

# Redefining the ‘paper-pusher’: A Review of *Pushing paper: contemporary drawing from 1970 to now*.

By Amie Kirby

On Friday 28th February, the Oriental Museum was packed to the brim with eager art-lovers of all ages, here to see the hotly-anticipated preview of *Pushing paper: contemporary drawing from 1970 to now*. In this review I explore the exhibition’s many strengths and intriguing features, especially **incorporation of artwork from students of Durham Sixth Form Centre**.

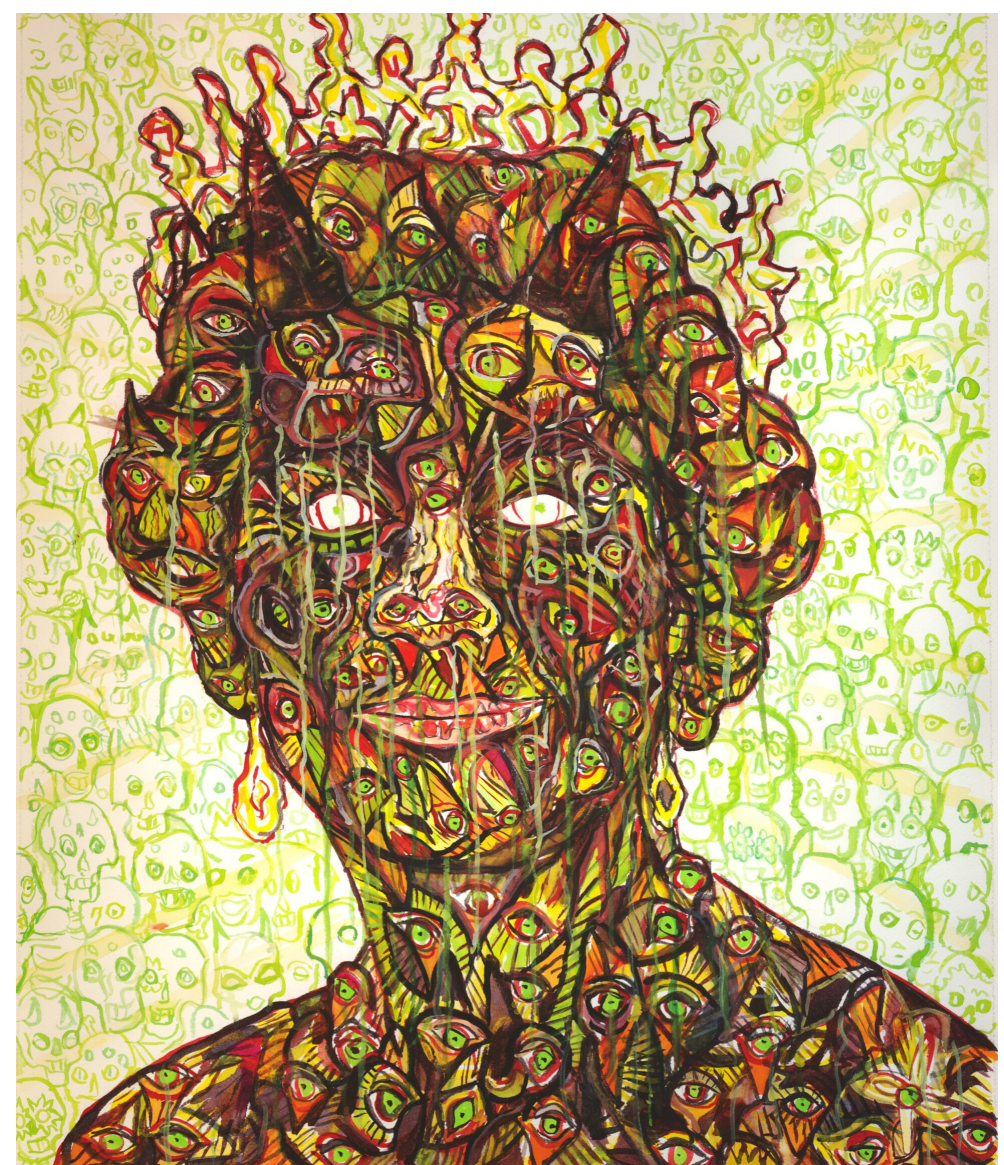
*“Drawing is both a noun and a verb. It has an elasticity, capable of being drawn in many directions.”*

