of the town of Dudley where I grew up, these memories still living with me as I experience life in the city of Leeds where I now live; the town in a city itself being a metaphor for the past in the present. As one experience overlays the other, space opens out for reflection on mythic, political and social visions, all of which need landscapes to unfold within, these landscapes being neither of today nor yesterday, can then become visions of a future as yet unknown."

THERE IS NOTHING LIKE A SHAVE TO MAKE A PIG FEEL LIKE A MAN AGAIN

INTRODUCTION

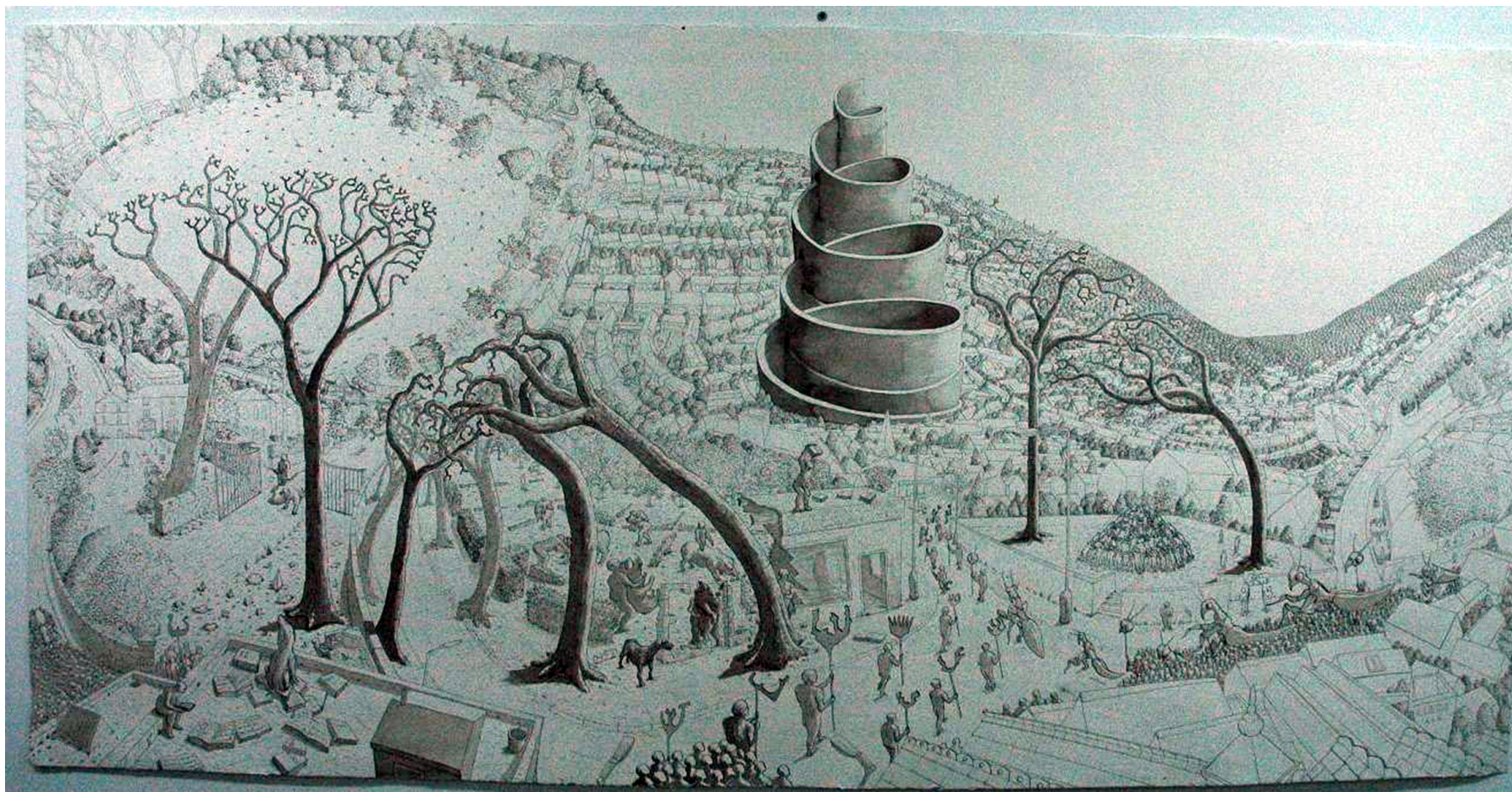
Writings in response to details from the drawings.

As you read this writing it can feel as if you are travelling forwards in time. One thought comes after another; you begin at a beginning and come to an end. When you look at a drawing the image arrives in what could be called a simultaneity. If you want to focus on individual details, you can do this, but always with an awareness of how each detail is part of a larger whole. As focus shifts, it moves within a greater complex image and awareness and understanding of the image is inseparable from this complexity. Writing is a linear communication and writing about drawing is therefore to some extent always a failure, but a failure of such significance that there is an entire section of literature devoted to this very practice. Ekphrasis as it is properly called, has a long and honorable history, usually first attributed to Homer's descriptions of the engravings that covered Achilles' shield. These responses to my own drawings are though writings that belong just as much to another tradition, that of the visual artist trying to make him or her self understood in a world dominated by the spoken word and written text. The open-ended nature of the image is so open to interpretation that at times the maker wants to step in and intervene. Pretty nearly always a mistake but an interesting one nevertheless.

In 2013 Terry Hammill asked me if I would show some work in the Shed Gallery. Something I was very happy to do and it gave me an opportunity to see how three of my large narrative drawings would work when hung together. Each drawing could be read as a further exploration of the visual narratives explored in the one made before it. A tower in one drawing inverted to become a huge hole in the ground in another, an image relying on size constancy to anchor its position in one drawing becoming a play on perspective in the next one.

While the work was up Terry was also using the space as his studio and during this time decided to photograph the drawings. Because they are so large, often over eight feet wide or tall, and usually on white backgrounds and drawn in pen and ink, photography has usually failed to record anything like the actual experience of seeing them. However Terry persisted and sent me a CD of 50 images taken from all three drawings, the responses to some of which forms this contemporary venture into ekphrasis.

If I had to boil down what these drawings are about it would be that they are childhood memories of the town of Dudley where I grew up, these memories still living with me as I experience life in the city of Leeds where I now live; the town in a city itself being a metaphor for the past in the present. As one experience overlays the other, space opens out for reflection on mythic, political and social visions, all of which need landscapes to unfold within, these landscapes being neither of today nor yesterday, can then become visions of a future as yet unknown.



