



Article

## **Contemporary Reportage Drawing** Ecstatic moments and hybridity

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The field of contemporary reportage practice is diverse and divergent. No longer is reportage drawing restricted to the commissioning structures of print media and accompanying expectations of journalistic doctrine. Contemporary reportage disseminates its activity largely through online exposure and some specialist print publications such as Eye magazine and Varoom (both devoted to illustration and or design). There has also been a notable split between professional and enthusiast activity with the explosion of Urban Sketchers. This organisation captures the important and previously unseen activity by professionals from a variety of fields within, and on the periphery of art and design along with amateur enthusiasts. For many within Urban Sketchers, this activity is about refining vision and the pure pleasure of engaging with their surroundings. The important split between this activity and 'professional' reportage artists is in the terms of their engagement. In contemporary reportage drawing, practitioners are seeking subjects and circumstances that are both personally significant and provide some opportunity to exploit the political and social dimensions of their subject. The authorial shift in reportage drawing is not a refutation of its journalistic origins and rather takes those ideals and applies them inward. Contemporary practitioners are setting their own briefs and find sustenance in un-explored political and social terrain while mining the qualities of their own drawing. This contemporary moment for reportage drawing has come to be most vividly about drawing itself.

In a crowded and quickly moving media landscape, drawing becomes a visible reminder of the power and limitations of the hand and all that tells us about vision, witness and the layers of understanding contained in marks and lines that are dashed out in confrontation with a world in flux.

This paper seeks to explore past and contemporary reportage artists and my own work as an example of how the practice has come to highlight the qualities of drawing and experience and, how self-initiated work has meant an evolution of the relationship between text, image and journalism.

Feliks Topolski was a Polish born and British based illustrator who became one of the most well-known and highly regarded illustrators during his most active period between the 1950's and 1970's. His work is highly relevant to the shape, form and concerns of contemporary reportage today. Although Topolski enjoyed many commissions and successes as an illustrator, his self-initiated Topolski's Chronicles and books, in particular Holy China, reveal an artist who is engrossed in the world and using drawing as a means of mediating his experiences and sharing them with the wider public. The fact that his drawing reflected a confrontation with reality in its brusque mark making and highly gestural language, made his work both accessible as a conduit of experience

and, sophisticated in its disinterest in tidying up that vision. What we see and value in Topolski's drawing and what makes him relevant today is an awareness of what drawing can do and in fact, what drawing is very good at; namely, insight into with the workings of vision writ large. In Topolski's work and the work of many contemporary reportage artists, this connection to the perceptual qualities of line and the momentary (as Gary Embury notes 'time based') qualities of the act are not purged but celebrated, even exploited. The legacy of Topolski's vision is that drawing is not about depiction alone, it is about vision and experience and reportage drawing can bring us to this convergence. It is a convergence of thought and action, of seeing and making sense of that seeing in drawing. Topolski notes in *Holy China* what he is seeing:

China: tinny high-voiced song-and-music (knob it down but cannot off) and train clangour turn the sand-coloured panorama into a pantomime of communal rhythm; little horsecarts trot to it, clusters of burdened carriers sway to it, smoke puffs with it over dusty villages, strings of peasants in the fields dig and fork in unison with the train-steward hoeing his vacuum cleaner. (Topolski, 1968)

Topolski's commentary condenses observations which can be seen in his drawings and the identification of rhythm and linear references like strings suggest that the commentary and drawing can be seen as counterparts, riffing of each other and not, in this case, establishing either a hierarchy or a preferred order of viewing/reading. Although clearly *Holy China* is a book that highlights Topolski's drawing, his writing does more than provide contextualisation, it speaks to the same procedural thinking inherent in the drawing and touches upon challenges that are reflected in the artwork. One such notable case is below in which Topolski expresses the revelation of just how different the function of art and life are in Mao's China and how the constructed and the real confound western perceptions.

