



ATMOSPHERE

Ashraf Jamal

More sonar than sound, *atmosphere* was the one word which returned persistently on first encountering Benji Liebmann's pencil drawings. The literary definition is perhaps the most familiar one – pertaining to 'a type of feeling that readers get from a narrative, based on details such as setting, background, objects, and foreshadowing'. But it can also evoke a state, or sensation, unloosed from any framing context. Atmosphere, therefore, does not require a story, it can be conjured in a plume of smoke, an absent-presence, by something invisible and yet visible.

To say that an art work possesses a certain atmosphere, then, is to respond either to what moves, undergirds, or foreshadows it. It is to speak not so much of the thing-in-itself but that which emanates from it. Ambience, aura, climate, air, mood, feeling, tone, overtone, undertone, force, spirit, aspect, element, undercurrent, impression, suggestion, are some of the most commonly used synonyms for a state mysterious and difficult to tether.

When an artist chooses this state as their defining project, then, all the more, one becomes intrigued. Cy Twombly is such an artist. In *Great Thinkers*, the School of Life collective describes Twombly's work as 'a specially designed mirror of a part of our inner lives, deliberately constructed to draw attention to it and to make it clearer and easier to identify'. As to just how successfully this connection is attained is disputable, but what cannot be disputed is Twombly's powers of evocation, which, according to the School of Life, 'are being deployed in the name of wise cultivation, of true self-development of the enlargement and refinement of the spirit'.

Something to this effect is, I believe, at work in Benji Liebmann's pencilled drawings. If the movement of the mark-making is more lambent, less discordant, it is because Liebmann's musical score – the movement of his hands, the markings and their erasure – is not compelled by anything portentous, or unevenly listing. One never senses any discomfort or tension. Rather, the marks – scored with a blue nosed 'gris noir' pencil – are largely blurred rather than distinctive, suggesting an engagement which exercises itself most effectively as a *feint*.

A term used in fencing, a feint is 'a deceptive or pretended blow, or other movement'. Its point of attack is obtuse, its line of vision oblique, because what impels it is not the blow itself – the point of contact, in this case the precise thrust of a pencil mark – but what underscores or overrides that moment of contact, that mark. Each and every encounter possesses its aftershock, its *shudder*. Even the most surgical point of entry is never as clean as we might think. Everything resonates, everything is consequential – even something that may seem to be isolated and starkly singular. Indeed, as Twombly reminds us, 'every line is the actual experience with its own unique story'.

Liebmann shares this view. 'Above the concrete outcome', the artist is consumed by 'the act, or the process, of making'. 'For many years I made work for the sake of making – without any idea of ever sharing it or any concern about what might become of it', he says. 'Out of kilter with the contemporary scene ... which is filled with purpose and function', Liebmann finds himself 'inextricably interwoven with what making art does' for him 'as a "self"; for the sheer pleasure; for the dedication to harmony and hopefully, the simple beauty of it'.

If, after Twombly, each line, each mark, possesses its own 'unique story', then an art work, conceived of as an imagined whole, supposes multiple stories. The imagined whole, then, is but the ever-deferred goal, an act, after Liebmann, of 'dedication to harmony', and to 'beauty'. This qualification is critical, for the consequence or final outcome of the act of making a given work is never truly discernible – it can be inferred, but it cannot be claimed. In Liebmann's best works it is not the narrative of an action – the completed flight of a bird, say, or the completed flow of an arced movement – which, finally, matters, but its *accretion and aggregation of moments*. This is because the artist does not seek to resolve a story, or pictorial thematic, but *to evoke the fragile condition for its existence*. After Twombly – though in his own peculiar way – Liebmann is appealing to our 'inner life', and, in so doing, laying the ground for some 'wise cultivation'.

To conceive of wisdom as a cultivar, as a selective action, a peculiar spawn, is to recognise its organic soul, for wisdom is not merely about clever ideas, it is about engaging with the aggregation we call life, or experience, or creation, or knowing. That this knowledge can never be understood in its entirety – despite absolutist claims to the contrary – in no way inhibits its value or purpose. For it is the obscure purposiveness of Liebmann's mark-making, its involuntary-yet-voluntary quality which affirms its existence and reason for being.