Entrusted with carnival business, I make friends with our enemies and have no empathy with the vegetable world
Pen, ink and wash. 244cm x 112cm 2013



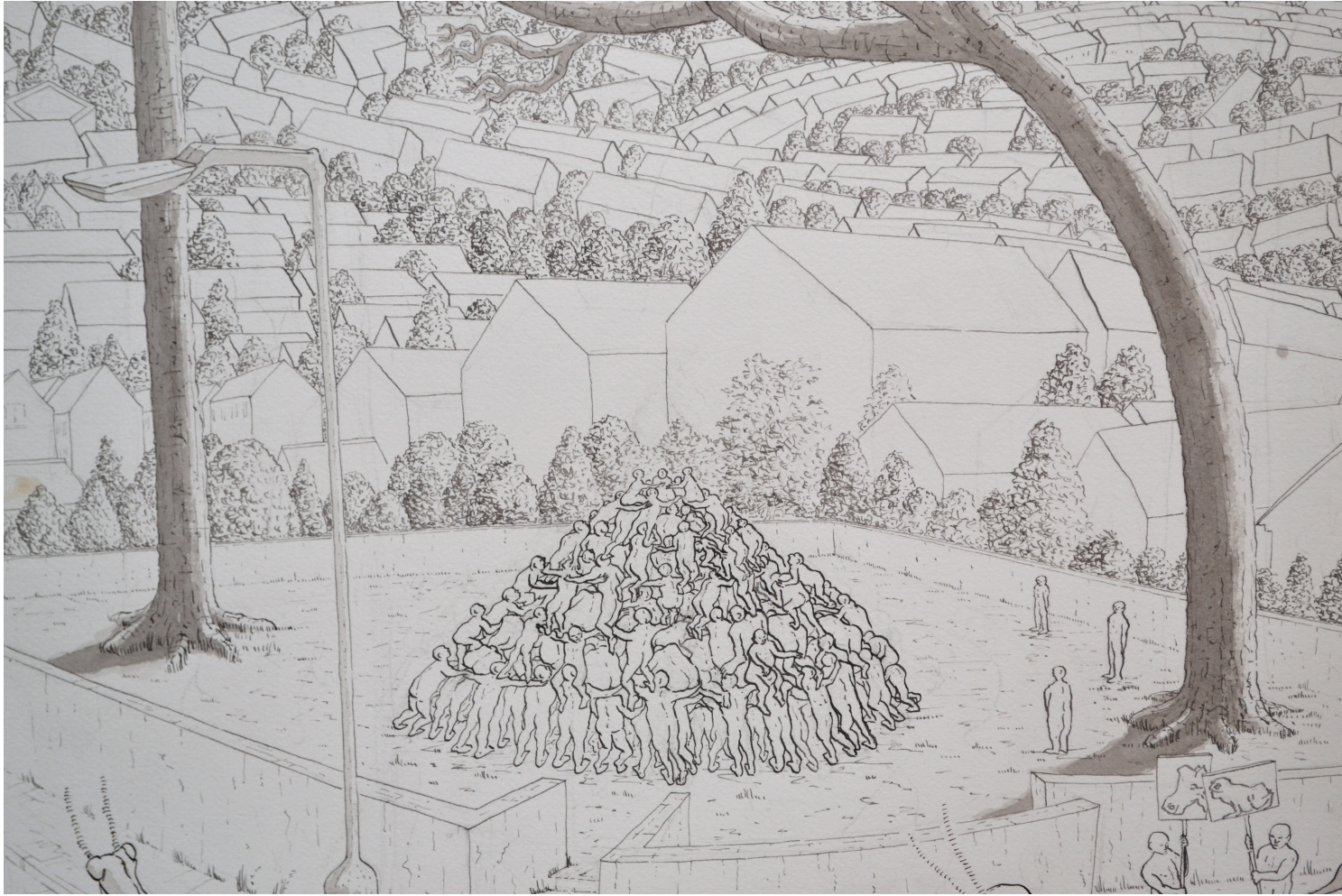
At the centre of the image stands a tower. It is impossible when drawing a spiral tower in the centre of an image to avoid comparisons with Bruegel's 'Tower of Babel' paintings but I was trying to make a slightly different metaphor.

My original drawings of towers were simply done by taking pencil spirals and inking them in as if they were solids. The tower is of course an impossible figure, only possible as a drawing. It is on the one hand an attempt to develop a metaphor for the activity of drawing itself and on the other to play with Bruegel's and of course the original Bible author's, metaphor for 'hubris'.

The tower rises out of a landscape composed from various drawings of Leeds, on the horizon sits a tiny image of the Markazi Jamia Masjid Bilal mosque, which is in Harehills. The denomination of this mosque is Sufi, a perennial philosophy of existence that according to some authorities pre-dates religion, while cutting into the base of the tower is the spire of a traditional Victorian church tower of which there are several in the area. It is the mosque of course that is at the moment far more active, fears of jihad and suicide bombings often echo in the stories told to me by local people who fear possible future riots and sectarian violence in this area of multicultural faith.

Standing on the roof of a building in the foreground a figure is about to hurl a book into the street below. This book is meant to signify the religious texts of the peoples of the book. The Jews, Christians and Muslims, the learning enclosed in each book may be wonderful, but over the last 2,000 years the slight differences between them have led to bitter conflicts. The wars in their name are always righteous wars, crusades or jihad always in the name of God. However nobody notices, nobody can see anything outside of their believer's trance.

The tower is also an image from my boyhood upbringing in Dudley. A small industrial town dominated by a castle on a hill. To get to the top as a boy you had to climb a long stone spiral staircase, that in those days was never lit. Climbing upwards in total blackness on all fours was one of the scariest experiences of my young life, but the reward of being able to see the town spread out below me, one of the richest. These imaginary views over Leeds are in reality my attempt to draw how the tiny buildings of Dudley spread out into the distance before me on that day back in 1959.



This pile of bodies developed from a series of drawings made after trying to follow up on some family history. My grandmother was called Lilly Lucy Singer and her mother was a Sanderwitch, both families were originally Polish Jews, but there are virtually no Jews left in Poland any more. If you look at those piles of suitcases that are still preserved in the museum of Auschwitz, one of the suitcases is labeled clearly 'Singer'.

The impossibility of escaping the gas chambers, the horrors of piles of naked bodies, piles of bodies created as they tried to climb over each other to reach the zyklon B inlets, were images that have lived with me since as a boy I read my dad's collection of war books. He had a fascination with these things and read widely around the subject, never of course ever letting on that he was himself technically Jewish.

