

MATTHEW ATTARD

Matthew Attard is a visual artist currently reading for a practice-based PhD research at the Edinburgh College of Art, funded by the Malta Arts Scholarship scheme. Situating his work within the realm of contemporary drawing, he explores the extension of the 'line' within 3D spaces, the phenomenology of perception, datafication, drawing as a cyborg in dialogue with technology, the challenging of the use of data and technology, and provocations about how we represent ourselves today. He holds a Masters degree from the Digital Arts Department, University of Malta, and in 2009 worked with the Peggy Guggenheim Collection and the USA Pavilion at the Venice Biennale. His work has been shown in Venice, Rome, Valletta, Genoa, London, Beijing and Los Angeles among other cities. In 2014, he was invited by Galleria Michela Rizzo to collaborate in the bi-personal show, *In Between/Viewpoints*, with artist Rashad Alakbarov. In 2017 he was selected for the 3rd edition of the Le Latitudini dell'Arte Biennale at the Palazzo Ducale in Genoa. In 2018 he was awarded the Under 30 Euromobil prize at ArteFiera, Bologna. In 2019 he was selected for a third time to exhibit during *Ten Artists to Watch* at LACDA, Los Angeles Centre for Digital Arts. He was also present during the collective show *Soglie e Limiti*, curated by Elena Forin at Galleria Michela Rizzo, Venice. In 2019 he was also selected to participate in *Artissima Telephone* at the OGR spaces in Turin, taking place during the Artissima Art Fair. Most recently, Attard has been shortlisted for the Lumen Prize 2021. Before the show's opening, Attard spoke with Ann Dingli, discussing his research and contents for his solo exhibition at Valletta Contemporary (VC).

Ann Dingli (AD): To start with, can you talk about your work for this new show. Would you say it's mainly digital?

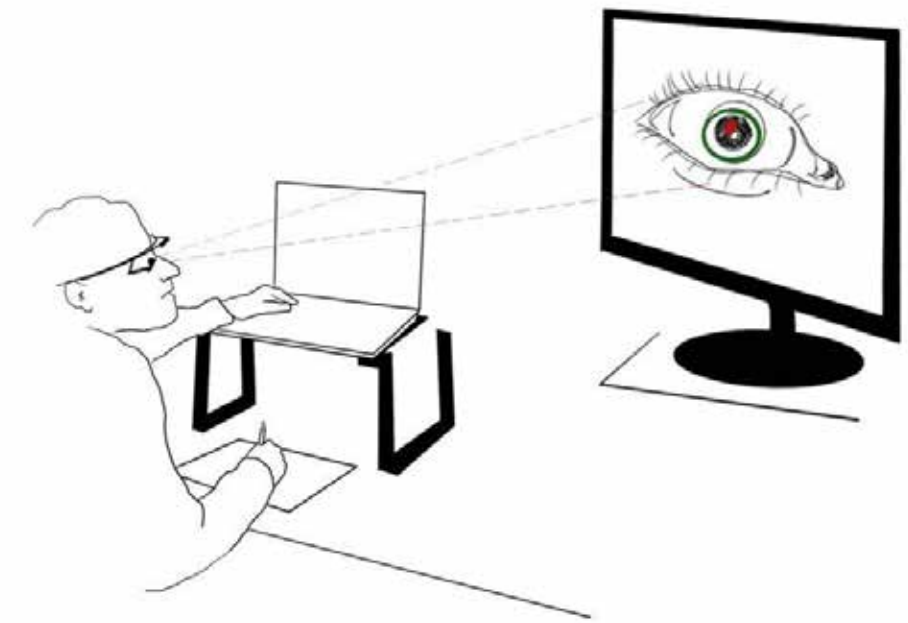
Matthew Attard (MA): The way I'd describe my work would be simply as drawings – or rather – drawing with an eye-tracker. Whether hand or digital – they're working in parallel. My work with the eye-tracker started with my Master's in Digital Arts, which I completed here at the University of Malta in 2018, with Vince Briffa – so a very exploratory course. At the time I was exploring how to draw with the eye-tracker, and along the way I found out that other artists had tried to make use of it, but in very different ways. Their equipment was also different. But the initial interest behind it from my part was strictly related to drawing. In a sense, it was about hacking the methodology of drawing in itself. Whenever you read about drawing, you're reading about hand-eye coordination, and in this case, I removed the hand from the equation – so it started within those parameters. This also included the acknowledgment that a scientific device was going to be explored creatively. So the Master's was all about this exploration into how it could be done.

