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Abstract

In this case study two sets of images are compared that emerged from drawings made by the artist Garry Barker whilst talking to people who live in his local community. One set of drawings were produced in response to conversations made about a selected 'special' object from a domestic setting, that meant something important to a post stroke victim; another group of drawings were made after talking with refugees living in temporary accommodation in a repurposed high-rise block of flats. In both cases drawing is used to reveal narratives that can emerge from human/object relationships and two different world views are articulated, both revealed as being as much to do with fiction as reality, as they travel in opposite directions, sometimes as imaginary travellers and at other times as observers of a harsh reality.

A third 'life story' is then interjected as an example of how when images are woven from the threads of stories about 'home' they can also be disturbing, especially when events are generated by political realities.

These drawn images allow us to reflect upon the fact that sometimes the home hosts doorways to other worlds and sometimes home is not a home at all.

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Drawing Conversations 5: What and Where Is Home?



Drawing Conversations 5: What and Where Is Home?

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Greig Burgoyne is Subject lead BA Fine Art at University for the Creative Arts, Farnham. As artist and researcher Burgoyne is interested in the paradox of visible/invisible, whereby the active body is an event space of powerful, if absurd weakness. His work features in “Performance Drawing-New practices’ published by Bloomsbury Books 2022. Recent solo exhibitions include Civitella Ranieri Foundation Perugia; Museo dell’arte Classico Rome; Kunsthallen Bochum; The Lowry Manchester and Palazzo Bentivoglio Bologna. Solo Exhibitions in 2024 included Château De Montsoreau- Musée d’Art Contemporain Loire Valley, and Performance Art Bergen. Recent writing and conference presentations include Venice Biennale, photomonitor, Glasgow school of art, Robert Gordon University Aberdeen, Universidad Complutense de Madrid, Louisiana State University. www.greigburgoyne.com

Jill Journeaux is an artist and convenor of [Drawing Conversations](#). She was Professor of Fine Art at Coventry University, UK, from 2004 until 2023. Her publications include *The Artist at Home: Studios. Practices and Identities*, Bloomsbury, 2024, co-edited with Imogen Racz, *Collective and Collaborative Drawing in Contemporary Practice*, 2017, and *Body, Space, and Place in Collective and Collaborative Drawing*, 2002. She is currently co-editing *Drawing as Placemaking: Environment, History and Identity*, Bloomsbury (due out in 2025) with Simon Woolham.

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Drawing Conversations 5: What and Where Is Home?

Home and the Imagination Chair: Greig Burgoyne

Home is a belief

Garry Barker, Porto University, Portugal

Keywords: Animism, home, drawing, resident, migrant, magic

In this case study two sets of images are compared that emerged from drawings made by the artist Garry Barker whilst talking to people who live in his local community. One set of drawings were produced in response to conversations made about a selected 'special' object from a domestic setting, that meant something important to a post stroke victim; another group of drawings were made after talking with refugees living in temporary accommodation in a repurposed high-rise block of flats. In both cases drawing is used to reveal narratives that can emerge from human/object relationships and two different world views are articulated, both revealed as being as much to do with fiction as reality, as they travel in opposite directions, sometimes as imaginary travellers and at other times as observers of a harsh reality.

A third 'life story' is then interjected as an example of how when images are woven from the threads of stories about 'home' they can also be disturbing, especially when events are generated by political realities.

These drawn images allow us to reflect upon the fact that sometimes the home hosts doorways to other worlds and sometimes home is not a home at all.

Home is a belief

In earlier times a home within which religious rituals were kept and where household spirits were honoured with prayer or devotion, was a norm. The home was embedded into a matrix of interconnected belief systems. (Van der Toorn, 1996) These ancient belief systems are of course now regarded as being unscientific. Modern societies it is argued, no longer need to refer to or use the archaic rituals that used to be central to

day-to-day domestic existence. However, when the artist Garry Barker was making artwork in response to conversations concerning the narratives people developed in relation to 'special' domestic objects, it was apparent that a vitalist or animist set of beliefs were still in evidence. In particular, it seemed to Barker that people were using special, selected objects in ways that were similar to how sympathetic magic worked.