That Liebmann refutes art as a statement for some political or ideological conviction, returns us all the more forcibly to its core *rite*, or ritualistic manoeuvre, for as I've affirmed, the artist seeks not to mirror his purpose, let alone his soul, but to engineer a portal, a point of entry, into realms never fully formed, but which, despite this seeming failing, always remain a 'dedication to harmony'. His are aspirational works which remain mired in their mortality, accepting of the unfinished nature of things, of life's partiality, momentariness, fleeting sublimity.

In a world bloodied by categorical imperatives, the decision to confound them is heartening. It is not that Liebmann wishes to abstract a world confected of solids and certainties, rather, it is his desire to clarify the founding amorphousness of these seeming solids and certainties. That the artist abhors the notion of abstraction in the first place, should remind us that the purpose of this redaction of certainties is not to replace them with some overriding doubt, but to subtly invoke the spuriousness of the architecture of certainty and the vain-gloriousness of its yearning. For certainties, always, are also embattled and fragile conceits. Here one need only recall Percy Bysshe Shelley's caution regarding the hubris of absolutes in his famed poem, *Ozymandias*:

Of that colossal wreck, boundless and bare
the lone and level sands stretch far away.

Liebmann's art works, then, are testimonies to the fragility and the beauty of life. It is not the thing we call life that we see, but its atmosphere, its aura. A cloud formation seems to emerge from out of the earth ... a rolling mountain range appears to have lost its mooring ... gravity which holds the earth

in place may have snapped ... a flight of birds may be a hallucination. Nothing is what one thinks it is. This is not because Liebmann wishes through some trickery to confound cognitive perception, but because he cannot accept the lore of gravity, the stratification of earth and sky, or the final truth of anything that is seen. One could turn to Eastern mysticism to account for Liebmann's view of the world. My own decision, however, is to consider the artist via the pre-Socratic thinkers, Heraclitus and Thales of Miletus. The following lines from Heraclitus – author of the famous adage that one can't step into the same river twice – captures Liebmann's vision:

Whoever cannot seek

The unforeseen sees nothing

For the known way

Is an impasse.

On first arriving at the Nirox Residency and Sculpture park – the architect and custodian of which is Benji Liebmann – what struck me was not its physical beauty but its atmosphere. A drive in the golf cart to visit Liebmann's studio would follow a week later.

I could not have known that on first encountering Liebmann's art that that same sensation, which for lack of a better word I've dubbed *atmosphere*, would recur. But then the looseness of the word allows one to consider 'the pervading tone or mood of a place, or situation, or creative work'. It pertains as much to the psycho-geography of a place as it does to that of an artwork. What I needed to understand was the *continuum* between a place, a situation, and a creative work. If I was struck by the atmospherics of Nirox, its feel, its aura, it was also because I was struck by the place as an *Idea*. And it was then, in that instant, that the words of the first Greek philosopher, Thales of Miletus, returned to me – *everything is water*.

It was not the thunderous sound of the nearby waterfall, or, surveying the grounds about me, the rolling green leading to a vast body of water with its fatly-padded lotus leaves, its stillness broken by the thudding of leaping fish, which truly tolled. The atmospherics of the place, and its kinship with water, ran deeper still, for I would learn that deep beneath the park lay a dolomite aquifer rich in water. Wrung from an ancient collision of meteor and sea, it created the perfect environment for the early hominid species to thrive. Not for nothing, then, this region is called 'the cradle of humankind'. I, however, was also reminded of the words by the drunken Welsh poet, Dylan Thomas: 'The force that through the green fuse drives the flower'

None of this, at first sight, is apparent in Liebmann's drawings, shorn as they are of colour or loamy density, and yet, something about the atmosphere of the place – perhaps the criss-cross of brittle winter trees, the torpid summer heat, embrace of earth and sky, or the calligraphic lightning storms – may have all played a silent role in Liebmann's vision? Perhaps. Because, increasingly, I was reaching the conclusion that Liebmann is an *artist of the elements*.

That Liebmann conjures this connectedness without attempting to replicate what he sees all about him – be it his perfumed labyrinth or rose garden, or the monolithic sculptures made of stone and fibre glass and steel poised all about – in no way means that he has failed to conjure the elemental interface of the mechanical – the hand that moves – and the mortal – the being snagged within the movement. Rather, art, as Liebmann understands it, is *an activity, a grain of feeling*, wholly inspired by the realm that inhabits him as he inhabits it. Further words by Heraclitus capture the filtration of world within world, their connectedness:

The earth is melted

Into the sea

By that same reckoning

Whereby the sea

Sinks into the earth.

