

Wandering Eyes
Defining Meandering in the Static Objects of Miroslav Tichy and Dawn Clements

by Matthew Newton



Dawn Clements, *Lolas* (detail), 2005



Miroslav Tichy, *untitled*, undated

The quality of meandering flits about between my ears almost perpetually, spurred on by lurking appearances in a number of literary and visual works that I encounter. I see that it is there, imbedded in the idea construction -- even in the materiality -- of the works that most occupy my curiosity, but I haven't been able to describe its function or identify its form. Why has the idea of it so contaminated my thinking? What is it that I'm attracted to? It took two groups of hodegetrias, but not Mary's this time, Lolitas instead, to guide me to an excavation of meandering.

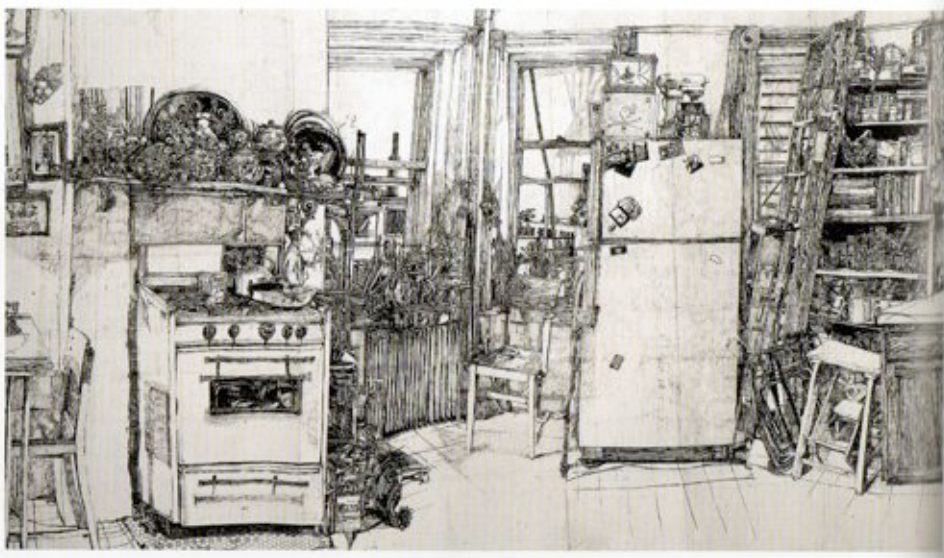


The first were those of Miroslav Tichy, an old, poorly dressed, unkempt man wandering the streets of his small Czech city with cobbled together boxes that he called cameras,

constantly pointing them at the town's young to middle-aged women. Surprisingly, the boxes were taking pictures, basic black on white light exposures; sideways hiding looks at attractive women or parts of them. It only took the New York Times reviewer three sentences into her article to make the comparison to Lola Haze's obsessor, Humbert Humbert. Not too surprising considering the compulsory and seemingly unending photo portraits of women-objects on display at the International Center of Photography. And yet the analogy felt broken. Humbert's obsession was one of containment, ownership, tracking a specific idolized prey and subduing it to fit his desire. Tichy's obsession (a term that will not do for much longer) was different. It follows, for sure, but it doesn't track and certainly doesn't seek to pin down or subsume. What is he doing exactly?

The plot thickened uptown with the artist Dawn Clements' drawing, also in graphic grayscale tones, sprawled twenty feet across its wall at the Whitney Biennial, far outstretching Tichy's hold-in-your-hand dirty icons but built completely with the micrometer-measured end of a ballpoint pen. Even as a whole, this was no rectangular monolith. Instead it was made of many jagged parts, both the paper support and the rendered imagery stitched together from smaller pieces added outward as the expanding drawing called for it. Clements, the Ivy League professor and Brooklyn studio artist, in some respects, couldn't seem farther from the aging Czech recluse; she uses different media, scale, and technique. But flipping through a catalogue of her work at the Boiler in Greenpoint, I find a humble image with a haphazard amalgamation of pretty female figures, thigh-high stockings, lingerie, and tightly bound breasts scattered about and crammed together on the page. The title: *Lolas*.