He notes:

Young men cluster attentively around some gadgets, obligingly they are queried, and the translated answer is: 'Discussing the quality of titanium foil.' And again, as often, the scene takes the shape of a staged socialist-realist painting-poster-sculpture - their truth to life, of life's to the picturings of it, is of such a perfect fit that the doubting Thomas from the West is tempted to see reality as a make-believe for his benefit. This utopia-aiming intensity discomforts the Westerner, accustomed to a vitality fed on opposition and indignation: here, Art and Life, for better or worse, idealize one another. (Topolski, 1968)

The above quote exhibits the kind of thinking that goes on behind the drawing. Thoughts that reside in the drawing in some way. Equally, this reflects the thinking of the artist about the image. Thinking which reveals that every image represents a debate of some sort and that his own images of China are polluted with his perceptions as a Westerner but equally, valid concerns that the 'reality' presented to him may not be true. The later concern is one that is central to reportage drawing and shapes individual orientations to the act. While the journalist has some responsibility to truth, the reportage artist has this same responsibility to vision and that can be equally as difficult. Although the textual elaborations are not a requirement of reportage drawing, the interplay is often lively and like the drawings, reflects a construction of vision and experience. As Gombrich notes 'we must try to relearn the difference between stimulation through self-projection, which, when applied to art, so often passes for 'appreciation', and that enrichment that comes from an understanding, however dim and imperfect, of what a great art is intended to convey.' (Gombrich, 1963, p.85) In reportage drawing, this enrichment manifests itself in the intersection between the artists record of experience and the viewers re-creation of that experience. The success of the drawing is in how well the artist traverses the space between witness, recording and mastery to convince us of his or her vision. The thinking on the page which is typically at a more advanced stage in a 'finished' drawing is at an early, tentative and searching stage in reportage drawing.

Arnheim notes 'In the course of the creative process the work goes through elaborations that require that the artist distinguish, with severe discipline, between what suits the nature of his subject and what is accidental impulse.' (Arnheim, 1969, p.439) In reportage drawing, this process is left as a record of thinking. The moves of the artist from attention to attention is evident in the marks and lines on the page and because of this we feel close to the artists thinking and the 'enrichment' that Gombrich speaks of can be seen as the intimacy felt with the artists hand. The fact that reportage practice persists in this media world may be due to this important connection to raw intention and strategies to form that are seen in reportage drawing and its close relative the sketch.

For Topolski, the relationship between text and image is more fluid. The text does occasionally provide what could be discerned as journalistic inquiry but more often than not it, like the drawing, is episodic, textural and anecdotal. The writing provides some context for the drawing but it is not a requirement for access. Topolski's drawings are rich and elaborate evocations of vision and they involve us in the drama of his thinking in ways that cannot be textualized.

Victoria Lomasko's *Other Russias* (2017) is a collection of writing and drawing in which both play a more definitive role. Lomasko's drawing is bold and less open in its construction than the sketchy indications of typical reportage. The book is broken into two sections which are 'invisible' and 'angry' and it looks at forgotten parts of Russian society through interviews and drawings done on the spot. Lomasko's drawing is built with thick black lines and a cartoonists flair for exaggeration, both subtle and exaggerated. She often includes her subjects own words in the drawing and her commentary is stripped down, setting the scene with just enough to understand the context. The voice of the people she has interviewed is central and these utterances are open, honest and often devastatingly, emotional and raw. Although the text here has a more important role in completing the drawing, it also creates, as Barthes notes a 'relay-text' in which 'the unity of the text is realised at a higher level,

that of the story.' (Barthes, 1977, p.41) This is a critical point. Functionally, Lomasko's *Other Russias* is telling us a wide ranging narrative first and foremost and the text is important for understanding the complexities of the lived experience of its subjects. In one such section of the book called 'Feminine', Lomasko looks at women and their unique plight navigating boredom and desire in the hinterlands. Lomasko notes in this section that she 'tried to move away from reportage and toward symbolism in this series' and 'the portraits here are not so much images of specific people as they are archetypes: the faded, lonely woman, the slutty boozier, the rigid old Soviet woman, and so on.' (Lomasko, 2017, p.35) This quote reflects the flexibility within the field of contemporary reportage to embrace other kinds of seeing, documenting, commentary and construction.

