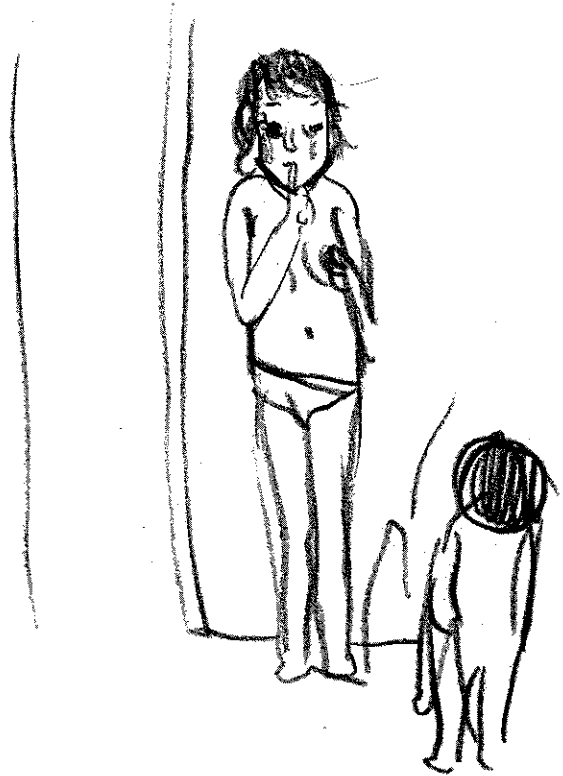




Drawings by Eli Langer

Sleeping WITH ELI

The impact of Eli Langer's art instead of his court case



“What makes these art?”

I asked Claire, as she freed Eli Langer's sketches from their bubble-wrap. “Because they are framed? Does framing something make it art?” I reacted badly to the first few sketches; the build-up to seeing Langer's work produced disappointment. The sketches were scribbles really, bearing no evidence of the polish or composition of drawings. The consistency of the white 8 by 11 frames gave the drawings authority, but they looked as if they had been produced in thirty second or minute-and-a-half scribbles. Scribbles, tossed off and framed. They were exactly the kind of work that was likely to elicit that handy criticism: “My kid could do better than that.”

by **Julia Creet**

Yes, these drawings do look as if they have been done by a child—but that's the point. They attempt to provide access to that preconscious place in which the child in us rules.

Had my friends, Sharon Switzer and Claire Sykes, whose aesthetic judgement I trusted, been duped by the hype of Eli's status as a controversial artist? Had the confiscation of his paintings and drawings by the Toronto Police and the subsequent trial given him a bigger reputation than his work deserved? Why did Sharon and Claire want to curate a show of these drawings when the work seemed so unimpressive? And, perversely, in London, home to the province's most enthusiastic division of the pornography patrol Project "P." (See also in this issue Teixeira's article, "Antidote to Hysteria: The Men and Boys of London.")

Claire continued to unpack the sketches. The rudimentary form obviously allowed for prodigious output. The sheer volume said something. Speed. It was there in the movement of the lines. You could almost see the sketches being drawn as you watched. And the figures too were caught in motion, blurred or not quite recognizable. Dream-like suggestions, bodies floating in space, not anchored in time or context. We stacked the twenty-two sketches on the dining room table, where they sat rather precariously. I don't know who thought of it first, who came up with the idea that given the size of the gallery — small — and the bareness of my bedroom walls, a trial hanging for the exhibit could be done in the room I stay in a couple of nights a week.

A week later, back in London. Claire and Sharon have hung the sketches while I've been away. I love the pattern of the frames on my walls, walls on which there was nothing in the six months I have been staying in this room. Lying in bed, I can see the drawings to my right but not the ones above my head. I wonder if they will affect my dreams. They have nightmarish qualities. The dreamlike figures are suspended in space; they float through the frames. Yet their presence has a disquieting solidity. They bear the insistence of childhood fantasies, of fleeting moments that shape the years that follow, and of twisted dreams changing in the early hours of the morning.





Yes, these drawings do look as if they have been done by a child - but that's the point. They attempt to provide access to that preconscious place in which the child in us rules. That place where violence and pleasure mix in unpredictable and unrepresentable ways. The violence of these sketches is emotional more than physical. A child watches a man in a tantrum; a child watches a woman half-naked; a child cringes in front of headless eyeballs. The sketches are populated by children with haunted eyes already witness to adult pain. And the pleasures are both innocent and already regulated by shame. They remind me of the opening lines of Monique Wittig's first book, *The Opoponax*, a story of childhood, for which she won France's highest literary award, the Prix Medicis, in 1964. It begins, "Robert Payen comes into the classroom last, crying, who wants to see my weewee-er? who wants to see my weewee-er?" The book was both violent and sexual. I feel this way about the drawings. I can hear Eli behind them, "Who wants to see my weewee-er?" Unfortunately, the response is shame. "You're laughing!" reads the caption of one drawing.

