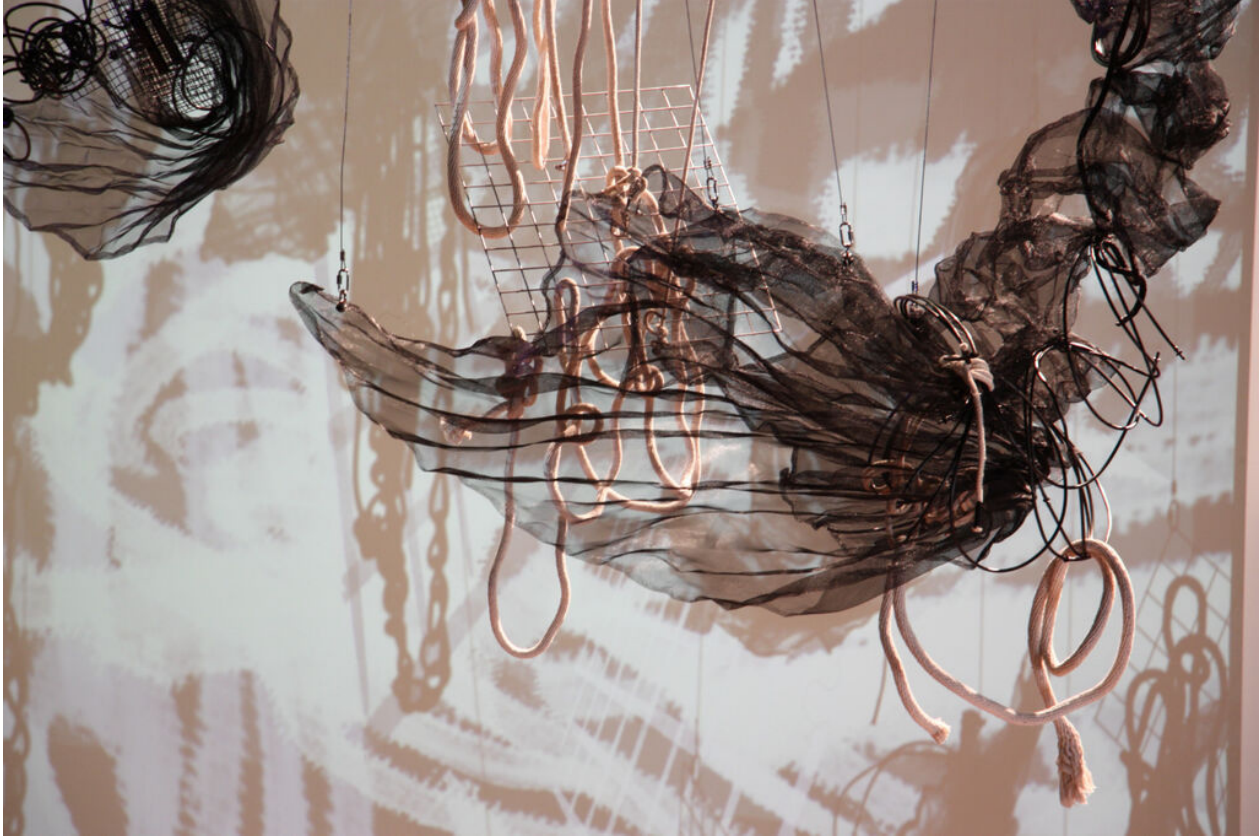


Lisa Woolfe

Birds

Casula Powerhouse Arts Centre

17 June – 15 October 2023



Installation view, *Birds*, Casula Powerhouse Arts Centre, 2023

Drawing! Shout it out!

Catalogue essay by Amber Boardman

If I were to write an essay—as concise as possible—that would convey the feeling I get when I look over Lisa Woolfe's art practice, *Drawing! Shout it out!* might encapsulate it. Fully aware that I've already used my quota of exclamation points, I'll try, nonetheless, to convey the ecstatic qualities I see in Lisa's work and the enthusiasm I feel when looking at it.

If you happen to be one of those folks who prefers to look briefly at art and then head straight over to an essay or wall text before digesting the work, you may wonder why I'm talking about drawing at all. When you enter Woolfe's *Birds* exhibition in the great turbine hall at Casula Powerhouse Arts Centre, you'll encounter a large installation suspended above you. This mass of semi-transparent shapes, sharp grids, and looped lines appears quite sculptural. Ambient wind currents create subtle movement within the structures. Projected lines light the work and cast shifting shadows on the wall. From the Turbine Hall balcony more details come into focus. These suspended bird forms are made of crimped and twisted bushfire mesh and insect screen, ropes, irrigation pipe, building lattice grids and fastening hardware parts. *Birds* is as if in a post-apocalyptic existence—once survival needs had been met—someone couldn't help but tinker with these everyday materials in search of beauty amidst the cataclysm.

One of the things I admire most about Woolfe is her ability to gently coax me into reimagining something I thought I understood. Having devoted my life to artmaking I assumed I could easily say, “Drawing. Yup. I know what drawing is.” As an undergraduate studying art in America one of my teachers said something twenty years ago that I still think about a lot today, “Drawing is about line and painting is about shape”. But Lisa upends this idea by finding new ways to work with line, to defy line. To bust out of the frame created by the edges of the paper while inquiring “What else can drawing be? What else can drawing do?”

If you were to watch a time-lapse film of Lisa’s studio practice over the last 5 years, it would begin with some charcoal drawings on paper taped to a wall in a small studio. As the film progresses and the drawings expand you would see them bust out of the paper, onto the wall and start to twist out into the room. The charcoal lines become curved black poly pipe and ropes. The smudges on the page morph into transparent grey bushfire mesh. By the end of the timelapse Lisa has broken down the walls of her studio, and the drawings stretch out into the hallway, past the storage area, uncontained.

What we’re witnessing in this exhibition are drawings in space; unfolded, off the page, and protruding into three dimensions. The source material for these ‘drawings in space’ comes from sketches Woolfe made while studying a family of ravens at the end of her yard, which serves as the dividing line between her suburban neighbourhood and a nature reserve. Much of Lisa’s work explores the tension between the ways we seem to enjoy the natural world and all of the ways we try to keep it contained at a safe distance. This is why she uses fencing, pipes and screens as her art materials—devices meant to direct or control nature.

Her work also describes a tension between the visible and the invisible world; there are forces we know exist in the world but we can’t see them: gravity, movement, and chaos. This interest in invisibilia places her within a field of contemporary artists who are also making giant public artworks that show unseeable forces at play, like Sarah Sze, Alice Aycock, and Judy Pfaff.

Reaching back much further: while in the process of creating the work for *Birds*, Lisa came across some sketches from Leonardo da Vinci’s musings on the flight path of birds, where he attempted to envisage how currents of air behave like fluid. She felt affirmed when she realized even five hundred years later, artists are still fascinated by the same concepts.

As you move around the *Birds* exhibition, your perspective changes and new compositions form. She’s challenging our perception of what we’re seeing by making negative space visible and by freezing motion in time. This work is doing what art does best, getting us to rethink something we think we already know. This is drawing.