OBSERVATIONAL DRAWING

JOSEPH PODLESNIK

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Cover image: Joseph Podlesnik, **Seated Figure (detail)**, 2009, Conté crayon on paper, 6.9 x 9.6 inches. © Joseph Podlesnik

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CONTENTS

PREFACE

A fellow artist and educator, James McElhinney, once advised me that every drawing teacher should be required to write a drawing book, if only to put it into the hands of his or her students. The sources for this drawing book are many, from a multitude of authors and historians on art to my own life-long love for the craft. The book's genesis is the feedback, examples, diagrams, and thought I have given to my drawing students over the years. The purpose of this book is to serve students in a range of disciplines—graphic design, animation, game design, web design, interior design—with a guide to the basic language of drawing, its materials, methodologies, and ways of seeing.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Joseph Podlesnik serves as Associate Professor, Lead Faculty for the Art Foundations Department at the Art Institute of Pittsburgh—Online Division. Joseph also serves as Adjunct Instructor of Art for Stockton University in Galloway, New Jersey. He is the author of three photobooks: *Phoenix*, *Surfaces* and *Almost Seeing*.

Joseph received his BFA degree in drawing and painting from the University of Wisconsin—Milwaukee and his MFA degree in drawing and painting from Cornell University. Since 2013, Joseph has been working with digital photography, exhibiting nationally and internationally. He lives in Phoenix, Arizona, with his wife and son.

DRAWING

1

1   DRAWING

The impulse to draw—even before we want to depict objects we observe or imagine—is the simple pleasure of movement, making marks freely on a surface, with little motor control. Gradually we want to control the drawing tool so we can represent objects, making what is not yet visible suddenly appear beneath our moving hand.

Drawing then becomes a collaboration between the eye and the hand. Whether drawing from life or from memory, we inevitably ask ourselves, *Where do I start my drawing?* Starting points are needed because in handmade images—unlike mechanical replicas such as photographs—the motif must be built up from scratch. Even faithful representations start with a plan or conceptual scaffolding, which we modify to approximate the look or effect of a subject.

What is drawing? Perhaps we can start by defining what it is not. Drawing cannot be defined by a specific medium, nor limited to a certain artistic technique. Old Master sketches and informative how-to diagrams both serve as drawing. Even writing and penmanship are forms of drawing. Drawing is, intentionally or not, a tool for communication; it can be likened to a language. And like language, drawing is a mix of convention, formula, tradition, and personal experience.

Like language, drawing helps us learn, analyze, map, and describe both inner and outer experiences. It can emphatically express ideas and establish formally organized statements. Drawing provides an essential vocabulary to designers in many fields—from interior design to graphic design, architecture

INTUITIVE DRAWING. Nathan Lewis, **Gesture**, 2004. Ink on hand-toned watercolor paper, 10 x 8 inches. © *Nathan Lewis. Courtesy of the artist.*

to animation, web design to fashion—that helps give form to their ideas.

This book concentrates on two drawing approaches for responding to the observable world: intuitive and analytical. An intuitive approach is impulsive, usually handled through free gesture, open to revision and momentary changes, even
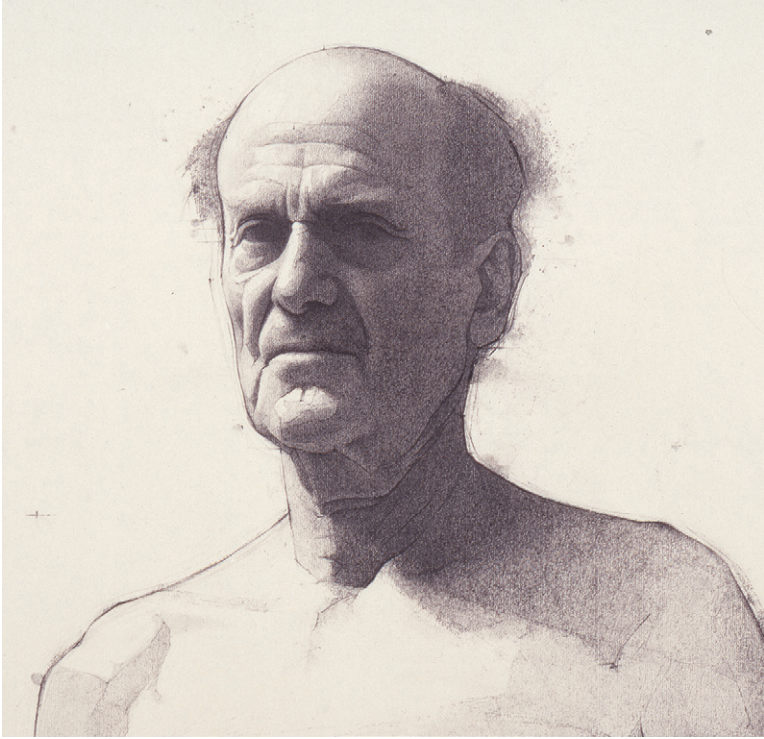
ANALYTICAL DRAWING. Israel Hershberg, **Stern (Detail)**, 1999. Soft vine charcoal on charcoal paper, 37.2 x 26.4 inches. © *Israel Hershberg. Courtesy of the artist and Marlborough Gallery, NY*.

