

James Davies

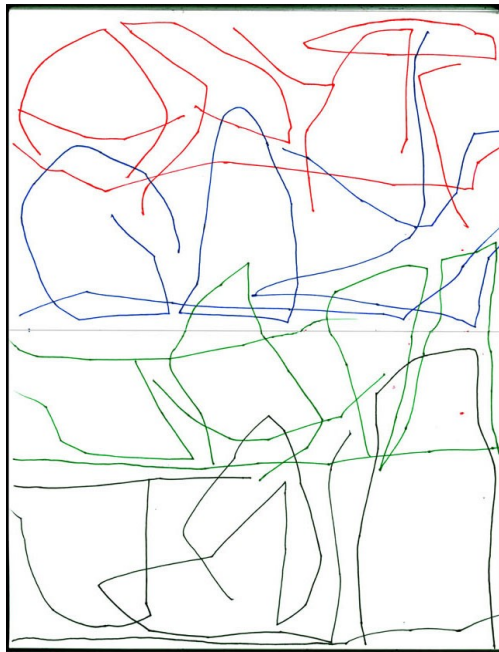
Robert Grenier – 64 (The Irony of Flatness, Bury Art Gallery, 19 July – 8 November)

For many years Robert Grenier has been one of the key proponents of minimalist poetry. His version of minimal poetry, although incredibly reductive, results in a richness in detail. Collections include *Oakland*, *A Day at the Beach* and *Sentences* amongst others. *Sentences* is particularly indicative of his oeuvre: 500 index cards in an index box, a short poem on each index card which can be read in any order. A randomized version exists at http://www.whalecloth.org/grenier/sentences_mac.htm. One poem reads 'late july', another 'two trees', and one of my favourites:

JOE

JOE

The poems in *Sentences* are a good starting point in considering Grenier's most recent 'drawings' which are the main focus of the exhibition *The Irony of Flatness* at Bury Art Gallery. The 64 of Grenier's works on display in the exhibition may at first look very similar - scrawl made with coloured ink pens - red, green, blue, and black - made in a notebook and then copied onto a single sheet of paper, framed behind glass. Here is an example:



Although these works may be seen or called drawings they are much more closely akin to poetry. The majority of marks on the page are letters. The other three/four lines run horizontally and divide the page up into four. The most notable difference between Grenier's poetry and any other written contemporary poetry is that, in the final cut, what both the public sees/reads and what the poet writes is handwritten. Grenier uses the conventional alphabet and writes in a handwriting which is childlike but moving towards cursive lettering. Ns, Rs and As often look the same. Os and Ds too. The one above for instance reads in its entirety –

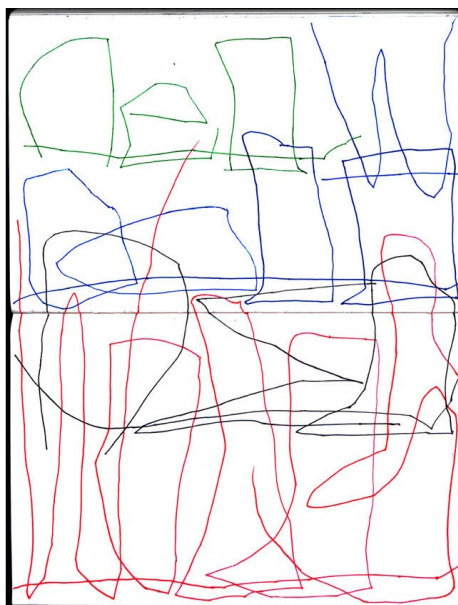
**APRI
COT
JAM
JAR**

One must question the choice of words used here to represent the image since neither we nor Grenier imagine an apricot jam jar but rather apricot jam *in* a jam jar.

The drawings come in quatrains and most letters are written in upper case although there is no set pattern for this. Due to the limited space of the page (which is now reproduced and seen by the public as ‘canvas’) the amount of words in each poem is limited. Longer words such as Apricot are necessarily enjambed.

The process of making the work is clearly important to Grenier. He is a keen and excited reader who is reluctant to interpret his work. The poems are difficult to read in the most literal sense without help and even Grenier himself needs time to comprehend his glyphs when he delivers one of his charismatic readings. To some extent that’s what these marks are, unknown glyphs, there is an element of the mystical in them, the transcendental, in the American tradition of Emerson and Thoreau. Visitors to Bury are given the opportunity to read the drawings from a script should they wish or try to work out the letters for themselves. But even with the aid of a script words may appear as fragments to readers and in some sense this works as a metaphor for the fragmentation of our vision and perception. However Grenier’s choice to handwrite the poems, over word processing, isn’t intended as an exercise in making the viewer decipher what the semantic meaning of the piece is; the handwriting is at some point meant to be seen in terms of representing letters of the alphabet and once this is achieved by the viewer then he should consider the form of the poem as part of the content (form now being the way the letters are formed individually and as a whole). As I have said, Grenier is reluctant to say that there is anything beyond the poem, but it must be that there is some element of ‘truth’ or ‘necessity’ in the way these things are made; the often concrete object(s) that forms the basis of the poem’s subject matter, which Grenier sees, either live or in his imagination, is transmuted through a hybrid of drawing and writing – something which surely imagines or re-investigates the primitiveness of the initial marks children make: a celebration of ‘seeing’.

Another example is:



**REDW
OOD
RED
WOODS**

Whereas APRI / COT / JAM / JAR (reminiscent of Wallace Stevens *Anecdote on the Jar* in its intentions and images) enjambes because the first word, APRICOT is too long for the space of the page, the poem REDWOOD... deliberately breaks awkwardly. Not only that, but there is a misspelling in line two which creates a protracted 'oo' sound (the sound of listening to your own voice in a woods or the dawn chorus). The poem also evokes the euphoric sound and emotion of the realisation by an individual of one red wood tree's existence becoming the realisation of the existence of many red woods. The shunting of the 'red' and the 'wood/woods' reminds us of the simple movement of branches. Yet on the other hand puts us directly in the poem, directly in the woods and questions the power and complexity of nature compared to that of man. There is an element of the organic in both the form and content of the drawings. The works can be seen visually as a tangle of bracken, boulders on the horizon and other landscapes of Grenier's Bolinas Valley. The colours work twofold. On the one hand the colour often differentiates the words or lines - RED is green, WOOD is blue, RED is black and RED is red. On the other they work pictorially - leafy greens, sky blues, nature's black outlines, woodland reds all add to the effect of the beauty of the landscape. This heavy layering of textures in such a short amount of words answers why the poems need to be drawings for both poet and reader. The drawing element is an additional communicational tool to the letters themselves, away from the tranquilized communication of the typewriter/word processor: literally a return to nature as a process. In this sense Grenier's work is traditional, romantic, mostly pastoral in content yet innovative in form. In many ways these are the poems that William Carlos Williams was writing at the start of The Twentieth Century yet Grenier's are even more reductive and simplistic in method and perhaps all the richer for it. A final drawing reads After / Noon / Sun / Shine. It's worth noting that Grenier's 1965 Harvard honours thesis was called *Organic Prosody In The Poetry Of William Carlos Williams* and 43 years later Williams' maxim 'no ideas but in things' is still clearly at the forefront of Grenier's thinking.

