

RICHARD FORSTER: MODERN
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Richard Forster and the Space of Drawing

By Claire Gilman

American pastoral nudes and East German novelty stores; rugged seascapes and Bauhaus housing estates; a down-and-out steel plant in Teesside, England, and views of the East German city of Dresden lifted from the popular media site Flickr. Such is the range of subjects comprising the graphite-and-acrylic-medium renderings after photographs by Richard Forster that a casual viewer might wonder what exactly they have in common. Equally mind-boggling is the artist's labor-intensive method. Indeed, Forster's expertly crafted drawings are so often mistaken for their photo-based originals that one wonders about his intention in spending the time at all. By way of an answer, Forster has asserted that "to draw from life, even though I have done this, seems alien now."¹ Drawing from photography, by contrast, appears a more honest way of approaching the world, one that incorporates loss – or the distance that accompanies viewing one medium through another, and the world through the camera's lens – into its very architecture.

It is this acknowledgement of loss that connects the artist's translations of industrial England with his images and icons from the former DDR, disparate as these subjects are in time and place. Growing up under the dominant forces of the Thatcherite politics that profoundly depressed the industrial area of Teesside in which he was raised, from early on Forster possessed a fascination with European socialisms; specifically, with the rise and fall of the socialist experiment in East Germany.

¹ Richard Forster, email to author (November 7, 2010).



Sandman, Berlin, 2012
Graphite and acrylic medium on Bristol Board
38.7 x 29 cm page size
Private Collection, New York

A visit to Berlin twenty years ago, mere months after the events of October 1989, cemented his fascination. Equally illuminating was Wolfgang Becker's 2003 film *Goodbye Lenin* which tells the story of a young man's attempt to shield his mother—newly awakened from an eight month coma—from the anxiety of the DDR's fall by reconstructing the product environment rapidly being extinguished by the capitalist West. At the basis of this film is the concept of *ostalgie*, a peculiar East German longing for a return to life prior to the fall of the Berlin wall that has come to fascinate Forster and that undergirds many of his iconographic choices. Consider a series of images featuring the Sandman, a popular character on East German children's bedtime TV that Forster encountered in the windows of novelty shops and the photo archives of the DDR museum on a recent visit to Dresden.



Dresden on Flickr, 2012
Graphite and acrylic medium on Bristol Board
Two parts, 63.2 x 41.9 cm each page size
Private Collection, New York

Consider too the double portrait of Dresden (*Dresden on Flickr*, 2012) in which a pair of distanced city views pulled from Flickr are transcribed on separate pieces of paper and placed on the wall three inches apart. Forster explains that he was drawn to the photographs because of the phantasmagorical vision of zonal change produced by their elevated vantage points, an effect that his gray-toned transcriptions render even more surreal.

As scholars make clear, *ostalgie* cannot be defined as simple nostalgia. Rather, it entails a longing for what is lost mediated by an irony about the present and past that combines widespread feelings of estrangement from both. This estrangement is palpable in the literal disconnect that defines the Dresden images and that similarly invades *Two Girls Dancing, East Germany* (2012) in which Forster cropped and spliced together two young couples, eliminating the male partner and using a trompe l'oeil rendering of masking tape to “hold together” the two halves.



Two Girls Dancing, East Germany, 2012
Graphite, acrylic medium and watercolour on card, 20.7 x 23 cm
Collection Whitworth Art Gallery, The University of Manchester

The result is a tangle of arms grasping across a divide at the unknown. A parallel alienation characterizes *A Rehearsed Inability to Know this (un)place* (2009) a project that is closer to home and that concerns a reconstructed train ride that the artist habitually takes from his residence in northeast England to his studio in Middlesbrough. Here, Forster paired twelve drawings after photographs of coal ovens located on one side of the track—taken on consecutive days at incrementally later moments in time to approximate the emergence of the plant to its disappearance from view—with a model covered with hand-drawn wood grain based on composite photos of a steel refinery across the track. Forster's title plays on the ambivalence associated with a place that is both inhospitable in terms of its working conditions and yet also an integral part of the community. By positioning himself as an ordinary tourist reduced to approximating the plant through a series of quickly snapped moments, Forster accepts his own authorial limitations as well as the literal and metaphoric instability that characterizes his subject.

That Forster's agenda transcends any particular history is evidenced by several projects in which he unites disparate realities. For example, the 2011 series *American Pastoral/Ostalgie Pattern* places drawings of frolicking nudes derived from internet photographs alongside transcriptions of wallpaper and fabric patterns that Forster found in the DDR museum.



