

## ***D-SEGNI Interview***

Fondazione Sandretto Re Rebaudengo

### ***Ilaria Bonacossa in conversation with Marguerite Kahrl***

**Ilaria Bonacossa** The title of the show in Italian indicates a funny word game, while phonetically sounding like the word drawing it is a D for donne (women and segni is Sign). It is a way to speak about contemporary drawings, opening it to any sign left on paper, so not excluding the use of paint or any other technique...

**Marguerite Kahrl** The title captures well my understanding of making drawings - combined with sense making as a woman artist. The more traditional drawings are made with graphite, colored pencil, gouache, acrylic, wax, pastel, ink on paper. Although the handmade paper works are rooted in the technique of drawing, the images are constructed from the pigmented paper pulp itself.

**Bonacossa** Drawing is still the most direct and immediate way to capture the creative process in its transformation. Drawings can maintain a certain aspects of un-finished ness that still reflect in some way the presence of the hand of the artist, in a way that most other media have lost... do you think this is true for your drawings??

**Kahrl** Yes. There is a trend in various media to produce glossy, polished work-leaving little trace of the artists touch. Digital and printing technologies have certainly changed how we view images. We have become accustomed to consuming refined images in magazines, billboards, the moving image...this has a relationship with image production in the art world. My hand is present in the work, as is my sense of humor and hunger for questioning which balances between what is articulated and left unsaid. The blank spaces hold as much weight as the spaces illustrated, similar to a map or even a handwritten letter. I am drawn to the tradition of how paper has been used to describe worlds and organize thoughts.

**Bonacossa** Drawings have the capacity to change the speed of time, on one hand they can be born in an immediate very fast way; on the other they allow a space of reflection, a time to stop look and meditate on some issues, becoming metaphors of real life...

**Kahrl** Scale, speed and deliverance. Large images suggest the drawings can be read quickly from a distance but up close they are slow due to many small details. I hope that this change in pace will create a mental space for expectation to shift towards recognition while the narratives and metaphors present are unpacked.

Bonacossa **Your drawings vary a lot in size and technique...but what do you think is the red line in all of them? Which issues are central to your work??**

**Kahrl** Loss of control and the struggle to regain it.

Bonacossa **They have a narrative and descriptive character showing some similarities with illustration, but they also look like cartoons....**

**Kahrl** Humor is an important part of the way I see the world. It adds a lightness that enables me to look deeply at human frailty. Comic books and strips are often used to comment upon serious subjects. The characters allow us entry into a world, we may otherwise overlook.

Bonacossa **Drawing in the seventies was completely process oriented, now may artists use drawings not to illustrate a process but to create works, where do your drawings stand...**

**Kahrl** I see the drawings, especially the large scale ones as works in themselves. Process is an important part of how they are made. Paper shows a history of mark making in a way that canvas or other grounds do not. It also lends itself to the development of ideas; I erase half of what I draw on the paper in the course of finding balance, expression and a relationship between elements. This process or history is very much part of how the work develops.

Bonacossa **Are your drawings all hand made or do you use computer-generated images? Do you re-elaborate them digitally??**

**Kahrl** No, they are hand made. I choose not to use digital tools in the drawing process as it flattens the images. This flatness works for me in photographs and video - but not in the drawings.

Bonacossa **There is a strong narrative aspect in the work, your “landscapes” are so densely populated that it takes hours to see them properly, it always feels as if when you look at them again you discover new things. The public looks at them but has to spend time with them, they are drawings that have to be read nearly like a book'?? The small ones are like small parts that then get mounted in the larger ones...**

**Kahrl** The large drawings take time to ingest. They seem complex but there is usually a clear trajectory of associations. The “landscapes” exist as a playground for the interrelation of cause and effect –they mark a shift from the linear thought process. I have looked at folk tales and their morphology (i.e. analyzing components, their relationship to each other and to the whole). Heroes play several roles and have good and bad attributes. Narrative elements exist but are

not linear; instead they can be strung together from multiple places having different interpretations each time.

The small drawings are either made as studies for elements which reappear in the larger works or as investigations for sculptures.

**Bonacossa** Looking at your work has made me think of some novel that talks about a possible future world a mix between the *Petite Prince of St Exupery* and *Orwell's 1984*... science fiction...it deals with important issues but it also tries to guess their transformations in a semi-serious way....

**Kahrl** Orwell was not far from the mark with his vision. Although I cringe at the word semi-serious, there is a point in embedding a very serious point in works of fiction. Just look at current US politics. The US pushed for a confrontation with Iraq to gain access to their oil - second largest reserve on the planet, the search for weapons of mass destruction was a propaganda effort run by the Office of Special Plans (quite an Orwellian name) and Vice President Dick Cheney's Office. Once the sanctions lifted, Saddam's Iraqi oil would have been traded for euros rather than dollars. This would have grave consequences for the US economy marking a power shift from the dollar dominated global economy. In 2003 Bush signed an executive order returning the oil trade to the dollar. Even in reality facts merge with fiction. My work as an artist marks an investigation, undertaken to discover how to represent these shifting realities.

**Bonacossa** Drawings also because of their nearness with comics or illustration often have a playful or light atmosphere, do you feel this is true??

