
Book Review

KIRKLAND, SEAN D. (ED)., *The Nature Drawings of Peter Karklins*. University of Chicago Press 2012, 64 pp., \$20 paperback.

Reviewed by Jake Nabasny

After the release of the film *Good Will Hunting* (1997), many asked whether characters such as Will Hunting actually existed in the world. With the publication of *The Nature Drawings of Peter Karklins*, we can answer the question in the affirmative. But Karklins is not a math genius mopping the floors of MIT. Instead, he is a night watchman at DePaul University and creates elaborate pencil drawings while in his office or on the commute to work. The drawings evoke an organic, atemporal feeling that is often, according to most commentators, charged with sexuality. Once “discovered” by a philosophy student, faculty at DePaul and other universities began to take an interest in Karklins’ work. This interest led to an art exhibition, a symposium, and the publication of the volume in question.

Karklins’ pieces contain tropes that figure prominently in many of the essays. The most often used and abused trope is the “UP ↑” sign on the verso of the drawings. This minor feature is magnified by numerous layers of significance. Did Karklins merely intend a proper orientation for his drawings? Or was this a sign that he had “irretrievably lost his mind, his time and place” (37), according to Ryan Feigenbaum? Other tropes from the verso are timestamps marking when work was done on the piece and phrases or song titles. The front of each piece is often discussed as ooze, slime, liquid, or “engobulation.” What is up for debate in every essay is how these tropes relate to each other and what aesthetic affects may be derived from them.

Each essay in the book is short and does not exceed two pages. At the beginning of the book, a selection of Karklins’ pieces has been printed, and many of the essays refer directly to those presented. The essays are divided into two sections. The first, Art \Rightarrow Nature, attempts to view Karklins’ work through the lens of humanity. The forms (or non-forms, according to Malek Moazzam-Doulat) within the drawings resemble breasts, penises, or severed limbs. This leads to meditations on privacy, politics, and consciousness. However, these human modalities are always on the brink of becoming inhuman. William McNeill refers to Heidegger’s aesthetic philosophy to understand Karklins’ play with the human and inhuman. While the drawings represent the “primitive, primal, [and] prehistoric” nature of the Earth, the human history recorded on the verso

brings us back into a person's "world" (31). Sean D. Kirkland analyzes the art through Nietzsche's critique of the subject-object relation. For Kirkland, the art provides a "passage into and out of the human" (25). The other side of this passage, its verso, is not examined until the second section of the book.

The second group of essays is collected under the heading Nature \Rightarrow Art. If the first section approached Karklins' work from the perspective of the human, the second section addresses it from that of the inhuman. The landscapes are referred to as a desolate world, wilderness, and an emotional geography. The philosophical meditations of the first section are exchanged for the baleful excretions of Dante and William Blake, or the solitary ruminations of Henry David Thoreau. H. Peter Steeves compares the art to a "David Cronenberg storyboard for a film project chronicling H. R. Giger channeling William Blake commissioning a zombie version of Auguste Rodin to sculpt the New Gates of Postmodern Hell" (36). Steeves' essay draws out the inhuman character of Karklins' drawings and rightly notes its effect on the human (the distinction is precarious at best). "*Dasein* is being eviscerated," he writes. "This is what it sometimes means to be human" (36).

Karklins' work can produce an apprehension to respond. One is not initially prepared to respond, even though the work calls us to come closer and enter into it, as Kirkland and Steeves note. This feeling has, perhaps indirectly, been articulated by some of the commentators who interpret the art in outlandish ways. For example, Michael Naas explains the technique of the drawings by playing on Karklins' name in the same way that Jacques Derrida plays on John Searle's name in *Limited Inc.* The final essay, by David Farrell Krell, is a logorrhea about women that only directly addresses the art by reproducing phrases from the verso in the final lines. While these essays appear to be *non sequiturs* alongside the more direct interventions with Karklins, they provide unique viewpoints that question the status of the art as such. They are *outlandish* precisely because they take us out of the examined landscape and address the art in a different register.

The Nature Drawings of Peter Karklins reaches out to many audiences. Not only art critics and philosophers would be able to take something away from it, but also amateur artists and art lovers. The length and style of the essays allow the reader to pick up a new understanding of the work quickly. The diversity of interpretations assures that any reader will find something agreeable in the art. However, the book as a whole has a few shortcomings. While the ambition of the work is interdisciplinary, many of the commentaries come from a philosophical background. This leaves one hungry for interpretations from other disciplines that may be able to contribute something new to this discussion. Another shortcoming is the failure to notice apparent shifts in Karklins' drawings. The works surveyed span from 1999 to 2004. Throughout this time, the drawings undergo two stylistic transformations. Perhaps coincidentally, these shifts coincide with September 11, 2001. The canvases become generally darker and more complex. The first piece of what we may call Karklins' late period has a note on the back: "Analysis = Paralysis." It is odd that none of the astute reflections on Karklins' work comment on these shifts. For a person working in security at a public institution in a major city, it is hard to believe that 9/11 had no effect on Karklins or his art, especially when the art was produced primarily while at work. These considerations notwithstanding, the book offers a rewarding kaleidoscope of interpretations through which Karklins' work should be viewed.

JAKE NABASNY
 Department of Philosophy
 Loyola University Chicago
 Chicago, IL 60626

EMAIL: jnabasny@luc.edu