American Pastoral / Ostalgie Pattern with Tape, 2011
Graphite, acrylic medium and watercolour on Bristol board, 30 x 42.5 cm
Private Collection, New York

Blurry and out-of-focus, the graphite halves are again visually joined by drawn and painted tape. An exhibition at Middlesbrough Institute of Modern Art from the same year brought together twenty-eight drawings of photographs of the sea's edge at the artist's hometown and birthplace of Saltburn-by-the-Sea with twenty-four renderings of stills from a film depicting the construction of a Walter Gropius-designed affordable housing project that Forster happened upon on a trip to the Bauhaus Foundation in Dessau.² The seascape drawings are made from photographs that Forster took with his Practika camera standing on the pier at Saltburn, snapping his shutter each time the sea's edge passed into view. He then used these random timings (twenty seconds, one minute etc.) to determine the filmic intervals, and hence stills, to select for transcription. Forster notes that it is difficult to tell whether the original photographs depict construction or deconstruction and his third-order translation renders the action even more obscure. Before making his drawings, Forster mocked up the twenty-four photo stills on black construction paper and then proceeded to draw the collage-like arrangement. What results is a figurative image sandwiched between two blank monochrome bands. Much like the faux pieces of masking tape, this physical arrangement infects the drawing with a fragility—and in this case an emptiness—that is echoed by the subjects depicted. For instance, in one particularly compelling drawing an empty scaffold hovers between the black bands as if suspended in mid-air. This series presents a by-gone

² Like all of Forster's image choices, the juxtaposition in this case was far from arbitrary. As Forster explains it, in 2008 when he made his first seascapes, he and his family had recently moved back to Saltburn from London. The move to the coast dramatized his estrangement from an urban center and city life with the shoreline itself—that is, the literal edge of a land mass—serving as a symbol of his disenfranchisement. It is this same estrangement that haunts his drawings of the construction of the Törten estate in Dessau, a subject he was attracted to because of his larger interest in utopian modernism and its failures.

world of utopian hopes and dreams, a world to which the artist dedicates himself nonetheless with patient, unflagging attention.

Which brings us back to the artist's motivation. Referring to the *American Pastoral* series specifically, Forster observes, "my photocopy-realism and collage aims to bring the two social histories together [America in the twenties and Eastern Europe after World War II] through the instantaneous collapsing of time that the internet accesses. This time is then extended by the arduous, even earnest, task of drawing an intimate representation that involves my own skills and labor time."³ Taken more generally, Forster's photocopy-method appears to enable him to insert himself into history's ceaseless flow and to acquire some purchase, however abstract, over its intangible representation. In this regard, Forster's drawings are as much about him, or at least about his needs and desires vis-à-vis his subjects, as they are about the subjects themselves. In response to an early critique that his seascapes felt claustrophobic (a tight, compressed space is in fact typical of Forster's work to date), Forster opined that this could be attributable to the position of the sea's horizon line in relation to the top edge of the picture, but that it might also result from the fact that for a long time he continued to do much of his drawing within the confines of his bedroom, a practice he began as a teenager.⁴ It is as if this habit of gathering images and "filtering [them] in a private space"⁵ allowed him to process the political events that seemed so distant from his cloistered suburban upbringing even as they inevitably impacted it.

Put differently, one might say that Forster is present in the space of his drawings; in the shots he chooses to translate; in the joins and gaps he inserts and transcribes; in the sooty, monochrome world his graphite pencil evokes. As if to render this explicit, Forster has recently completed a monumental triptych of the sea's edge with a vertical dimension equivalent to his own height of six feet. It is the first work he has made at this size and it represents a scale adjustment that Forster claims he made in response to returning home after a three month residency in America. Forster's feelings about this residency and its relationship to his birthplace are not discernible in these images. Indeed they are beside the point. What is apparent is the shift in the artist's position and, moreover, that it is this position—this act of attending to the world even in the face of absence and disorientation—that his drawings enact.

³ Forster, unpublished statement on *American Pastoral/Ostalgie Pattern*, 2013.

⁴ Forster, *Seascapes*, *Journal of Visual Art Practice*, Vol 9 No 3, 2010.

⁵ Forster, email to author [November 7, 2010].



Untitled VII [Seascape], 2007
Graphite on card, 29.5 x 20.8 cm
Private Collection, Edinburgh

Ultimately, what Forster creates are images of spaces and sites (the city of Dresden, mass housing projects, his native shoreline), as they are seen and occupied by him. Better yet, he creates images of *images* of spaces and sites, which second-order images are in turn their own kinds of spaces; whether a romantic photo spread from a 1920s camera magazine, a grainy shot produced by a pre-digital camera, or a file from a now ubiquitous media site like Flickr. Forster is drawn to subjects haunted by illusion and his method in turn exposes the fabricated nature of all that he depicts. The seascape drawings, for example, are contemplative images but hardly “natural.” Rather, their ceaseless, stuttering repetition reflects on the failure of technology to capture the natural world’s slow pace, as well as the artist’s own limitations in his quest for quiet comprehension. Forster’s drawings do not pass judgment. Instead, they reveal the way in which reality inevitably escapes us framed as it always already is for our view. Forster’s solution is not to attempt to rectify this dynamic but to use the tools of his trade to enter it head on.