However the earlier studies were too direct, too much to do with the worst side of what it is to be human. I had been to Barcelona a few years before and had seen the Plaça Sant Jaume people towers. In this case people worked together to get as high as they could to aspire to. They had obviously prepared well, hours of training must have gone into their orchestrated moves, each layer of men, standing firmly on the shoulders of the ring of men below them.

This seemed to me a powerful example of human beings at their best, all working together in harmony to achieve something for others to admire. The drawings I did at the time were not very good, but I realised I could rework the idea as a counterpoint to the large tower I had already decided on as being the focal point to the overall drawing.

As to the actual drawing of these figures, this became an exercise almost like solving a jigsaw puzzle; each body shape had to be fitted to the next, so it's actually a flat image that has an illusion of being about a mass, it is no more substantial than the main tower itself, which it vainly attempts to compositionally echo.



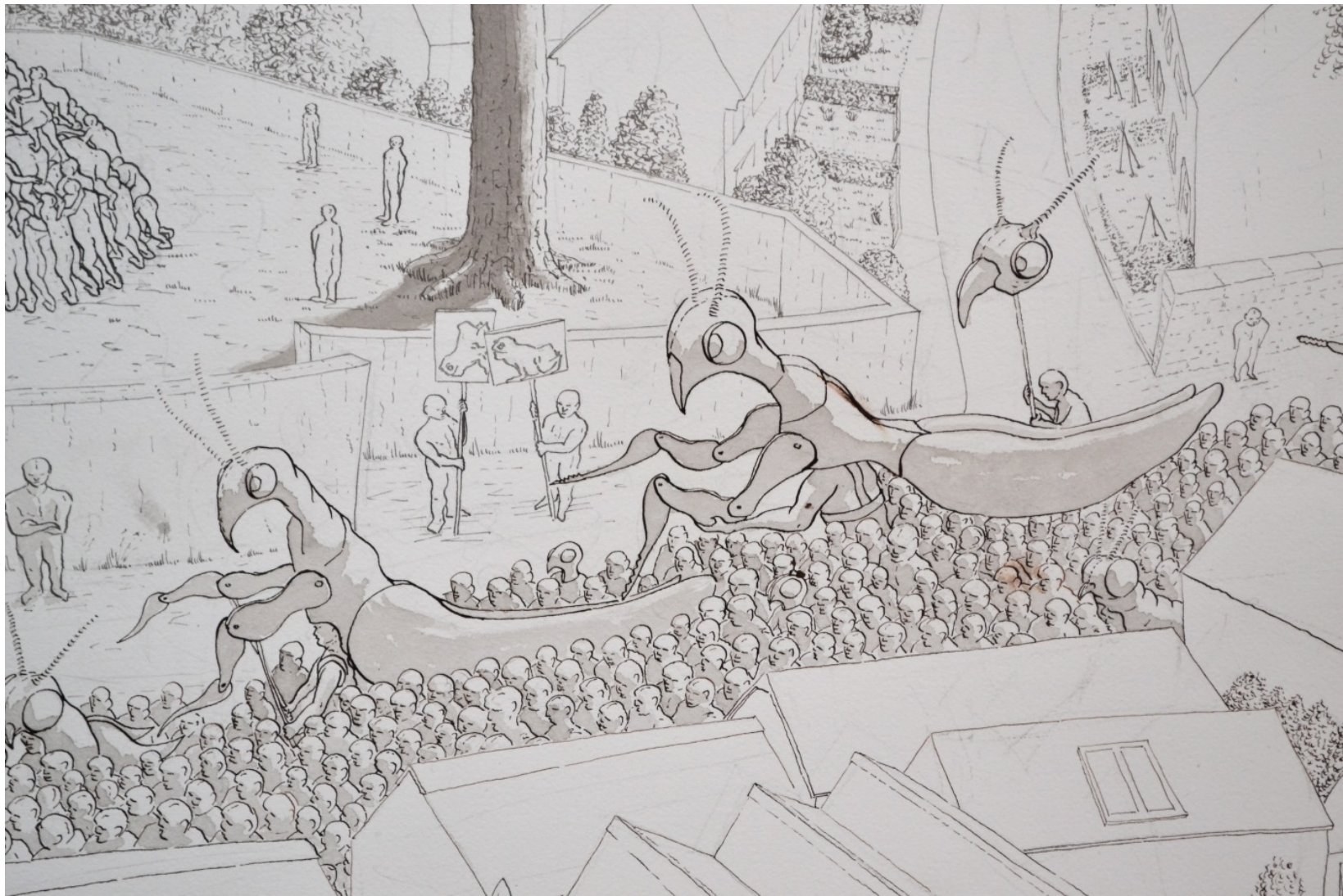
This image is one I think of as 'the lungs' of the drawing. Local people go to Potternewton Park for a breath of fresh air, the Victorians having heavily planted not just the park but because they lined Chapeltown's roads with trees, they created what appears to be a forest amongst the houses.

The park edges are all drawn from life, the 'turning over' of the space reflecting the way I walk around the park as I draw it. This device gave me a central space within which to make trees operate as if they are the lung's alveolar sacs.

This turning of the space upside down is something that often occurs in my drawings and was initially simply a way to solve a visual problem of how to fit together the various drawings I do on my walks. In particular taking a walk both up and down the same street led me to develop a curved space that could also be used to push some elements close and hold others further away, but in a far more dynamic way than in traditional perspectives.

Potternewton Park is also the place where the Leeds Caribbean Carnival is held every year; the trees flagging up a 'farewell to the flesh', a further reminder of the topsy-turvy nature of the old European carnival.

Although at the moment it is empty, everyone who lives in Chapeltown visits the park on Carnival weekend, however the full significance of carnival will to be highlighted using another detail.



Every year Chapeltown hosts a carnival. From my bedroom window I can watch as crowds of people mass through the streets, the carnival procession merging with onlookers as it progresses towards the park. Each year there is a different costume theme and these costumes inevitably become part of the iconography of my drawings. One year insects, in particular praying mantis costumes, were heavily in evidence.

Humans dressed as other creatures, is an old shamanistic theme and one that has remained constant over thousands of years. The dancers wearing the costumes also tried to mimic the movements of the creatures they were meant to be, dipping down and weaving in and out amongst the throngs. The procession is also broken down into themed sections, one might be fire, another birds, this section of course 'belonging' to the insect tribe, their affiliation further signified by the wearing of insect masks.

This joining of tribes or parties of interest is something that is common to us all and as much as it is a powerful tool when used for mutual support, can become a force for evil, eventually becoming sectarian and leading to fascism.

