

## **Double Vision**

### **Frances Colpitt**

Alicia Beach and Constance Lowe: Double Vision recognizes a fortuitous intersection of concerns in the work of these two artists. Although they work independently of one another, both artists are inspired by natural forms; their vibrantly colored drawings contain floral or entomologically suggestive images in which one can identify tendrils or antennae and petals or patterns reminiscent of butterfly wings. Most conspicuous is their interest in doubling and symmetry, expressed in the form of ink blots and two-handed drawing. Developing their compositions around a vertical axis so that they seem to unfold from the center, Beach and Lowe reject traditional methods of balance in which individual shapes are one-by-one dispersed across the field of the support in pursuit of equilibrium. Instead, the image is given as a whole shape – a Gestalt composed of smaller units that is more organic than rational. The sense of opening outward like a blossoming flower is reinforced by the use of symmetry, which is a form of doubling through reversal and repetition, as if in a mirror.

The mirror is one of the key metaphors of twentieth-century psychoanalysis, most famously articulated in Jacques Lacan's identification of the mirror stage occurring in the six- to eighteen-month-old child. At this stage, the child recognizes himself as a Gestalt or integrated being in the mirror, signaling the formation of the ego. The mirror stage is also a doubling process in which the infant not only recognizes his identity as distinct from other beings but the reflection as other (to be recognized by other beings as different from themselves). This fundamental stage in psychic development is crucial to the formation of a balanced sense of identity. Although both Beach and Lowe confess to an interest in Lacan, other aspects of psychoanalysis have a more direct bearing on the development of their works. Lowe's "dysfunctional" sculptures and tableaux of 1993 and 1994 were partially inspired by the history of the psychiatric treatment of women,

particularly the phenomenon of hysteria (derived from the Greek word for womb, hystera), once thought to be caused by the dislocation of the uterus. Herself a beneficiary of analysis, Beach has long contemplated the psychology of gender based on the differences between men's and women's bodies, a belief confirmed by a recent Los Angeles Times report on experiments with mice that showed that female brains are more symmetrical than male brains. Beach's desire for symmetry in all of her work, but especially in her recent two-handed drawings, is a way of remaining in touch with her feminine body.

The symmetry of ink blots, a source for most of Lowe's recent drawings and Beach's series of monumental paintings on paper in 2002, is the result of folding and pressing wet ink into dry paper. Now commonly associated with the Rorschach test, ink blots were an inspiration for Sandro Botticelli, Leonardo, and Victor Hugo. Bruce Conner used the technique for a series of diagrammatic drawings suggesting occultish glyphs, and Andy Warhol, who titled his randomly generated paint-on-canvas blots Rorschach Paintings, did not know that the Rorschach test uses a standardized set of ten cards. Developed by Hermann Rorschach (1884-1922), the five black- and-white and five color ink blots were intended to be a personality mirror in which the subject's formal identification of whole or details, shape or outline, and color or shading indicate his or her grasp of reality, emotional maturity, degree of repression, etc. Content analysis is a relatively new development in the Rorschach but one that clinicians now consider more valuable than perceptual testing. The subject's identification of the ink blot's content, whether human, animal or object, static or moving, and the degree of popularity or originality of the response, can reveal feelings about sex, one's father or mother, and oneself and others.

In the drawings based on her own inkblot studies, Lowe does not intend to test her own or the viewer's personality or ability to recognize identifiable objects in abstract shapes. However, their existence as drawings, as penciled translations of liquid originals, reinforces their

personal nature through the closeness of hand-to-paper and the immediacy of touch. A comparably delicate directness characterizes Beach's drawings with colored pencil and watercolor. "Because it is so intimately to do with the workings of the hand," Neil Bartlett has noted, "drawing comes closest to handwriting in the index of forms of expression. A drawing is often an unintentional autograph, a signature." Often dismissed as minor because of their prevalent use as preliminary sketches by painters and sculptors, drawings are valuable sources for connoisseurship, which identifies authorship based on personal style. Where other art works might originate in a workshop or foundry, drawings are the product of a single individual, intimately engaged with the pencil's contact with paper. "The mother of the arts," according to Pamela Lee, drawing is "the ground from which all other arts originate." Drawing's advent as a major art form occurred in the 1960s when process artists replaced oil paint and bronze with disposable materials and the "dematerialization of the object" led to the substitution of drawing for sculpture. Conceptual art's emphasis on "primary information" in the form of diagrams, texts, photographs, and other works on paper also contributed to the legitimization of drawing. Works by major artists such as Jonathan Borofsky, Nancy Spero, Vija Celmins, Mike Kelley, and Raymond Pettibon are no less valuable for being drawings.

