

# Between the lines

Gallery review by Sebastian Smees

## KEDUMBA DRAWING AWARD

Kedumba Gallery  
Blue Mountains Grammar School, Wentworth Falls  
Until December 10

## GEOFFREY DE GROEN

Glenmore Galleries  
Paddington  
Until November 19

Drawing is usually defined these days as whatever you want it to be. This mildly anarchic situation acknowledges the underlying freedom of mark-making – something humans have been doing seemingly forever, and which children seem to do with particular panache. But isn't a definition that loosens itself out of existence unsatisfactory?

How, for instance, do you run a drawing award if you can't explain to the entrants the conditions of entry? This problem has been faced and bravely stared down by the organisers of the prestigious Kedumba Drawing Award, an annual acquisitive prize for Australian artists. The invited artists are asked to submit two recent drawings . . . and that's basically it. How they interpret the invitation is entirely up to them, a policy that has produced some rather interesting entries over the years, from computer-generated vinyl to scratched marks on cibachrome film.

My dictionary of art terms defines drawing as a "representation by means of lines", or "the arrangement of lines which determine a particular form". But the emphasis on lines seems questionable. What about dots or atmospheric smudges and smears? Do, for instance, the graphic works of Seurat and the 19th-century divisionists not qualify as drawings?

The trustees responsible for acquiring works for the Kedumba collection state that "while colour is acceptable, work will be assessed on its graphic quality". But the judge responsible for choosing the winner and the two placegetters is under no such restriction. It's a case of whatever takes his or her fancy.

Definitions of drawing may be hard to come by. But a vast amount of rhetoric is routinely sprayed on the subject. The fount of this rhetoric is a (largely justified) feeling at large among traditionalists that, throughout the past two or three decades, drawing has been neglected, not only by critics and artists, but more worryingly at art schools where students are submerged, so the line goes, in everything from French philosophy to CV-assembling, but not in the how of drawing.

This rhetoric has some favourite themes to which it returns again and again. Ingres's line about drawing being the "probity of art" is a particular favourite. But the overriding impression, once you have heard enough of this stuff, is of a persecuted cult taken up with too much protesting. "Enough!" you want to say. "Quit the rhetoric, show me a drawing and let's talk about it."

Happily, the Kedumba Drawing Award, now in its 11th year, has grown up to the point where it is possible to forget most of the gooey drivel drawing attracts and get back to the business at hand. The guest speaker at the presentation was the fluent and unpretentious Wendy Sharpe, who spoke about her experience in East Timor as one of two official Australian war artists.

Sharpe is, by her own admission, a compulsive draughtswoman; she spent all her waking hours in East Timor drawing. But just at the point in her moving story where she could have gone off on flights of rhetoric about drawing and life, and life and drawing, she didn't.

It was a blessed relief, not least because the audience was left free to come to its own conclusions about drawing, just as an artist has to decide what drawing will constitute for her every time she puts

herself in front of a blank piece of paper (or sand, or styrofoam or whatever).

Art prizes are inherently dumb; just ask the artists who compulsively enter them. But they can play a valuable role. And in accumulating a coherent collection of Australian drawings, the Kedumba certainly does that. The winner of this year's award, the whimsical and talented children's book illustrator John Winch, was perfectly deserving. The other works recommended for acquisition also earned their individual honours, in particular David Harrex's *Black Landscape*, an intimate, unpretentious work in which it was possible to feel a sense of discovery in almost every line or mark.

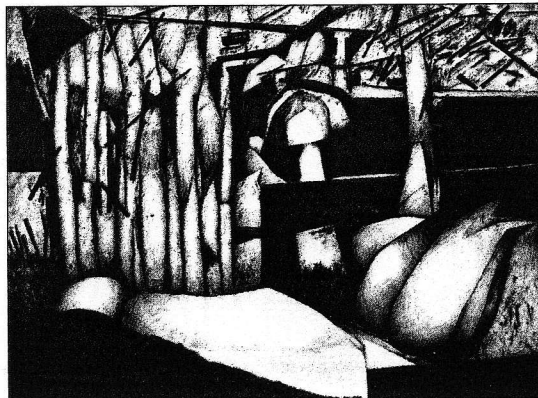
But few, if any, of the works in this year's prize are a match for the black and white works (they do qualify, I think, as drawings) in Geoffrey De Groen's solo show at Glenmore Galleries in Paddington. That's not meant as a slight on Kedumba, which this year boasts its strongest field in years, but as a compliment to De Groen.