Masses of humans are quite frightening and its only when people come out onto the streets do you realise how many there are of us. Cities house thousands upon thousands of people in very small spaces and as a species we have not just filled our niche but have started to overspill into every other creature's territory.

I started drawing crowds in detail after I went with many others to protest our proposed military intervention in Iraq. Being part of the crowd is a powerful emotional experience. That particular demonstration saw masses of people stretching as far as the eye could see, all agreeing that war was not an option, all singing to the same tune, thousands also carrying images and texts on poles which were designed to get the message across.

The streets of Leeds and other cities have over the years hosted many marches and processions of people, both political and religious. In April each year the streets of Chapeltown host the Vaisakhi procession that starts and ends at the Sikh temple, in the not too distant past women marched to 'reclaim the night' and more recently Asian and African-Caribbean tensions have seen the potential for rioting once again raise its head. One group or another comes out in force to assert its identity, celebrate its culture or air its grievances. The two characters holding up placards representing this need we have to band together behind different beliefs or affiliations, one is holding up a horse and the other a frog. We associate ourselves with animals because they are very like us, because they are the reality we are. In West Yorkshire we follow Leeds Rhinos and Bradford Bulls. However if you look closely at the horse/frog images you will see that they are exactly the same image, simply seen from another angle. The need for a Leeds fan to follow the Rhinos, is the same need a Bradford fan has to follow the Bulls, both are indeed 'fanatics'.



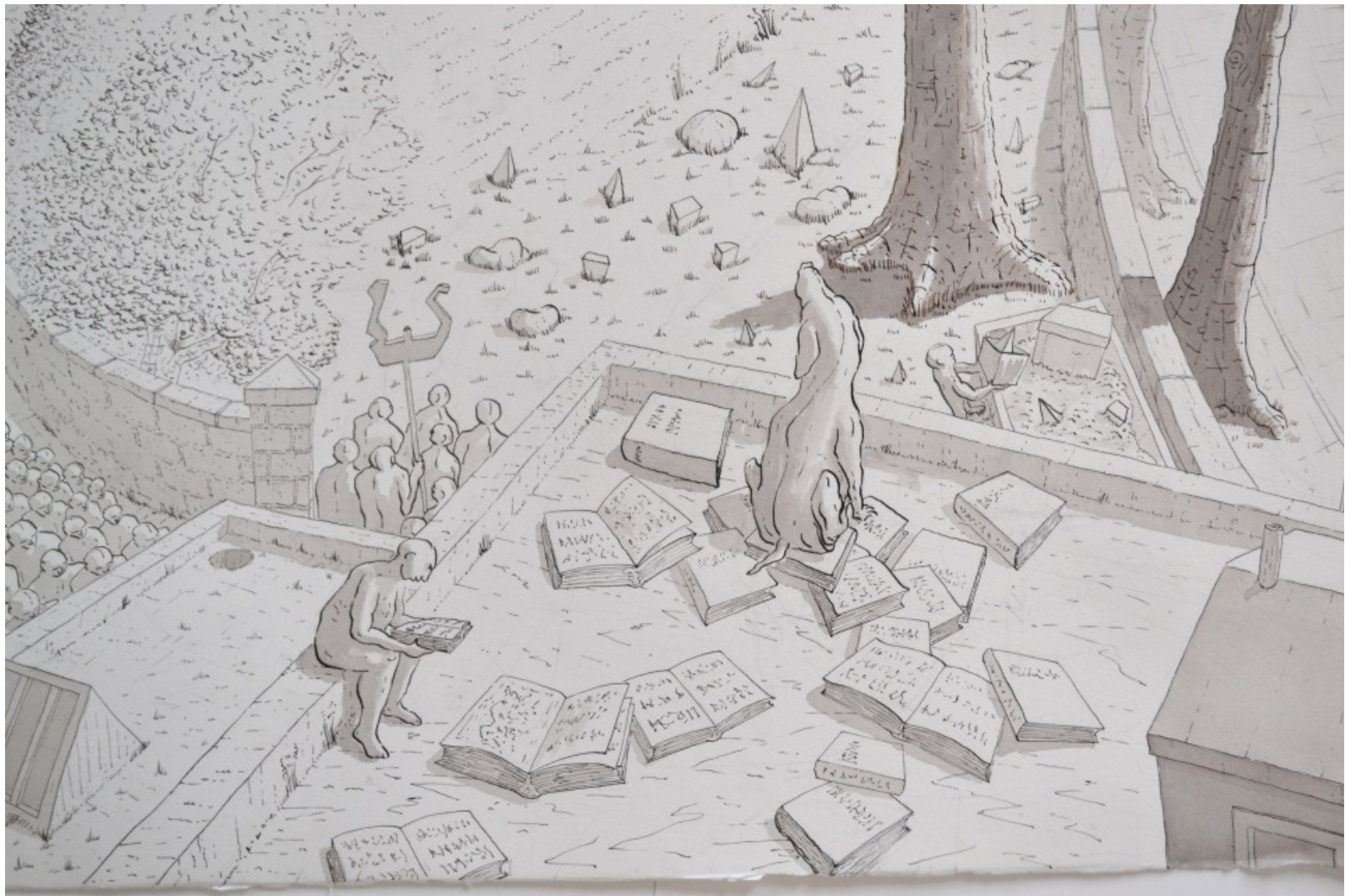
The pig stands firm gazing directly out at the oncoming crowd, while the man reads. Both are meant to be guarding the entrance to the houses beyond, which includes my own home; however the man is still trying to find out what it's all about, he seeks the meaning of life in a book.

The pig of course knows life's worth already, no lofty ideas will save its bacon; it stares bluntly towards its future. Littered in the foreground are discarded Platonic solids, signs of other ideas; other thoughts about the nature of things that are no longer useful.

Gates are significant things; be they the gates of Paradise, the gates to Hell, the gates of Eden or simply the garden gate. God placed Cherubim at the gates of Eden to make sure Adam and Eve would never return, a story told in another tale of the People of the Book, one that perhaps the man is now reading.

These gates were put into place because of a joint venture between Newton Futures and the Groundwork Trust. This is a neighbourhood community group that I have been part of for several years.

Most of the meetings are held in our house and we got together to help organise responses to crime and general degradation of the local environment. We have had lighting improvements installed, confronted on-street prostitution and drug use, as well as helping to clear tipped rubbish and plant disused land. The locality is one that I try to take a real as well as imaginary responsibility for.