Jill Gibbon, a reportage illustrator known for drawing in arms fairs across Europe notes, 'drawing is capricious, forever wandering away from what is seen or intended.' (Gibbon, 2018) While this may seem like a departure from the seen, what we saw in Topolski's textual divergences equally occur in the drawing and sometimes these archetypes necessitate creation because, as Lomasko notes, the symbolic is sometimes more important and urgent than mere recording. It also does not mean that these archetypes are wholesale invention. They are often a condensation of the observed, an amalgamation of features to create a symbolic whole. George Grosz took this one step further. For him the drawings of people he observed were also part of him. He noted:

Arrogantly, I considered myself a natural scientist rather than a painter or even a satirist. Actually, however, I was everybody I depicted: the rich, gorging, champagne-guzzling man favoured by fate, as well as the one out there holding out his hand in the pouring rain. There were two equal parts of me. In other words, I participated in life... (Grosz, 1998, p.125-126)

Reportage drawing demands this kind of empathetic leap of imagination and drawing, no matter how caustic, trades on the humanity of its forms, both in its facture and the idiosyncrasies of depiction. Lomasko's drawings, like all drawings, render something anew and our engagement with the text in *Other Russias* creates a compelling correspondent connection to the world of/in the drawing.

Kate Evans book *Threads* explores the daily life of immigrants stuck in the no-mans-land of the 'jungle' in Calais in a comic that trades heavily on a reportage style eyewitness drawing. (2017) The drawing is stripped bare of ornament, stylistic indulgence or contrivances. What results is a drawing language and comic storytelling language which feels urgent and honest. The occasional clumsiness of the drawing reinforces what we imagine is the speed of execution but also the circumstances of its creation in an under resourced migrant camp. There is an inherent flatness to the compositions and the overall colour is applied somewhat crudely, giving the images the impression that they are conduits of experience and not articulated drawings to be admired for their mastery. However, in this media environment of high polish, these drawings and the overall humble aesthetic of *Threads* is highly effective. Evans notes in the book when talking about her supplies, 'thick cartridge paper. I want the pictures to feel weighty and professional, even if they don't look it.' (Evans, 2017, p. 75) I think she is aware of the aesthetic she is creating but equally, it emerges out of the limitations of her own hand and as much as this may be an artistic limitation, it does the opposite of limit the text; it amplifies the rough, chaotic and tragic elements of the narrative. Equally, like Lomasko's bold but economic line art, the aesthetic of *Threads* disappears hierarchies of author/artist and subject and grounds the narrative in a dialogue of equals. As noted previously, reportage drawing is effective in eliciting compassion through the knowledge that the artist has borne witness to something and through the active means of representation in drawing, constructed that vision with intention.

My own drawing below reflects similar concerns and orientations to the act as above but unlike some contemporary reportage, my work functions more as visual essay. My work is aligned with many of the tenets of journalism but it seeks something more textural, experiential, personal and less comprehensive. In 2009 I started my drawing blog *Life's Too Short For Nuance* and it was intended to capture the reportage drawing that I had been doing all around New York where I was living at the time. The practice evolved as my confidence grew and I realised what I was trying to achieve. In short, this was a more comprehensive image of my experience. This did not mean that my drawings intended to tell a comprehensive story. However, it did and does mean that my drawings are intended to be a reification of the ecstatic moment(s) of experience and the textures of that experience. I often produce my drawing after the fact but my visual memory has been tuned by years of practice and I can both conjure and construct memory on the page with surprising accuracy. I have often been surprised that the drawings contain so much of the seen, especially when I see the same people after the fact.

The text on my blog functions as an adjunct to the images but like Topolski's writing, it is not essential to enter the world of the images. It is however, helpful to be aided by the location. Something which is particularly important in my recent work in the informal settlement of Mukuru in Nairobi. This work also speaks to the importance of novelty in reportage drawing. Contemporary reportage drawing is often about human spectacle in drawings of protest, the refugee crisis and migrant crisis. In these drawings, the context is supremely important but so too are the aesthetics. In these important and consequential events, the flux of humanity, the contrasting realities and challenging circumstances on the ground provide difficulties for the reportage artist but also sustenance. These challenges and experiences find their way in to the drawing and the drawings become repositories for a range of emotions, textures and deeply felt emotions. As noted by Grosz previously, 'participating in life.'