Neither artist makes a direct connection to Nabakov's pre-teen. In fact the differences weigh much more than the similarities. Clements' Lolas are scrawled from Fassbinder's flick of the same name and Tichy's women are without individual identity or singularity of obsession. But here in Clements' oeuvre, just as in Tichy's, were female bodies looked at closely and repeatedly, often sexually. However, the images of both artists stayed on the surface of the female forms they presented. Clements was not illustrating the story of Lola or the complications of her lifestyle, she simply repeatedly recorded her legs, breasts, and hairdos in the various ways they appeared on screen. Tichy didn't reveal a portrait through commitment to someone's habits and biography. We only see ghosts that appear long enough to have their curves captured before slipping back into anonymity. Likewise, though often sexy, neither artists' work can be seen as leading to sex. Again, we are left with surface only, mapping a place without ever setting foot on shore, orbiting at a distance at which we are held by gravity but never land.



Dawn Clements, *Kitchen and Bathroom* (detail), 2004

These and other complicated qualities of the meandering habit began to illuminate. The force that pushed Clements' drawings to monumental scale without creating an air of

domination; the same force that led Tichy on a multi-decade pursuit of a narrow image; the plurality blended into singularity; this quality of wandering, something akin to scientific research but without pragmatism and without an end, this was the quiet but distinctive presence holding my attention. And once stumbling into the arbitrary overlap of Tichy's and Clements' women, the consonance and dissonance between their works, the expansion, the drift, the fidelity, all of these many qualities of meandering shook up to the surface. How do their images activate it? How does one's static art objects turn from fixed to sentient? What is it about the way they see?

Philandering and Fidelity

To meander is to respond to a structure greater than one's self and immovable. The source and personality of that structure, whether from within or without, whether benevolent or hostile, is undetermined in the most basic sense. It could be as benign as a system of city blocks or as charged as the oppressive rules of a dictatorial regime. In either case, the meander is defined by how one responds to the structure and one's mobility continues to function within and through the assumed limitations. What is the engine of the mobility? What pushes one forward within systemic confinements? Both Tichy and Clements seem to traverse with a simultaneous desire to be restricted and to roam.

To recognize a structure as a limitation is to be an outsider to that structure. And yet there must be some gravity that holds one to it, that asks of one to engage it as an outsider, to respond to its imposition, to deal with the constraint it places on one's ability

to move freely and at will rather than disengage with it altogether. Here we can point out that Miroslav Tichy's career began and continued for many years under the aggressively normalizing rules of Soviet expansion in Czechoslovakia. Without a full exposition of the political history, it will suffice to note that his work as a young abstract painter and that of his contemporaries was forcefully muted in favor of social realism. Tichy continued to be harassed for much of his career by suspicious eyes and conforming authorities.

And while Tichy's quiet and reclusive disengagement with social norms can be read appropriately as responsive actions to the imposition of authority, a meandering resistance, it appears that his relationship to rules takes a much more severe and intrinsic turn into his own psyche evidenced by the images he allows and doesn't allow himself to make.



Miroslav Tichy, *untitled*, undated

There is a portion of Tichy's photographs that seem to escape the dominate narrative of a man wondering the streets of his hometown faithfully and dutifully recording the living female models around him. Although they seem to be ignored in essays, there is a bank of images that were not photographed on the street but from the television screen and printed advertisements. Mostly these photographs are pornographic, soft-porn at least, showing not just women walking along or the outline of a swim suit, but also breasts and crotches uncloaked, erotic clothing, women who are obviously presented as models and not going about daily errands. The sets of images are framed similarly by Tichy as his others, treated with the same dishevelment, blurred, without any real personality, etc. However, the images captured from second hand sources, specifically a time-based source that can be paused, are more directly sexualized and represent an opportunity to make an image that for Tichy doesn't exist otherwise. The blossoming of sexual experience from the enticement of covered form to the actuality and performance of biology, however scripted, is a development both too real and too fantastical to be allowed unmediated.