These resounding words were spoken in a welcoming speech by Hugo Chapman, Keeper of the British Museum Department of Prints and Drawings. As people hung onto Hugo’s every word, my eyes darted to the various works across the gallery floor, soaking up and taking in the large volume of works on paper that met them. The elasticity of drawing, as so astutely summarised by Hugo, is exemplified in this exhibition.

One of the first things I noticed upon entering the gallery space is how insanely diverse this exhibition is in every possible regard. Co-curated between the British Museum, Durham University, and other partner institutions, *Pushing paper* explores contemporary drawings from 1970 to the present day. It is a truly innovative endeavour: as Craig Barclay, Head of Museums, Galleries and Exhibitions, put it, the exhibition displays an “outstanding example of cross-institutional working”. Various individuals collaborated to research five main themes (power and protest; system and process; place and space; identity; and time and memory), incorporating pieces from all over the world. The palpable and clear attempt at versatility was embedded into both collection and display, emphasising that drawing is a universal medium that has been used for millennia to convey thoughts and feelings.

*“The exhibition displays an outstanding example of cross-institutional working”*

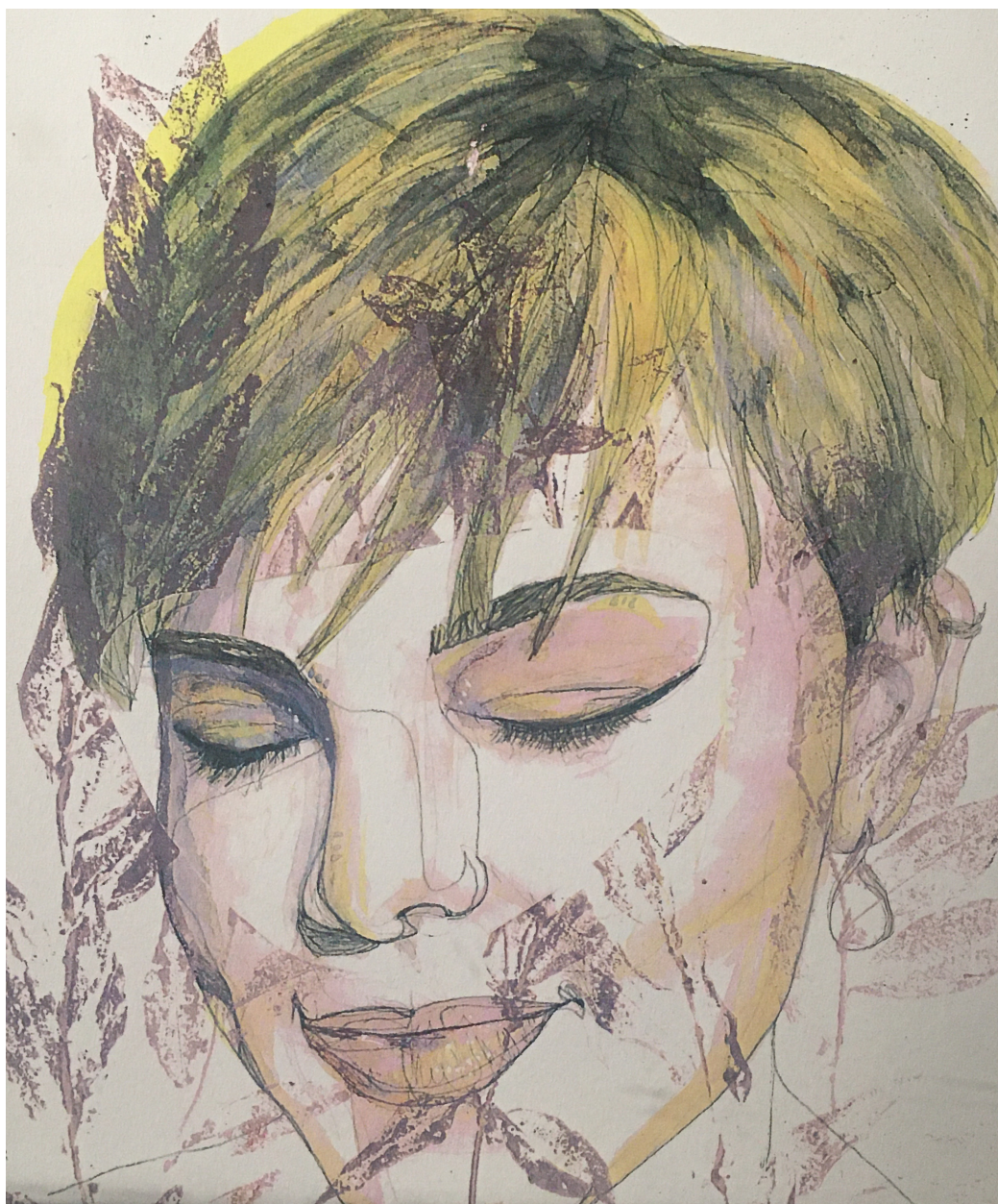
The night progressed, wine was flowing, and the gallery was animated. Whilst women waxed lyrical over the eccentricities of Grayson Perry, the masterful minimalism of Bridget Riley, even affectionately exclaiming “there’s our Tracey!” of course referring to Emin, it was the modest display of student art that caught my eye.



