

Barbara Walker - The act of looking: the action of seeing

Seeing comes before words. The child looks and recognizes before it can speak.
John Berger, *Ways of Seeing*.¹

“Before Barbara Walker knew anything about anything, she knew that she could draw.”
Karen Roswell

If our entire educational system was built on perception and thought and not based on the study of literacy and numeracy - words and numbers – could we develop a visual intelligence that persisted in the knowledge that visual perception **is** visual thinking? The art practice of British artist Barbara Walker suggests we can.

Presented by Tiwani Contemporary, **As Seen** is a compilation of 10 large scale charcoal and graphite drawings produced by Barbara Walker. It showcases Walker’s art practice as processes of abstraction which are intricately incorporated within her drawings. Exhibited together for the first time, **As Seen** is a collection of new commissions combined with selected artworks from two earlier bodies of work **Louder than Words** and **Show and Tell**.

The art psychologist Rudolf Arnheim explores a theory of seeing that draws no distinction between "thinking" and "perception". The latter, he explains, does not simply consist of passive reception, absorbing facts from the outside world, but is an "*active exploration*" which includes complex mental processes.² **As Seen** offers a possibility to delve into the processes of Walker’s visual thinking. Arnheim’s theory of visual perception is closely related to what literary critic Terry Eagleton defines as a tacit knowledge of culture. Eagleton says,

*In its [culture’s] concern with symbolic meanings and local solidarities, it offers an alternative to the abstract and universal. Cultures are all about knack, habit and know-how, rather than rational methods or conceptual procedures. They are the taken-for-granted background of everyday behaviour, the invisible colour of daily existence, the collective unconscious of political society. Culture is what everyone knows without knowing it. Unlike algebra, you get the hang of a culture not by swotting it up but by taking part in it. It is more like a child learning a language than an adult learning how to assemble a coffee table.*³

For Walker, her drawings are a cultural discourse that comments on today’s society. Her act of looking stimulates her perception in a complex way that involves “*selection [...], abstraction, analysis and synthesis, completion, correction, comparison, problem solving, as well as combining, separating, putting in context*”⁴. These processes, as acts of absorbing, observing and researching, enable Walker to create visual constructions of thought, a visual intelligence which is then mapped out in her drawings. **My Song**– whose title is a meditation

on the Old Testament's *Song of Solomon*⁵ – is a portrayal of her son from Walker's **Louder than Words** series. The magnified West Midlands Police Search/Stop Form is partially covered with translucent white paint onto which Walker has mapped the portrait. Following the form's instruction (*Delete As Appropriate) she selects areas to blot, abstracting the figure from the text.

Visual Art is Walker's preferred language. As a child she would pore over the illustrations in children's books, actively absorbing and abstracting the colours, shapes and forms which enabled her to make sense out of what she was seeing. *"I've always been interested in art. From as early as I can remember, so, that can be from primary school. I loved drawing and I loved painting and liked being creative with my hands. But I didn't really get into it until when I was a mature student. I dabbled a bit, but as soon as I took on the role as a mother that was my priority. My priorities and my concerns were my children."*⁶ She left school at 16 with few qualifications, and returned to Higher Education – as a mature student – to gain an academic degree in Art and Design from the University of Central England. Drawing is and remains integral to her understanding of Western society.

Barbara and I have been in conversation (by telephone) for little over a year. When I first visited her Birmingham studio, she made it very clear that my visit was not a common courtesy. Walker's studio is her sanctuary where she likes to work in isolation; visits are allowed by appointment only. Like Giacometti - whose aesthetics heavily influence the works in **As Seen** - Walker sees her studio as an extension of herself. She does not like to talk about her work here; this is her private space in which to dissimulate her emotions and assimilate her thoughts. Walker spends years researching and gathering material, yet her studio bears no visible references to this process. There are no books, sketches, or signs of art production on display. The majority of Walker's practice is *visual thinking* which then instigates the formation of her drawings.

Through acts of research, similar to the lens of Irish photographer Willie Doherty⁷, Walker's surveillance is relentless. She scrutinizes that which we overlook. Her eyes are her "teachers" and her drawings are a running commentary on what we fail to notice. Walker's drawings are traditional. Embedded in each composition are critical conversations about perceptions of male identity. Representation; belonging and power through the politics of black fashion and dress⁸ become drawings. Each portrait is a portrayal of the lengthy discussions between Walker and the individual. However, we do not get to see their face or meet their gaze. We do not get to meet them.

The new commissions signal a distinct shift in her visual language. In the most recent artworks in **As Seen**, Walker invites us to engage with her 'troubling vision'⁹. Gone are the open white spaces prevalent in **Show and Tell**, the newer artworks signalling an anger and urgency that is foreign to the restraint of the earlier bodies of work. Walker uses her sweat to smudge the pigment, thereby adding the most personal touch, her DNA. The newest drawings, in particular the **Dichotomy of Kenny and the Dichotomy of Sean**, suggest a second story. Like cryptic crosswords each title contributes to the tension contained in the compositions. She adds text. The letters reference newsprint; phrases are taken from the

widely reported murders of two innocent young men: that of Jean Charles de Menezes, murdered by Metropolitan Police in 2005 and of Trayvon Martin, a 17-year old who was killed by a neighbourhood watch volunteer in Florida in 2012. This is no longer just about her son but an observation that has extended her personal trajectory from the physical application of pigment to a political statement that is inscribed in each drawing.

¹ John Berger: *Ways of Seeing* (1973). BBC / Penguin Books, London

² Rudolf Arnheim: *Visual Thinking* (1969). University of California Press, Berkeley / London

³ Terry Eagleton: *Big ideas – Rediscover a common cause or die*, (2004) New Statesman, accessed on: <http://newstatesman.com/node/148506>.

⁴ Arnheim, ibd.

⁵ Bible

⁶ Extract from an interview Barbara Walker and Karen Roswell, 2012

⁷ See Interview with W. Doherty, accessed online 20/05/13 <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qpUB233TcrA>

⁸ see also: Monica L. Miller, *Slaves to Fashion – Black Dandyism and the Styling of Black Diasporic Identity* (2009), Duke University Press, Durham, NC

⁹ Nicole R. Fleetwood: *Troubling Vision: Performance, Visuality and Blackness* (2011), University of Chicago Press, Chicago/London