

What the Work Knows

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The text on this page is extremely dense and repetitive, appearing to be a series of vertical columns of characters and symbols. It is largely illegible due to the high density and lack of clear structure, but it seems to contain a large volume of data or a highly stylized form of text.

What the Work Knows by D. Graham Burnett

One often hears that this or that painting (mosaic, icon, mural, etc.) depicts a figure whose eyes appear uncannily to follow the spectator. A thick stratigraphy of mytho-poiesis and history lies under this trope, which straddles the threshold of art and life. Why does this tale recur? What is it trying to tell us about art, artists, and the work of looking? It seems impossible *not* to situate those roving eyes at the juncture of artistic virtuosity and shamanic magic. Which is to say, the unsettling feeling that an artist has conjured from dead matter (from ochre and malachite, from Murano glass and gold leaf), a quasi-being of queer penchants (a thing-life that appears to know something of us and its world)—this harkens all the way back to what we must suppose is the shared archaic ancestor of Frankenstein-science and Pygmalion-power.

The first David Bowen piece I saw put me in mind of all this. It was a gallery-mounted drafting table at the center of which sat a nervous stylus arm that orbited, compass-like, describing jittery circles. The general effect was not unlike an old-fashioned radar screen: a 360-degree expanse upon which a sensitive indicator swept out, in polar coordinates, a sensory field. In fact, that's exactly what the piece was. The perturbations in those light charcoal circles indicated the piece's real-time awareness of visitors to the gallery. Each deflection left a trace that recorded the improvisational and emergent choreography of all those who milled around the work itself, drawing near to peruse, circling slightly in an effort to understand, moving away (while looking back) to test their hypotheses. The large, round, concentric drawings that emerged from *sonar drawing device* (2002) looked for all the world (and this was my favorite part) like a big eye: the faint radiance of the tightly layered lines nicely evoking the radial scintillations of an iris, and the central punch-out hole (through which the stylus arm passed on the drafting table), a perfect pupil-void.

What do works of art know? It is a strange question, for in one sense, of course, they don't "know" anything—knowledge being, as the term has come to be used in our tradition, the special purview of self-consciousness; knowledge being, within our tradition, the distinctive crossing point of information and awareness. And yet, the long lineage of works of art that seem to see their seers is also a history of the ambition to make something that knows something—that knows where we are, that follows us with roving eyes because it is aware of us, and in that awareness shares something of our condition.

Examining Bowen's work over the past decade reveals a pervasive preoccupation with this important problematic. *Tele-present water* (2011, 2013) and *underwater* (2012, 2013) both exemplify the evolution of the themes, craft, and technologies on display in *sonar drawing device*. In these two more recent works, the data from remote sensing systems are transformed (or, perhaps better, transposed) into expressive sculptural gestures. We come upon a work of art that knows something about the world and that is engaged in a process of bodying forth its knowledge. Surveillance is implied, but the mood reverses the dreaded radial architecture of the panopticon. Through the elaborations of this Daedalus, the centripetal tools of information-collation are made to serve an expansive and encompassing art of centrifugal relocations. What we are looking at is in fact "seeing elsewhere." It is tempting to suggest that the narcissism implicit in those tales of paintings that kept their eye on us is here, in these works, being exquisitely reversed, even everted—to be replaced by a dynamic awareness of our planet and its troubled, churning kinetics.

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The Museum of Jurassic Technology in Culver City, California, features a small exhibition on the stagecraft of baroque theater, and more specifically on the different mechanisms used to depict, scenographically,

a tempestuous ocean—of the utmost importance for the broad genre of shipwreck melodramas. One walks past the little windows on to dynamic dollhouse models of these sea scenes: long, spinning spindles bedecked with scimitar blades of painted blue produce a field of whirling waves; saw-frame joists crested by gentle undulations swing and rock to create the nimble dance of a running tide.

We, now, here on Earth, are currently late in the second act of a tragic *naufugio* play that is unfolding at the scale of the entire globe, as the sea rises to protest our carelessness and threatens to swallow us for our sins. Bowen's mesmerizing mechanical sea surfaces can be thought of as something more than set design for this large and fateful theater of our time. It would be more correct to suggest that he has brought the protagonist of the drama right to the gallery stage.

The sea. Out there. All around. It has its eye on us.

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