My drawings of Mukuru below can be understood without a tremendous amount of context. They can be seen as observed moments that reflect the daily reality of people living in the large informal settlement and struggling to make enough money in a day to feed themselves or their family. For me, the drawings hold a tremendous amount of empathy and humanity. Like Mukuru itself, they swing from the ordinary to the poignant and back again. It is impossible not to see the exotic in ramshackle houses and improvised infrastructure, including the most elaborate wooden bridges. It is also a place that feels interconnected. Lives are entangled together and a sense of community is powerful and uplifting. It would be very difficult and problematic to take photographs in Mukuru but drawing is largely okay, although I did at one point have a rather large crowd surrounding me on my first visit. I have since been a bit slyer in my approach.

Contemporary reportage is a fluid practice with practitioners utilising the comic format (Evans), a hybrid text and image reportage (Lomasko) and more standalone statements like Jill Gibbon and myself. All practitioners engage in the act of drawing to mine meaning. The way that drawing connects to our psyche in surprising ways and is a document that feeds back to the artist and the viewer, unfolding new understandings. It is also a human document made for humans. Gibbons notes in her book about drawing in arms fairs that it is a 'performance of respectability.' (Gibbon, 2018) What is notable about her work is that under these strange circumstances of being in an arms fair, what emerges in this tragic reality through her drawings are the ravages this industry has wrought on the salespeople, models, performers and cocktail waitresses who prop up this odious industry. This is a highly compelling angle which reportage drawing is uniquely equipped to explore. Reportage is attracted by spectacle but it almost always uncovers something else.

Drawing is always a balance between the seen, the felt and the intended. Because of this, reportage drawing elicits a connection to the inner-space of the artist but equally, the world of the subject. A world created new in marks and lines which like our world, shifts and moves, acquiring new meanings and perspectives with every viewing.



