



James Drake

James Drake's work has taken a variety of forms in recent years. Drawings, often of over-life-size dimensions, are the form by which he is best known. Some are elaborate compositions involving multiple figures, others, but for the presence of animals that also appear in the tableaux, are nominally still lifes. All are essentially allegorical and the intrusion of feral creatures lends them an air of menace tenuously held in check by a careful but dramatic rendering. Drake's affinity for the violent narratives and elaborate formal diction of Cormac McCarthy's novels is plainly evident in this regard.

Drake's earlier, video works have much the same quality. In one of them a table has been set with elegant silver, china and glasses. In the middle is a candelabrum and what at first glance appears to be a centerpiece – until it moves, and one realises that it is a coiled snake. Into the frame walks a chicken that innocently or ignorantly takes no notice of its natural predator. What follows is a slow, uncannily decorous *pas de deux* of death. In another video, a larger banquet table has been set in similar fashion, but the 'guests' are mammoth pigs that, true to their instincts, overrun and destroy the luxurious domestic context. It is difficult, while watching this porcine bacchanalia, not to see it as a metaphor for conspicuous consumption and despoiling greed of a kind that is all too much of our time.

Tongue-Cut Sparrows (Inside Outside) is also allegorical, but its *mise en scène* begins as a straight documentary. The image comes from a poem by Jimmy Santiago Baca and vividly denotes the crippling of a bird's spontaneous capacity for song: for two years Drake hung out with one of the many gangs active along the border between Texas and Mexico and learned how

members in prison – Baca himself once numbered among them – communicate with loved ones on the outside through sign language. Drake recorded their silent gestural dialogue and, as he came to know the protagonists, introduced them to texts by Baca, Jorge Luis Borges, Federico García Lorca, Antonio Machado and other writers, favourite passages from whom they incorporated into their exchanges. Thus, lyricism infiltrated a brutal penal system and intimacy crossed frontiers, penetrated walls and passed behind bars.

—RS

Tongue-Cut Sparrows (Inside Outside)

Each day men and women congregate on the streets below the jails in different cities throughout the world in an effort to communicate with their incarcerated friends and loved ones. They do not speak with words but have invented a simple and effective sign language using their arms and hands. Even though this form of communication is usually on a public street it has a very private aspect to it and is ultimately more personal and immediate.

As might be expected, most of the signing deals with family matters and local gossip, however, I asked if they could sign William Shakespeare, Dante Alighieri, William Blake, as well as contemporary writers, Cormac McCarthy, Benjamin Saenz and Jimmy Santiago Baca. Not only were they very receptive to the idea, they were instrumental in choosing certain passages and works that exemplified their love and loss and desperate need to communicate.

—James Drake

James Drake. Born in Lubbock, USA, in 1946. Lives and works in Santa Fe, USA.

Solo exhibitions

2006 *James Drake: City of Tells*, Museum of Contemporary Art, San Diego, Downtown, CERCA Series, La Jolla, USA.
2005 *City of Tells*, SITE Santa Fe, Santa Fe, USA.
2000 *A Thousand Tongues Burn and Sing: James Drake*, University Art Museum, College of the Arts, California State University, Long Beach, USA.

Group exhibitions

2004 *perspectives@25 A Quarter Century of New Art in Houston*, Contemporary Arts Museum, Houston, USA.

2002 *Lateral Thinking, Art of the 1990s*, Museum of Contemporary Art, San Diego / La Jolla, USA; traveled to: Colorado Springs Art Center, Colorado Springs, USA; Hood Museum, Dartmouth University, Hanover, USA; Dayton Art Museum, Dayton, USA.
2000 *Whitney Biennial 2000*, Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, USA.

Publications

Ellen Berkovitch, *City of Tells*, Santa Fe, SITE Santa Fe, 2005.
Steven Henry Madoff, *Party of 36 (plus one serpent) City of Tells, James Drake*, in 'The New York Times', Arts & Leisure, 6 February 2005.
Bruce W. Ferguson, *A Thousand Tongues Burn and Sing*, Kansas City, Grand Arts, 1999.

