

Garry Barker

Drawing Age

Abstract

By accepting that an aging body and its memories are simply a conglomerate of materials moving from one state to another and that drawing materials can be thought of as operating in parallel to this acceptance, drawings are made that can be read as visualisations of the aging process. The experience of the 'self-feeling' of aging is entangled with Deleuze's idea of 'the fold' in order to develop a personal understanding of how one's own thought can be taken 'into' the thought of another and how a conversation can enter the mind of others as a material entanglement.

Drawing age

Bergson suggests that ‘the past survives as a bodily habit’, (2016, p. 47) and that repeated actions are amassed in the body, not as representations of the past but as enactments of it. As I get older I grow more aware of this, the lines of tension within my skin now clearly revealing the archaeology of my body's previous behaviour. My skin is a materialisation of a life lived, and as an idea or as a language of communication between others, it is interwoven with the stories I tell, stories that themselves become infused with memories.

This project report examines a drawing as a body's parallel material ‘enactment’, designed to fuse the physical and chemical narratives of an aging body with memories, conversations and reflections.

One conversation in particular with my retired nextdoor neighbour is central to this recent work. We were talking about our bodies and how they feel, of memories and the need to communicate them to others. My neighbour is finding memories of her childhood inhabiting her consciousness far more and at the same time she is aware that she can't do the things she used to do. We compared our particular feeling tones and memories. One of which was of running, of the feeling of air as it rushes past you and over your face, as in your memories you run as a child excitedly down a steep hill into the wind. This is as much about imagination as experience, the stories we told each other were of times over sixty years in the past but as we reminisced, imagination made the experiences seem like yesterday. As two old people together with the same story, it felt as if our memories, were part of our chemical composition and as if the aging of the materials we were built with, was coupled with a quantum memory that was itself interacting with the body's cells both in close intimacy and at a superpositioned distance. Something was connecting our material lives, a conversation and something else.

As an artist I have worked for many years visualising the stories told to me by people I meet as I make drawings, I have developed visual allegories and visualisations of their fears and needs, both as a fine art practice and as community development (Gorrill and Journeaux, 2007) but now, as I move into the later stages of my life I have realised that there is the need for a body of work that helps both myself and hopefully others understand what it is to become old. My question being, can I visualise what it feels like to inhabit this internal and external process of aging that is both a story and a physical change? In order to do this I felt I needed to explore the relationship between the ‘feeling tone’ of some of the experiences of getting older and the potential of drawing to communicate this. By feeling tone I am referring to what Ernest Beaglehole termed ‘self feeling’ (2017, p. 3), the overall quality of an experience, including its emotional resonance, which he believed could be changed or developed by association with an individual's particular awareness of possessions such as clothes or even a name. In this case how an individual develops self-feeling in relation to owning the idea of being older and of how we ‘possess’ our own bodies.

The approach taken to developing drawings in relation to the experience of the ‘self-feeling’ of aging has been one that has been predicated by a growing awareness of materiality and the acceptance by myself of a more ‘animist’ understanding or acceptance that things other than humans can have voices, of how to think through an association with a materiality, (in this case drawings) that is external to myself. By accepting that an aging body is primarily a conglomerate of materials moving from one state to another and that drawing materials are also subject to similar changes as part of

the condition of their materiality, drawings are made that can be read as visualisations of the aging process. An 'embodied' approach has been taken towards the communication of an understanding of drawing as a parallel process to aging, which in this case was mainly centred on drawing using the movement of liquids over paper surfaces to represent an awareness of touch and the body's skin and what it covers; this was developed in conjunction with an approach to 'memory drawing', whereby the location of memories and the body are looked at as a way of suggesting that all memories are eventually embodied.

