



## OUTLINE + SHADOW = **SILHOUETTE**

What's in a silhouette? Usually not much or else everything, that is, everything essential. The concept of a silhouette can seem simultaneously fundamental and ordinary. In his *Natural History*, the ancient Roman author Pliny the Elder claimed that the first art work was made when a father preserved the likeness of his daughter's departing lover by tracing an outline of the man's shadow on a wall. The word itself is the name of a mid-18<sup>th</sup> century French finance minister, Étienne de Silhouette, known for his picayune economic policies, hence it became a term applied in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century to anything done cheaply, and it was at that time the cheapest way to get a portrait likeness, simple but somehow ghost-like.

Pre-historic cave dwellers painted silhouettes of the animals of their hunt, presumably wanting to control it. For **Louise Laplante**, it's the meaning of the words found in her collage of antique book pages or letters that sends her toward a particular silhouetted form. She feels that the lack of specificity in a silhouette gives her more control, control to make up her own story, create movement in a way that also allows viewers an imaginative power of their own. The swirling lines around her deeply embedded silhouette shapes are made with an eraser, eroding the firm boundaries of the figure and resulting in an unnerving dispersion of energy.

Silhouettes can involve a play, occasionally a conflict, between the abstract and the real, as with the decline of silhouette portraiture in the later 19<sup>th</sup> century at the time of the advent of photography when a sense of the elemental was interrupted by a new found pleasure in both the details and the immediacy of everyday life. (Silhouettes were for girls and the dead.) **Ali Osborn** is curious about the relation of distance and proximity in a silhouette: what can be seen or sensed from afar may be quite different, more abstract, from what's conveyed up close and is more particular. Ali's art work often grows from the detailed perimeter of an image which he minutely articulates before feeling confident to fill it in.

Today a silhouette can be a fashion statement, presenting a strongly illuminated or outlined figure in a stylized manner. The ancient admiration of a seemingly eternal profile portrait on coins and medals is thus offset by a 21<sup>st</sup> century interest in constantly changing style and connotation. This modern sensibility appeals to **Chelsea Granger**. She is amazed how much information simple silhouettes of people can reveal—race, psychology, sociology, habits and customs. At the same time she acknowledges that observers can wonder if her outline drawings show people dancing together, or, conversely, portray figures who have trouble connecting.

Silhouettes convey a range of meanings and also require a good amount of skill. For **The Children's Storefront students**, it's challenging not just to draw a person or an animal but to draw one contained within a single outline and thus, to their surprise, learn about the power of art even before the time of Jesus Christ. And then there's the lively and insatiable urge to use color to fill in the blanks or to try to guess just whose silhouette is whose (can you?). The students' silhouette-based short i-movies range uncannily from threatening to reassuring, taking you to eternity or not keeping my eyes off you, the shadow of death vs. love in the shadows.

Silhouettes hover between a primitive fear of the visual, or in fact of life, a disturbing ambiguity of interpretation, and a profound human need to communicate without words, before words in fact, directly, visually with relatively simple shapes, to overcome fear with a new kind of magic. So the strikingly specific imprint of a malformed hand in a cave painting can stand for this artist's burgeoning awareness of his own creative powers, and also be a telling reminder of human frailty and imperfection. Or, as in a *New Yorker* cartoon, one of two pre-historic men crouched behind a rock, faced with a giant mammoth and armed only with a small spear, says to the other: "How about we go back to the cave and paint this one?"