The artist Garry Barker has for several years been having conversations and making drawn responses to what he now regards as animist modes of thinking; types of behaviour he has found in a wide range of situations, from people inhabiting what are seen as stable, middle class English homes and the associated objects and furniture that these homes are traditionally associated with, to people that have been totally dispossessed of all their worldly goods and who have had to seek new homes in often strange new environments. He uses conversations made alongside the making of 'objective' drawings in order to come to some sort of 'understanding' of what is happening, conversations that then inform the direction in which he takes the drawings he makes. The resulting images are also used as narrative interjections back into the conversations held and they are then used to help formulate what could be described as imagery for secular myths. He has for several years been part of a community group and has used several different approaches to drawing to engage with local people, as outlined and explained as a practice in 'Drawing as a tool for shaping community experience into collective allegory', (Barker, 2017) published in the book that emerged from the first Drawing Conversations conference, 'Collective and Collaborative Drawing in Contemporary Practice'.

Alongside conversations with people, Barker has been trying to visualise the relationships that they have developed with objects, in particular those objects that facilitate how people think, that he regards as types of externalised minds, or that function as a part of the mind, a concept described by Clark and Chalmers as an 'extended mind'. (1998)

People can develop deep emotional attachments to inanimate objects that can help them channel, what Barker has begun to think of as animist approaches to thinking, including recently ideas concerning security and safety, or threat and insecurity. Some of these ideas relate to the myths of having a home and others are associated with the

myths of finding a home. In both cases 'feeling' and emotional register are central to how individuals understand or find meaning in these situations.

Central to animist belief is the idea that objects can mediate between individuals and the wider world, (Bird-David, 1999) the house and its contents for example, can be used as an externalised mind that reflects the belief systems of those that occupy it. Those that are seeking refuge, often have ideas of the types of places within which they would like to find themselves, these imaginary places are also in many ways structures that reflect the belief systems that people have. They become rather like imaginary memory theatres, spaces within which to project a continually growing and reforming set of concepts about the world, ideas that are externalised by being centred on particular chosen objects, even if these are imaginary.

The artwork that Barker has been making has attempted to tap into what he has called 'the speech of things. A situation that responds to an animist idea that before writing human voices were part of a mix of animal, mineral and vegetable sounds. Speech and prayer were one thing, and people could directly address their animate and inanimate surroundings, and in doing so, seek to find their proper place and coexistence within an animal, vegetable and mineral environment. Experience before the invention of writing was something much more about the body; creativity, consciousness, a sense of self and the world, were all fused together and animism, as defined by Harvey (2006), was the underlying structural form for many cultures' mystic experiences.

The rustling of leaves was experienced as a type of speech, a communication that humans took part in and were part of; actions between non-human and human agents could be directed by a shaman, a person that knew how to inhabit other things and beings and talk to them. This was the early world of magic, and it could be argued that it still is in evidence, and it seems to the artist that the process of intermingling verbal conversations with drawing, is an ideal methodology when it comes to communicating the fact that these ways of thinking are still viable.

For magic to have effect there needs to be certain beliefs on place, one of which is that 'like produces like', or becomes like. (Rozin, and Neneroff, 2002)

An effect resembles its cause, which is often termed, ‘the Law of Similarity’ or Sympathetic magic, i.e. dress like a bird and you become a bird; representation and mimicry lie at the core of old magic and also many drawing processes.

The material turn in theoretical debate has to some extent it is argued, eroded ‘the boundaries or distinctions between bodies, objects and contexts’ (Coole and Frost, p. 16) this erosion has encouraged the artist in this case to poetically inflect the complex interconnectivity between allegorical thought, magic, theology, history, sociology and anthropology. In particular the social system called ‘home’, is in Barker’s work, represented by an approach to selected objects, that he feels reflects an interconnectedness to a host of other surrounding complex, self-organising processes. The, what has been called by Coole and Frost, ‘naively representational’ approach being used to present the poetry of these interconnected experiences as a valid form of understanding, in particular because representation includes an idea of likeness, and this enables his work to tap into the concept of sympathetic magic. He points to various connections that have established an enmeshed tangle of relationships between entities; relationships that indicate something more than objects simply having separate existences as things, and which can be fleshed out as narratives or stories told in conversations and elaborated through the making of drawings and the re-telling of stories through the various lenses that these drawings offer. A room in a Leeds house, is embedded into the wider world, and it is a focus around which drawings are used to reflect upon a complexity that can appear to be at times magical. A small space in a sinking boat at sea, requires by contrast a sharp focus that in an experiencer’s memories long after the event, now reminds them of the physical reality of being a refugee and the continuing relationship of that experience to what they now think of as ‘home’. Both these relationships it is argued are experienced and embodied within us, and may emerge both verbally and visually, as a form of animist thinking.

