



## Your Thoughts on Why You Draw

It is a uniquely satisfying experience when a group of total strangers gather for an afternoon of life drawing. They can spend hours working together in silence and, at the end of the day, feel as if they had just had a series of intense, even intimate, conversations, without having spoken a word.

In many ways, drawing is about deep conversation—between eye and hand, between tool and surface, between perception and reality, even between the marks themselves.

In my Design Culture column last July, I asked readers to respond to the question "Why do you draw?" I was, in a way, presenting a challenge by asking for verbal articulation from people who are accustomed to expressing themselves visually. But as soon as the column came out, I began receiving lucid and thoughtful responses. I found that readers were grateful for the occasion to describe something so integral to their lives.

### Drawing as meditation

In his classic book *Flow: the Psychology of Optimal Experience*, Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi describes flow as "a state of concentration so focused that it amounts to absolute absorption in an activity. People become so involved in what they are doing that the activity becomes spontaneous, almost automatic; they stop being aware of themselves as separate from the actions they are performing."

This sounds very much like the responses from readers who described their state of mind when they are deeply immersed in the act of drawing.

Whether their drawings are from nature, man-made forms or their imagination, many readers shared a common experience: when they draw, they enter a kind of meditation. Drawing provides the perfect conditions for a meditative space: because so much concentration is involved, extraneous thoughts slide by, without taking hold.

Here are some of the responses:

"Drawing is one large moment in time of complete focus; in that peace is found...much like all of the arts."

"As a child, drawing was what I did. Sitting for hours studying my subject and watching it, like a meditation. That's when I knew that I would always need art in my life."

"This is it; this is the moment I seek; an absorption in now.

(When I draw) I occasionally experience a fleeting sense of a spontaneous reaching outward...with the barriers down, without fear or self-consciousness or ulterior motive. Then I glimpse what Tao is and what Zen practice can lead to."

Some readers talked about the ability of drawing to turn off thinking, thus allowing an experience that's free from self-judgment.

"When you're self-judging, you're not meditating. There's a constant critique in your head. When I use my left hand, it turns off the critical voice because I've handicapped myself. My self-examination is learning how to keep that voice turned off. If

"I draw because I can."

I'm in a meditative state, the voice is quieted. 'Thinking' is the voice. Leave the voice out. Then you can do what you feel."

"I draw because it's the only thing that naturally comes out of me... It's the only thing that I don't think about. When I do think about drawing, it's terrible and forced."

### Drawing as thinking

While many readers described this immersive, non-thinking state, others described drawing as a way to enhance or document thinking.

"Drawing became my problem-solving process. My sketchbooks are a record of my thoughts, my array of projects and ideas and poems and plans, my characters and observations and stories."

In the wonderful book *Between Artists*, Chuck Close interviews Vija Celmins about her drawing practice. She says, "I see drawing as thinking, as evidence of thinking, evidence of going from one place to another."

On the surface, it appears that some artists draw to escape thinking while others draw to enter thinking. Perhaps these approaches are not contradictory; instead, they identify another way of thinking.

In general, thinking is considered to be a verbal activity, but one of the definitions of "to think" in the *American Heritage Dictionary* is "To visualize, imagine." When we draw, thinking is a visual progression. Instead of forming a linear sequence of

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words and sentences, the "thought process" in drawing is the formation of marks that relate to each other spatially. As one reader said, "I draw because I can look at things in terms of value, lines and texture, and forget their meaning."

In my column "Promoting Visual Thinking" (August 2001), I referred to Vera John-Steiner's book *Notebooks of the Mind: Explorations of Thinking* in which she describes the value of visual thinking. She begins by pointing out that verbal language is a highly ordered and conventionalized form of expression. In contrast, no corresponding visual language exists. Images that rush through our minds are difficult to externalize, and John-Steiner suggests that this very difficulty allows for more play and exploration.

Many responses reflected that notion. One reader wrote: "Between everything and nothing: between empty formula and chaos—between language and a meaningless babble of random noise, I approach this act of drawing."

Another reader talked about his experience when he was living in Japan. Perhaps I'm reading into this, but it seems that his inability to be verbal gave him permission to spend more time being visual.

"After college I spent a couple months in Japan and I drew daily. I couldn't speak the language aside from being polite. Given the fact that my Japanese was horrendous I began to feel very isolated. I began drawing to help pass long periods of the day that were becoming increasingly lonely. These drawings became better and better."

### A conversation that does not include you

Another aspect of visual thinking is allowing the drawing to progress in response to itself. This can be true of imagery that is realistic or abstract, whether you are drawing from reality or imagination.

The painter Philip Guston said that there is a point in his process when he must "leave the room." In other words, the conversation is taking place within the work, between the marks, between the mark-making and the surface. The book *Eleventh Draft*, edited by Frank Conroy, addresses the same process for writers. In the chapter "Not Knowing," author Fred G. Leebron says that while working on his novel, he followed the characters. He didn't care what they did as long as they were the ones doing it. The characters tell the author what they will do. The conversation is propelled by the life in the work, and the author (or artist) is there to carry it out.

Some readers responded in that vein: "When I draw, I see the lines looking back at me... even when I leave it undone, it's still alive waiting to be completed."

"...the joy of a pencil mark that looks like it happened of its own energy."

"I write fiction as well, and it works the same way—I formulate a loose starting point and things just appear before me."

### Because I can

Along with this sense of being separate from the work, there is a simultaneous feeling of personal accomplishment. The desire to draw often comes from one's knowledge that he or she has a particular ability, or has achieved a certain level of skill.

The first two responses I received began with the exact same words: "I draw because I can." Many others expressed the same idea:

"...the thrill when the sketching stops and the drawing begins, when trying gives over to experience... The joy of getting the measuring right that occurs only in the eye."

"It is very gratifying to really nail something and be able to represent the essence of three dimensions using only two."

"Drawing was the first time ever in my life I felt a sense of accomplishment. The feeling of taking a blank sheet of paper, and recreating something on it by my own hand was indescribable."

"It is my responsibility to draw, because I think that drawing is one of our primal expressions. We draw even before we learn to read and write and, as a species, we drew to have what we now call History."

### Drawing as observation

Whether you are drawing from reality or imagination, observation is crucial. In order to represent a person, a place or an idea, or to translate it into a new physical form, you have to have some understanding of it. And in order to understand it, you have to observe it.

Several readers described their appreciation of the slow and measured observation necessary in drawing.

"I, too, experience the same thing Monique Johannet expressed (in your column) like my eye has arms that can completely go around an object and feel the space in back of it and around it. When I draw my cats, I feel each muscle as I build the body."

"Drawing really allows you to absorb your subject and experience it. My photographs from my trip are great to share with people, but my drawings have an added layer of emotion, appreciation and time that are a huge part of my trip and ultimately my maturity while there."

Sometimes we draw to understand a physical object or space. And sometimes we draw to understand something more elusive.

"Why draw: To extend the power of touch. To touch something unreachable except by eye—the ridge in the distance, the vertical cliff. To feel something in one's own body as if the object being drawn sends itself in reverse through the artist's pencil, up the arm to one's heart. Then look at the drawing years later and remember the touch." CA

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