(IMAGE- ‘Sovereign’  
CREDIT- Hew Locke (b. 1959), *Sovereign 3*, 2005,  
watercolour© The Trustees of the British Museum.  
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Art A-Level students from Durham Sixth Form Centre were invited to submit their works for display in the exhibition, and, as student Megan Latham tells me, this was easy to do as the themes explored in the exhibition closely complemented themes they explored in their coursework. I spent at least 20 minutes speaking to Megan and her course mate, Laura Wigham. These girls spoke with a self-awareness and passion for their work that I could have only hoped for at their age, just four years ago.



Laura's work (left) explores the relationship between humans and their impact on the environment, stating that "we have a mutually-beneficial relationship with nature; if we take care of the environment, the environment, too, nurtures our wellbeing". This theme is evident in her work, in which she has carefully drawn natural motifs across the face of her portrait.

*"...it was the modest display of student art that caught my eye."*

*(Laura Wigham) -Durham Sixth Form Centre Artist  
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Meanwhile, Megan's intriguing piece (below right) depicts two versions of herself, one from 2018 and one from 2019. Megan explained to me that she was influenced by how our landscape and upbringing impinge on our identity in obvious, yet subtle, ways. Cleverly choosing to overlap the two drawn versions of herself, Megan explains that whilst our identity is ever-changing, there is a constant nature in the perception of ourselves. Quoting her mother, she tells me, "I am pieced together by my identity".

My conversations with Megan and Laura, and the work of their entire cohort, showed me the very core of *Pushing Paper*: that drawing has the power to portray complex and varied themes. Their astute portrayal of both societal and personal issues, in conversation and in art, gave me a lasting hope for the future of art and its relevance.

Whilst '*Pushing paper*' was a contentious title for this exhibition (Hugo tells us that the British Museum's marketing team nearly didn't allow it, due to its 'negative connotations'), I found it to be a perfect encapsulation of all that is on offer. With the addition of student art in particular, 'paper-pusher' takes on a new meaning, and it's up to the next generation of Perrys and Emms to decide what this means to them.



*(Megan Latham) -Durham Sixth Form Centre Artist  
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***Pushing paper: contemporary drawing from 1970 to now* is now on at the Oriental Museum until 17th May.**