I cannot stress enough the significance of this pre-Socratic insight, for it not only mirrors the filtration of realms central to Liebmann's vision of the world, it also summaries its abiding principle.

Unlike William Burchell who, having travelled through South Africa between 1811 and 1813, bemoaned the country's harsh light and lack of vegetal variety, dubbing it 'a desolate wild and singular landscape', Liebmann, who was born in this seemingly bone-dry heat-struck clime, understands its rich variety. For while Burchell looked 'in vain for those mellow tints with which the sun dyes the forests of England', Liebmann transformed the world about him. His green enclave is not a copy of England's green isle. Rather, what Liebmann has created is a landscape as a moveable feast and dreaming tool, an active principle as imposing as it is also unloosed in its fecundity. This is because Liebmann is not the master of all he espies but its contractual and passing custodian. His relationship to landscaping is as provisional as his role as an artist.

Liebmann informed me that his objective was 'to create a place that transports us; that is a place away from the harsh realities of fact and truth and relevance; opening us to other possibilities'. The phrasing, here, is as relevant to the understanding of the artist's drawings, for in both his vision of art and a transformed earth Liebmann opens 'other possibilities'. 'Nothing is as we expect, there are no givens'. More critically he adds, 'The ideas that have grown to define us as African or European or human for that matter – these are not as concrete as we have allowed them to become ... we are not wholly prescribed by physical reality. Indeed, the physical realities are less real than we think'.

Thales of Miletus would agree. If, according to the Greek philosopher 'all goes back to being water', this is because, after R.J. Hollingdale, 'earth is solidified water, air rarefied water, fire (aether, the hot sky of the eastern Mediterranean) rarefied air or twice-rarefied water'. But, Hollingdale resumes, 'Why should earth not be earth, air air and fire fire, as they seem to be?' This is because there are *two worlds*, one in which things appear or seem to be, another in which the world *is*. There is the apparent world and the real world. And for Thales the real world – a world that forms a unity – is bound by water.

In *The Principle Works*, Francis Bacon elaborates on this core understanding. If 'it seemed proper' to make water 'the principle of things, in which the virtues and powers of beings, and especially the elements of their generations and restorations, were chiefly found', this is because Thales 'saw that the breeding of animals is in moisture; that the seed and kernels of plants (as long as they are productive and fresh), are likewise soft and tender; that metals also melt and become fluid, and are as it were concrete juices of the earth ... that the earth itself is fertilised and revived by showers of irrigation, and that the earth and mud seem nothing else than lees and sediments of water, that air most plainly is but the exhalation and expansion of water, nay, that even fire cannot be lighted, nor kept in and fed, except with moisture and by means of moisture. He saw, too, that the fatness which belongs to moisture and by means of moisture, and which is the support of and life of flame and fire, seems a kind of ripeness and concoction of the water'.

If Thales returns to me now, as it did on first encountering the Nirox Sculpture Park, it is not only because of the liquefaction of the world, its wateriness, but because water as a unifying element – a thickener, emulsifier, distiller, clarifier – bonds us to life. For Thales, however, water also possesses a greater power, it defines the process of mind, perception itself. Water helps us to look at the world and live within in it *as an activity of mind*. It helps us to think. It is the 'green fuse' that drives and blasts and illumines.

It is this *fuse* – water as element and idea – which drives Liebmann’s artworks as it does his life. Wandering through the artist’s perfumed labyrinth and invited to stroke the stem of a healing plant affirmed water’s centrality in the artist’s vision. For it is *water as an idea, as an abiding and binding element*, which conveys the artist’s mercurial, impermanent, shifted and shifting perception – as well as its implacable search for beauty and harmony. The shredded pieces of paper that hover on the surface of certain works are but the most literal manifestation of this liquefaction, for water-as-idea is the inner realm of the works, its aquifer as it were, informing their movement, drift and flow, as it informs their elemental fusion of all worlds – physical, emotional, psychical, and spiritual.

Text from the book *Benji Liebmann, Drawings* (TSU Libros)