In this reflection upon a drawing led practice, two sets of drawings are compared. The first body of drawings were begun in the interior of a flat that occupies a large Victorian terraced house. These drawings were of a wooden sculpture of a crawling baby that was positioned on a small table in the middle of the living room of a retired man suffering

from post-stroke trauma. The sculpture had enabled the man to come to terms with his past life and was in conversation thought of as a possible entry point into how he might meaningfully enter a new phase of life. Another set of drawings were made in response to conversations with refugees living in temporary accommodation in a repurposed high-rise block of flats. These drawings responded to the fact that for those that have found new homes their old ones still exist as ghosts. A state that in many ways highlighted the trauma of passage and the disappointment of arrival, informing allegorical visions of a present reality, whereby the solid walls of a block of flats, metaphorically eroded away, until they are seen as thin shells surrounding a spiritual emptiness, not as a comforting home.

In his book 'The Entanglement' Alva Noë points out that the aesthetic experience is centred on the way that we engage with ourselves and the environments that we find ourselves immersed into. He suggests that the aim of this experience is to move from a position of not seeing to seeing, or from seeing to seeing differently. Barker's recent work looking at how we materialise thought through the use of significant objects, is made within a community setting, and its intended purpose is to hopefully help people to see things with a new heightened awareness. Noë points out that we see the things we love differently to the things we don't care about, stating, 'Values are antecedent to the encounter with the object, because they are embedded in and find expression in the relationship that is the encounter with the object.' (Noë, 2023, p112) He then goes on to say that these values are what makes the object 'present' and for Barker, it is this relationship between value and feeling, that is the core around which visual stories begin to emerge.

Barker has been sitting with people and drawing objects that they think are significant to them. In doing so he has tried to learn how people can work together to come to some sort of agreement about the imaging of that significance. His work is focused on how one person's values are gradually transferred to another person by conversation and as this process is visualised hopefully both participants can move on from 'not seeing to seeing differently' and when the work is then seen by others, perhaps it may help them see things differently too.

Barker begins with making sketchbook drawings of a significant object. These drawings are made whilst making verbal conversation with the object's owner. As they converse

significant ideas and thoughts begin to become apparent, and they become the gateways through which the next phase of the work will be entered.

In this case, the carving of a crawling wooden baby became central to the conversation. Memories associated with the sculpture begin to be related and a tale of a Thailand island and jungle wonderment began to emerge, as the conversation opened out. Flying fish entered the story as a short sea voyage was remembered and a mystery 'shaman' type figure was introduced, as a long-gone supplier of Chinese heroin and in another conversation a memory of seeing fighting cocks surfaced. The baby is a carved figure made over 40 years ago. It may crawl across a table in northern England, but its dark polished rosewood surface, intimates another life, one from a time when the participant was a young man. Initially carved in Thailand and made as a symbol to help others see the child in all our lives, the baby was now a narrative magnet, and Barker began to seek out other stories that it could be crawling into. In Thailand carvings of Baby Buddhas are common or at least were when this one was bought. A story of Buddha's birth may have been taken from a Hindu Rig Veda text, such as the birth of Indra. After Alexander the Great conquered central Asia in 334 BCE, there was a considerable intermingling of Buddhism with Hellenic art and ideas. (Halkias, 2014) It seemed to the artist that the last visual echoes of a similar time, one when influences from Christian art were seen in Buddhist Art, were apparent. He believed he could spot a ghost of the form of the baby Jesus in the shaping of this carving. This East/West commingling was something vital to the culture of the 1960s, the participant in particular back in the late 1960s was trying to get off the day-to-day treadmill of office and factory work and was like the Beatles, looking for spiritual nourishment in the East.

When making drawings of the wooden baby in the participant's living room, Barker was reminded of the law of contact or contagion. This law states that things that have once been in contact with each other, continue to act on each other at a distance, even after the physical contact has been severed. (Gosden, 2021) Hair, nail clippings, bodily fluid, clothing, something you have owned or touched, all are potential points of contact within voodoo and other magical traditions that use the law of contagion; (Owusu, 2002) and in this case the wooden baby had been handled so often that its surface had been polished with touches. After hearing about stories relating to this object, and then

seeing how new stories seemed to flow out of the old ones, it did indeed feel as if this object had somehow managed to facilitate a magical control over both the man who had originally found this figure in a Thailand jungle almost fifty years ago and the artist that was now making images of this crawling baby and placing them into imagined settings.