chance effects. An analytical drawing approach is more deliberate and done by sighting, measurement, and mapping. But these approaches are not mutually exclusive; a drawing may combine intuition with analysis, joining logical problem-solving with spontaneous expressive discovery.

MEDIA

2

2   MEDIA

The characteristics and limitations of different media, whether we realize it not, impact our drawings. Media choice influences how we observe something and how we approach drawing it, which will inevitably have expressive effects. When using sharpened pencils or fine-tipped pens, for example, we tend to see aspects that can be rendered with linear or point precision. Large sticks of charcoal or blunt media can steer us to see and draw masses. Different types of media allow for different approaches to form. Experimentation allows us to see how different media influence our attention and shape our responses to motifs.

We use several tools for drawing, the most common being the **graphite** pencil (2-1). The marks from a graphite pencil have

GRAPHITE PENCIL. Francois Dupuis, **Rubbish**, 2017. Graphite, 6.3 x 9.8 inches. © Francois Dupuis. Courtesy of the artist.

Figure 2-1

a silvery, typically shiny appearance. Graphite pencils have various grades of hardness or softness, which are affected by the ratio of clay mixed into the graphite. The more clay, the harder the graphite. Harder grades of graphite go from 9H (hardest) to F. These grades leave a very light mark. The middle grades of graphite, H to HB, are roughly equivalent in hardness to a common #2 pencil. The softer grades of graphite range from B to 9B (softest), and they leave a noticeably rich, dark mark. Ebony pencils, as they are known, are a variant of graphite. The overall value range for graphite pencils is smaller than that of other drawing media.

Said to be one of the oldest drawing media, **charcoal** comes in hard and soft varieties that leave different degrees of light

and dark marks (2-2). Charcoal is made from dried carbon that remains after wood has been burned. With larger, wider pieces of charcoal, you can go from a moderately fine point to a broad swath of value at a moment's change. Vine charcoal, which comes in thin and thicker sticks, lends itself to looser gesture drawing and quick sketching. Vine charcoal's advantage is it can be easily erased and dusted off the paper, which makes it interfere less with other media you apply on top. However, it cannot yield the rich, dark blacks of other types of charcoal.

Compressed charcoal consists of charcoal mixed with clay and binder to hold it together (2-3). The more clay, the harder the compressed charcoal. It is the binder that helps the charcoal adhere to the surface of the paper and create rich, dense
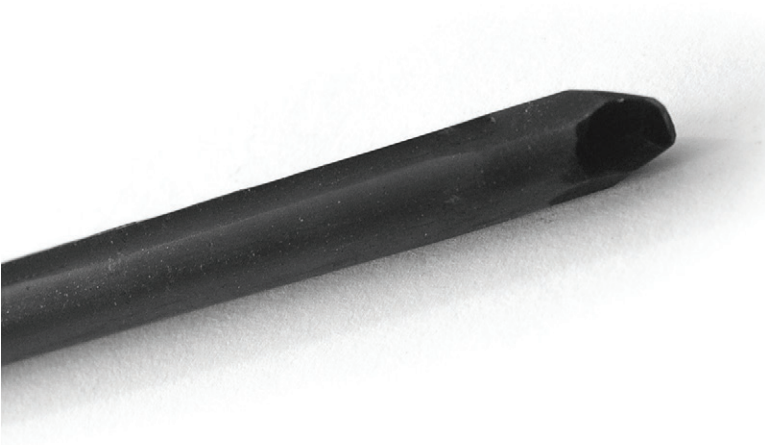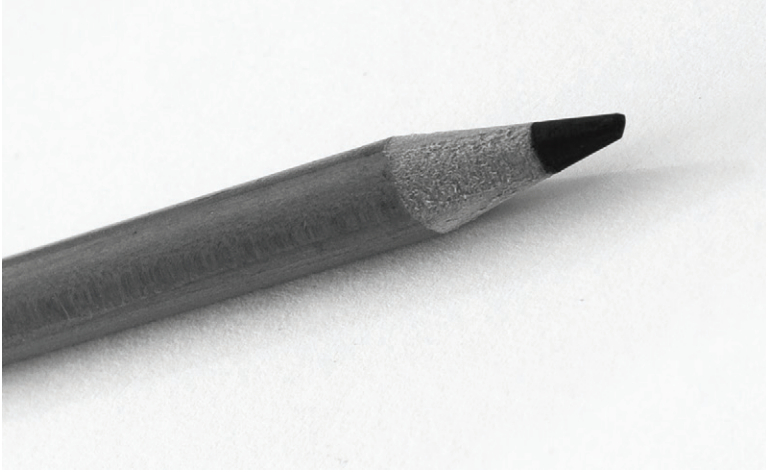
Figure 2-2