From there, I dove into my PhD – which is a practice-based PhD and which I was able to do with the support of the Malta Arts Scholarship. I chose Edinburgh because the university has a very interdisciplinary approach. Technology is at the fore. Bev Hood, my main supervisor specialises in embodiment and its relationship with technology and comes from the school of design, while Ruth Pelzer-Montada, my co-supervisor, specialises in printing and comes from

the school of art – so for me this interdisciplinary advisory team is perfect. That's how it all started. But the moment I began my PhD, Covid hit. So, being practice-based, I had to either adapt to that context, or ask for an extension – which I didn't want to do. I'm treating the PhD as a testing ground, experimenting with work I would have explored anyway, but it's a bit more intense.

AD: I want to go back a bit. You talk about subverting the process of drawing by removing the hand from the act. Do you do this as a study into the mechanical aspect of drawing, or the psychological? Are you trying to understand how intuition or coordination works, or is it purely a physical study?

MA: I think my Master's work featured the mechanical, but now I'm more interested in the drawing itself. The drawing and the embodiment nature with the technology are on the podium. The process itself is so unpredictable, I see it as a dialogue between the machine and the person, as though the machine is an extension of the arm. There's an extension that's happening, and this extension is changing my psychology while it's happening. Drawing is always about seeing and looking, and that was part of my initial interest in this subject. Every time we talk about drawing, we're talking about a different way of looking. Theoretically there's a lot of writing on this – it's not new. In terms of drawing, we can go back to perspective in the Renaissance and talk about that new way of seeing and looking. So, in reality, this is not an alien exercise, but this technology is making things newly possible.



To a certain point, I'm drawing as a cyborg. But it's not a science-fiction cyborg. We're cyborgs even when we use our phones, or sunglasses, or spectacles. So, I'm taking that theoretical angle. I'm drawing with the machine, rather than 'using' the machine. There's a constant dialogue. And the machine is not just about the electrical tool. There are two stages – the performative act of me standing somewhere and drawing, trying to control my gaze, or not, and drawing. And then there's the post-processing aspect of it, where I'm trying to interpret what I would have recorded and use that as the drawing. So, it is digital. It starts from a digital base, but then I'm using a plotter to re-draw it.

AD: In the first stage – the performative stage – do you ever use other people to draw, or is it always you?

MA: In the show I will – okay, this is complex! It's still being worked out. So far, in my PhD, it's just me and the eye-tracker, but in the exhibition it will vary. Firstly, the show is a solo show, curated by Elyse Tonna – but it's also going to include other artists. When Norbert [Francis Attard, Gallery Director] gave me the opportunity to use the whole gallery I knew I wanted to have a solo that included works from other artists, but with very specific works that reinforce viewpoints and arguments of the central theme. The show will be a sort of journey. But to come back to your question – the other artists' work won't be connected with the eye-tracker.

Another layer involves the project room upstairs. Here, I'll use the space slightly separately to my show. It will be curated by Margerita Pulè and we'll have six artists using the eye-tracker with respect to their own work. It will be a collaborative installation; I'll be providing the equipment and the parameters in which the artists will be working in, and the work will be video-based not drawing-based. The eye-tracker here is used purely as an eye-tracker, so not in the way I'm subverting it. So almost like eye-trackers are used in marketing, by scanning people's gaze in front of adverts.

During Covid, my bedroom became my studio again. I feel as though I had to take advantage of that context. Initially, I was following the same trajectory I was on in my Masters' course. So, looking at what I could see using the eye-tracker – *what can I see around me?* For example, I would draw my hand often, and this is where I was going. Throughout this the literature I was reading was cognitive based, and even looking at the eye-tracker as a tool in the study of art, one of the most famous experiments using the eye-tracker was conducted in the sixties in front of a painting. I was reading about this experiment that had this *Clockwork Orange*-like machinery, with a very influential psychologist having patients gaze at a rapid painting while he asked them questions – for example, how old do you think this painting is? He realised that there were different eye trajectories for this conditioning.

