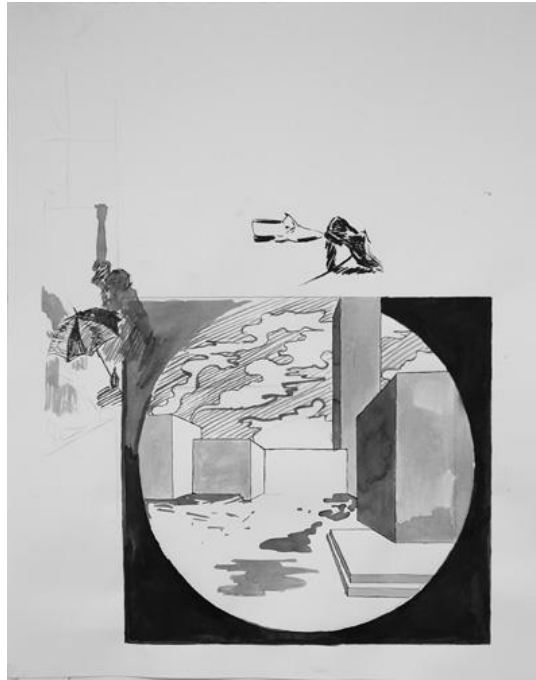


frieze

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Nick Mauss

Drawings and anachronisms; books, prototype designs and romanticism



Browsing the shelves of New York's Strand Bookstore recently, I found myself thinking about the work of Nick Mauss. I suppose it was because earlier that day I had read an article about the late novelist David Markson, whose eclectic library had just been sold to Strand. The article explained how his books could be picked up for a song. More interestingly, it described how heavily he had annotated each tome: 'Oh god the pomposity, the bullshit!'; and 'Oh I get it, it's a sci-fi novel!' I wondered whether I might come across one of these Markson-marked volumes: there is something appealing about marginalia and how the scribbled thoughts of a stranger become part of your reading experience.

Markson's biblio-graffiti reminded me of the version of Arthur Rimbaud's *Une Saison en Enfer* (*A Season in Hell*, 1873) that Mauss made with his partner, the artist Ken Okiishi, in 2007. Okiishi processed Rimbaud's delirious poem into deranged English with the help of Google Translate, before working on the text further, spiking it with slangy idioms. It was then type-set before Mauss added annotations and drawings to each page: elegantly sketched images of figures and bodies and carefully inked decorative motifs, like frontispiece illustrations cut loose from the title page and left to drift through the text. It's hard to place which season Mauss and Okiishi's *One Season in Hell* dates from: although the language is

firmly 21st century, it could be the work of some unknown 1920s Surrealist lost in an opiate haze or a 1940s novelist doodling in the margins of the book as he waits for his call-up papers or a graphic artist employed by a Madison Avenue ad firm circa 1960, dreaming of jacking in the job and joining his boho friends downtown.

One of the striking aspects of Mauss' work is how it embraces this anachronism without falling into the trap of nostalgia. His drawings – whether the marginalia of *One Season in Hell* or the odd, scratchy aluminium leaf panel works – seem to come from the art academies of another era. Figurative forms drift in and out of focus – a line in a drawing could be someone's arm and back, or it could be a huddle of abstract doodles – yet, no matter how provisional they look or how fragmented the bodies they represent, they are executed with a confident and economic sense of draftsmanship. Mauss has said he likes drawing 'because it's a kind of a secondary medium. Drawings can be casual, humble and simultaneously vague and very direct. A drawing rarely seems to be finished, it is a notation of an idea before it is set in place.' Although his wallpaper and small provisional sculptures look like prototype designs for some now forgotten purpose, alongside the elegant mark-making are unmistakably contemporary images: pixel-soft mobile phone shots; badly deinterlaced low-res photos of a shop window; a flag hanging from a balcony; the top of someone's head; Okiishi standing in Flushing Meadows Park. A photo snapped today appears next to a drawing recycled from last week, which sits adjacent to something discovered in a book from 70 years ago.

The half-glimpsed and half-remembered are key to Mauss' work. Like a conversation that opens 'hey, can you remember the name of that place we went to once?', it's also an invitation to others to continue that dialogue. Temporary pavilions such as *Occasion* (2009), made from wood and black silk ribbon and suspended from the ceiling like a wonderfully impractical tent designed by someone far too urbane for their own good, demarcate a provisional space for socializing. His latest book, *Geschenkpapier* (*Wrapping Paper*, 2010), contains page after page of folded sheets of beautiful gift paper designed by Mauss to be torn out and used by the book's owner. The convivial function of his series of matching chairs needs little further explanation beyond their face-to-face arrangement like Victorian courting chairs. It would be simplistic to accuse Mauss of hankering after a certain early-20th-century Modernist moment, like so many nostalgic young artists have done over the past few years. Sure, you might be able to detect in his work an occasional longing for some halcyon epoch in which we could exchange poems for paintings and not worry about paying the rent or answering emails. But there's nothing wrong with a little romanticism so long as it has a pragmatic counterpoint. In the case of Mauss, this pragmatism could arguably be seen in his handling of image types: how a careworn chair might sit alongside a drawing of a dancer and a phone photograph of a friend; you just need to go with it, since that's the haphazard way images come into our lives. His practice takes the position that the hierarchy of images is not fixed and never could be because our relationship to them is always changing. In this sense, you could say Mauss' work is work in progress. **Dan Fox**