

TITLE: GESTURE DRAWING: The Essence of Capturing the Moment as a Tool for Extended Investigation

BACKGROUND:

When enrolling in Drawing II the University of Wisconsin--Stevens Point art and design students have already covered the basics of drawing. This second drawing class is then geared for developing conceptual ideas within an exploration of color media. However, faculty had noticed that the building block of gesture was applied inconsistently within the Drawing II class. This assignment was to reintroduce the student to gesture in a different way: building multiple gestural images on the same page and relating those images through color and mark-making utilizing the entire picture plane. The assignment emphasizes the importance of gesture and the application gesture has in drawing and painting development.

AUTHORS:

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COURSE:

ART 104. Drawing II. 3 cr. Foundations drawing using a variety of media and approaches with emphasis on conceptual development and color theory/application. Prereq: 103 [Drawing I].

GESTURE DRAWING: STEPS OF THE LESSON

1. Students need several sheets of paper, minimum 18 x 24 inches, ready at drawing board, preferably at an easel. One sheet is taped to board, extra tape available. Several sticks of soft, heavy charcoal (Alpha-color charcoal). All students should be standing for this exercise.
2. Teacher demonstrates with her/his own clothed body what fast poses entail but moving in a slow motion dance-like succession of positions and explains:
 - a) main lines of force in body
 - b) weight bearing leg
 - c) center of gravity
 - d) overall distances between parts of body -- how to see across form and measure form to form
 - e) sense of stress/energy required to take poses -- can ask the class to take a pose at this point -- to realize this is a high energy, muscle tiring exercise which requires full effort on part of those drawing
3. Undraped Model or draped model takes podium. Consult with model whether teacher will call 10 second shifts or model will just move in approximately that amount of time.
4. Model takes pose. Before students draw, teacher draws in air in front of model the entire life-size movement. Teacher uses her/his entire arm and body to demonstrate how quickly -- in less than 10 seconds -- the entire pose can be captured. This quick demo shows how fast, broad based marks are the only way to capture this pose in this short amount of time.
5. Recommend putting on a fast paces music CD at this time.
6. Begin
7. Do not waver on the 10 second time frame. Do this for 10 minutes. Teacher circles room and demos on paper if necessary. All students should be standing. More paper is made available as needed. Many drawings can be done one over the other until page is a web of lines.
8. Do not allow stick figures. Emphasize:
 - a) initial line of force of pose
 - b) scribbling marks that "discover shape"
 - c) use groin and torso as center point and work out
 - d) lift charcoal on and off paper -- skip around page and find relationships
9. Repeat the concepts that it is not what the form looks like but rather what the form is doing that is the goal of the assignment.
10. After this 10 minute exercise -- which is a good exercise before any life drawing session -- the concept of gesture can be utilized in a number of ways:

- a) Display drawings as is. Discuss the work of Susan Rothenberg and how this relates.
- b) Cut up drawings and use in collage

- c) Do quick gestures on paper, overlapping but not too dense. Erase as able -- charcoal will leave marks. These marks become a ground -- "pentamento" -- for a longer drawing. Some of the ground marks surprisingly enhance the marks of the final work.

- d) Do quick gestures in vine charcoal before any longer drawing or painting to capture the movement and avoid stiff, labored figures.

- e) Use gesture drawing as basis of longer realistic or abstract image adding color and other media as desired.

What results have emerged?

LEARNING GOALS

- Loosen up
- Full body motion to move drawing hand (versus wrist action)
- Quick visualization
- Trust
- Understanding that gesture is an unlimited root of extended drawing

THE STUDY

- Steps for classroom assignment are located on p. 1-2.
- Discussion: Artists such as Susan Rothenberg, Jim Dine, Rembrandt, Toulouse Lautrec can be used to encourage dialogue and visual stimulus to increase understanding.
- Revisions: Add element of famous artists prior to assignment versus later in critique. Force a faster time frame for longer period of time. Individual faculty participants strongly felt differently on time frames extending from 10 seconds to one minute. We realized in discussion how one concept such as gesture drawing can be interpreted in various manners, each feeling they achieve success.

What resources / references have you found helpful?

Handouts (2):

- Handout One. Emeritus Dr. Walter Ball, Northern Illinois University, DeKalb, Illinois. This handout was distributed to Sheila Sullivan during graduate school (Northern Illinois University in DeKalb) mentor, Dr. Walter Ball (located p. 7-9.)
- Handout Two. Associate Lecturer Sheila Sullivan's adaptation of this drawing assignment (located on last page.)

What was your approach and/or what evidence have you gathered?

APPROACH

Open minded, high energy, experimental and process oriented, for a kinesthetic experiential drawing.

FINDINGS

The students resist this risk taking; and uncontrolled non-representational "scribbling". However, once the student succeeds at this approach there is a confidence, and willingness to "go with the flow" and to let the picture grow from the page rather than be dictated by a mental construct.

Students have exhibited works created in this and related assignments in the UWSP Juried Annual Art Foundation Exhibition (juried by an outside judge). In addition, the faculty who are using this assignment and related assignments consistently receive excellent faculty evaluations, and student comments related in evaluations are consistently positive. Initially the assignment was taught without the use of master examples presented in the classroom and handouts, our findings indicate that this added information enriches the outcome. To our surprise, the act of creating the video segment of this project also enriched the experience of the students, and could be a teaching and learning opportunity for further study. The video was produced by class member: Noah Martin. The final video was also presented as a culmination activity for the class.

Examples of student work:

Numerous figure examples are on the two-part video.

