





# In Dog Light

David Norr

Roger Palmer combines word and image in his darkly humorous wash-and-ink meditations on humanity's faults and foibles. Folk insight and analog wisdom, spiked with wit and pathos, and a tendency toward rebellion, are at the heart of Palmer's drawings. These are not easy works. They can wound and blunt with sharp doses of the painful reflection of what we probably already know, but cannot easily or collectively learn. Palmer achieves this unruly effect with an intense and genuine empathy for the underdog and a stubborn, if not wayward, attraction to the troubled pockets of American culture. Indeed, Palmer does not avoid difficult subjects; rather he invites them into his studio, page after page, day after day. His drawings affirm the personal and subjective over the public and official, allowing for idiosyncratic and surprising subversions of narrative convention. Palmer is acutely concerned with what is going on in his own head and therefore entirely reliant on the thrust and momentum that comes from the act of drawing itself. The world he describes is an inward world of reflection—it's a personal world that can feel isolated, obtuse, and characteristically cynical—but it is our world, too.

The act of drawing, for Palmer, is a way of managing and filtering his past and present experiences, and through the process a way of extending the parameters and possibilities for meaning. One of Palmer's most extraordinary achievements has been his dedication to his daily practice. For nearly forty years he has worked in self-styled isolation, far from the constraints of the market, sustaining a prolific studio practice that continues to invite improvisation and reinvention.

Palmer's personal history provides some insight into his practice and trajectory as an artist. He was raised on a 1,200-acre cow-and-calf farm in central Florida, and the imprint of his boyhood experiences with Florida's wildlife and landscape remain intensely present in his life and his drawings. After receiving his BA in printmaking from the University of South Florida, Palmer was drafted into the army at the height of the Vietnam War, and subsequently discharged with conscientious objector status—an experience that proved to be a defining moment in his life and a thematic constant in his work. On a 1985 trip to Japan, Palmer discovered Japanese gardens and their slow and deliberate engineering. The

choking and cutting of plants, and their awkward and controlled grafting into difficult relationships provided a surreal, if not uncanny, sense of order for Palmer—bridging his already strong connection to nature as “something rich but dangerously romantic in our cultural mind as American cowboys.” Most importantly the gardens provided Palmer with a practical model through which he could begin to parse and retool his own experiences in the landscape of the American South, pointing him to a centuries old vernacular of the landscape taken apart and put back together again. Palmer has appropriately compared his experience of Japanese gardens to being inside “a living Cezanne, that provided a kind of tension with my ranch kid past and wandering nature. Nature became a larger and less perfect garden—one of extreme beauty, humor, and horror.”

The work, *Crematory Garden for Dogs*, from 2007, evokes such extremes. The vertically stacked landscape hides within its lush frame a ramshackle contraption functioning as a crematorium for dogs. Obscuring the distinction between subject and landscape, this drawing typifies a move common in many of Palmer’s works and reveals an influential trope of Chinese and Japanese painting. The large green palm tree that centers the composition is engulfed by formations of dots and lines in red, orange, green, and blue, which combine to shape the surrounding foliage. In simple outline, a stiff dog sits atop a burning stack of wood. Clouds of feathery smoke billow towards the top of the drawing, eventually dissipating into spots of yellow paint. The burning contraption tucked within the brush suggests the presence of human activity, but the landscape is mysteriously void of human presence.

Another influence, primary to Palmer’s current practice is *haiga*, a combination of haiku and painting. Palmer has been mixing text and image in the same compositional space for as long as he can remember, but it was his introduction to *haiga* that gave him complete permission to explore their combined strength. He writes, as he draws, daily. As indispensable as words are in Palmer’s drawings, they play more than simply a descriptive and compositional role. He describes his drawings on one level as parables or fables, which suggests some necessary hermeneutic engagement—one must interpret in order to see. It also suggests a story with a moral dilemma at its root. If Palmer is a storyteller, his narratives unfold in fragments that build from drawing to drawing. Looking at his works takes time, partly because we “read” images differently than words, but also because Palmer’s drawings do not return simple answers. “Reading” a drawing from top to bottom or left to right is not of consequence, but seeing everything on the page is. His patchwork approach to building narrative is framed more by poetry and innuendo than timelines and facts, granting him the freedom to spin spontaneous picture stories culled directly from his head.