Another human is lost in reading a book while others march under the banner of a sign. The reader sits on a rooftop, raised above it all, removed from the reality of other people's lives. The others follow a sign, a sign which was one of several designed to be part of a family of forms that could refer to anything from pound signs to ancient hieroglyphs.

When people are marching under a sign it implies that they have a direction to follow and perhaps this is all they need. Behind the wall a man loads up a skip with discarded ideas, he is about to dump a tetrahedron that sits inside a cube, or perhaps he simply discards a broken speaker inside an old cardboard box.

Tetrahedrons used to symbolise fire and cubes earth, old now almost forgotten ways of thinking about reality. Books lie strewn about, their languages unreadable, the dog simply uses them to sit on, they keep his bum warm. The dog is interested in other things, he sniffs the air for meaning.



Humans and pigs go back a long way. Pigs dream and see colours. Piglets chase each other, play fight like puppies, thrive on affection, love toys, and will not develop normally if deprived of an opportunity to play. Pigs are extremely devoted to and protective of their young and being gregarious, greet each other with friendly grunts and rub snouts affectionately. Pigs have been found to have the same cognitive abilities as three-year-old children. When treated well, pigs are extraordinarily gentle and have a great capacity for gratitude and reciprocation. They know their names and wag their tails when happy and for over 9000 years have lived alongside humans.

Traditionally, pigs consumed our refuse, and we ate their flesh. They fed on our discarded food, a practice that was still in operation when I was a boy, my nan giving me the potato peelings and similar waste to feed them with. This was a left over practice from the war, the re-learning of the old ways of rearing pigs in Britain was promoted by the Small Pig Keeper's Council, convened in 1940 to encourage the sharing of pigs in associated 'pig clubs' and the collection of kitchen swill for their fodder. We have forgotten that time and the practice of feeding surplus food to pigs has not only almost disappeared but has been regulated away by European Law.

Like us they are not covered in hair, their skin a sign of their domestication. Many religions prohibit the eating of pork, regarding the pig as unclean, perhaps pigs are too close to home, too easily confused with ourselves, representing what we might become if we are not careful. We are though all animals and to celebrate this fact people and pigs join on mutual endeavours, the one though never forgetting that it fills the other's stomach as much as it fuels the other's imagination.

The dog looks out, watching the parade, the dog is wary of the future, a sensitive creature attuned to the moods of men, worried about the consequences of people marching. It stands next to the ruins of a building, the few bricks standing perhaps attempting to spell out μEL_L nobody seems to learn from the past, a future conflagration appears, to the dog, inevitable.

One marcher's sign is based on the pound symbol, another on a falling man, to the marchers these symbols are all of one family, they follow blindly, unaware of the future consequences of their actions.



The two marches converge; insects and sign carriers begin to walk side by side. A rather cross shop owner looks out from behind a broken window at what is at the moment a peaceful march, earlier street activities have not being so peaceful.

What has now become the most important activity for all the actors is the ritual of the march. Within the ritual no one is themselves any more, all the players are subsumed in a much larger drama.

The mass hysteria of the crowd is contained underneath the ritual, a ritual not far removed from those orchestrated by Adolf Hitler just a few years before I was born. As these anonymous souls go about their business how long will it be before they decide who is the cause of their misfortunes?

The shopkeeper has already suffered, he is always going to be in the firing line of any street unrest. His goods all taken during an earlier riot, he belongs to neither the sign followers nor the insects, he had better watch out for his future. If he is not one of them, he is against them. He is framed by jagged broken glass, a reminder of a previous crystal night, nights of broken glass often the precursor of broken hearts and broken people.



Trees compete for nutrition as much as animals do. However they act so slowly that we don't notice how they deal with their competition.

In this case the trees are drawn as if they are Medusas, their snake-like branches seeking out their neighbour's, part of a secondary battle in this arena, which on my daily walk is a type of 'non space', a space between others, a space that appears designed for things to happen within it, but which is rarely used for anything except the occasional game of football. The people standing and watching in this detail look at other people, never at the trees and so are not aware of the drama above.

The title, *'Entrusted with carnival business, I make friends with our enemies and have no empathy with the vegetable world'*, comes from an attempt to sum up some of the complexities embedded within the drawing, a long title that suggests that as an artist you are entrusted with some sort of duty, in this case to reflect upon what is going on around me, the carnival having a resonance beyond the annual local celebration.

There will be times when the various communities come together and differences are forgotten, however as humans we are still mainly unaware of how our actions are starting to be unsustainable, mainly due to the fact that we ignore the natural world around us and at some time we will all have to come together to confront our failed responsibilities.



Of noses of roses that charm the pink of charnel houses to the sound of resurrection and the taste of vegan roasts
Pen, ink and wash 251cms x 126cms 2013



At the centre of the image is a deep depression, a quarry that operates in opposition to the tower in the previous drawing.

Once again the image is composed using memories of my time growing up in Dudley and my experiences of walking through Leeds. Dudley has a rich underground mythology and when I was a boy growing up on the Priory Estate we used to play in the entrances of the Seven Sisters caves. These caves are now plugged with concrete and the area fenced off but in my mind they are still open and full of the excitement, danger and mystery that they inspired at the time.

Layered over these memories are more recent ones of the old quarry at Newley in Leeds, a place I often used to draw, and which is now almost totally overgrown.

In the drawing the rocky landscape above the quarry is partly composed of images taken from drawings I did of the Wren's Nest rocky outcrop in Dudley and partly from memories of Western Landscapes taken from Roy Rogers' annuals. Roy was a 1950s boyhood hero and when we played 'Cowboys and Indians' in that rocky Dudley landscape, somehow the shapes of the American landscape fitted perfectly into our local imaginations.

The quarry is drawn using very pale watered down ink. This suggesting on the one hand an area that is becoming faint as memory fades but on the other is a simple pictorial device to enable this part of the drawing to 'sink' below others, a visual echo of a deep depression that we used to play in.



The hand that appears to be that of a giant beneath the earth is an image based on a memory from the time that we used to as boys conjecture what lay beneath 'Barrow Hill' a place near to my grandparents house in Pensnett.

In the then Russell's Hall fields below that hill there were often smoke emissions from fires that had started in the old coal seams below the ground, it was as if Hell was never really far away.

As Dudley was riddled with old disused mineshafts it felt as if a 'life' existed below ground, this chthonic entity being the cause of many everyday events, from the fact that the windows of our house wouldn't close to the reason why houses might just suddenly slip down into a hole during the night.

The thought that huge figures might lie beneath is something deep lying in our sub-consciousness. It gives the land anthropomorphic resonance, it's shapes echo those of our own bodies, perhaps also implying that when on death we are buried in the soil, perhaps like seeds in the dark of the earth we will eventually grow into other forms.