Nairobi, 2020, Fruit Sellers, Buruburu  
By Louis Netter





Nairobi, 2020, Man near moped rank  
By Louis Netter





Nairobi, 2020, Old woman sitting, Mukuru  
By Louis Netter



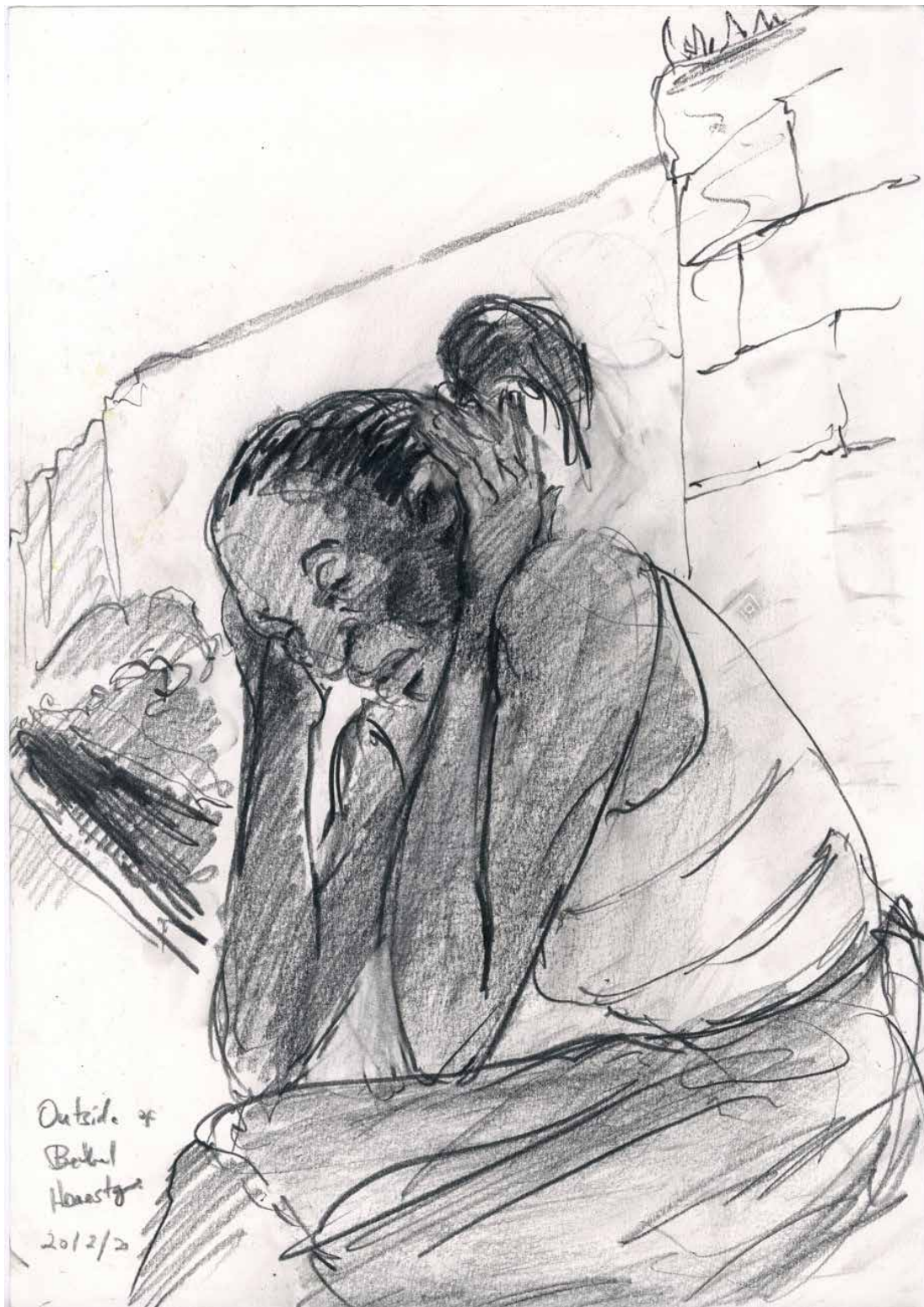


Nairobi, 2020, Hidden fruit seller, Mukuru  
By Louis Netter



Nairobi, 2020, Man on the median selling hats and belts  
By Louis Netter