Laura U. Marks (in de la Bellacasa, 2017, p.116) noticed that 'a small caressing gaze', is needed to entice the viewer to engage with the pores and textures of the body's surface, this 'erotic oscillation', being about haptic speculation and requiring a soft focus, a focus exactly right for the recording of touch through finger tips. It is through touch that an awareness of squidgy materiality becomes central to our lives as organic entities; the slow hardening of this squidginess being one of the signs of aging. Using materials suspended in liquids to communicate touch rather than sight, can be seen as an analogous process that allows the drawer a fluid approach to visual decision making, that will gradually as the liquid carrier evaporates away, harden into a fixed image. As water and its floating sediments settle into an undivided movement, I try to capture an on-going process of exchange between drawing material, feeling tone and memory. However because the things we study also come to guide or shape our attention, this correspondence or entanglement with these parallel objects of study become part of the experience. The movement between observations and reflections on the aging process, become gradually subsumed into how observations of material metamorphosis reveal a micro and macro entanglement between processes operating at both quantum (chemical) and human scales.

Various substances were explored that could give different textural experiences and suggest in the way that they moved and changed as they dried out, various metaphoric associations. The associations I began looking for were geological landscapes that could also be quantum fields of energy, a body, that could also be a chemical melting pot of interactions between liquids and solids and a fluctuating field that could stand for human skin or the outer surface through which we humans intuit what lies beneath. Paper has many analogies with skin. Younger skin is much smoother, aging skin is marked and wrinkled. Paper can be 'scrunched', sanded, hand made to heighten textural possibilities and have more or less size added to it to decrease or heighten its absorbancy. Each of these possibilities has been explored, and eventually after several trials it was decided to use an Indian rag paper, because its surface was very absorbant, but not as absorbant as blotting papers, so that liquids could be controlled by pooling and working with the paper as it expanded and contracted due to its response to various degrees of wetting. There was enough surface adhesion made with the various liquidised pigments to suggest a textural hardening and softening, which blotting papers could not support. Physical size and cultural awareness were also factors; the skin is a large body organ and is central to our culture's concerns with mortality, its constant appearance in the media as something integral to youth and well being, reflected in the huge amounts of money spent on its cosmetic refurbishment. (Connor, 2004)

Our skin can of course be stripped off, flayed and stretched out as a flat sheet but above all it acts as a boundary for the body, a membrane that separates the inside from the outside. Without skin our organs would be in direct contact with the world, therefore we could read skin as a type of exchange interface. Lewis-Williams (2004) refers to cave walls operating for Palaeolithic artists as membranes that acted as porous surfaces between the reality of the everyday and the world of the spirit and of dead ancestors, the paper surface I would argue operates in a similar way. If you think of the skin as a topological surface, it is contiguous with your insides, there is no break between the

outside of the cheek and the inside, we just slip over the edge of the mouth and we are inside the body. It is not a very difficult step to think of how a paper surface might substitute for skin, and become an arena for metaphoric invention in relation to inside and outside body experiences.

As I made test surfaces I was replying to physical changes such as those caused by water evaporation, and the dropping of mineral salts as water dries up. These different processes made marks that suggested on the one hand geological features such as dried river beds, and on the other foldings and surface erosion reminiscent of old skin. Similarities between aging bodies and well worn landscapes, ecological, geological and medical references becoming entwined as I thought of how minerals were distributed around the body and the fact that we are in effect just a walking bag of sea water.

