

Drawing: Research, Theory, Practice

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REVIEW

EVOKING A SIGN / PERCEIVING AN IMAGE. TOBA KHEDOORI: DRAWN PAINTING (TRANS. M. L. DOBRIAN), MONIKA LEISCH-KIESL (2020)¹

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1. Translated from *ZeichenSetzung / Bildwahrnehmung. Toba Khedoori: Gezeichnete Malerie*. Wien: Verlag für Moderne Kunst, 2016.

To address in one book both the question of how signs in general are meaningful and the constitution of meaning in paintings or images in particular is no small feat. Leisch-Kiesl presents semiotic insights into a theory of the sign, on the one hand, and phenomenological/hermeneutical insights into the perception of images, on the other hand. She marries these two disciplines in pointing out a temporal problem afflicting both: neither the sign nor the image is static, both are expressed in time and space and perceived again later. Another problem is that the artist effects or creates the sign, e.g., a painting, but is not the sole master of the result, as neither sign nor image is solely what the artist intended it to be. Leisch-Kiesl puts her emphasis, rather, on how sign and image become meaningful in their reception, in the act of the perceiver.

This is explicated in the book's study of drawing. When we draw, we put forward a sort of hypothesis, a resemblance or mimesis of an object. However, this thing that we draw is not the resemblance, the *mimesis* per se. It is only when the line or image is perceived that the sign(ificance) is evoked. In this sense Leisch-Kiesl offers an answer to the old philosophical problem of art. The

artist does not mimic reality. The artist rather effects the work that partakes of reality through the mimetic and iconic. In the end, Leisch-Kiesel is convinced, it is only the perceiver who can close this circle. It is not the intention of the artist that gives to the artwork meaning or its likeness to reality, but the perceiver who opens up all the possibilities of mimesis or participation for the object. Leisch-Kiesel's book is situated at the most difficult junction of aesthetics, where we ask not only what the artist intended (a likeness/*mimesis*) or what the perceiver perceives in the artwork (another likeness/*mimesis*) but how the artwork and the perception of it form a participation (*methexis*) in being. This is what Leisch-Kiesel aims at when speaking about Jacques Derrida and his notions of the *entame* and the *brisure* – an in-between.

Leisch-Kiesel investigates the specific qualities of drawing in the 1990s and 2000s, giving special attention to the work of Toba Khedoori, an Australian-born artist of Iranian descent who has been living and working in Los Angeles since she received her M.F.A. from the University of California in 1994. Leisch-Kiesel asks *How does an image become a sign?* as well as *How does a sign become an image?*, using the term *Zeichen-Setzung*, literally the setting or making of a mark, which is here translated into English as 'Evoking a Sign', as a new theorem which she tests using Khedoori's painted drawings, in which she has great confidence. She places Khedoori's exceptional approach to abstract and realistic drawing in the context of the history and concepts of drawing in the twentieth century in the United States and in Europe through an exacting discussion of semiotic and phenomenological theory. This discussion culminates in a dialogue between Khedoori's drawings and Derrida's idea of *brisure*, 'hinge', as introduced in *De la Grammatologie* (Derrida and Spivak 2016). The reader acquires not only a thorough overview of the history of drawing but also a fresh way at looking at modern art and insight into the magic of drawing and perception. A key question for Leisch-Kiesel is how images gain individual or social relevance, the answer she gives being that it happens in the eye of the beholder. The book's originality consists in the dialogue it establishes between the images and the theoretical approaches. Leisch-Kiesel's method reaches a climax in the introduction of a second key artist in the last chapter, Katharina Hinsberg, whose cut-outs can be seen as the culmination of the topic of drawing.