Both artists in this exhibition arrived at drawing after working through the more concrete forms of painting and sculpture. Constance Lowe's early paintings are concerned with the shifting boundaries of nature and artifice. Canvases painted with iconic targets, crosses, stripes, or circles are complemented by the attachment of actual objects, such as a framed spider specimen or a jar filled with mold. By 1992, the relationship between painting and object in her work is reversed: army blankets serve as supports for dispersed patterns of painted circles or other small units. Lowe continued to utilize the soft and drapey, yet symbolically masculine, army blankets for the next three years, juxtaposing them to plywood boxes with apertures covered by screens. These "ventilators,"

as she nicknamed them, convey the illusion of function but, like [Hive #2](#) (1993), a metal cabinet bound with straps and supported by uneven legs, are frustratingly mute and nonfunctional. During this period, Lowe also produced two wall pieces containing framed elements, including painted floral upholstery fabric and birch plywood panels on which symmetrical contoured patterns in the wood grain were stained with red paint to resemble ink blots. Titled [Heterotaxia #1](#) and [#2](#) -- a term meaning an abnormal arrangement of elements, typically applied to parts of the body -- these works also contained jars of molding bread. The bread's conical shape and pockmarked surface inspired an enlarged version in orange fiberglass, which is suspended over a white upholstered slipper chair with straight-jacket belts attached to its seat, in *Flourescence* (1994-95).

Lowe's major work, [striking likeness](#), was a temporary installation created during a residency at ArtPace, A Foundation for Contemporary Art|San Antonio in 1998. Like her earlier works, *striking likeness* was an anti-narrative composed of clearly recognizable, figurative forms that refused to divulge a coherent story. On the floor, silver butterflies alighted on yellow pools of poured latex reminiscent of toxic waste. In contrast to the more literal, ecological message of the butterfly tableau, an enigmatic store-bought red raincoat, with salt sewn undetectably into its hem, was hung on one of the turquoise walls of the installation. On an adjacent wall was a mural based on a photograph of a burned building shrouded in icicles.

The ink blot drawings included in this exhibition developed from Lowe's interest in the symmetrical shapes and markings of butterfly wings combined with the random spills of the poured latex in *striking likeness*. Eventually titling the series *FabCom* (an abbreviation of *Fabulized Combination*, a category of responses to the Rorschach test in which "an implausible or unbelievable relationship is described between two or more aspects in the inkblot"), Lowe has produced hundreds of original inkblots as source material for her drawings. Using whole blots or inventively combining splatters, blobs, and smears from multiple

blots, the shapes are traced on translucent drafting paper known as Mylar film. With waxy colored pencils and a characteristically delicate touch, the images are first developed on one side of the Mylar before the sheet is turned over and the colors and the process of blending and modeling are repeated on the drawing's front. Beyond the drawing's lateral symmetry, drawing on both sides results in an additional form of doubling as well as color intensity. Framing the Mylar so that light can seep behind it produces a luminous burst of sensuous color.

As with Rorschach blots, the viewer is tempted to identify the "content" of Lowe's drawings. Over the last three years, however, the blots have become less and less identifiable and large figural shapes have given way to pulled-apart attenuated forms. The dichotomy of nature and artifice characterizing Lowe's earlier work is dissolved; the blot-drawings are hybrids, neither natural nor artificial, neither wholly random nor calculated, but suggestive of both. A related recent body of work, based on photographs of sea foam, is even more resistant to interpretation. Drawn in the same manner as the blots but without their bilateral symmetry, they convey a sense of mutation through the constantly changing contours of floating sea foam, recalling her earlier incorporation of mold.

With very different means, Alicia Beach's 2002 exhibition, *Seafaring Love Songs*, produced a comparable effect. Critic James Scarborough associates the undulating surfaces of her wooden reliefs with the gently rolling waves of the ocean: they "shimmer as one looks at them, like sunlit water." Made from painted vertical slats of varying thickness that protrude from the wall to create curving frontal planes, the reliefs in *Seafaring Love Songs* are identified by the artist as "personal seascapes."

Begun in 1998, the series of slatted reliefs grew out of a group of stripe paintings on rectangular plywood supports. Beach made the first reliefs by cutting out individual stripes and spacing them evenly apart on the

wall. The next series of slats was fabricated from layered sheets of plywood and the final group from solid but lightweight basswood. With a single stroke from top to bottom, flat and metallic acrylic paint was smoothly applied to the face of each slat. As the works grew in size, the depth of the slats and the spaces between them increased. In the most recent pieces, the painted sides of the slats, which cast glowing atmospheric colors on the wall, complement multicolored stripes on the front. Despite the use of sculptural material and their flirtation with the third dimension, the reliefs remain resolutely pictorial. Maintaining the overall rectangle of traditional painting and the unifying effect of reflected color between the slats, they are experienced as paintings. At times, their material presence dissolves into pure light and color. By varying the depth of the slats, Beach introduced the undulating surfaces that would characterize her “personal seascapes” of 2002. The *Glacier Between Us* (2001) includes twenty-four vertical elements painted in icy shades of pink, blue, purple, and turquoise enhanced by glistening “interference” paint that causes the color’s appearance to shift with the movement of the spectator. The slats are wider, deeper, and taller on the sides of this nine-and-a-half foot wide painting, incrementally decreasing in size toward the center, where an invisible axis, like a mirror, links the two halves consisting of twelve slats each. *You Show Me How to Love* (2001) and *Butterflies of the Mountains* (2002) are much more radically shaped, with angled tops and bottoms on each slat as well as thoroughly warped frontal planes. Their deeper, darker colors are equally turbulent.