A newshound, Palmer watches, listens, reads, and searches the Web sorting through the news. He is personally engaged in the political dilemmas of our time, and with the moral contradictions inherent to political rhetoric. Some drawings reflect this—his political revenge fantasies that could be considered a form of alternative reporting or political satire. Seen as a whole, however, too many contradictory desires converge in Palmer’s drawings for such critical commentary to stick. And though his works do in fact contemplate what it means to be an American, they provide few clear answers. Perhaps it is because Palmer’s works maintain such a high quotient of empathy, even in the face of the bloodiest news. The drawing, *Fall on Stilts* of 2007 manages equal parts empathy and horror with canny efficiency. The falling soldier has been shot while marching on stilts, holding a gun, teetering

over patches of shrubs. The prosthetic stilts are a kind of reverse crutch—puppetry without the strings attached. *Fall on Stilts* is just as much about the perversion of the body in war as it is about the perversion of choice, however fleeting and invisible that sense of choice may be.

It is difficult to position Palmer's work within any one particular frame of either painting or drawing, though it is possible to uncover revealing relationships to other artists whose works relate in method, subject, and appearance. At first glance, Peter Doig's loosely painted and resonantly colored works share a brushy similarity with Palmer's drawings. Though Doig's tendency to comprehensively treat the entire compositional space seems tied to more Western representational approaches, Palmer's compositions proceed rather iconoclastically in this regard, avoiding any attempt at real or illusionistic space, preferring instead to explore a patchy and disconnected approach to figure and ground relationships. More common in method and materials are works by David Shrigley and Raymond Pettibon, who both mix text and image in their hybrid works. Pettibon's word and image amalgamations, like Palmer's, crop up from the mind and body of a unique and solitary voice. All have managed to hack into some secret virtual translation chamber—allowing them to affectively process a deep and personal existentialism. Their differences lie in where they get their images—Pettibon intentionally culls and depicts often from a more general pop cultural stockpile of imagery, while Palmer's sources are difficult to trace, effectively stripped of their references through memory and invention. Palmer and Pettibon also differ in the scale of their approach, timbre of line, and use of color. While Pettibon maintains a surfy-punk distance befitting his Los Angeles address, Palmer too exploits his regionalism, exposing his attachment to Southern storytelling traditions and the realities of growing up in the rural South. The spontaneously caustic drawings of David Shrigley appear, as Palmer's, to erupt from the depths of a dark and humorous mind. Perhaps most striking are their similar, albeit weird, plays of logic and their willingness to alter the course of a drawing, mid-stride. Shrigley crosses things out, leaving a history of corrections and imperfections that become a part of the story, while Palmer layers brushy images over images, loading his works with a history of erratic traces that become integral to the reading.

How Palmer draws reveals much about the way he develops and processes subjects in his work: "I start drawing in my chair, eyes closed, eyes open. I blink them into a flicker film of a story, bits of information: toys, photographs, text, stories, memories. Notes. Sketches." Like his description, his drawings suggest a theatrical and improvisational space, a space of connections and associations between color, memory, and emotion. He describes his process as physical and fast when "at the chair" drawing, typically working on more than one drawing at a time. On the surface, his drawings appear bold and brushy. He uses pure pigments and mixes them moment-to-moment using a variety of suspension agents for a speedy drying time and fast absorption into the paper. The application of color is not a premeditated act for Palmer: "I like to see the colors sometimes, before I know the form it's going to make. I see green; it says, 'I am a green piano.'"

Palmer clusters works into thematically linked series often developed during a period of months. Over the years he has cultivated an instinct to not make the same drawing twice, promoting instead a serial instability of style from drawing to drawing. His themes are likewise, all over the place, which makes it difficult to apply any taxonomical approach to

his work. In spite of this, during his years of drawing, Palmer has accrued a collection of shadowy recurrent themes—death, god, war, abuse of power, and the unexplainable loyalty of dogs, among others. The most common vehicles in Palmer’s antinomic cosmologies are indeed animals, which he often employs as stand-ins for humans—embodying all their behaviors and corresponding consequences. The defining character of animals for Palmer is that, despite our intimacy with them, we really don’t understand their intentions. Animals cannot be easily reduced to any singular role—as untamed beast, loyal friend, or future meal. And though he ascribes human characteristics to animals, Palmer’s anthropomorphisms are less about the potential of animals to transcend their quadrupedal state and more to explore the terrific irony of our bipedal lapses.