**Kahrl** Depicting characters part real and part artificial blurs the distinction of reality. This shift in perception is woven with drawings of things existing in the world along with figments of my imagination. I make leaps of association which become successful if the viewer can follow them. Comics are only funny if someone gets the joke. Art is a form of popular entertainment in this way.

**Bonacossa** What is the relation between your drawings and your sculptural production? Do you draw all the time??

**Kahrl** The drawings represent my thought process and the sculpture manifests it. Or in other words, in the large drawings I represent a cosmology, which the sculptures inhabit. The larger drawings take a long time to produce; I have one in the works most of the time. I write notes to myself all the time, sometimes the notes are about finishing the drawings.

**Bonacossa** Do you feel there is something more personal in your drawings than in the rest of your work?

**Kahrl** Yes. I am always interested to see artist's drawings, as I believe they are a direct link to how a person thinks and what their priorities are. Paper is akin to a snow-covered landscape. Similar to tracing tracks in the snow, the marks left behind give one an indication of where someone has been, how often they visit certain areas and so forth. Sculpture, photography and videos are often less transparent because their process implies a certain finality.

**Bonacossa** What do you feel is the relation of your work to many issues of contemporary social and political life? How has living in Italy and leaving the USA influenced the perception of many global issues???

**Kahrl** I returned to New York last summer and saw the streets crowded with gas-guzzling SUV's, I thought about the pervasive notion of 'might makes right' and how it can isolate the individual and country. And further how our dependence upon perishable energy resources shape worldwide political and economic forces, Yes, I am influenced by cultural and political issues - their complexity and opacity. Oddly enough these qualities inspire me to look through the tangled web of connections to search for clarity. I realize the limits of visual representation in transforming culture. I also realize how important it is to find a sense of empowerment in the face of despair and powerlessness. Metaphorical connections present in my drawings depict a mapping and illustration of this search. The remote-controlled-methane-digesting sculptures elaborate on this search for meaning- a process of taking something apart and putting it back together in a way which makes more sense to me.

**Bonacossa** Installing your drawings in FSRR meant interacting with a space strongly marked by a pure minimalist architecture, how do you think this influenced your work??

**Kahrl** Building a model of the space helped me to visualize how to hang the work and what to include. Before installing the work, I considered either a formal or scattered approach to hanging the drawings - I chose the more formal approach, mainly because it makes the work more accessible. The architecture influenced our decision to hang the smaller drawings in little groupings, divided by themes. These groupings functioned as short sentences would, describing parts of the larger whole. In this way the viewers' passage through the gallery space could be a cumulative experience moving from the studies to more complex compositions.

**Bonacossa Can you elaborate on the use of an aerial view and how you think this impacts the perception of your work?**

**Kahrl** Structures influence the way we look at the world. During the twentieth century the grid had a huge impact on modernist thought and art. Spatially it put everything on one plane and anesthetized context. The contradiction between spiritualism and the values of science was repressed by the structure itself. I have tried to break from this ordered realm by zooming out from the landscapes to depict a multilayered surface peppered with isolated elements, mental projections and close up views. The aerial view helps to shift the focal length of thought from individual elements, to include the larger structure of perception. Aside from this there is a reference to surveillance-which the blimps highlight.

**Bonacossa There is a strong scientific feel to your drawings...also the way in which they develop is very close to scientific experiments...you start and work constantly but you never know at the beginning how the work is going to turn out...**

**Kahrl** The main scientific link has to do with examining the structure of causal thought processes-how one thing affects another. My inquiry is really more about perception, than science. I see the world as an adaptive feedback loop; things are connected to and affect each other. Our notion of self can defy this larger quality of relationship - we are often led by illusory tendencies and can live in a vacuum without realizing it. This can happen because we are taught to think and process in a linear manner, based upon the notion of cause and effect. When I begin a drawing I have an idea of a place for the landscape, important elements and a feeling for how I want it to develop. Despite this, they grow in an organic way because they are organized by multiple connections rather than a projected hypothesis. The experiment is akin to modeling a cybernetic or self-regulating system, which at a certain point takes on a life of its own

**Bonacossa FSRR is dedicating a full year to women artists. How do you feel about this? How does it feel to be part of this programming? Which women artists you feel have particularly influenced your work?**

**Kahrl** I am thrilled to be part of the curatorial programming. It is a fabulous idea and strong statement to dedicate a year to women artists. The benefit is a designated space for raising awareness and emphasizing the often under-recognized cultural role women have played in the arts. Institutions have devoted centuries to male artists - they can afford to sit this year out at FSRR.

Some women artists who have influenced my work ... Laurie Anderson for how she handles technology, Louise Bourgeois how she inhabits her material, Anne Chu – observing her process as a studio assistant, Ann Hamilton's sensory work ethic, Eva Hesse - art from non-art, Roni Horn - experience of looking,

my mother, Anita Kahrl, for how she presented the landscape, Toba Khedoori - her scale of drawings, Annette Lemieux for encouraging me to be playful in the studio, Annette Messenger's sculptural poetry, Cindy Sherman's investigation of subject matter, Ursula Von Rydingsvard in her display of raw courage and Andrea Zittel's living systems.

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