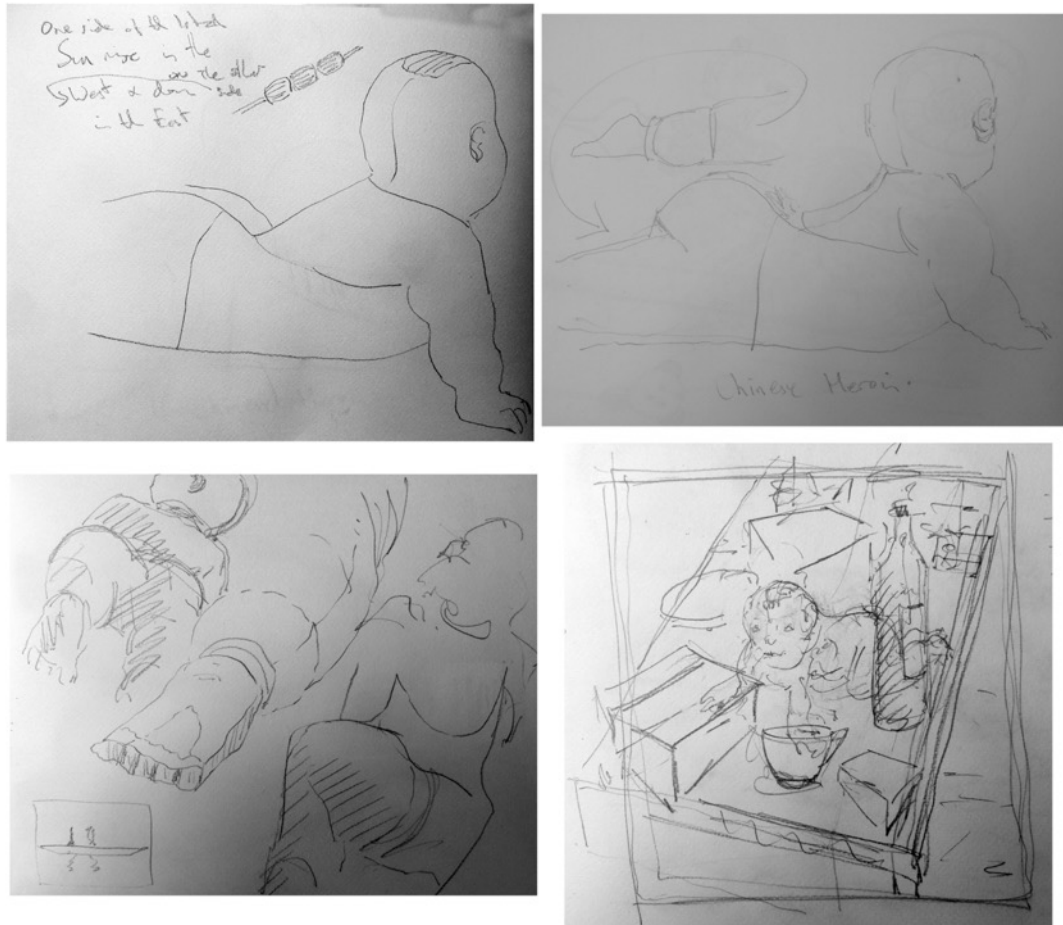


Fig. 1 Sketchbook drawings of wooden baby: Pencil: 2024 © Garry Barker

Beginning by handling the wooden baby, conversations were held whilst sketchbook drawings were made. At first the conversations were simple, and questions reflected this, “Where did the baby come from?” and “When did you first come across this wooden baby?” But gradually as the importance of the figure became more apparent, new stories began to be constructed between the artist as a listener, the artist as mythologist and the initial storyteller as memory narrator and who was now also a narrative responder to the images that were emerging from the conversations.

As the wooden baby was drawn and then in further images placed back into the jungle it came from, both artist and the storyteller, who was himself recovering from a stroke, became engaged with what the baby meant. For instance, the artist pointed out that the crawling baby motif was usually associated with Buddha and this association then changed the wooden baby owner's idea of what it could have been. This awareness in turn began shifting the context into a more spiritual or psychic dimension. As conversations moved on, new possibilities emerged as to how this baby could have influenced the man's life, and there became something meaningful about the fact that whilst the man aged, the baby stayed a baby. Although the carving was when bought quite new, it was now fifty years older, but in appearance it was still a baby, unlike the young man that had initially bought it, who was now clearly an old man.