But although this was all interesting, this wasn't my central focus. The truth is, at this stage in my work, it's still all a process of questioning. Questioning how, from drawing using a pencil I can now draw with my eyes, with the eye-tracker.

AD: There's a long lineage between the eye-tracker and the artist's tools. It's related to the chisel.

MA: Yes. It's a tool. That's a question then – at some point the chisel stops being a chisel. You think with it.

AD: I'm thinking of Richard Sennet's *The Craftsman*, and he talked about craft as an extension of person. This feels similar.

MA: Yes. Let's take for example the appearance of a car. It's a vehicle, it has a function. At some point you start driving it, and it becomes your body. If it doesn't, then you're probably going to crash. If you're not understanding it, if it doesn't extend from you, it's a problem. The moment you embody our tools/technology, they become an extension of the mind – a philosophy which has been widely promoted by Andy Clark and David Chalmers.

AD: So there seems to be an idea here of revising intuition, or at minimum as extension of purely corporeal intuition. Is this right?

MA: I guess one might say that in certain cases. For example, I began using the eye-tracker while carrying out mundane activities in the house – cooking, brushing my teeth, staring at the ceiling. These became doodling moments with my eyes. I was finding these mundane moments where I would try to subvert the natural movement of my eyes due to the awareness that I was using a machine. I found this way of doodling out of mundane activities to be very interesting.

AD: Did you find yourself editing your behaviour because of this realisation?

MA: Yes, of course. It's a constantly tense challenge. You're wearing these glasses on your face. You always know they are there, although at some point, they do vanish – like when you're wearing normal sunglasses. You forget about them. But you don't really forget about the psychology of using them.

I eventually started to read more about the eye-tracker and how it gives us data. I read this very interesting article by Jonathan Crary, where it speaks about the eye-tracker as a spy – which is interesting to me in terms of my earlier body of work. I am interested in the way he talks about how big data from the eye-tracker has conditioned us to make decisions, even at a supermarket. Crary explains how eye-catching objects, as studied through an eye-tracker, don't always equate with value, they are just attention grabbing; and how we are not aware of this. So these ideas became interesting theoretically.

Obviously, I'm using the eye-tracker for drawing, but I delved into literature about AI – looking at how it's neither artificial nor intelligent, the effects of big data and so on. These readings are all on the side-lines. This all impacts the plan of the show.

AD: Does the show similarly take viewers on this meandering physical and theoretical journey?

MA: I've tried to tie everything to the local context. It's my first solo show in Malta, so I began to question how I could use the eye-tracker to make work in a critical way. So not just an exhibition about the act of eye drawing. The work began to take a socio-political path. Even the name of the show – *rajt ma rajtx... naf li rajt* – holds commentary. This is also where a massive curatorial input was ignited with Elyse [Tonna], running throughout the show.

The title itself hits two notes. It is deriving from the oral tradition, *rajt ma rajtx, smajtx ma smajtx*, which more or less refers to the idea of pretending not to have seen nor heard something for the sake of staying out of trouble. The second note regards my dialogue with the eye-tracker. The device is fictionally characterised throughout the show, and it is replying that it knows what I saw referring to my gaze data it constantly records.

AD: When you talk about the data the eye-tracker is giving you, in relation with the proverbial link to the show's title, it leads to a discussion on 'truth'. Does the eye-tracker bring ultimate truth?

MA: The eye-tracker makes a lot of mistakes – especially in view of the fact that many times I use it incorrectly – and therefore there are a lot of multifaceted layers to this. I'm not using it in a binary way of true or false – especially since I'm also assigning cultural views to it. This is why I decided to tie the exhibition to the local scene – or rather – context: it's my background and where I grew up. So the nature of the show is very multifaceted. There's reference to global and local contexts, art, allegories, data and technology among others – readings which are presented through the practice of drawing with an eye-tracker, or rather of embodying and being in constant dialogue with a technological device.