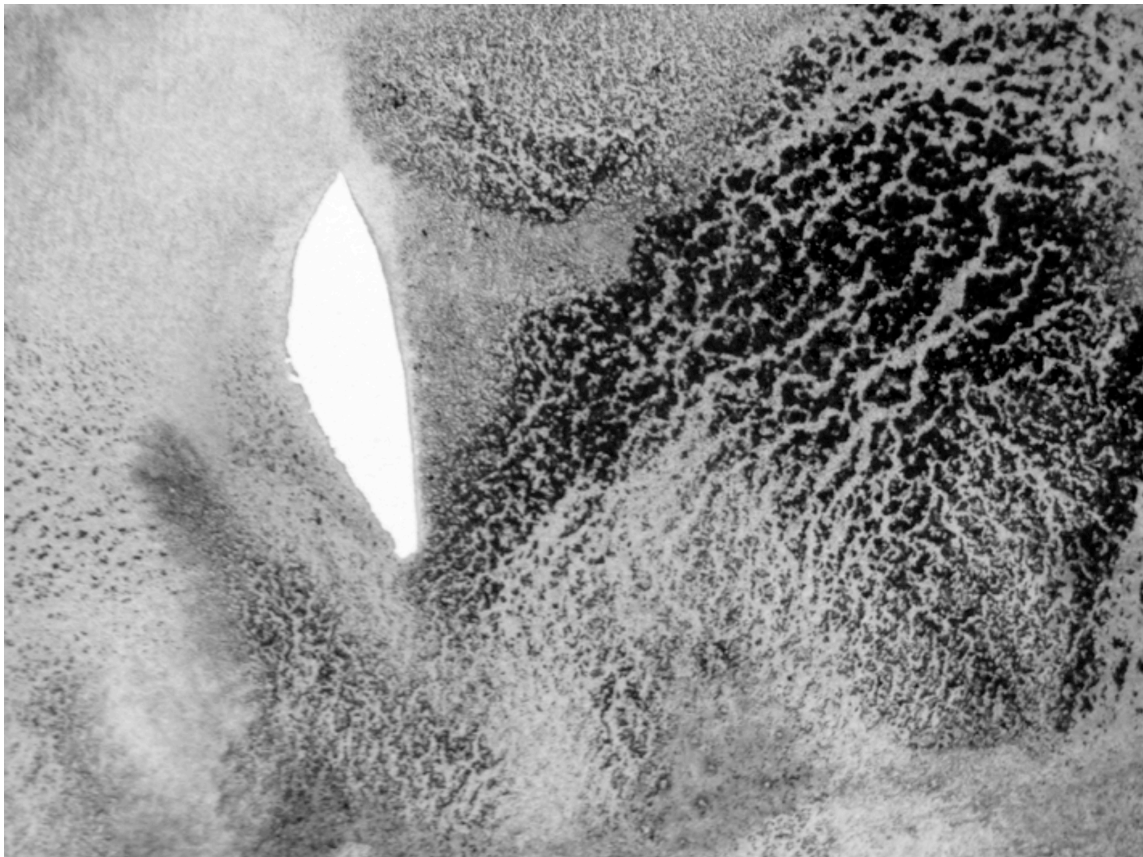


Figure 1 Garry Barker. (2019) *Detail of surface texture: The body and its memories: Granular materials bound with gum Arabic on Indian rag paper 7 x 10cm* © Garry Barker

You can make a wide range of drawing materials by suspending various substances in water. However you quickly find that many of the materials you would think would dissolve in water don't. If you want to make a smooth black, soot is too greasy, it tends to clump, which leaves an interesting surface texture when the water evaporates, but which is too like a diseased skin and not enough like an aging one. However a small amount of gum Arabic helps, as does a drop of washing up liquid. The washing up liquid creating almost exactly the right textural suspension, one that allows for individual material grains to retain their identity without clumping and without that seamless solid surface that you get when you buy manufactured inks.

I am very aware that my own body is getting worn out. I go to the doctors more often and things seem to take longer to heal or there is a need to monitor certain conditions, to keep an eye on things or they can easily get worse. I'm also losing my hearing and now have to use hearing aids. People I talk to of a similar generation have their own issues

and I have tried to develop a working process that entangles itself into the flows of conversation I have with others about these things and the flows of liquid materials that I work with when making drawings about aging. By joining in the flow by asking questions as to how certain things feel, and highlighting the materiality of descriptions, you begin to remove the boundaries between things, the drawings becoming an extension of a conversational understanding. I have come to believe that by standing outside of the world (being objective) we allow ourselves to damage the world because we don't feel the effects of the things we do. It would seem that either we are part of everything or we are part of nothing. Life is a holistic process not a series of discrete things. Tim Ingold states, (2018) that in the correspondence of voices we are an intermingling. We are part of an ever forming plenum, which is the world we live in. The world he would argue is therefore a 'pluriverse', very similar to a body consisting of endless multiples of kinks and folds and it is this situation that I find myself trying to visualise as the drawings evolve. As Paul Klee stated, "Art does not reproduce the visible, it makes visible" (1920, 2015, p.33).