Nairobi, 2020, Woman sitting outside of fortified compound (Bethel Homestay)  
By Louis Netter



Nairobi, 2020, Suspicious of the mzungu, Mukuru  
By Louis Netter





Nairobi, 2020, Overloaded bike with chickens  
By Louis Netter





Nairobi, 2020, Man burning wire casing for metal while smoking, Mukuru  
By Louis Netter





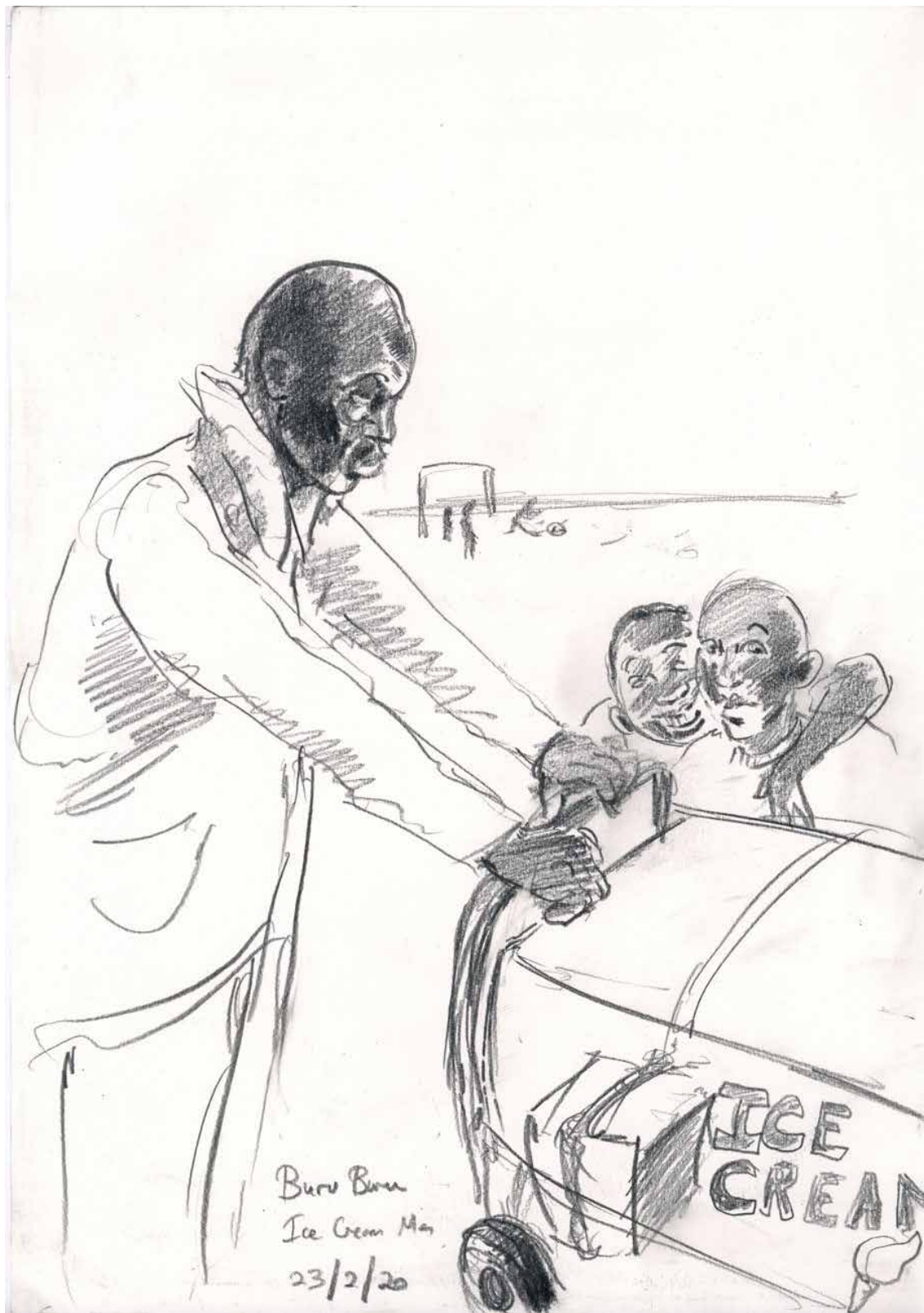
Nairobi, 2020, Woman selling salt fish (Changu)  
By Louis Netter