Tichy's self-imposed limits to pleasure are palpable and unyielding. Like a slacker eunuch, his fidelity to avoiding actual sexual experience in the open is unquestioned, except that in an interior, controlled, and pre-fabricated environment, he looks across the divide and consumes the experience to the degree he is able. Tichy's images from the street teem with self-repression and with faithfulness to a law that is only in his own head. And like so many others, he restricts his blank-firing philandering to secondhand sources like pornography and posters as much as his photographs are secondhand ogling

for his viewers. He never breaks his code because it is as rigid in his mind as gravity. It doesn't matter whether or not he likes the law, it just is. His response is a lifetime of wandering in every possible crevice or loophole in and around the rule of law, capturing impotent fragments of infidelity. On the spectrum of his philandering, Tichy's photographs of the television screen are the portal to an extravagant pole.

Clements also takes images from stilled televisions as a way of expanding her perspective on a self-limited world of quotidian surroundings. For her, the television provides a window to a fabricated approximate world to her own, giving perspective on the one she occupies otherwise. She seeks out in movies the same types of spaces she renders around her, interior dwellings. From the vantage point of her bed, for example, she draws everything she can see in the room. Or, starting with the flowers on the table, she draws outwardly an eventually has captured the table, the other stuff on it, the floor, the wallpaper, the paintings on the wall, everything within eye's reach. Like Tichy's wandering of city streets, Clements' eye wanders around the room absorbing what it bumps into and processing it onto the paper in a new organization.

For Clements, like Tichy, the imaginative space of the stilled television sits within and vibrates against a banal daily viewing habit. She removes herself from the context of her daily surroundings by removing the imaginary image from its sequential context. The transmitted space is caught, extracted, and put in or beside the new context of a personal world to reveal information about each. Of using movie stills Clements says, "The movie spaces are beautiful fantasy spaces, lovely interiors... For such a long time my only

working space was my kitchen table, and the TV became a window to some other kind of world. I wanted to make a connection between myself and this fantasy representation of women. I wanted to make a shift between that fantasy world and my world."



Dawn Clements, *Smoking Room (Titanic)*, 1953, 2006

This desire to have another view differs from escapism. In particular, it is a habit of stopping something, freezing an image to examine it out of context. By halting the otherwise moving image, Clements becomes the activated agent. The 'rules of the world' are suddenly locked into place and she can begin her investigative roaming. The image is cut from its context but Clements herself is also outside of her normal contextual existence. Like Tichy to sexual indulgence, Clements can now wander in a landscape in which she doesn't belong and that she can't touch, but a place where she is nevertheless allowed to look. Interestingly, Clements' meandering of the still movie frame often takes a different form than that of her interiors. For example, in "Lolas," her drawing is no longer a faithful recording of the world as it is presented. Instead she extracts Lola again and again, abandoning most of her surroundings and leaving the figure to populate the

drawing through multiplicity. The investigation is no longer of the contained world but of the person.

Through this operation, Clements remains wed to the 'rule' of pure observation but in an artificial place. The movie provides a heightened visual experience that she can approach as an alien on exploration while always tethered, even grounded, in her domesticity. She chooses artifacts at will to bring back into her recorded world and leaves others behind. Her drawings of interiors always allow a freedom of movement, but the movie stills in particular seem to reveal gaps in the rules enough for her habits of observation and representation to flex in unexpected ways.

Expansiveness and Depth

To meander is to have no end. Lacking destination means meandering can never be called travel because no matter how far you go, there you are. The borders of the place called 'here' are never crossed but only widened by one's movement. Clements' drawings are nearly illustrative of this point. As her vision expands, (refrigerator to window to stool to corner to oven) she attaches paper to allow the drawing to grow, but more interestingly, very rarely allows the drawing to meet the edge of the surface. Unlike a globe that always has another side or a map that will always crop an area, Clements' drawings allow the viewer to point to a singular contained thing within the limits of the drawing, no matter how expansive, granular, or multi-faceted it is. When meandering serves this function, seals the parameters, disables mapping, it collapses expansion upon itself turning it from outward growth to static downward excavation. That unsure

relationship of expansiveness and depth finds permanent residence in the meandering object.