Figure 2-3

Figure 2-4

blacks. Compressed charcoal can be easily sharpened to a point, and it too comes in different grades, from hard to soft, leaving lighter or darker marks. This type of charcoal is more difficult to erase away.

Sold individually and in sets, often in cedar casings, the **charcoal pencil** is more manageable than vine and compressed charcoal (2-4). The degrees of hardness range from HB (hard) to 3B (soft). Sometimes 4B charcoal pencils are sold as carbon sketch pencils. There are white charcoal pencils, too. Some charcoal pencils are wrapped in paper instead of cedar, grease pencils being one example.

Conté crayons (developed by Nicholas-Jacques Conté, an 18th century artist and inventor) are made of pigment compressed with gum binder paste and formed into small rectangular sticks (2-5). The sticks come in black, white, gray, red-orange, dark
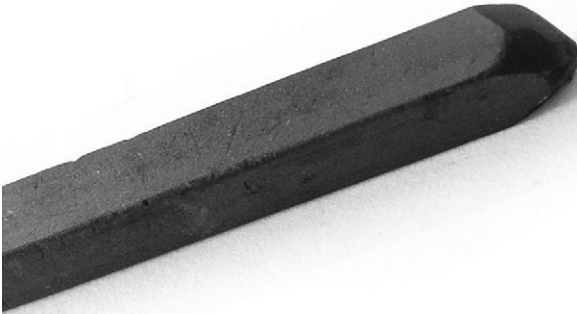
Figure 2-5

brown, and ocher. They are available in HB (hard), B (medium) and 2B (soft) grades.

Like drawing tools, drawing paper has a variety of weights, textures, qualities, and styles. The specified weight of a paper describes how thick it is; heavier weights signal thicker paper. Medium weight paper falls around 60 to 80 lbs. Some papers are manufactured in series, with higher numbers signifying better grades of paper. Hot-pressed papers are smoother, while cold-pressed papers have more tooth or texture to them. The paper's surface affects how drawing tools move across it. More permanent and durable papers are made from cotton fiber or cotton rag. They are pH balanced and over time will not degrade or become discolored, because the paper is not acidic. Some papers are sold in pads of different sizes or as stand-alone sheets. Drawing paper can also come pre-toned as off-white, cream, gray, or other colors.

Figure 2-6

Made from common wood pulp, newsprint is the least expensive paper. It is not permanent; the acids in the fibers cause the paper to deteriorate and yellow quickly when exposed to air and light. Newsprint paper, being non-archival and inexpensive, is ideal for dashing off rapid-fire gestural drawings (2-6). It comes in different textures, from smooth to those with more tooth.

Sometimes known as pastel paper, charcoal paper has a more noticeable tooth or texture. It is designed for loose, particulate

Figure 2-7

media such as soft charcoal, pastel, Conté crayons, and chalk. The paper's tooth affects the texture of a drawing, where most of the material strikes the raised areas of the paper, leaving the valleys empty (2-7). This can make interesting textural effects integral to a drawing and its expressive intent.

Bristol board is manufactured by bonding together two or more single-ply sheets of paper. The added layers make it heavier and more durable than single-ply bond paper. Bristol papers range from rag to wood pulp; most are chemically

Figure 2-8

treated for permanence and whiteness. Surfaces are hot-pressed (smooth) or cold-pressed (textured). Bristol board is a receptive ground for most media (2-8).