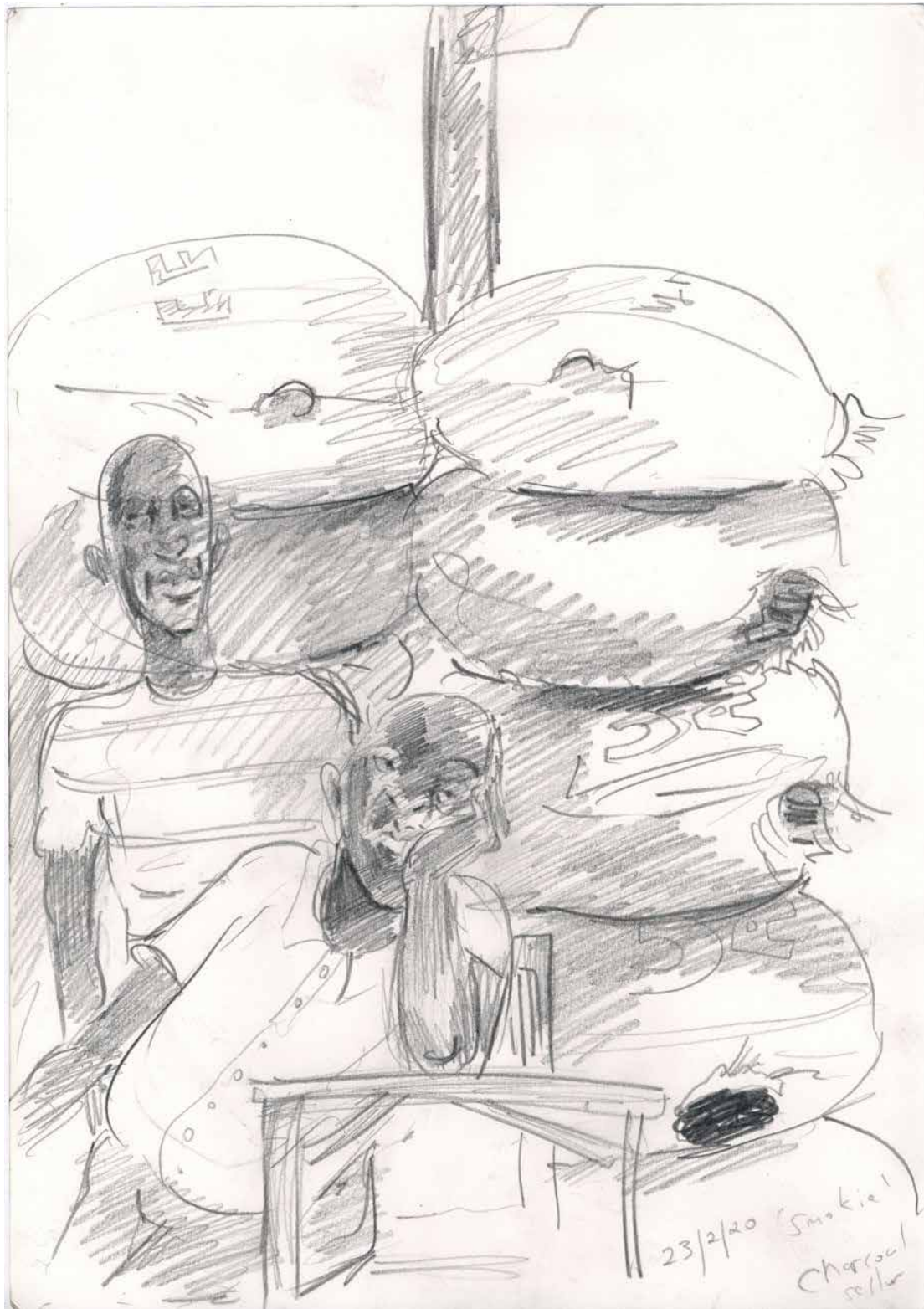


Nairobi, 2020, Women picking through rubbish, Mukuru  
By Louis Netter





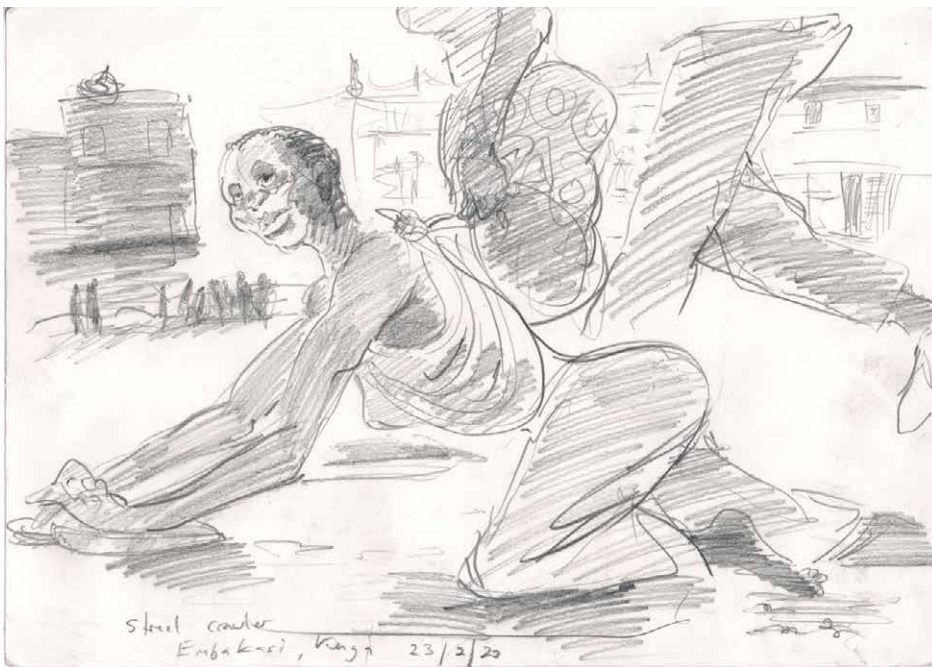
Nairobi, 2020, Ice cream man, Buruburu  
By Louis Netter



Nairobi, 2020, Charcoal seller, Buruburu  
By Louis Netter



Nairobi, 2020, Rafat singing, Mukuru  
By Louis Netter



Nairobi, 2020, Woman crawling, Mukuru  
By Louis Netter





Nairobi, 2020, Pub owners, Buruburu  
By Louis Netter



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