How can one say when the expansion or deepening of an idea or image has had its fill when there are no boundaries? Clements describes the situation:

"Sometimes I will enter into a piece with a very specific intention, though there's a lot of wiggle room within that intention. But, really, I can stop when I want to... It

sounds like I've got very easy ways out but, certainly, things fail sometimes." Clements' expanding drawings are no longer in the business of finding an end,

illustrating an idea, or solving a problem. Often the drawings stop when she reaches the other end of the

room she is rendering. Success or failure is not

predicated on solving the rectangle even though she is making drawings on paper. The viewer is left with the

unanswered and unanswerable question, why draw with such rigor some things and leave other things out? The

decision may not be fully arbitrary but it is indiscernible after completion. Because

everything is contained by an indeterminate law as well as the edge of the paper, the

drawings flatten and collapse upon themselves to a place where each thing could

potentially equal another or be crowded by something else, no matter how fully rendered

and hyperreal the drawing becomes, no matter how much the drawing expands outward.

That abstraction confuses our ability to interpret things into symbols imbued with meaning.

The stuff of Clements' interiors do not appear to be referential to anything greater or less than exactly what they are and certainly not anything outside of the place they are housed. Or, their identity is dispersed completely by the jolting disorientation of a drawing that could continually expand outward but is constantly collapsing into formality and granularity. In her drawing with ballpoint pen from 2004, *Bed*, it appears that she is tightly rendering the top surface of a floral print comforter and maybe a few throw pillows. As your eye takes in the baroque pattern and moves across the drawing you find the form of a stuffed animal on the bed that was almost invisible before, steamrolled by the flatness of the drawing and lost in the depth of the rendered forms but as obviously present as anything else. This even-handed processing of images puts a cool distance between the things we see and what they signify. Though very much hand-crafted, the meandering eye functions like a machine unable to assign meaning to the objects it encounters.

In a similar way, Tichy's multi-decade practice, roaming the streets of Kyjov and recording female bodies, collapses into a singular time capsule. This is partly due to his penchant for homemade cameras and damaged prints which make almost anything look dated. However, it's not so much that these photographs look old, rather they appear to be small blips of a way of looking at the world that could continue indefinitely. Even if it took forty years to compile all of these images, one could imagine the catalogue

unfolding for much longer and becoming even more nuanced. Like Clements, there seems to be no destination to reach and no boundary on how far Tichy's images could expand outward. His meandering is mobilized without a break shaft.



Miroslav Tichy, *untitled*, undated

Like the objects within Clements' drawings that lose their identities and meanings, Tichy's photographs are not individual works but documents scooped up while looking. We aren't able to look into the identities of women, we just have nameless bodies, undated and untitled facsimiles. Naming one photograph anything but a reference identification makes no sense and we are unable to assign meaning that separates one from another. The photographs don't ask that we look ever more deeply into them to find

their substance, they bleed outward asking for the company of similar images to expand the theme. The only thing to be found within the images are abstracted, blurred, and damaged forms and the frustration of physical enticement without gratification. Tichy's habit of looking always needs another place to go, another body to record. At the moment when no more images are to be found, when expansion ceases, the entire canon collapses into singularity and a dive into the depths of abstraction and unsatisfied longing will be the only place left to go. In this sense, Tichy is making only one work of art. One may be able to hold a Tichy photograph in their hands, but the photograph is almost meaningless unless understood as one frame in the moving image of his life's work.



Dawn Clements, *Katarina and Ludwig (The Lost Honor of Katarina Blum, 1975)*

Defining and Concluding

To meander is to define, to craft a definition of the thing one meanders within and around. It is starting from a small level and slowly building on and around until an image

of the thing appears. This is a separate operation from illustrating which holds the final view in mind and works to find the most efficient means of transmitting that idea. As such, Tichy and Clements both start from a place of impulse, responding to something small and eventually finding themselves with something massive. And yet that massive thing still cannot be a stand in for whatever was originally pursued. They have made a simulacrum but the original will never be completely known through the work. Their efforts do nothing to stop simple visual pleasures around us from fading and disappearing. Instead, the work is a frozen moment of places and things that are no longer there. They define to the flow of time which simultaneously allows room for their research to expand and erodes their source material from beneath them, like walking across a bridge that crumbles with your step. Except that the bridge does not connect to a safe and solid other side. In meandering, the act of concluding means forfeiting, quitting, arbitrarily and suddenly giving up on the task of defining before the definition is complete.