

Ebb, Flow and Raven Gloss:

Looking at Emma Fielden's 'Approaching Zero'

By Carol Jenkins

Emma Fielden's show at Dominik Mersch Gallery, inspired by calculus, matters celestial and Magritte, turns on moments of transformation, honing in on the tension between states of being, black and white, and in her drawings, notably *The Veil*, what happens as you sidle up to zero. Mercifully, she has not kept her thoughts on calculus, space, zero and infinity to herself, but has made them manifest in her work.

Confluence

Confluence is a set of diptychs; we might call them pour-spills, flow-mills, ink-wells or puddle-pours of Sumi ink. Each of the pair flows away and into the other, making conversations that come up to the brink, to an edge. They nudge, in a calculating way, at limits. Is the auto-sheen gloss of Sumi ink a hypnotic Rorschach test, is each pair with their uneven pattern perhaps a nod at the asymmetries of marriage? They suggest worm holes, having the absolute blackness of nothingness, but without the existential angst that black holes evoke.

Sumi ink is usually diluted for calligraphy but Fielden pours and drips it straight onto the paper — a concentrate of a hundred million kanji — a constellation of characters like the beginning of the universe – that spreads into self-organizing forms, an ebb and flow of raven gloss, as if a black bird was set out to be landscape or the night had been compressed and made to wait discretely.

The Veil (after Rene Magritte's The Lovers) Almost Nothing, Almost Everything

Magritte's painting 'The Lovers', catalyst and inspiration for the drawings in Fielden's show, depicts two heads at a Hollywood angle of embrace, tantalisingly close and both covered entirely in a short veil. There is a palpable tension; to be in love is to fall, to step towards the void. In this separation between the two heads love is blind.

The Veil pivots both on the allure of what is partly visible and the intrigue with what is concealed. The withheld and the taboo tantalise, what is underneath? Anticipation and longing are to my thinking the most romantic qualities and Magritte's surreal landscape with its idealised and anonymised lovers uses to affect the swoony state of not-knowing as an aphrodisiac. With so little known so much can be imagined. In these drawings the fine lace of zeros that create a nearly unknowable number, Fielden has made veils that play with optics, nothingness and romance to hypnotic effect.

Fielden's hand is uncannily steady but there are just perceptible differences in the zeros, some due to ebb and flow of ink in the Rotring technical drawing pen she uses. I imagine some of the zeros will have been narrowed by an in-breath, others fractionally enlarged. Let's give this difference in size a name, say delta. Could I sample a section, measure this difference, delta, from the ideal width in each of the zeros in the sample, and calculate the standard deviation for every zero that will be drawn on the completed *The Veil*? Tempting, but it is more the evocation of these kinds of investigation – the mathematical and conceptual conjectures these drawings create that are to be enjoyed and explored.

In a way Fielden reverses art's allegorical tradition, the drawings in *Approaching Zero* are not tableaux of figures that allude or set up a metaphor about approaching zero, Zeno is not lurking in the background with a tennis ball, but here zero is both the signifier and signified, and from this position becomes, by aggregation and scale, a mesmerising textural surface, a meditation in making and observation, each '0' an eyelet to thread a thought through.

At the same time *The Veil* deals concisely with the antique problem of art: the depiction of space, and the tension that exists between figures in a scene by the simple reiteration of zeros and the finely calibrated distance between each zero. Where the work lifts is in the synergy of the zeros. They shimmer on the paper – and in this embodied moiré pulse that seems to make the work float off the page, a sleight of hand that creates an illusion of three dimensions.

The Veil illuminates the paradox of how Fielden uncannily steps just over the sleeping dog of zero, and puts her infinitesimally small and adamant '1' at a place that is close to but not the very furthest remove allowed by the page and the number of zeros she can fit on to head of her proverbial pin, each of a gossamer width. It lets us see the alliance between what is tending to the infinitely large and what is tending towards zero. Infinity is hard, if not impossible to imagine, but Fielden helps in this with her psychologically dizzying *The Veil*. If I look at it long enough, I feel like I'm looking into space.

Return to Sender¹

You can be sure of death, and this:
every poet will make up, for what it's worth,
a poem on stars, starlight, nebula or red dwarfs.
But, mind the stars have got in first and made
the poet, ink, pen and page from spare parts,
with the caveat: *return to sender*.

¹ Carol Jenkins, *Return to Sender*, from *X²*, Puncher and Wattmann, Newcastle, Australia, 2016

Coalescence

We may be better at imagining we can imagine zero than we are at actually imagining it. All our fates are finite. However, the universe is a big place and to consider the infinite it helps, at least in imagination, to slip into the intergalactic. Fielden has a predisposition to astronomical and fluid states, themes central to her work, and in her videos as she prompts us to give, fluidity, infinity and the intergalactic more thought.

To watch *Coalescence* is to be raised into a buoyant state of satisfied expectation; what is it about? For me it is as if I am embarking on a multiple choice exam which I have already passed with distinction, and there are no wrong answers, I can (a) watch it again, (b) sit down and have a good think about it, (c) ring up EF and talk to her about fluid dynamics and the big bang theory (not an option for readers) or (d) theorise that this is a retelling of how the universe was made, or maybe how night was made.

Andromeda and the Milky Way

This performance video turns on the relationship between the galaxies Andromeda, the galaxy closest to our own Milky Way, and the Milky Way itself. Though to use the possessive 'our' in connection to the Milky Way does not seem in any way plausible. Fielden and the fellow performer Lizzie Thomson sit opposite each other in a corner of the universe, both with a pile of willow stick charcoal, drawing ever increasing elliptical spirals that grow closer and closer until they overlap. Like all the work in *Approaching Zero* this is discipline in blackness, each spiral of willow stick laves the ground with a dense velvety opacity, the application, to borrow from Keats, might be a study in charcoal's negativity capability.

The action here proceeds with mild methodical, meditative serenity. It is Fielden, who I have nominated as the persona for the Milky Way, whose intense application creates a halo of carbon particles that spread out beyond the orbital lines of charcoal. In 2015 NASA's Hubble Telescope mapped out Andromeda's nearly invisible halo of diffuse plasma. You probably know that the two galaxies are due to collide in about 4.5 billion years from now but in some places, according to the Hubble date, they may already be bumping halos.

Is Fielden suggesting our possible galactic demise in referencing the collision of Milky Way and Andromeda? In this quietly played out piece where we have some serious thinking to do, she does not impose an argument as to what we should think about astronomical events, rather her work acts as a catalyst for thought and exploration, suggesting that the present, as a time scale for thought, is due for a rethink, a philosophical shift.

Approaching Zero is above all a meditative and finely made prompt for metacognition. It is an invitation to flirt with nothing, while wearing, with a nod to Edward de Bono, a hat made of stars.