

MOUSSE

“Charlie Prodger: Cardinal Beams” at Hollybush Gardens, London, 2024
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“Charlie Prodger: Cardinal Beams” at Hollybush Gardens, London, 2024 © Charlie Prodger. Courtesy: the artist and Hollybush Gardens, London. Photo: Andy Keate

“A novel wants to befriend you,” the writer Joy Williams once mused, “a short story almost never.”¹ This pithy observation on fiction typologies resonates for its interpretation of reading as an emotional experience, equal in pathos to human connection and mediated in intensity by textual structure. I had not heard Williams’s axiom until Charlie Prodger invoked it in conversation, using it to counter my aspersions on the short story, which I complained is too often abrupt in pacing, or sentimentally cheap. It was pleasantly disarming for Prodger to quote Williams—as we stood together in her exhibition at Hollybush Gardens, London. Indeed recalling the format of the short story, the show, titled *Cardinal Beams*, consisted solely of drawings that had been executed with quick concision, and were notably devoid of the intimacy signature to Prodger’s moving images and installations.

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At its most literal, Williams's aphorism, excerpted from the author's 2015 manifesto-like guidelines for short story writing,² casts short fiction in relational terms; it may not be friendly like the novel, but it still exists as part and parcel of a dynamic where brief flares of text have the power to impart lasting meaning. This line of thought—where brevity and subtlety are potent artistic agents in their own right—was particularly applicable to *Cardinal Beams*, a tight, muted presentation of seven colored-pencil drawings on paper (all 2024), each set in a simple white frame, none more than four feet in its greatest dimension, and all assigned ample wall space in the gallery's stark white cube.

Five of these were housed in the main gallery, and though every drawing depicted a different scene, they all contained the flavor of a still life. We saw a cluster of postcards lined up on a shelf in the honeyed New England light of Prodger's Cambridge studio during her Harvard residency; a nondescript white fabric-like object levitating in a cloudy deep-blue sky; the backside of an airplane seat from the vantage of a row behind, peeking between other seats at the safety pamphlet and in-flight magazine slashed by a slice of light from a slightly open window shade; and pale-skinned male genitalia juxtaposed with, in one instance, a lackluster entrance to a communal pool and, in the other, the detail of a secular stained glass window in a Saratoga Springs mansion at the artist residency Yaddo. For the most part, without explication, we don't understand the why of what we're seeing. At face value, a postcard on a shelf is just a postcard on a shelf.

This is a remarkable shift. Prodger has until now largely been known for her works in moving image, widely described as "video essays," an appellation that reinforces the aura of intimacy around her practice given the frequently intimate, confessional nature of essay writing. Alongside that work, Prodger simultaneously toyed with technology's capability to convey emotional fragility, for instance wielding an iPhone to record fragmented shots that she conflated in acuity to the searing pangs of an intense feeling. Compared to Prodger's videos, born as they are from the blurring of body, technology, and personal history—most prominently her trilogy *Stonemollan Trail* (2015), *BRIDGIT* (2016), and *SaF05* (2019)—these drawings appear benign, antiseptic, sterilized. Aesthetics alone aren't entirely to blame (although, for instance, the striations in the blue background of *Jasmin Untethered*, *November* are the visible lines of gridded paper, evidencing a prioritization of precision), nor is the adoption of a new medium or working process. Instead, the drawings comport a new sense of detachment, on par with reduced affect or emotional blunting. Like the short story, Prodger's drawings are not concerned with being your friend. Whereas the artist formerly embraced personal disclosure packaged in accelerated technology—the iPhone in *BRIDGIT* made the device, cupped in one's palm, an extension of the self with a seamless swoop of the arm—her process now deliberately implements a full stop between mind and body: "Drawing really is a different head space, because the way I make video is not production. I don't do a shoot and then do an edit; I'm shooting and editing at the same time, so I'm constantly thinking on a fundamental level. But if you're drawing, you make the decision about what the drawing is, and then you execute it."³

Prodger was awarded the Turner Prize in 2018 for *BRIDGIT*, which reflects through narrative storytelling on standard internet behaviors in alignment with themes of time, language, mythology, and queer existence. In many ways, *BRIDGIT* takes the form of the novel as defined by Williams (the prize jury described it as "meandering through disparate associations,"⁴ which parallels the genre's discursive written expression), whereas her recent drawings are rife with stories yet minimal in their telling. You have to dig through the tight offering to emotionally connect.

