

Art Gallery of NSW 'Drawing Out' exhibition shows how sketches reveal more than words

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French poet and essayist, Paul Valery, said that drawing required "a sustained act of will" – but any child can pick up a pencil and draw with pleasure. The act of drawing, which keeps growing less definable, is both simple and difficult. Simple because anyone can make a mark, difficult because it requires unstinting practice to make marks that convey a true impression of what the draughtsman has seen and felt.

A successful drawing captures forms that are registered by the retina but transformed by thought. Among artists, it requires a symbiosis of eye, mind and hand achieved only by those who are willing to devote long hours to this most primary of skills.

This was brought home to me when I took part in a life-drawing class in connection with an exhibition of Robin Wallace-Crabbe's work. Although I had been writing about art for decades and was confident I could recognise and analyse a good drawing, this didn't mean I could execute one. No matter how resolutely I concentrated on the model or the paper, the line that appeared was hard and lifeless, quite unlike the fluent swaths of charcoal blooming on nearby sketchpads.

Looking is automatic but seeing has to be learned. To translate one's impressions into an image on paper or another surface is akin to learning a language. One may get by with a few crude words and phrases but fluency arrives only with constant practice.

For centuries, drawing was the foundation of art education, faltering momentarily in the 1960s and 70s, when so-called "progressive" art schools encouraged spontaneous self-expression and conceptualism. Soon drawing would return, driven by the needs and demands of students who felt short-changed by courses that didn't provide them with the building blocks of their vocation.

However, the resurgence of drawing was also a reinvention. In the conventional academic education of the past a student was required to make painstaking studies from plaster casts before moving on to the life model. No one was allowed to pick up a paintbrush until their drawing skills had reached a level of competence that satisfied their masters.

This system remained in place in the Soviet Union and China long after it had been abandoned, as an unbearable constraint on artistic freedom, in Western countries. When artists began to creep out from behind the Iron Curtain in the 1980s, audiences were astonished by the technical skill they possessed. It was clear that all those drawing classes had not crippled Soviet and Chinese artists' creativity: they had bestowed a set of tools that allowed them to express an idea with exceptional force and clarity.

Nowadays it is axiomatic that no one has ever suffered from taking drawing lessons. Although conscientious students might find they had acquired techniques and skills that became habits, the best of them were able to break free of such mindsets. Matisse would tell a story about Toulouse-Lautrec looking at one of his own works and exclaiming joyously: "At last I don't know how to draw!"

Australian artist, Ken Whisson, once told me how appalled he was when a reviewer praised him for his "good technique". He claimed to have spent his entire life trying to get away from "good technique".

The return of drawing to the schools did not mean a return to the plaster cast. Although there is plenty of traditional life drawing today, the new emphasis is on drawing as an experimental activity, a way of forcing students to think outside the square. Drawing is no longer viewed as the enemy of self-expression, it is presented as a crucial first step.

This range of attitudes and approaches is reflected in the work of the 10 artists included in *Drawing Out: the Dobell Australian Drawing Biennial* at the Art Gallery of NSW. The artists selected by curator Anne Ryan are

Tom Carment, Joe Furlonger, Ross Laurie, Ivy Pareroultja, Ana Pollak, Peter Sharp, Mary Tonkin, John R. Walker, Gosia Wlodarczak and John Wolseley.

Each of these artists featured prominently in the ancestor of this show, the Dobell Prize for Drawing, which ran from 1993 to 2012. The Prize was an open competition that attracted many hundreds of entries. By transforming the Dobell into a curated exhibition the gallery is forgoing the revenue from entry fees, and asserting its right to quality control. For this first biennial Ryan has kept a tight focus, taking landscape as her theme.

One should not expect the classic Claudean landscape showing a recessive view of mountains and water, framed by a coulisse of trees. The emphasis in this show is on the immediate response to a place. For Ross Laurie it is the landscape of New England, where he lives and works on a farm. Joe Furlonger draws Goondiwindi, on the NSW-Queensland border. Ivy Pareroultja depicts Aranda country, near the old Hermannsburg mission in central Australia. Anna Pollak looks at the Hawkesbury; Peter Sharp responds to the arid environment of Fowlers Gap, near Broken Hill; John Wolseley makes evocative drawings of wetlands in different parts of Australia. Mary Tonkin draws the Dandenongs, while John R. Walker immerses himself in the landscape near Braidwood, in the Southern Tablelands.

The artists' approaches are as different as the landscapes themselves. Although there is a sculptural element to Sharp's work, and Pollak is showing a video, the two artists who stand out from the group are Gosia Wlodarczak, who will make a large-scale performative drawing on the window of the gallery that looks out over Woolloomooloo; and Tom Carment, who treats his sketchbooks as a visual diary, jotting down his impressions of every place he visits. Carment says (with apologies to Paul Kelly), that his contribution will be called *From Cape Leeuwin to Kings Cross*.

He continues: "I've always considered drawing to be the core of what I do, the starting point and sometimes, by itself, all that is needed to convey an emotion about a certain place or landscape."

The process is so fundamental that when the curator visited Carment's studio and expressed an interest in his sketchbook entries, he had to ask: "Do you call these drawings?" The implication is that a "drawing" should be more elaborate, more finished, probably on a larger scale. Instead the exhibition will feature 128 small drawings that record Carment's travels in the form of quick visual notations made with charcoal, ink, pencil and watercolour.

