

Progressive permutations: works on paper by Richard Caldicott

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In previous writing about Richard Caldicott's photographs I have emphasised their physicality as objects and their embodiment of light. Considering now his drawings, unique ink-jet prints and other works on paper, different qualities come to mind, even though they clearly derive from the same sensibility as the photographs, and similarly reflect Caldicott's unique and instantly recognisable visual aesthetic. When I first looked at some of these works on paper, they prompted a connection with something in my visual memory that I struggled to identify, but eventually I summoned it up. Bizarrely, it was the film version of *West Side Story* (Jerome Robbins, 1961), or more specifically, Saul Bass's extraordinary opening title sequence for it. Even to call it a title sequence is inaccurate because, uniquely in cinema, there is no text on screen, and not even any moving image or graphics for the entire seven-minute duration of Leonard Bernstein's overture. Vibrant orange fills the whole screen. Specifically placed short vertical lines are strewn across the composition - an abstract static image that slowly changes colour, kaleidoscopically, through reds, purples and blues as the mood of the score changes. Eventually the image pulls backward to reveal the film title below, and the pattern of vertical lines reveals itself as an aerial shot of Manhattan, but the real accomplishment has already occurred - an exemplary and wholly dependent use of colour. It is this that resonated immediately but subconsciously with my appreciation of Caldicott's prints. Colour is their material, freed from its support structure - these are not coloured things but things made of colour.

Once this train of thought began I started to see in some of Caldicott's drawings a connection with an earlier Saul Bass sequence, for *The Man With the Golden Arm* (Otto Preminger, 1955). Bass's titles for this film feature cutout spiny linear shapes. The lines proliferate and jab at awkward, unsettling angles. None of this is to suggest any direct connection or inspiration. I refer to it only to suggest that in Bass and Caldicott, even though in very divergent ways and different media, and with entirely different intentions, we are looking at two individuals who have each developed a mastery of colour and linear composition that is uniquely atmospheric, seductive and visually engaging.

Caldicott has always worked serially and the works on paper, lacking the scale and production complexities involved in the photographs, tend to be in larger and more rapidly generated series. Viewing the limited sequence of visual events within any given series of works, the *Tape Drawings* for example, one can see progressive permutations within a reductive logic - a reduction that can also suggest a potentially infinite progression. By this I mean that the specific procedures and compositional elements that define each series become a kind of "generative constraint" that enables infinite variation within a very simple structure.¹ Working in a different art form, the musician Keith Jarrett has suggested that, "the more experience a person has, the more simplicity is profound".² It is the very simplicity and austerity of Caldicott's pared down aesthetic that generates the real depth of its visual sophistication. For me the *Tape Drawings* are often reminiscent of Lorser Feitelson's paintings of sinuously curving lines in the 1960s and 70s, exemplified perhaps by *Hardedge Line Painting*, 1963. Feitelson is a major but now almost entirely unacknowledged artist who was one of the *Four Abstract Classicists*, shown at LACMA in 1959,³ who aimed to work with "instability of colour, and instability of line, to make things move psychologically".⁴

Whatever the scale of Caldicott's works on paper they always present an expansive space combined with elements of taut linearity. The emptier the space and the more austere the formal composition, the more exquisitely luscious and sensuous is the colour of which it is made. As in all Caldicott's work there is an elegant balance of space, form and colour in which all three are completely inter-dependent. Whereas his photographs depend on the

dramatic play of transparency and saturation, luminosity and intensity, in the lighter gentler works on paper he often achieves a more subtle intensity of muted colour - blunt earthy hues and flat velvety pastel tones that contrast with the luminosity and iridescence in many of the photographs.

The most minimal of the drawings have an architectural quality of the most austere kind, wherein just one or two lines create a highly calculated articulation of the space in which they intervene. Space is tautly divided, parceled, cut, sliced, spliced, partitioned. In others the space is much more activated, with dancing shapes, floating, darting and gravity defying, sometimes reminiscent of some kind of choreographic or musical notation, and sometimes almost like an actual visualization of sound. Whether quietly austere or energetically animated, in both cases the effect is somehow ethereal but deeply real.

¹ “Generative constraint” is a term that the writer Richard Kostelanetz uses to describe the working processes of John Cage.

² Keith Jarrett: *The Art of Improvisation*, dir. Mike Dibb, Channel 4 Television, UK, 2005

³ After the 1959 show at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, the exhibition toured to London and Belfast in 1960, re-titled as *West Coast Hard-Edge*.

⁴ Feitelson, interviewed by Betty Hoag, Los Angeles 1964, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institute.