Figure 2 Garry Barker. (2019) *The inside becomes the outside, study*. Ground pigments suspended in water on Indian rag paper 84 x 118cm © Garry Barker

The second part of the process was trying to visualise memories. The conversation with my neighbour was a process of memory comingling. One thing meets another thing; one type of energy passes through another and changes it, matter and energy; two aspects of the same thing, sometimes as people, sometimes as conversations and at others as drawing materials. It was important to get lost in this process. If I am a thing like any other thing consisting of a series of interacting fields that interact with other fields and I am interacting with stuff just like everything else is interacting with stuff, my drawings can be seen as the result of a certain type of quantum entanglement. The materials I engage with are at the same time engaging with me, neither being more or less important than the other. I am in effect the subject of my drawing materials' engagement, just as much as an idea I might have, indeed, it could be argued that I am an idea implied by the way certain materials are coming into new formations at a sub-atomic level. Therefore I needed to work with a way of drawing that would flow easily through my hand and my

fingers, something that I was so familiar with that its handling was 'second nature' to me. I have been using a dip-in pen since I was at junior school, initially to write with, but as I have grown older it has become my medium of choice. It is rather like a seismic needle, the pen nib responsive to pressure as it thickens and thins the line and the amount of liquid it holds being just enough to ensure that I have to think carefully about what I am going to do in the short time available to me before its small reservoir is used up.

Memories needed to be incised into the body surfaces of haptic feeling tone, if they were going to be seen as also embodied. Each line as it was drawn needed to be both a mark that could be read as part of a surface texture and as a way to establish a visual narrative that was about place, event and memory. If I was to draw on a surface representing the body, I realised I could also think of myself as a tattooist.



Figure 3 Garry Barker. (2019) *Detail: The body and its memories: A tiny figure runs across a skin/landscape. Granular materials bound with gum Arabic on Indian rag paper 7 x 10cm* © Garry Barker

How a memory 'arrives' or is 'triggered' by physical action is a mystery to me, but it has something to do with associations. As you put down a series of marks, you can relate them to a memory and as you do so, these collections of marks will either confirm a gradually firming up vision and or they will not. Each time an image begins to feel 'right' more work is done to reinforce this, gradually by a process of evolution, an image of a memory is teased out and grown.

The memory drawings eventually merged with what my neighbour told me about what it was like to run when young, they also became about what it felt like to be small and frightened by pigs, to be shot at by big boys with air rifles and all these memories and others were gradually embedded into the embodied landscape form, which was now the surface that the memories began to inhabit.

As these drawings arrive I have realised that my understanding of them is both a physical material engagement and a movement towards a theoretical position. Deleuze's idea of 'the fold' (2006) gradually emerging in my mind as central to a personal understanding of how one's own thought can be taken 'into' the thought of another and how my neighbour's conversation can become entangled in with my own and how these ideas can enter the mind of others as a material entanglement. In particular, how my body as a physical object can be translated into a narrative that is both words, as in this project report, and as an image. The concept of the fold for Deleuze relates to the production of subjectivity, not just by humans, he also hints at 'non-human' forms of 'subjectivity'. He critiques ideas such as the difference between subjective and objective, the idea of the fold suggesting that the inside is folded in such a way that it becomes the outside, for myself a reminder that the mouth is a topological point of connection between the inside and outside. Subjectivity in this case is understood as a type of topology, the reading of which I have taken to be my drawing's sensitivity to my bodily awareness of aging.