The problem of definitions is also on John R. Walker's mind when he says: "I'm not sure that I really do anything else but draw." Walker views painting as another form of drawing, rejecting the idea that his sketches are merely preliminary studies. He says he looks at the landscape intensively but draws from memory rather than direct observation.

"It's a matter of accumulating enough material in mind until it somehow starts cooking of its own accord," he says. "It's only when the image tells me what it wants to do, that it takes off."

This is an idea many artists hold in common: a drawing has a life of its own that is not directed by the conscious mind. Wlodarczak takes this concept to the limit, admitting she can't decide whether she has chosen drawing or drawing has chosen her. "Since my childhood," she says, "it has been easier for me to present my thoughts coded in drawing than to formulate and express them in speech."

Wlodarczak tries to narrow the gap between the perception of her surroundings and the translation of these perceptions into a drawing. She draws spontaneously, on a large scale, keeping a line constantly in motion. It's a highly physical process that has more in common with dancing – or perhaps rock climbing – than the seated posture favoured by most artists. The results capture a sense of the surrounding environment, but also have an abstract dimension.

Wlodarczak's strenuous approach places her within a modern tradition that puts emphasis on capturing a sense of immediacy within a work. In the West, this preoccupation may have begun with the Impressionists.

Although artists of earlier periods always made quick sketches, these drawings were treated as studies for major works. Some believe that Caravaggio didn't draw because we have no surviving examples by his hand. It is more likely that he discarded his drawings as mere stepping-stones towards a painting.

To pore over the drawings or sketchbooks of an Old Master helps us understand how they thought and worked. Looking at a show of Pontormo's drawings in Madrid this year I was amazed to find pieces that could have been attributed to Picasso. When I show people a snapshot and ask: "Who did this?" everyone opts for an artist of the 20th century.

Although the impressionists are not known for their drawings, like John R. Walker they tended to treat painting

as a form of drawing – trying to capture ephemeral sensations on canvas while working directly from the motif in the landscape. Nevertheless, Camille Pissarro recommended: "drawing often, drawing everything, drawing incessantly".

The need for spontaneity would soon become paramount. Matisse would pronounce: "The artist has to look at everything as if he were seeing it for the first time."

For each of the artists in the Dobell, drawing is an essential part of their work, and perhaps their personalities.

"Drawing for me is everything," Sharp says. "It's the point of direct contact between 'you' and 'it' - the 'it' being the landscape. I love the fact that you can't hide in a drawing – it either works or it doesn't. Full stop!"

Laurie says the need to draw is like the need to keep scratching an itch. "Drawing should be, and is for me, the area in which one can experience the greatest freedom," he says.

"It is so malleable, so open to chance, so easy to change. It can be so pure, so raw, so exciting, and so difficult. It's probably the greatest challenge for an artist." Like Sharp, he appreciates the fact that a drawing "allows nowhere to hide".

It may be the artist that needs to hide. When she draws en plein air, Tonkin requires absolute privacy. "When I worked at Werribee Gorge," she says, "I was tucked away off the main tracks but occasionally someone would stumble across me. It used to leave me shaking, not from fear but from exposure. For me, the process of working from life means opening up to what is before me, whilst drawing it in. All my nerve endings are exposed. It gives my work great personal meaning – that ability to be fully and rawly present. I think it's essential for how I cope with the world."

Put this way, drawing seems more like a need than a choice. Many of the artists say they are not good with words. They see drawing as their most effective means of communication.

It's often said that words are never adequate to express the emotions inspired by a landscape. This is where the "inarticulate" nature of art becomes an advantage. In conveying a sense of a particular environment artists insist that drawing is a more reliable instrument than any amount of verbal or written description. Yet a drawing of a place might be unrecognisable from a photograph of the same location because every artist has a unique way of seeing.

"Seeing" is finally what drawing is all about. By opening ourselves to the way an artist sees the world we begin to see it differently ourselves. Indeed, allowing us to see things differently is the most valuable service that art can perform. "There is no recipe for improving nature," Rodin said. "The only thing is to see."

Or as Sharp puts it: "What I've noticed over the years is that I change, but the place does not." Nature changes with monumental slowness, but our ways of seeing are constantly evolving. Considered in this way, drawing – which opens a new perspective with every additional line – is not only a window onto the world but a path of self-discovery.

Drawing Out: The Dobell Australian Drawing Biennial is at the Art Gallery of NSW from Friday until January 26, 2015.

READER OFFER

In charcoal, ink, pencil and watercolour, Tom Carment records his impressions of the places he visits. His book, *Seven Walks: Cape Leeuwin to Bundeena*, documents his walks with photographer Michael Wee through some of Australia's wild landscapes. The book will be published this month (see sevenwalks.com). *Tom Carment: Paintings & Drawings 2011-14* opens at King Street Gallery on William on November 25. Carment's drawings of the pontoon at Redleaf Pool, including Spectrum's cover artwork, are available in hand-signed, limited-edition prints at smhshop.com.au/art/carment.

This story was found at: <http://www.smh.com.au/entertainment/art-and-design/art-gallery-of-nsw-drawing-out-exhibition-shows-how-sketches-reveal-more-than-words-20141111-11jba.html>