Back in London again. Above my pillow floats a tiny worried child's face tucked into a sheet of white paper. The power of these drawings derives from the evocative simplicity of the line and the intensity of the pencil mark. Haunted dense black dot eyes convey sadness and terror. And in the frightening blackened opening between bunk beds, a body dangles. Gravity works in mysterious ways in these upside-down worlds. A man hangs bat-like, his penis droops. In another, a girl stands beside him, looking. A little boy stands beside the bedside of a withered woman; the caption, which might be a plea for rejuvenation, reads "lift up cunts and pricks." Spots of emphatic density mark the emotion of these drawings, while their strange spatial orientations seem to function as commentary.

In another mark of reversal, clothes rather than nudity have the potential for obscenity. A woman half-clothed stands before a child signalling silence. The detail of her underpants is in distinct contrast to the vague and faceless figure of the child. Her half-nakedness is obscene; she is in a state of half-undress, her veiled sexuality half-

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exposed. But there is little desire anywhere in these drawings, even on the part of the adult figures. Many drawings suggest the abuse of power: a kneeling child is held by his hair, an adult towers above him. Power emerges from the dimensions of proportion and perspective. And yet here, in this topsy-turvy world, it is the larger figures who are exposed as perversely vulnerable, and the child-like figures are charged with the responsibility of witnessing.

One theme unites both children and adults in these pictures: shame. One drawing in particular tells a vivid story. The scenario is captured in the time it takes an anguished child to cry "You're laughing!" This drawing is undated, but is, as are the others, part of the aftermath of the trial. Langer's drawings and paintings were saved from destruction because of their artistic merit, yet the humiliation of having to argue for their worth is written into this drawing and others. A laughing adult, her (I think) eyes rolled sideways, covers her mouth in a gesture of weak restraint. Her mirth is obvious. Before her stands a child whose shame is captured in the powerfully gestural frustration of hands thrown upward towards the unreachable laughing face. Beside these two stands another figure, who does nothing to help the child. Behind this trio two ducks fuck. They are partially scribbled over, as if to hide their shame, the shame of their creator, and to protect the observer from embarrassment. The drawing speaks to a child's fascination with sexuality and adult embarrassment about one of the few places children are allowed to see sexual activity—among animals. Every active element of this drawing expresses shame.

Two weeks later, after March break. The drawings are gone from my room. The exhibition opens this week and the drawings are now hanging in the gallery. The leftover nails make the walls seem emptier than they were before. I miss the intimacy of the drawings. I miss the way they drew me in; each time I came back I found myself looking at them more closely. In some, I saw things that I hadn't seen before. Only after several weeks did I see that the child cringing in front of the eyeballs was shitting. A child's pride in his bodily products, the gift of shit, has turned, once again, to shame.

Shame has come to explain how I understand the melancholia of these drawings. Eve Sedgwick has written that shame is "integral to and residual in the processes by which identity is formed." She argues that shame is an integral part of both childhood formations of self (shame produces self-consciousness) and later political identities (shame is the precondition for "pride"). I see both instances of shame in Langer's work. He has rendered visible the processes by which children come to know themselves as (sexual) beings, while working through his own shame of having to prove the worth of his "artistic" gifts. The regression to a child-like figurative quality constitutes a method and a challenge.

Eli is coming to town for the opening and to give a talk to a drawing class. We have arranged to meet at the bus station; he will be arriving and I will be leaving, with few hours in between. Langer is a sweet, edgy, interesting man. He has brought slides of all his work, including the paintings and drawings that were seized by the police. He asks me if I can pick them out. They are quite obvious, and I am glad that I have not been faced with the task of writing about them. Sharon and Claire have carefully chosen a sanitized selection of the less offensive drawings, no children and adults in blatantly sexual positions. He tells me about the humiliation of leaving the courthouse with his artwork under his arm, about the shame of having been publicly slapped on the hand. He does not think that the publicity has launched him as an artist; he has given away far more of his work than he has ever sold. But, he has been given a Canada Council "B-Grant" this year, so somebody has taken notice.

Eli talks about the fun of drawing and the speed with which he produced these sketches. Looking through his slides, I find what I want to see: his paintings show signs of strong talent in their colour and form, and there is no question that he knows how to draw. I feel much more comfortable about the artistic merit of the scribbles. Some of the paintings are, in his words, "smut." He's not shy at all about his sexual imagination or about admitting that these are images that give him sexual pleasure, but he is also adamant that he has never used models to paint his scenes, and that much of the imagery is non-representational. He is not advocating anything; he is only trying to work through the things that float through his mind. Outside of his circle of friends, there has been little discussion of his work beyond the sexually-explicit content. He has recognized that the content has become a liability.

The last painting I look at is of a girl squatting beside a pond. It has the hallmark intimacy of his other work, but the pastel colours and the soft, blurred lines are serene. The sensuality is hard to pin down to the content.

As we put away the slides, he laughs about wanting to spend the night in a downtown hotel with an overnight girlfriend; the fantasy seems so playful in contrast to his troubled and troubling images. I put him on the bus to campus. I get on the bus to Toronto. He spends the night in my room.

Eli Langer's drawings were exhibited in London, Ontario at the Palace at 4 a.m., February 27 to March 9, 1996. They were part of a joint exhibition with Shary Boyle called "Drawing From Memory," curated by Sharon Switzer and Claire Sykes.

Scanning of Eli Langer's drawings courtesy of Claire Sykes.