Top draw: artists pushing the boundaries of drawing

If you could draw anything, what would it be? Three exhibitions showcase exciting and varied approaches that go far beyond traditional drawing practice.

Room Without a View: Gosia Wlodarczak resides inside a black box on which she draws what she sees. Photograph: RMIT Gallery

There's always a tendency in art to push ideas to their limit. While more conservative artists and their followers are happy to paddle in the predictable shallows of generic art making, braver souls are willing to dissolve the limits of their chosen form. A trio of exhibitions currently on show in Melbourne, Sydney and Canberra suggest that even drawing is an idea that's up for grabs.
eX de Medici's career survey show Cold Blooded at the Drill Hall Gallery in Canberra is a bravura display of the artist's formidable technique. From early black and white pieces to her well known and more recent colour works, Medici's various works on paper and vellum are hyper-detailed, maximal images that pile
up symbols of war like guns and helmets alongside symbols of peace such as flowers and doves to create eye-boggling, large-scale pieces. They have the appearance of drawing because of their hard, illustrative edges but they are created using watercolour on paper and vellum. The artist’s training as a tattooist is evident in both subject matter and treatment. Tattooing is an art form in its own right, but it is too a kind of drawing. In Medici’s work you get the sense of a very careful hand at work and, while it has the unsubtle directness of street art, it certainly gets it point across.

Cold Blooded: eX de Medici’s show in Canberra is a bravura display of the artist’s formidable technique Photograph: Rob A Little/Drill Hall Gallery

The blurring of the boundaries between drawing and painting is tackled in Saif Almurayati’s Departed And Gone To The Unseen, at Janet Clayton Gallery in Sydney. Almurayati, an Iraqi-born artist who migrated to Australia in 1998, has taken the rich tradition of Islamic calligraphy and applied it in large-scale paintings where an undulating sea of words creates abstract expanses of colour and line. Drawing and writing are closely related, activities of the hand and wrist, and Almurayati gives his paintings the feel of calligraphy mixed with the uncertainty of abstract paintings. But it’s in the sculptural pieces that something really interesting emerges. In Praxis and Melancholia’s Halo, the artist has drawn/painted onto pieces of wood; the result looking like a combination of an ancient object, and those lonely rocks in the Australian bush where passers-by record their names or initials. In this kind of drawing, the sacred and the everyday mix quite happily.
Room Without a View: Gosia Wlodarcza's work is a densely layered knot of lines that look a bit like superimposed 3D computer drawings. Photograph: RMIT Gallery

I first discovered the work of Gosia Wlodarczak when she was one of the finalists for the now defunct Dobell Prize for Drawing – I wonder if Wlodarczak had won the prize, once one of the most exciting in the country, it would still be with us. Wlodarczak is now staging two consecutive performances of her rather brilliant drawing-performance pieces.

At the RMIT Gallery is Room Without A View in which the artist, from 10.30am until 5pm every day (until July 5) resides inside a big black box. She draws what she sees onto the surface of the box, in this case the outside of the gallery, people who come to look, her own shadows and lines, in fact anything that enters her visual field. The result is a densely layered knot of lines that look a bit like superimposed 3D computer drawings, or technical blueprints. Drawing using a silver paint pen, Wlodarczak's lines have a technical feel but are rich with details that can be picked out by a patient eye. After the performance part of the show at RMIT visitors can see the result of her performance until August 17, while from July 16 until August 4, Wlodarczak can be found in the Soiree Bar at Sofitel Sydney Wentworth from Tuesday to Sunday afternoons.

An ability to draw is one of those ideas that the general public shares with the more conservative quarters of the art world. The problem with that idea, like most widely held opinions, is that it tends to severely limit just what a drawing can be. I suppose the question is: if you could draw anything, what would you draw? And how? What's interesting about these artists is that while they're pushing the limits of what many people would even consider drawing, they're also exploring something essential – their responses to the world.