Beyond thematically linked groupings, Palmer sorts out his drawings with an instinctual sense for the integrity of an artwork. “Liars,” “gifts,” and “professional wrestlers” are the terms Palmer uses to measure a drawing’s character and success. “Liars” are drawings that come easy; works that feel so right in the making, but in the end prove empty, lacking both substance and innovation. They get tossed out or put into a drawer for further contemplation. “Gifts” may likewise come easy, but only through an unsuspecting process that is impossible to plan for or reproduce. Through omission and a compositional awkwardness that relies on asymmetry and imperfection, “gifts” achieve a substantive beauty that avoids the trappings of good taste. If “liars” and “gifts” come easy, “professional wrestlers” are long, drawn-out battles that require Palmer to work back into drawings, repeatedly covering forms with new layers of images. The struggle is palpable but worth every awkward and alien moment produced in its wake. Palmer’s “wrestlers” evoke an ugly beauty that he seems to know all too well. These are guttural works—abject and perverse. By perpetually mining the faults and cracks of his process, Palmer unlocks a reservoir of rich and complex compositional DNA. This untapped reserve is part of the secret potency and freshness of Palmer’s work, which may be traced to his willingness to get down and grapple whenever the need arises. What Palmer has learned through his unrelenting, continuous practice is that “gifts” can’t exist without “professional wrestlers,” and both can’t exist without “liars.” What makes Palmer an important artist is the unique vantage point he has developed over his years of practice—a topological perspective that allows him to discern between drawings that impart truth or lies, empathy or apathy, nobility or hypocrisy.

David Norr  
Curator of Exhibitions and Special Projects  
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Plates





Fall on  
stilts.



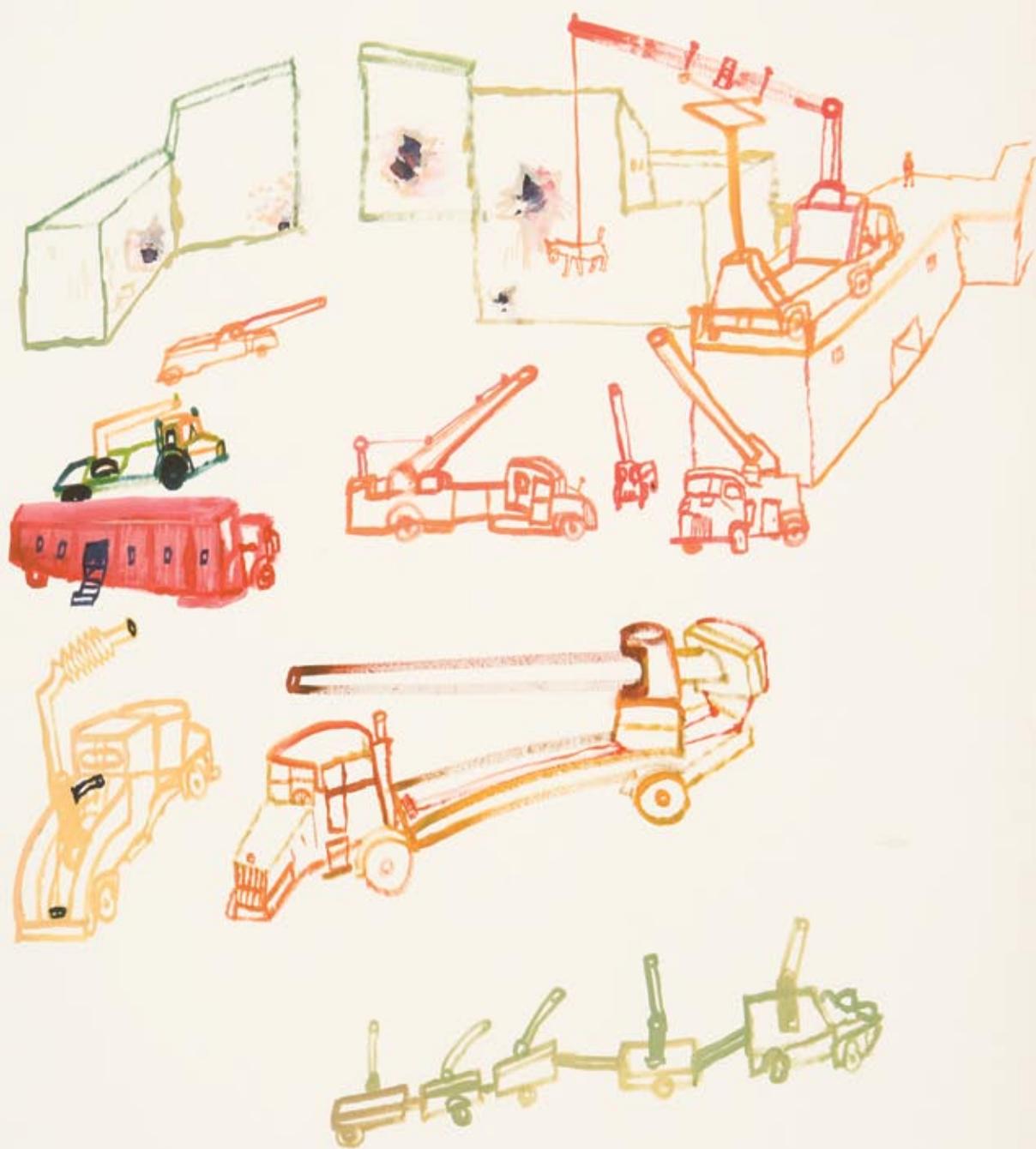
The smell of his burning tank  
would form the plate upon  
which all other smells were  
served for the rest of his life.



