

EAT UP YOUR GREENS – DRAWING AS RE-INGESTING THE WORLD

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“Do not fail, as you go on, to draw something every day, for no matter how little it is, it will be worthwhile, and it will do you a world of good.” Cennino Cennini (1370-1440)¹

Cennini asserts (above) in his *Il Libro dell'Arte* (c.1400) that drawing is, in some quite vague way, a bit like eating all your vegetables. He suggests that the continuous practice of observational drawing – and the emphasis seems more on the regular activity than its content – is the equivalent of good



Thomas Elliott, *Hand-drawn*, 2004, pastel on paper; 30 x 42 cm²,
photograph: Alan Dove, image courtesy of the artist.

nutrition for the aspiring artist. This notion eventually found physical expression in the setting up of the Accademia del Disegno in 1563, in Florence, under the guidance of Giorgio Vasari. Vasari's intention was to reform art education by grounding it more strongly in drawing and this led to the proliferation of academies and academic education. However, even in the early seventeenth century El Greco had clearly abandoned the dictates of correct anatomical proportion in favour of an ecstatically articulated, transcendental space (one of the most compelling examples of this is *The Opening of the Fifth Seal – The Vision of Saint John* of 1608-14). Interestingly, in those later paintings he was developing his painted figures from small sculpted models in clay rather than from drawings.³ Over a century later in 1735, the academies that Vasari had initiated were receiving bad press. The limitations of verisimilitude (and its implied link with the supposed aims of observational drawing) were becoming more fully realised. Voltaire wrote in a letter that year: "No work, in any genre, which is called academic has ever been a work of genius."⁴

The place of observational drawing in modern academic institutions and its relevance to contemporary art practice have been increasingly questioned. Much of this questioning flows directly from an ultimate rejection of the fixed, single view-points that grew out of Renaissance linear perspective. This rejection became particularly evident in the changing modes of the two-dimensional representation of space (particularly in Impressionism in the late nineteenth century and in Cubism and modernist abstraction in the early twentieth century). Observational drawing also suffered from the advent of the photographic and moving filmic image, the technical diversification of art production, the theoretical analysis of the complexities of seeing and looking and a growing discomfort with the power relationships implicit in the life room. The role of observational drawing within visual arts education has undoubtedly contracted with these re-evaluations of fixed representational practices. No longer is observational drawing a core activity within all art schools and it is more often relegated to some fringe activity, if it survives in any form at all. The ability to draw is frequently viewed as a desirable, but non-essential working skill that can be helpful but, along with many other manual and technological skills, constitutes a fairly minor part of the artist's bag of tricks. Given this general drift into near redundancy, can Cennini's assertion that, "it will do you a world of good" still have any relevance?

I believe that observational drawing still has relevance but only when considered in the actual spirit of Cennini's words. He was clearly interested in drawing as a *process* as opposed to an outcome and, like the process of ingestion and nutrition, its benefits rely on regularity and are both incremental and accumulative. As a *process* it engages with an extensive menu of theoretical concerns (seeing, looking, the gaze, the body, gender politics etc.) but it does so in a directly experiential way. As a mode of engagement with the world it demands completely different qualities of attention from our habitual interactions and can provide a direct route to our assumptions about the way we are in the world, particularly our assumptions about our physical and psychological relationship with everything that is 'Other'. It seems to me an invaluable process for examining *accepted knowledge*. As John Berger writes in *Ways of Seeing*: "The relation between what we see and what we know is never settled."⁵

But what constitutes this knowledge and how does it interpose itself in the act of seeing? From the pre-language phases of babyhood, informed by our sensory perceptions of the world, we begin to establish our sense of I and Other. As our visual encounters with the world (Other) unfold, we begin to sense Other as, in part, an increasingly autonomous entity and also as a series of images that, through identification, can form a new, altered sense of I. Jacques Lacan's thesis on the mirror-phase of childhood development states:

We have only to understand the mirror-phase *as identification*, in the full sense which analysis gives to the term: namely, the transformation which takes place in the subject when he assumes an image – whose predestination to this phase-effect is sufficiently indicated by the use, in analytical theory, of the old term *imago*.⁶

As seeing becomes more urgently motivated by a more pragmatic processing of information (survival) we then begin to learn the art of not seeing or 'un-seeing'. If one considers the numerous filters and simultaneous levels of attention that operate within our cognitive awareness whilst driving a car through a busy urban street, then the extent and necessity of our 'un-seeing' becomes clear. We simply cannot afford to see everything on offer. It is imperative that we recognise without any distractions in order to negotiate and anticipate the changing space through which we are passing. We need to see the bird, or tree, or pedestrian, only in terms of their relevance to our purpose, rather than to register their actual appearance. Our peripheral impressions are offered up to a series of templates or cognitive maps. These cognitive maps rely as much on knowledge as they do on appearance and have, in a metaphorical sense, a similar relationship to the actual appearance of objects as a land map has to the visual experience of the landscape. Just as the map of a city centre bears a closer resemblance to a bundle of blood vessels or a tree root than to any single or multiple view of the city, so our cognitive maps engage as much with the ideas, projections, archetypes and schematic notions that are embedded in our known assumptions of the world as they do with its actual appearance. As Simon Ryan explains in *The Cartographic Eye*:

Maps do not bear any simple relationship to a pre-existent reality, nor is this reality available in any unmediated way. Maps do possess a use-value – that is, when compared to objects of vision, there may be some relationship. This does not mean that any aspect of a fundamental 'reality' has been successfully traced on a map, but rather that one cultural construct (maps) is used to negotiate another (the seen).⁷

Through the mediation of our cognitive maps our continuous intake of visual information is being matched with our accumulated visual experience and, to some extent, is *in the process of fulfilling our expectations*.

Consider though, at the other end of the cognitive scale, how these maps can enable us to recognise a friend that we haven't seen for five years at a distance of fifty metres and from behind across a busy road. Somehow, from this meagre information, which may be little more than a half-glimpsed silhouette, we are able to register the familiar; as if it had been loitering in the unconscious in anticipation. So our cognitive maps are sophisticated and loaded mechanisms, constantly in a state of revision and extension as we accumulate yet more visual experience.

To say that we see the world, though it seems simple and self-evident, is, on closer examination, a more complex statement. We also *un-see* the world. We use the process of seeing and unseeing to confirm our expectations of the world; and we often do this as a way of containing the world within the limits of what we already know.

In the painting *The Chandelier* (below) I have indulged the cartographic impulse in order to map my own consciousness (picturing consciousness with one's consciousness is, of course, a spectacular folly and an irresistible attraction). This is a cognitive map of cognition that traces consciousness as a cross between a light fitter, a wiring diagram, a charm bracelet, a Christmas tree, a history of art encyclopaedia, a luminous cabbage (illumination and enlightenment) and as both a receiver



Clive Humphreys, *The Chandelier*, 2002-2004, acrylic on canvas, 160 x 160 cm, photograph: Alan Dove.

and generator. It is a map of maps (each individual motif acts as a discrete map). And, because consciousness is inseparable from our physicality, the global shape is symmetrical in the way that the cognitive maps of our own bodies tend to symmetry.

So much of our visual measuring and weighing of the world is made through our bodies. We are the measure of all things. In my experience as a teacher of life drawing I have observed students in a daily struggle with their response to the appearance of bodies in space and, although this is largely speculative on my part, I will attempt an analysis of some of the physical and cerebral processes involved (though I'm not sure that the brain ends and the body begins in any specific place).

Initially the drawer will spend some time in close observation of the subject. But, in order to commence the drawing, it will be necessary to look away from the model and turn towards the blankness of the white paper. At this point in the process, observation transforms itself into memory; a memory reconfigured into the scale and empty space offered by the white paper. Clearly, it is a physical impossibility to look simultaneously at the model and at the drawing, and so, even in the model's presence, drawing is primarily an act of memory. (Blind contour drawing is the only example I know of where looking and drawing can ever be simultaneous and is often employed to avoid the committal of form to memory). The first few speculative marks appear. A kind of plotting commences (this is also a map!). But what actually happens as the drawer attempts to hold the retinal imprint of the subject in their internal eye? Reliant on a memory that seems to decay so rapidly, I would suggest that the cognitive map (replete with all its subjective knowledge and assumptions) quickly becomes a kind of default position. And so observational drawing creates a theatre of conflict between what we see and what we know; where, paradoxically, only what we actually see can change what we know.

One of the first instincts of the drawer appears to be the need to outline. This instinct is evident even in the earliest graphic representations, for instance, in the Chauvet cave in the Ardèche valley, France c. 25000 – 17000 BC (some of the animal drawings are even inscribed outlines in the rock face filled with pigment⁸) and persists across cultural and geographical boundaries in various manifestations through to the wall drawings of Sol Le Witt. What does this common convention suggest? It is obviously about the boundaries between things (maps again), but, on an even more basic level, it suggests *separateness* and the primacy of objects over space, or, put another way, the differentiation between somethingness and nothingness and the implied dominance of somethingness. Space tends to be described in the negative, as the absence of somethingness. It is the residue of white paper left untouched after the figure and the objects have been delineated. The outline states, by strong implication, that objects and bodies are assumed to act as initiators, whilst space remains neutral and passive.

Things act and space is acted upon. Drawing objects (somethingness) and space (nothingness) in a more mutually affecting and complementary way requires a very fundamental shift of mindset (the common exercise of drawing only negative spaces is a way of re-evaluating this mindset). But it is just those things upon which we seem to universally agree that become the greatest impediment

to actually seeing. Again, knowing in this assumptive way, necessary (even vital) in many situations, is the enemy of seeing.