A series of games are being played with the idea of scale and perspective, objects normally small are now big and size constancy is distorted. A flower-head is bigger than a tethered horse, a giant horse strides past a building being watched by a huge 'tiny' bird.

The point being that as signs they operate outside of the conventions of perspectival spatial location, their logic is that of the symbol not of perception and to test this the fires throughout this image are all the same size, even though some are in the foreground and others much further back. They are either getting bigger as they are further away or they simply represent fire, which is what they do.

The small 'camp fires' we used to build as boys echoing the larger ones made by young Nazi wood-folk as they walked in the mountains and cemented their Fascist comradeship.

A fish jumps out of the stream, which is drawn directly from an image I made of Meanwood Beck in Leeds, drawn from the bridge that crosses it on Buslingthorpe Lane on a day after heavy rain. The stream signifies water, the fish becoming part of an animal, bird and fish living triangle that plays a visual riff against the non living elements of earth, air, fire and water.

All of the plants and creatures drawn have at one time or another been spotted in the actual location that has been drawn; only their size relationship is distorted. In this way they also reflect the various ways that memory distorts perception. Animals met on my walks always occupy a much larger part of my recollections, they are more memorable than plants, their forms 'sticking' longer and occupying much clearer image banks.



A giant left hand is being dragged out of the earth, as it ploughs through the ground it leaves a chasm behind, to the right of which lie small housing estates and pig sties.

Again the scales are distorted, the sties being larger than the houses. Pigs emerge to see what is going on, but the people ignore them, the people are starting to mass again, they have a march starting.

To the right of the divide a fire burns amongst shapes that are becoming either hard-edged and geometric or amorphous, one to the left of the fire suggesting that it is a shrouded human body.

The tall trunks of trees are used to clarify the curvature of the earth and provide a curve of perception upon which the whole image is designed. Space is bent as if gravity is pulling at it with differing intensities according to shifting importance, the pigs and their sties growing in importance as human housing starts to diminish.

From the right-hand edge spring buds emerge, a prophesy of a bright new future for the plant world and reminding the viewer that the whole image is constructed around the rhythm of tree masses seen from a distance and the tall verticals of trees seen close to. Without the trees the drawing would have no structure.



Further along behind the chasm left by the giant's arm people are crammed down in the bottom of the valley. They are in reverse scale, the bigger they are the further they are away from us. It is as if when the earth cracks open what we will find is a direct vision down into the pits of Hell. The intimation is that as these 'blobs' of humanity move away from us they will eventually become so large they will break through the layers of earth above them, emerging at some point gigantic.

Above ground more geometric forms are found. These are in the moment of becoming, some appear as if they will become automobiles others we are not quite sure what they will become. These forms reflect that aspect of drawing that is always at play, shapes becoming what they need to be as you draw them, a reflection on an underlying morphic serendipity that informs the hand as it thinks shape as the pen moves.

To the immediate left of these forms a rectangular slab has a square hole cut into it with a ladder leading down into the ground. I found these entrances into the ground when walking through the woods in Kirkstall, they are often brick-lined and go down into old sewer systems.

Entrances into the ground were also a feature of my childhood recollections of Dudley, these often being airshafts that went down to the railway tunnels that passed under the town and which emerged at the foot of Castle Hill. It is suggested that caves lie in the walls of the chasm and that these might link with underground tunnels, one of which opens out directly above the surging crowd below. The caves that ran below Dudley also formed part of the structure of the zoo. In particular the bear pits occupied a series of hollows that had blocked cave entrances in their deepest parts. In a young boy's imagination, these bears would know a way through, and at some point they would reemerge in the wilds of the Wren's Nest woods; the Seven Sisters caverns it was well known were linked directly to those caves that lay underneath the zoo.

Just behind the geometric play another fire burns, again the same size as the others fires, this time appearing much larger than the trees to its left.



The human houses are now simplified to an extent that the design similarities to pig sties is obvious. The humans' little gardens, patches of ownership with gates, are no different to the pigs' small outside spaces with gates. Both humans and pigs are outside their homes, the pigs in isolated grandeur, the people lost in mass demonstration.

People march down towards the bottom edge of the drawing, in effect dropping off the edge of this drawn world. A tree holds the edge, beginning a rhythm that will sweep like a protractor's arc up from the bottom right, a beehive and a bee appear beneath it, as two figures discuss the impact of bee deaths on the future of the plant world.

A dog observes, unattached. This tree is not just structurally important, it is a long distant cousin of that tree that used to link worlds together in the old Norse myths.

An ash I wit standing Called Yggdrasil,
A high holy tree Sprinkled with white clay,
Thence come the dews That in the dales fall;
Stands it always ever green Over Wyrð's Well.

(Gylfaginning 16, Prose Edda)



A forest lies just off centre, occupying a similar visual shape to the quarry. Colour now becomes important, this was a drawing done during late Autumn, a combination of Autumn mists and golden leaf colours suggesting the soft tonal changes that are used to move the forest backwards into space.

A zig-zag path takes the observer to the edge of the quarry, as I drew this path I was very aware that it was a 'through the woods path' a journey taken by Snow White, Hansel and Gretel and those who travelled through Tolkien's 'Mirkwood'. The forest re-appears several times in my drawings and I'm very aware of it is an image that goes all the way back to Albrecht Altdorfer's Saint George and the dragon. The Northern European concept of the 'wyrd' being something I have long been interested in.

Just as these drawings reflect memories of my own life, in Anglo-Saxon mythology, the 'wyrd' reflects the patterns that we all leave behind us as we make our way through life. It is as if we leave an invisible thread behind us which weaves its way around the people and things we encounter, until eventually this woven web becomes an image of our destiny and then at some point the thread will be cut and our particular image is over.



Deer have started to appear in the wastland that covers Button Hill. On my morning walks I sometimes come across small groups of three or four standing shock still, warily watching my approach, often not moving until I get within a few yards. They are a reminder of how lightly our civilisation sits across the landscape, nature occupies a vacuum very quickly, I have a sense that as soon as we move our attention to other things our hard fought gains will quickly disappear.

The deer stand to the right of a path that leads deeply into the woods, another entrance into an older world, one that used to cover the land thousands of years before we began to shape it.

A fire burns, it operates as a sign, its scale as with all the other fires in this image difficult to understand, it could be huge, much bigger than the buildings to the right, it could be more like a small camp fire if we measure it against the deer.