From the very outset Leisch-Kiesel also discusses the unease that engendered the iconic or pictorial turn. She points out that both Boehm (1995) and Mitchell (2007) introduced the icon or picture/image at around the same time in reaction to the linguistic turn. Since then we have also experienced a *performative* turn, and Leisch-Kiesel rightly makes a connection between these. Can we ever speak of an image or picture that is static, she asks? Do we not need to start with a performative account, with a picturing account instead? This is why she puts together the sign and the image to show a rupture in thinking. If semiotics thinks that images are a species of signs, then 'what makes a picture a picture' or an image an image has not even been touched yet, according to the *Bildwissenschaftler*.² Both semiotics and *Bildwissenschaft* seem to be correct. Leisch-Kiesel asks which fields are engaged

2. It is hard to translate *Bildwissenschaft* into English, as there just is not the same interest. Later in the book Leisch-Kiesel points out that it is best translated as Visual Studies.

with this question, listing phenomenology and hermeneutics, which are concerned with the way we perceive pictures, as well as semiotics, in the study of which several philosophical projects of the present converge on the problem of the sign, of language, of interpretation. She uses *Zeichen-Setzung* to open a field involving the question of the death of the author, who makes the mark or evokes the sign. She then engages with Emma Cocker (2011), an artist and thinker who asks the question what it is to 'draw' a hypothesis. Cocker thinks that 'drawing' the hypothesis is more than a figure of speech, that it is shaped by artistic practice. Leisch-Kiesel goes further, wanting the drawing to be itself a valid hypothesis. While Cocker thinks that the hypothetical 'if' is followed by the predictive 'then', for Leisch-Kiesel the image is the 'if', whereas the evoking of the sign is the 'then'.

Khedoori's drawings fill walls and rooms. Their almost monochrome, off-white area brings the viewer in close to see what is shown. The paper has been covered in light wax and the traces of particles that were caught in the process – dust, hair and insects – can also be seen. Khedoori sketches fine parallel lines and then paints them in with a brush. The process ensures that we actually see the foundation of the picture. As simple as the lines on white paper are, they evoke a complex process of perception. They create a situation which occurs in the blink of an eye and demands that we rest on them while still not quite knowing what they are. Despite the simplicity of the motifs their effect is auratic. This is due to the opposing perceptual mechanisms confronted by the artwork. What makes these images drawings? That question is at the centre of Leisch-Kiesel's book. The way Khedoori poses the elements does not allow a singular narration, rather there are many. This is why Khedoori has been compared to Giorgione, Hopper, Richter, Serra and others, partly due to a similarity in the perception of space.

The process of production is important, but not in the sense of an open process, as it would be for process art. Khedoori's images are planned. If one asks what kind of art this is, one hears 'large scale paintings on paper', 'drawn images'. The large works are more like an installation. Reust (2001) thinks the images are at the threshold of meaning. They create a minimal event, a going back and forth between painting and drawing due to a three-dimensional illusion and the two-dimensionality of the drawing. However, there are worlds in between. Leisch-Kiesel goes beneath the image to its ground or grounding. This is where Derrida's philosophy is put to work, also showing how pertinent Derrida still is. The notion of *brisure*, introduced at the beginning, becomes thematic towards the end. Leisch-Kiesel again uses art to make us see, by introducing Katharina Hinsberg's cut-outs. Hinsberg draws with a scalpel. The question here becomes what happens when a line is missing from a drawing? It is nothing, but still there as an empty space. Building on Hinsberg's art Leisch-Kiesel develops the idea of the line, French *trait*, that unites but also divides. She works up in this way to speaking about the blank space of the intertext, where she says the cipher lives before being carried from one text to the other. It is this line/trait before the difference, Derrida's (1982) *différance*, that is being elaborated here.



Figure 1: Khedoori, Toba (2005). *Untitled (Stick)* © ~~Monika Leisch-Kiesl~~.

(c) Toba Khedoori, Courtesy The Albertina Museum Vienna.
(corr. MLK)

One last thing must be added: in addition to its theoretical merits, Leisch-Kiesl's book is a beauty. The German original was printed in a very unusual format, which was continued in the English translation. The main pages with the text and images are full-sized, while the bibliography and the notes are inserted as much shorter (one-third pages). Printed on sturdy, cream-white paper paying homage to Kheedori's canvas, it is a pleasure to behold as well as to read. Leisch-Kiesl has taken similar care in choosing her chapters, going back and forth between Kheedori and her place in the history of drawing, to the question of what is drawing itself, to a thorough discussion of the notions of *mimesis* and 'showing' in German *zeigen*, which is very close to *Zeichen*, sign.

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