A soap box on a tank  
explains the collateral  
damage to the town  
clown.



the streets got a  
lot quieter when they  
taught the smart cannon  
to hunt certain kinds of music.



Pinata .



two gentlemen  
Walk Through Cannon



a falling green piano



Wat dogs Leave The home





dog in the ice



out of the gate  
they were puppies  
but tuco knew  
if he did not stop  
the dogs of war  
now, they would  
grow into hounds.



Crematory  
garden for  
dogs.

## Plates

*Fall on stilts*

2007

pure pigment on rag

40 x 26 inches

*The smell of his burning tank would form the plate upon which all other smells were served for the rest of his life.*

2006

Pure pigment on rag

40 x 26 inches

*A soapbox on a tank explains the collateral damage to the town clown.*

2006

pure pigment on rag

40 x 26 inches

*The streets got a lot quieter when they taught the smart cannon to hunt certain kinds of music.*

2006

pure pigment on rag

40 x 26 inches

*Pinata*

2007

pure pigment on rag

40 x 26 inches

*Two gentlemen walk their cannon.*

2006

pure pigment on rag

40 x 26 inches

*Falling green piano.*

2006

pure pigment on rag

40 x 26 inches

*War dogs leave the home.*

2007

pure pigment on rag

26" x 40"

*Dog in the ice.*

2007

pure pigment on rag

40 x 26 inches

*Out of the gate they were puppies but Mr. Tuco knew if he did not stop the dogs of and war now, they would grow into hounds.*

2007

pure pigment on rag

40 x 26 inches

*Crematory garden for dogs*

2008

pure pigment on rag

50 x 27 inches



## About the Institute for Research in Art

The USF Institute for Research in Art is the umbrella organization for the *Contemporary Art Museum*, *Graphicstudio* and *Public Art* program. Part of the University of South Florida College of Visual & Performing Arts, the IRA is dedicated to an international artists' residency program that brings to the University and Tampa Bay community today's most accomplished and influential artists working in the international art arena. Exhibitions, collection development, publication of limited edition graphics and sculpture multiples, commissioned public art works, lectures, symposia, workshops and special events are designed to foster awareness about the role of contemporary artists in shaping our culture and society. Participating artists represent the full and diverse spectrum of contemporary art practice including, but not limited to, painting, sculpture, photography, electronic media, and performance.

The University of South Florida *Contemporary Art Museum* (USFCAM) organizes and presents significant and investigative exhibitions of contemporary art from Florida, the United States and around the world, including Africa, Europe, and Latin America. Changing exhibitions are designed to introduce students, faculty and the community to current cultural trends. USFCAM also publishes relevant catalogues, schedules critically important traveling exhibitions and underwrites new projects by artists emerging on the national and the international fronts. USFCAM maintains the university's art collection, comprised of more than 5,000 art works. There are exceptional holdings in graphics and sculpture multiples by internationally acclaimed artists.

*Graphicstudio*, founded in 1968 as a non-profit, university-based, collaborative art making facility, remains unique in its commitment to aesthetic and technical research in the visual arts. Leading contemporary artists are invited to work in Graphicstudio's state-of-the-art studios in collaboration with expert artisans to create works on paper—including prints, photographs, digital images, books—and editions of sculptures in a variety of materials. In addition to its publishing program, Graphicstudio carries out a program of research and education including technical workshops, conferences, tours, lectures and publications.

The *Public Art* program at USF focuses on site responsive works, typically resulting in the creation of places, as opposed to objects. Most projects have been developed for the interjacent spaces between buildings, with footprints that result in plazas, gardens and courtyards. These projects serve as informal gathering spaces for the various academic neighborhoods of our campus.

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