Indian balm seed-pods and a flower appear at the same scale, surrounding trees that are smaller than the flower-head. Space is pushed forward and backwards, the top edge of what is the opening of an old forgotten air-raid shelter, allows for a deep spatial entrance that allows the viewer to build an intuition of an underground world that lies directly beneath the path into the woods.



Clouds sit over the distant landscape. They are drawn with a brush and pale ink of the same tonality as the rocky landscape below. I had been looking at a Corot landscape and was fascinated that he used impasto to indicate his clouds and oil washes to define a rocky landscape. The paradox of representation that is possible in drawing fascinates me. An image of clouds is as solid as an image of rocks.

The shape of the rocks is based on a series of drawings done in Dudley of the Wren's Nest rocky outcrop. This is mainly composed of Silurian limestone and is a rock full of fossils. These rocks are implanted in my memory as the landscape of my childhood. A memory is in some ways as insubstantial as a cloud. In drawing a record of a perception, a memory and an invention, all have parity.

Clouds and imagination have been coupled in my mind from the moment I saw the film of Irving Stone's 'The Agony and the Ecstasy'. In Carol Reed's film version, Michelangelo lies on his back staring at the clouds and he sees the shapes of what will become the Sistine Chapel flowing into form as the clouds shift before his eyes.

As a boy I would spend hours doing the same thing, lying on my back with the Wren's Nest hills deep beneath me and the excitement of what was possible flowing into my imagination above me, I started to dream of being an artist.



Leafless trees search for sustenance from the air. Insects hover over the landscape, they are its pollinators, finger-tips reach up and the tree fingers reach down.

These trees are gothic in sensibility. Sometimes these can be organised as 'cathedral' trees, the visual rules of growth being very similar. The dendritic series of divisions that the trees are built from make for a series of curved rhymes, which allow small repeated visual 'cupped' rhythms to both the left and right of the dominant tree form. The tree's grasping 'fingers' also point towards a way back down into the image.

Without these visual movements a vertical tree trunk would take vision off outside the rectangle. These purely compositional issues are very important as they hold the image in tension, if eye movement is allowed to simply slip off the edge the holistic reception of the whole image is impaired and visual tension lost.

These insects will have to find flowers to pollinate and they are found along the left side bottom edge of the image, if insects are to fertilise these plants, they will have to make their way through all the various complexities of the image below. It will be a journey reminiscent of those encounters experienced by the forms in Abbott's 'Flatland'.

The fact that all these drawings are simply flat designs is never far away from my mind when I'm making them, the narratives perhaps being of far less consequence than the visual fitting together that takes far more time and energy than any of the stories that lie behind the images' gestation.



The father and the pen will both tell lies of Heaven dipped in Hell: Pen, ink and watercolour 153cms x 115cms 2012

The pink rainbow mound came to me the moment I saw a pile of dirt cast up on the side of Chapeltown Road. I had walked over to look at the diggings that were at the time being done in order to put in road improvements.

The first thing that attracted me was the fact that they had unearthed the old tram tracks. These were still resting on solid redbrick walls and glinted in the late evening sun amongst the grey clay and yellow sandstone chippings.

Men were still digging and I made a small sketch of the shops with their early evening lights glowing behind a growing pile of rubble. One man in particular was standing between the two rails and energetically shifting spade-fulls of earth. He seemed to stand for all those workers everywhere that go unmentioned in the constant evolution of our cities, in the digging of trenches both in war and peace and in the turning of the land.

I had years ago spent some time in the National Gallery drawing from Millet and Courbet, their heroicisation of farm workers and peasants left a strong and lasting impression and I wanted to do something that would give a certain mythic status to that digging figure.

As the sun started to dip towards the horizon its late rays were lighting the piles of earth surrounding the dig, setting up a wonderful rainbow glow, that seemed to me to make a sort of 'magic mountain' of these rubble mounds. I went home and made a couple of more detailed drawings and decided that I would have to construct a larger image around this central idea, a giant mythic digger and a glowing mound.

I had also seen Michael Andrews' wonderful painting 'Laughter Uluru' of Ayers Rock which he subtitled The Cathedral, and I had that lying somewhere in the back of my mind. Other images were circulating in the background too, one's like Joachim Patinir's 'Flight into Egypt Landscape' and Duccio's 'The Temptation of Christ on the Mountain', paintings that discount size constancy and promote the idea of if its big it's important, not necessarily just because it is close.



The previous year had seen a summer of tension in Chapeltown. In London there had been riots and it was rumoured that these would also spread to Leeds. I had seen the aftermath of riots in Chapeltown years ago and knew that local shops in particular would be targeted.

I have also been fascinated in recent years by how whatever is happening people come out to watch. They don't interfere and appear to be totally unconcerned by what is happening around them. It is simply a spectacle that seems like watching a newsreel unfold in 3D around them.

People are always sorry afterwards, they don't know what came over them, but others try and stop what is happening often local priests, who it always seems to me are also always ignored.

In Chapeltown there was a women's march. The mothers of the teenagers who would most likely crack off marched down Chapeltown Road and declared that they would accept no violence on the streets of Chapeltown. Their voice was heard and nothing happened.

However in the rest of the country riots did happen and nightly broadcasts brought with them the tensions and arguments about those that have nothing and those who are super rich, the growing financial divide that seems an unstoppable product of late capitalism, gnawing at the back of the mind like an old but persistent toothache. The bankers of course never living in the areas that do riot; the people that suffer being those in the immediate vicinity, small traders and those unfortunate to be on the streets at the same time.

Walking through the middle of what is happening are the blind being led by the blind. Of course Brueghel was a reference, but it seemed to me that nothing changes and we still follow any crowd of people as if we are hot wired to do this, no matter what the consequences. The rise of the Nazi party and the way they occupied the moral high ground in Germany all through the late thirties and early forties is a powerful reminder of how humans behave when sucked along by a forceful majority.



The view in the distance is from Sugar Well Hill, which looks over the Meanwood Valley. It is a view I have drawn many times as I walk over the hill on my way to work. Old factories line the edge of Meanwood Beck, the valley still wooded enough to give a good idea of what it would have looked like before industrialisation.

This image of a tree being climbed by 'soul-catchers' was partly inspired again by historical research. Apparently up until approximately 50 years ago trees in the area used to be adorned with cloth ties. A spring used to issue from the side of the hill, (now apparently culverted) and it had been an ancient place of worship, people coming to the spring to give votive offerings as part of a healing ritual.