As the drawing progresses beyond its initial plotting, the task becomes increasingly to match the seen (remembered) with the marks already drawn. This means transposing the seen into the established scale and graphic mode of the existing marks. Here a physical response to the drawing materials coalesces with an equally physical response to the seen (remembered). It is as if the drawer is touching the subject with their own body movements and feeling those movements returned through their tactile connection to the drawing tool. The activity becomes much like an electrical circuit, as much dependent on the feedback of its own actions as it is on its primary intent. Wired in parallel to this circuit is the ever present cognitive map seemingly eager to interpose its assumptions at any opportunity.

There are some very typical and clearly visible consequences of the map's operation within many drawings and these are, perhaps, most clearly evident in drawings of the human figure. Above all I have observed an almost overwhelming urge in the drawer to re-establish symmetry in spite of the visible evidence. For example, in the graphic placement of the navel (often rendered as a dark dot), there appears a tendency to centralise its position within the stomach regardless of the model's spatial relationship to the drawer. Perhaps we feel this centrality strongly within our own bodies, based on its importance as a vestige of our connection to mother. Be that as it may, our apparent need for centrality within a figure drawing returns the figure to a frontal and symmetrical mode. This particular pull towards the frontal and symmetrical is a symptom of a more general tendency and may have its basis in our own body experience both as a schematic visualisation of something *felt* (we primarily *feel* the symmetry of our two arms) and as a reconstruction of our reflected mirror image (which, by physical necessity, is most often frontal). Here are echoes of Lacan's mirror.

Another frequent 'aberration' in the drawing of the human figure is the (mis)placement of the head in relation to the rest of the body. As an unselfconscious action, the head habitually acts as the body's counterweight in order to achieve equilibrium and balance (this can also apply as a metaphorical function). When someone is standing, the relationship between the head and the feet becomes both literally and psychologically pivotal. The head will tilt in compensation for the slightest imbalance of the rest of the body. Lying down (sleeping?) the situation is quite different as the body is fully supported and the head no longer has its balancing function. So, particularly in standing poses, it is crucial, in a drawing sense, to establish the relationship between head and feet (the most separated features). But most often this seems to provide inexplicable difficulties for the drawer. In many cases drawn heads will appear tragically disconnected from, or at odds with their bodies. The depiction of standing may appear closer to falling. Perhaps this is indicative of a continuing Cartesian dichotomy between head and body; between thinking and acting. If the head is understood as the control centre of the body, then the struggle to draw the head in an appropriate (naturally connected) relationship to the body becomes a metaphor for both the activity of drawing and the drawer.

When the drawing of the figure has reached the stage of initial completion (i.e. all parts of the drawing are graphically present) it can now be compared to the appearance of the model and

the model's relationship to objects and space. I believe that this is where the real business of the drawing begins. The challenge for the drawer is now (having gone as far as existing knowledge will allow) to proceed from the known (what has been drawn as a first response) into the seen (what can now be perceived as the gap between that first response and the actual appearance of the model). Now knowledge is susceptible to revision by appearance. In rethinking the whole depiction through graphic modification or even starting afresh, existing knowledge may be re-evaluated and the cognitive map further informed.

The regular challenging of our visual (and all other) assumptions, in Cennini's words, "*will do you the world of good.*" Observational drawing is one of the ways of confronting the limits of knowledge. It engages experientially with a whole feast of theoretical delicacies. If thought of as *process* rather than as product then this naturally becomes its nutritional function. Beautiful or expressive or obsessive or ugly drawings may be a by-product of this process but, if the *process* is paramount, then the finished (or abandoned) drawing should mainly be seen as the evidence or residue of this mode of engagement with Other. In an environment where that engagement is increasingly mediated by distancing agents, drawing actually offers us an opportunity to *become* the seen through the continuous act of re-ingestion.

- 1 Cennino Cennini, *Il Libro dell'Arte* (c.1400), translated as *The Craftsman's Handbook* by Daniel V Thompson Jr (New York: Dover, 1933), 15.
- 2 *Hand-drawn* is a work by Thomas Elliott that isn't, in any way, preparatory to other work. It forms no part of any series and does not appear to have much direct relationship to his paintings. It is essentially a one-off. The drawing eloquently examines Other as Self, Self as map and the sometimes fraught connection between thought and action. Elliott is a graduate of Otago Polytechnic School of Art and has exhibited his paintings widely in New Zealand since graduating in 2000.
- 3 David Davies (ed.), *El Greco* (London: National Gallery Company, 2003), 240.
- 4 Quoted in Jean Leymarie, Geneviève Monnier and Bernice Rose, *History of an Art: Drawing* (London: Macmillan, 1979), 31.
- 5 John Berger, *Ways of Seeing* (London: Penguin, 1972), 7-34.
- 6 Jaques Lacan, "The Mirror-Phase as Formative of the Function of the I", translated by Jean Rousell, *New Left Review* 51, (September-October, 1968), 71-77.
- 7 Simon Ryan, *The Cartographic Eye* (Cambridge UK: University Press, 1996), 102.
- 8 Hugh Honour and John Fleming, *A World History of Art* (London: Laurence King, 2002), 40.

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