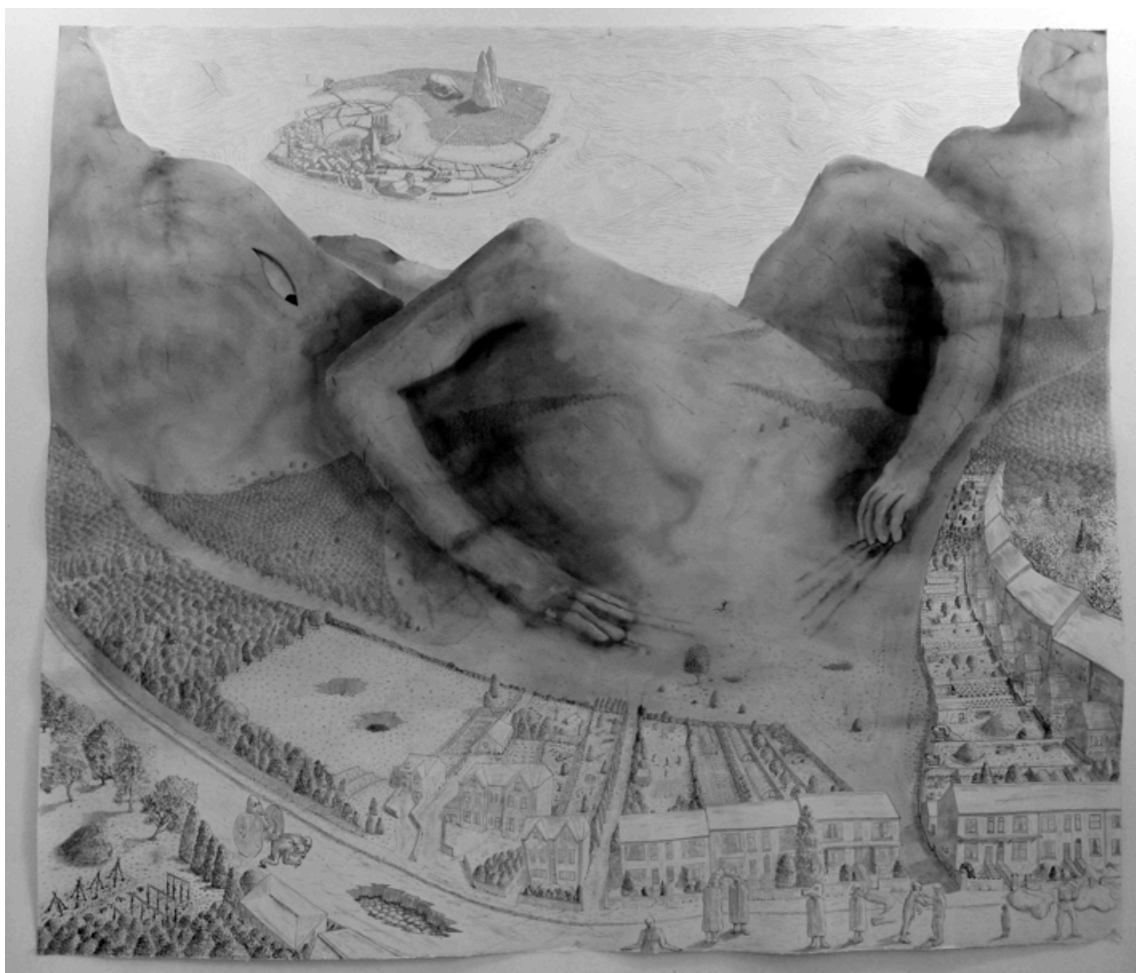


Figure 4 Garry Barker. (2019) *The body and its memories*. Granular materials bound with gum Arabic on Indian rag paper 121 x 152cm © Garry Barker

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