There are also a number of important drawing accessories. **Pencil sharpeners** typically have two hole sizes to accommodate pencils of varying widths. These sharpeners bring the pencil to a uniformly rounded point. Some sharpeners come with attached plastic cases that hold pencil shavings. **Utility knives** or blades are an option to manually sharpen pencils—you can even make the point intentionally irregular (2-9).
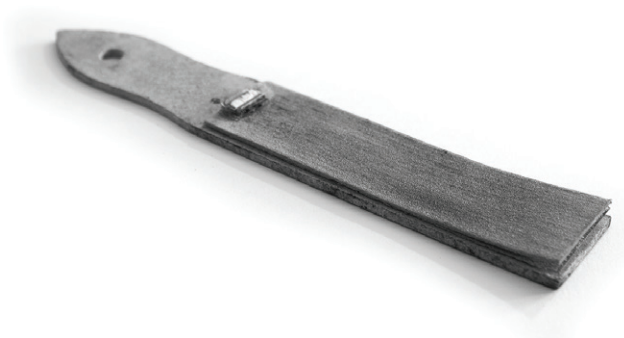
Figure 2-9

Figure 2-10

Sandpaper blocks, sold as wooden paddles with a small stack of sandpaper sheets attached, also sharpen the tips of pencils, charcoal, or other drawing media to a point (2-10).
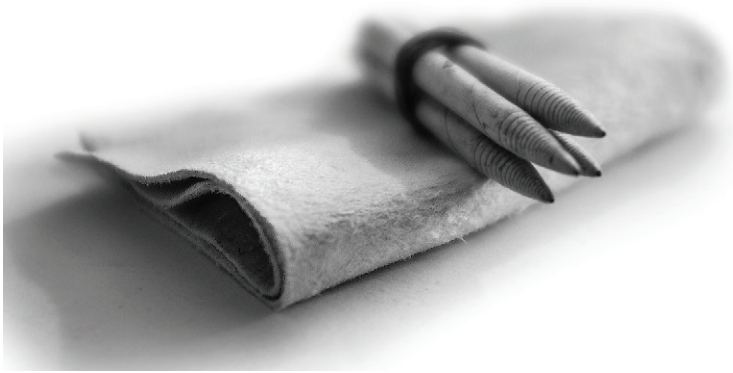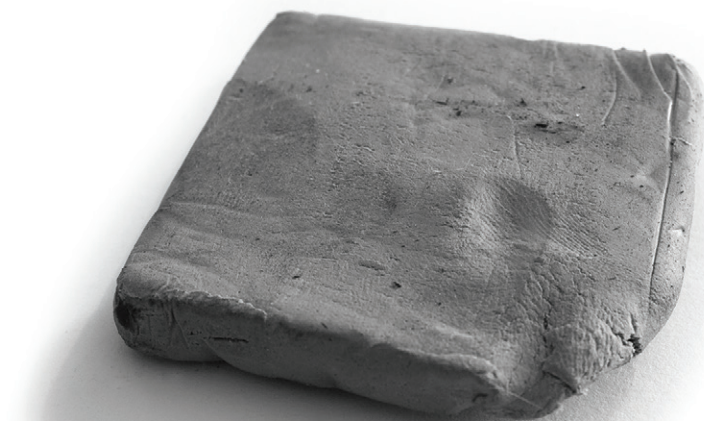
Figure 2-11

Figure 2-12

Figure 2-13

Other tools mix together your chosen drawing media. **Blending stumps** are made of tightly rolled paper; use them to blend values, creating smoother and more even gradations. A **chamois cloth** is a thin sheet of leather, used for the same purpose (2-11). Artists hold different opinions about blending tools. Some see them as helpful for photorealistic effects, while others feel they inhibit direct mark-making.

Erasers are also important drawing tools. A **kneaded eraser** can effectively absorb charcoal and Conté crayon (2-12). It is composed of a soft, gray, gum-like material. Kneaded erasers are very pliable and can be molded. **White plastic erasers** will remove drawn marks as you rub them over an area (2-13).

Figure 2-14

Preserving your drawings—so marks or tonal areas are not accidentally smudged during handling—is an important final consideration. **Fixatives**, usually in spray form, are popular preservation tools that help keep drawings intact (2-14). Most fixatives are reworkable, so you can continue drawing on top of any fixative already applied. Final fixatives, as their name implies, do not allow for subsequent reworking.