It seems to me that we still need those rituals, or some contemporary equivalent. Our present rituals are lacking in substance and the recent weddings and funerals I've been to don't seem to have a proper depth of meaning anymore, a commodity driven society now totally cutting us off from an earlier more spiritual awareness of our place within nature.

One branch sprouts talking heads, heads that try and speak to a human catching hold of a soul. How else can we make communication with the vegetable world? Only perhaps by anthropomorphic connections, if we can see ourselves in something then perhaps we might value it more.

Somewhere in the back of my mind was also an image of that great painting by Rubens 'The Descent from the Cross' in which Christ's shroud is held firmly in his teeth by one of the workers that lowers him down from the cross. Rubens had not only re-visioned an iconic image, he had also elevated humble unacknowledged workers to a status equal to that of all the other Biblical protagonists. "We are all equal in the eyes of the Lord", is often quoted but rarely found in reality; the anonymous figures acting out the drama in this drawing are my attempt to create equality in this fictional drawn world.



Sometimes souls need the help of other people to come out. This image of someone reaching down into someone else's body came via my own fear of the dentist, we know the dentist means well, so we suffer the pain and let it happen.

A dog has taken a soul and it becomes its tongue, which then flaps across a human toad. You just have to be careful when baring your soul as to what and who is about.

Dogs started to appear more in these drawings after one of my neighbours told me I didn't put enough of them into the images. She had always had a dog, and after dog sitting for someone else in the street, I realised that people with dogs are very aware of the world from a different perspective. Dogs are very like people and are sensitive to things we miss; a reminder of our own animal nature and the fact that we don't use our senses to their full potential.

Grasses line the edge of the drawing, drawn full scale, an attempt to not just deal with the edge but to again remind the viewer of the importance of nature. When drawing these few stalks I was reminded of lying in long grass as a boy, and the realisation when playing in a wheat field that wheat was simply another grass. We domesticate plants as well as animals.

The couple in the corner are linked together, a reminder of our need for each other. These human groups are essentially collectives, all playing out roles that depend on others for their significance. People are collectively working and that is very important to me and reflects the fact that these worlds are actually Socialist visions.



The plant is Himalayan Balsam, found in large clumps alongside Meanwood Beck, it is a foreign invader and it is an offence to plant or otherwise cause to grow these species in the wild.

I have found the recent debate about immigration very worrying. My Grandmother was of Polish Jewish stock. Her family took root in the Whitechapel area of London before moving to the Midlands and Manchester.

I have always loved this plant, it's wonderful flowers designed for large insects to crawl inside as pollinators, its bomb-shell seed pods that explode on touch, sending seeds shooting far and wide and its exotic flower, as spectacular as any man-shaped garden plant.

We police this at our peril. It came with trade and spread with trains and canal navigation, following in our tracks. But then we notice it has thrived and decide to cut it back and eradicate it in favour of indigenous species. The analogy wasn't lost on me.

To the left the ground is cut open, what we see is a modern Hell conceived in post-Duccio terms. The multitude the digger stands upon are the billions of people that have gone before us. We stand on the shoulders of the dead but rarely acknowledge it. Our very existence relies on the fact that the dead have prepared the ground for the living.

Why do we bury the dead? Are we planting them? Are we hiding them? In this case the earth is cut away and things are revealed as to what they are, the digger is supported by dead history, a past still alive. If you look at drawings and paintings of medieval people digging, they use the same basic spade design, they dig in essentially the same way.

At the centre of the drawing a lone figure and a dog stare out. The figure points to the dog, we are reminded that we are no different from any other animal and that dogs have remained loyal to humans over thousands of years, while we have been less than loyal to the other animals that inhabit the same planet.



The knotted trees are another reference to older stories that have been told using the same imagery. Celtic tree of life symbols seem to be making a popular revival, I often see them as tattoos or brooches. These trees however are more rooted in the ones described by Paul Klee as images for the way that art works, these branches however are more like roots, there are no leaves.

The trees are hiding their heads in the sand, their roots in the air, nature has been overturned and we play out our lives beneath a forest canopy that is leafless and sterile, but still we don't notice.

As the branches mass together root-like, they can also be read as a type of rhizomatic system, they begin to build connections between themselves, a series of connections that can potentially be linked to any other element within the connective mass.

Like the Internet, a system designed to establish communication links no matter how many connections fail, rhizomes are survival systems, systems that exemplify the old adage that a collective is always far stronger than an individual. Rhizomes are usually never seen, they are underground systems and because they are underground we are aware of them more as an idea than as a reality. Deleuze and Guattari referred to rhizomes as "images of thought that apprehend multiplicities", they saw multiple connections as possible points whereby levers for change could be found.

I am always fascinated by images that continue to find new uses, the interconnected invisible threads between humans and nature at one time becoming an aspect of 'the Wyrd' and thousands of years' later nature's interconnectedness becomes an image of future possibilities as well as a description of a world-wide electronic communications system.



Souls are being laid out to dry before hoisting as flags. Their form somewhere between long-johns and condoms, they are everyday things and can be treated just as we would any other close fitting garment. These people work in unison, they prefer to be like this and hum to themselves as they work.

The concept of these everyday souls emerged from a body of my writings done in response to Jacques Derrida's book 'Specters of Marx' Subtitled 'The State of the Debt, the work of Mourning & the New International', Derrida was attempting to respond to the death of Communism as a working principle.

My writings were an attempt to reclaim the ghost of communism as a fiction, but one that like Christianity and other religions was a necessary one and vital to the construction of our future society. It was in these writings that the dog first emerged as an observer and the soul as clothing to protect us from the cold wind of Capitalism.

The spectre within my writings became that of long forgotten first readings, the text the opening lines of the Communist Manifesto, haunting our language and its possibilities far more deeply than the reality of the Communist project. Alongside the spectre were the souls, those of everyman waiting in the dark rooms of possibility, the word made flesh remade within the writings of Marx, economic argument transformed into belief.

This was also an attempt to make a face from the curve of the grass edge and using figures to develop suggested eyes and mouths, however it became too convoluted, so I moved off this idea, a ghost of this remains and if you look at the full drawing you might just make the figure out as it peeps from behind the tree.



‘These reflections on drawing are made not to replace the experience of looking but to supplement the experience. The way the eyes have a simultaneous grasp of images as totalities is something writing can never replace, but what writing can do is open out stories that lay beneath things and this is what I’ve attempted to do’.

THERE IS NOTHING LIKE A SHAVE TO MAKE A PIG FEEL LIKE A MAN AGAIN

This catalogue is a record of an exhibition of three large drawings by Garry Barker held in the SHED GALLERY ILKLEY between 15 September and 29th September 2013