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That her near-comprehensive turn away from open vulnerability is coeval with a pull toward drawing (perhaps the oldest medium in the book) is telling. It implies that Prodger is venturing where other artists today are too hesitant (or too afraid) to wander. Even when she herself is attempting to explain this shift, she flounders to solidly locate the source of her impetus, instead floating various hypotheses. Possible causes she proposes include disdain for the tedium of barriers imposed by passwords and QR codes, or, alternatively, struggling to navigate the ongoing discourse around what supposedly legitimizes an artist's practice, the current benchmark being research-based pursuits. Time and again, Prodger returned to the ultimate reason of base intuition.

It begs the question of why other artists of similar standing have so fully bought into the bogus idea that constant engagement in frenzied debate on issues of the moment is required to maintain a relevant practice. (I'm thinking here of the current obsession with AI.) This is not to dismiss work facilitating genuine discussion with peers; the problem is that relentless talk around trending topics grows feverish, provoking a flood of slapdash artwork made from the need to compulsively insert one's commentary. Just as "post-internet" inundated the contemporary art conversation in the mid-aughts, where it was mulled to a point that eventually stymied any advancements of that movement's arguments, and NFTs more recently ignited a short-lived crisis in defining art, the question of AI has spawned incessant chatter and looped responses. It risks becoming a playground distracting from the actual act of making art.

Prodger bypasses this exercise entirely. It is worth noting that in our conversation, she did not remark on AI or the state of time- or technology-based art, instead citing an innate desire to "strip things back to the very direct relationship between the hand and the eye and the tool." In doing so, the medium of drawing forces critical distance in conceiving and then editing as the works develop. "There's two different stages: the concept, and then the doing," she elaborated, reinforcing the undertone of methodic restraint.

That said, Prodger is (to my mind, anyway) only seemingly eschewing the formative tenets of her two-decade career. Concealed in a more subdued form, the seven drawings on view in *Cardinal Beams* actually continue several central themes of her earlier work: mythology, intimacy, eroticism, fragmentation, language, and time. *Denim Telepathy* and *The Hypno-Domme Speaks* overlay sexually fraught imagery from Parthenon friezes onto tile patterns from Prodger's Glasgow renovation building, playing with perspective through the layering and using a heavily-smudged crayon—evocative of smeared lipstick—to create an added wax pastel flourish. *Arlington, August I* and *Arlington, August II* each juxtapose two images vertically within a single composition—these are the aforementioned man's groin in close frame above sketches of a community pool and the coiled rope motif of a stained glass window, respectively—echoing the layout of a film strip. They are both erotic (the man is engaged in an act of self-penetration) and fragmented; Prodger recently summarized her long-term interest in the convergence between the two plainly as "the erotics of fragmentation."

The artist goes back to the short stories when expounding on the exhibition as a whole: "When I look at the drawings now, they feel like maps, because I can remember listening to the audiobooks, and the narrative of each. When I look at that [gesturing to *Arlington, August I*], I remember the part of the Iris Murdoch story that I was listening to at that time. And his hands as well, I was listening to Murdoch while drawing his hands." The language Prodger employs here is intimate, the hand a potent romantic or sexual symbol and object, which likewise translates into the affinity one would naturally feel for the handwriting of a loved one. If the production of art is rooted in a shared language—the alphabet of which is the spectrum of human experience—Prodger's instinctive urge to draw is perhaps symptomatic of an exhaustion with the oversaturation and hyperactivity of our current era, both online and in aspects of art making. "I think it was quite good for my body—better than the computer. There was material pleasure. There's definitely a lot about time in these drawings. Because I listened to *so* many short stories. Some of them would take in the entire arc of someone's life, you know, and then in others, nothing seems to happen. All of that—all of these lives, all of these stories, so many people and places and actions—are embedded in these drawings."

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until October 26, 2024