Collectively the artist and the man began to imagine a new life for the baby, one that allowed the artist to then further elaborate possibilities. What had been for a while now for the older man, a nostalgic object from his past, was becoming a focus around which a new story could be told. The baby was in effect becoming a cypher for the way we all age, a concrete example of how even when very old, we still retain our younger past within us; a man in his early twenties in this case, still inhabiting the mind of a man in his seventies. Gradually, an object from the man's past life, was becoming both a reminder of an eventful time, and the grit around which a new story was unfolding, perhaps a fable about how to find a collective or universal value in the life we have lived. What was a passive personal history, was now becoming an active element in a new story that was collaborative and therefore shared. In its sharing, a positivity on the part of the older man was now evident and an awareness of the value of past experiences raised. Finally it was agreed that as the baby experienced life in the jungle, it would finally return, with all those experiences etched into its features, finally emerging from the jungle with the face of an old man.



Fig. 2 The baby crawls off into the jungle, has adventures and returns with the face of an old man: Digitised pen and ink drawings: 2023/4 © Garry Barker

Earlier drawings made whilst having conversations with people living in temporary accommodation within a repurposed high-rise block of flats, took a very different direction, but the attempt to draw out a more universal or mythic story from the encounter was also attempted.



Fig. 3 Tower block sketches: Pen and ink wash: 2015 © Garry Barker

The original drawings were made whilst Barker stood in front of a block of flats and gradually people came up to him to ask what he was doing. As they did so, conversations began and as soon as they found out Barker wasn't an official of some sort and realised, he was an artist, people began to open out about themselves and their lives. Barker soon realised that the flats had been used for temporary accommodation for people seeking residency status and that the experiences of these people had often been traumatic. In particular one man told him of his experience of crossing the Mediterranean by small boat and of how frightening that was. Another person told the artist how he had thought of England as a place of wonder and that he thought he would be welcomed with open arms, but that now he realised that it wasn't like that, and that English people hated him as an immigrant. After taking the drawings, he had made back into the studio, Barker on reflection, began to see the modernist utopian idea behind the design of the flats, as being now turned on its head, and the flats in his next set of drawings became empty containers, allegories of lost desires and the disillusionment of hope.