He lives in Taralga, near Goulburn, and was well known in the '80s, but in recent times has fallen more or less into obscurity. Despite redoubling his creative efforts in the past few years (he has had no fewer than six solo shows this year) he remains hugely underrated, except by a small group of long-term admirers.

In the early '80s, says one of those admirers, the critic Paul McGillick, De Groen experienced a creative crisis. He felt he had lost the connection between intuition and execution in his work, and wanted to bring back an element of spontaneity. So he stopped painting and for two years simply drew.

That was some time ago, but the work De Groen is turning out today roundly attests to the benefits of such intense periods of focus and renewal in the life of any artist.

These works are more openly figurative than a lot of De Groen's previous work. They show us interiors and landscapes, sometimes both in the same composition. The interiors reveal couches, cushions, lamps, chairs and vertical blinds. The exteriors consist of gently sloping expanses broken by fencelines and telegraph



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Postcards from the edge . . . top, detail from the winner of the Kedumba Drawing Award, *Correspondence Française*, comprising nine large illustrated envelopes posted in Paris, by John Winch; and, below, Geoffrey De Groen's *Bush, Bed, Inside, Outside*.

poles and distant bushland. Every shape and contour is conveyed through striking contrasts of line and volume, light and dark. It is all immensely suggestive, because nothing is insisted on.

The 11th-century Chinese poet Su Tung-po had drawing in mind when he wrote about the need to "pursue the image just seen, like a hawk swooping down on a rabbit. With a moment's hesitation it would be lost." Spontaneity, however, is not really what comes to mind when looking at De Groen's works. Instead, the effect that is produced is one of hesitation. Not so much quivering shapes and inconstant execution (these works are, on the contrary, technically assured) – more a kind of psychological hesitation.

It relates, I think, to thresholds, or the tension between wanting to be inside and wanting to be outside. And it relates to the kind of in-between feeling that can overtake the soul just after sunset before the house lights have been turned on, when shadows fill the house and objects lose their definitive appearance, taking on a foreign, wayward quality.

This half-light is the sort of light De Groen's drawings evoke. Emotionally, I suspect we are at our most fragile during those 15 or 20 minutes separating day and night. If we pay attention, all the day's decisions and all the night's promises can seem to shimmer and swell, turning themselves inside out like some strange, suspended piece of origami.

De Groen's works have an origami-like quality. They are marvels of composition, roping together abstract, bulging shapes into tight geometric crystals. In each work are two or three flat shapes that are either thickly black or snowy white. The rest hovers in between, their volumes suggested by lovely passages of chiaroscuro, their various entanglements nicely contrived. De Groen's medium here is acrylic paint on textured paper that has been glued onto polyester. The effect from a distance is like that of charcoal, but the acrylic achieves a more intense black. Because of the heightened contrasts this allows, these images swell and recede with the dramatic intensity of a string quartet.

Something is said to be "out of drawing" when the representation on a flat surface does not reconstitute itself, in the viewer's eye and mind, into a convincing three-dimensional form. De Groen flirts with being out of drawing in the same way a composer such as Shostakovich flirts with dissonance and irregular rhythm: by mucking about with perspective. He has a cubistic sense of space, in that he maintains a continuous illusion of shallow space that certain objects either cut into or jump out of. He doesn't overdo it, however, so that while some areas of each composition appear abstract and unrecognisable, the whole reads fluently.

As an artist, De Groen seems to have hermitic tendencies, which can be both beneficial and harmful. If it translates into shunning art-world politics and simply getting on with it, well and good. But if the attitude hardens into an imaginative stalemate, an intractability that carries over into one's work, then it can mean creative stagnation.

What attracts me about these works is that although they suggest solitude and meditation, they feel wonderfully porous to the viewer's imagination. Less, in other words, like private-studio experiments than like claims staked in the world "out there", which is inseparable, of course, from the world "in here".