A broken leg in 2002 led to an alteration of Beach’s working process, and as a result, a new body of work. No less physically demanding than the reliefs, *Psychosomatic Epiphanies* allowed the artist to work on the floor rather than standing on a ladder to paint the slats. Working with two massive sheets of paper, one suspended by pulleys above the other, Beach applied swaths of paint on the floor-bound sheet. The top sheet was then lowered and pressed into the first with the artist’s entire body. A giant ink blot resulted from attaching the two sheets side by side with

a center seam. The scale, horizontal orientation, and lucent, spreading colors of the Psychosomatic Epiphanies suggest watery dreamscapes reminiscent of nineteenth-century romantic paintings.

While finishing up the Psychosomatic Epiphanies, Beach began to experiment with two-handed drawing and painting, an obvious development from the ink-blot process. Although she is not the first to practice two-handed drawing, Beach, who is right-handed, was attracted to the process by its demand for expressive control and its indexical reflection of the symmetrical body. Two-handed drawing not only contributed to her physical recovery at the time but to the artist's emotional and mental stability.

Airy bouquets of meandering, pastel lines, Beach's drawings of roses were produced in the Tournament House garden in Pasadena, California, in the summer of 2003. Marking her paper with a vertical line to serve as an axis and point of reference, Beach drew the flowers, stems, leaves, and thorns on both halves of the paper at once. The shapes of the individual elements were developed by "drawing around them," that is, by delineating their outlines, rather than representing them. "The pleasure of observation," she commented, results from "letting go of the literalizing process that happens in the brain by constantly naming things."

For her recent Fantasy Drawings, Beach returns to the spreading colors and washy liquidity of the Psychosomatic Epiphanies as well as to the language of abstraction. Drawn and painted with both hands, their rigorous symmetry is softened by a multitude of gestural wisps, arabesques, tendrils, and curlicues. In unabashedly pretty pastel and Day-Glo hues, their centralized, floral, or even uterine forms are the result of a spirited exploration of female imagery and feminine sexuality. The celebratory nature of her drawings is especially evident in the heraldic compositions, recalling shields or crests, of Untitled #1 and Untitled #2 (both 2003), in which the isolated image floats in the upper

region of a large sheet of otherwise empty paper. In contrast to the heft of paintings on canvas, the lightness of the paper support is an essential concern for both Beach and Lowe. Along with many contemporary artists, they reject the authoritarian, and historically masculine, nature of the obdurate object associated with modernist painting and sculpture. The typically smaller and comparatively more fragile qualities of works on paper recommend them to a feminine sensibility.

Without, until recently, much knowledge of each other's work and no evidence of influence, Beach and Lowe have produced two remarkably collegial bodies of drawings. The pairing of their graceful, symmetrical images rendered in luscious color with a highly personal sense of touch may lead viewers of Alicia Beach and Constance Lowe: *Double Vision* to suspect that they are indeed seeing double.

## Notes

1. Jacques Lacan, *The Mirror Stage*, in *Ecrits: A Selection*, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: W. W. Norton, 1977), 1-10.
2. Rosie Mestel, *Brain Study Focuses on Gender Identity*, *Los Angeles Times* (20 October 2003), A13.
3. Richard Kalina, *Test Patterns: Warhols Rorschach Painting*, *Art in America* 85, no. 1 (January 1997): 90.
4. Edward Aronow and Marvin Reznikoff, *A Rorschach Introduction: Content and Perceptual Approaches* (New York: Grune & Stratton, 1983), 71.
5. Neil Bartlett, *Rae Smith: What Drawing Feels Like*, in *What is Drawing?* (London: Black Dog Publishers, 2003), 119.
6. Pamela Lee, *Some Kinds of Duration: The Temporality of Drawing as Process Art*, in *Afterimage: Drawing Through Process*, by Cornelia H. Butler (Los Angeles: Museum of Contemporary Art, 1999), 31.
7. Lucy R. Lippard, *Eva Hesse: The Circle*, *Art in America* 59, no. 3 (May-June 1971): 73.
8. Tara Rose, Nancy Kaser-Boyd, and Michael P. Maloney, *Essentials of*



- Rorschach Assessment (New York: John Wiley & Sons, 2001), 61.
9. James Scarborough, Seafaring Love Songs: Suzanne Vielmetter Los Angeles Projects, *Art/Text*, no. 77 (Summer 2002): 88.
  10. Alicia Beach, Artists Statement, January 2002, n.p.
  11. Best known are Dieter Roth and Alighiero e Boetti, who produced two-handed works in the 1970s. Leonardos left-handed mirror writing suggests a related activity.
  12. Conversation with the artist, 19 December 2003.

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