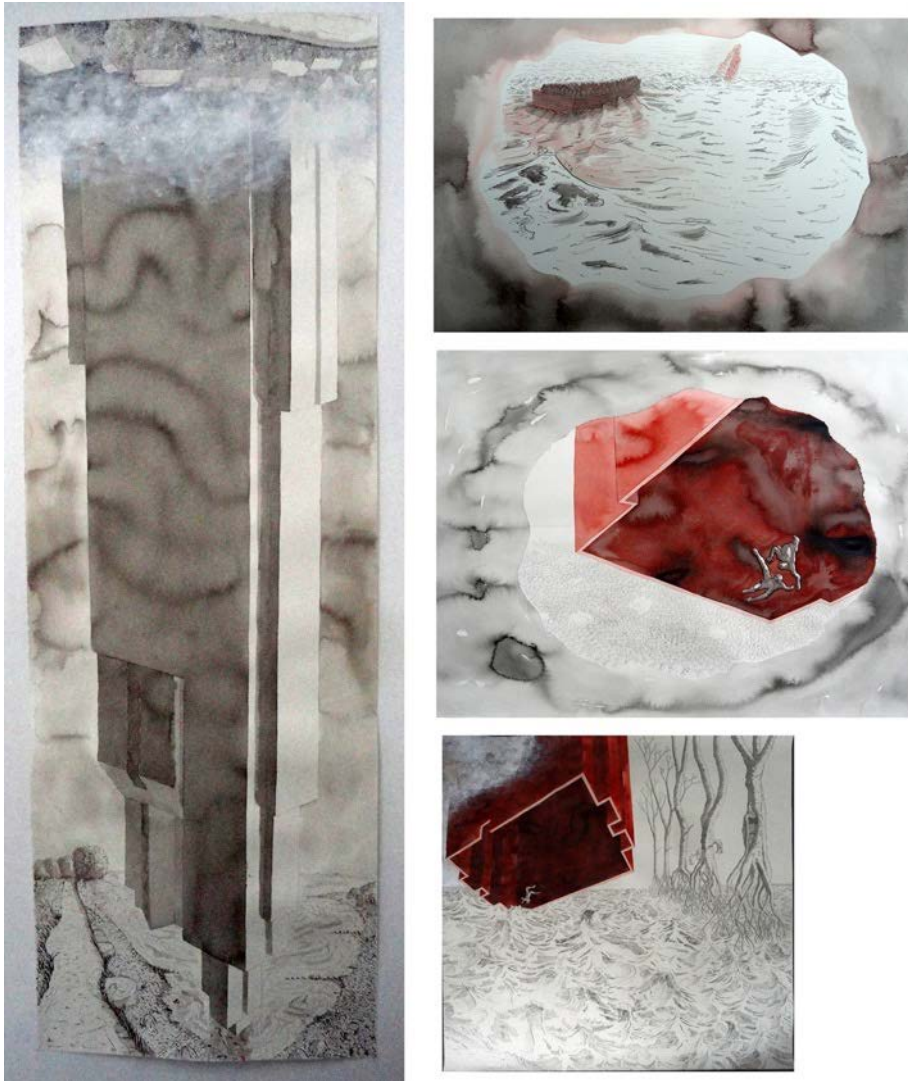


Fig 4. Allegories of lost desires: Pen and ink with watercolour on paper: 2015 © Garry Barker

In one series of drawings the modernist tower was turned on its head and it was used to link with a drawing of a site on the south coast where immigrants were often landed, with a part of Leeds where the original tower block had been drawn. In another series of drawings, the towers were seen as empty vessels, emptying their contents back into the seas, that had been crossed on each migrant's journey.

A wooden baby had provided for one person a doorway within their home to see themselves within a romantic past in a country far away, whilst the image of a tower block had been used by another, to visualise a distant place of safety and then later on arrival in England, the same object had become an image of lost hope.

As Barker was working on the images of the wooden baby, suddenly, there became other story to respond to, one that was far more urgent, that needed immediate actions to be taken, in order to resolve the issues arising.

Someone had been forcibly taken from their home. A neighbour from the Gambia had been picked up by the police and sent to Yarl's Wood detention centre and he had been told that he would be deported to Rwanda. The community group, of which Barker is the embedded artist, is a small but tightly knit one. In a time of trouble, it can act quickly. The process of contacting local councillors and MPs began, as well as linking in with specialist immigration solicitors and at the same time trying to reassure the now locked away neighbour, that people were working on his behalf and that professional help was on its way. He has already we soon find out, witnessed an attempted suicide. A situation that quickly spiralled out of control, as he was then beaten up by the man he tried to save from hanging. Life in the detention centre, we were told, was for some people, worse than death and drawings made by the artist after a mobile phone conversation, felt a very weak response in comparison with the work of bringing in specialist agencies to help.

However, now this man has been freed and has returned to live locally. He sees the drawings then made as evidence of an engagement that went beyond his own experience, and this is perhaps where the value of these images resides. In 'Drawing as a tool for shaping community experience into collective allegory', (Barker, 2017) it was pointed out that Barker made drawn responses to conversations with the people in the area he lives in, because he believes that by developing a visionary allegorical framework, he could provide a means by which the events of people's lives could become woven into meaningful visual stories. Many of the people he had spoken to felt as if they were experiencing an almost unintelligible mixed up tangle of circumstances and they found it helpful to realise that others had had similar experiences. Drawing it seemed helped people find threads of meaning. The visual allegories that were developed, did it seemed from verbal feedback, received when the work was shown in a local venue, help people locate their individual experiences within a wider context and the experience of someone taking an interest, helped them with the confidence to further develop their own stories.



Fig 5. The hanging: Digital print made from pen and ink drawing: 2024 © Garry Barker

Conclusion

The artist Garry Barker has over the last 30 years been making drawings within a multi-cultural community context. He continues to listen to what people have to say and as he draws, he tries to build a collective vision, using images that he feels might have some mythic resonance.

His earlier work with a community group helped to facilitate local environmental action, by using drawing to illustrate possibilities for change, but now as he gets older, the drawings made are more often than not attempts to find more general allegorical expression, for individual situations and experiences. In doing so he hopes he can help people understand that they experience life within a collective context, and that their individual experiences, although they will feel unique, are actually collective

experiences, and that these types of experiences are repeated over and over again, in all parts of the world and amongst all cultures and times. Therefore, in recounting these experiences and them then being reflected upon as visual allegories, individuals can begin to see themselves as part of the wider human story, a necessary part that needs to have its story told. In this process hopefully a sense of wellbeing emerges, and the participants see their lives as being far more meaningful than they did before.

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