If a figure model is not available, the students' hands and feet can be used for a similar assignment. Below are two examples of the assignment with hands and feet created in Professor Susan Morrison's classroom. These drawings were created in pastel on Kraft brown paper with a limited palette of primary colors.

VIDEO: [Gesture Drawing with Professor Bywaters – Part One](#)

VIDEO: [Gesture Drawing with Professor Bywaters – Part Two](#)



Student drawing example from class, created with a limited palette of primary colors with brown paper.



Another student example of hands and feet from Professor Morrison's class.

HANDOUT ONE

PAINTING ASSIGNMENT III, DEMONSTRATION/DISCUSSION SUMMARY

GESTURE/FIGURE:

Gesture is the action of a figure, shape or form. Gesture indicates what the figure is doing. Included are the figure's body language, its animations, exaggerations and reductions of body features as well as its movement. Gesture can, through body language and implied movement, convey internal attitudes of the figure. The intent of the gesture in drawing/painting is to characterize the action of the figure, rather than to represent its appearance or surface volumes and contours. What the form is doing is more important than what it looks like.

Painters often use the gesture of the figure as a vehicle for the overt expression of ideas. In using gestures, the action and animation of the figure are indispensable to the overall expressiveness of the idea of the work. The immediate clarity of the gesture, with its coherence and impact are vital to its effectiveness. Gesture in drawing/painting is intended to identify alternative attitudes to those oriented mostly to object representation or to techniques. The technical finesse of representation is not our immediate concern. Our emphasis on gesture involves the animated simplification of figurative forms through large simplified or obvious brush calligraphy, on the one hand, and the development of its thematic attributes, ideas or attitudes on the other.

The following are three basic aspects of gesture and their uses.

A. The action of a figure, or what it is doing physically as gestures (learning, falling, climbing, pushing, swinging, etc.), suggests activity that conveys internal attitudes that are evoked by the gesture of the subject. Thus the figurative gesture is a vehicle which transmits ideas to the viewers much like stage actors use body language, animation and action to convey ideas without the spoken language.

EXAMPLES (sizes are in inches):

Guido da Siena, *Reliquary Shutters*, egg tempera, 1255-60.

Giotto, *Ecstasy of St. Francis*, fresco, 1296-97

Michelangelo, *Creation of Adam*, fresco, 1509-10.

Libian Sibyl, fresco, 1508-12

Creation of Worlds, fresco, 1508-12

Peter Paul Rubens, *Horrors of War*, oil, 1638

Debarcation at Marseilles, 156 x 98, oil, 1638

Detail 1, Detail 2.

Honore Daumier, *Three Lawyers in Conversation*, oil, 1843-48

Print Collector, oil, 13-3/8 x 10-1/4, c. 1960.

The Connoisseurs, charcoal/pastel/watercolor/pencil, 10-1/4 x 8, 1862-63.

Uprising, oil, 54 x 44, 1860.

Circus Parade, ink line/wash, c. 1850-60

Reginald Marsh, *High Yaller*, oil, 23-1/2 x 17-1/2, 1934.

Edvard Munch, *Puberty*, oil, 59-5/8 x 43-1/4, 1895.

The Scream, oil/casein/pastel, 36 x 29, 1893.

Madonna, lithograph, 24 x 17-1/2, 1895.

George Bellows, *Stag at Sharkeys*, oil, 36-1/4 x 48-14, 1908-09.

B. Calligraphy of the brush stroke, like handwritten script, registers the hand, arm and body movements that create the marks. The stroke may thus be used by itself, without images, or again used to support the characterization of the figure's action.

EXAMPLES:

Richard Diebenkorn, *Seated Nude, Black Background*, oil, 80 x 50, 1961.

Emile Nolde, *The Dance Round the Golden Calf*, oil, 34-5/8 x 41-5/8, 1910.

Chaim Soutine, *Female Nude*, oil, 18-1/8 x 10-5/8, 1933.

Woman Bathing, oil, 21-3/8 x 24-3/8, 1929.

Jackson Pollock. *Number 3*, oil, 56 x 24, 1951.

Number 1, oil, 68 x 104, 1948.

Franz Klein, *Crosstown*, oil, 48 x 65, 1955.

White Forms, oil, 74 x 50, 1955.

William DeKooning, *Woman I*, oil, 75-5/8 x 58, 1952.

The Visit, oil, 60 x 48, 1966-67. (dancing figure)

Door to the River, oil, 80 x 70, 1960.

C. Abstract, non-representational, or essentially visual (pictorial) action of a form, which immediately evokes a sense of action, is another aspect of gesture. In its more pure form the abstract gesture bears no debt for its origin to subject matter or kinetic calligraphy of gestural hand/arm movements or strokes.

EXAMPLES:

Henri Matisse, *Souvenir of Oceania*, gouache and crayon on cut and pasted paper, 112-3/4 x 112-3/4, 1953.

Snail, gouache/cut and pasted paper, 112-3/4 x 113, 1953.

Woman with Green Line, oil, 16 x 13, 1905.

Larry Poons, *Han-san Cadence*, acrylic and fabric dye, 1963.

Morris Louis, *Gamma Delta*, acrylic, c. 1961.

Aleph Series II, oil, 78 x 106, 1960.

Mathew Smith, *Nude, Frizroy Street, No. 1*, oil, 34 x 30, 1916

The assignment is to complete 6 to 8 oil sketches on "oak tag" paper (24 x 36) using the instructions given on gestures, followed by the completion of a painting (34 x 40) during one class session.

No line is to be used for any phase of the assignment, in either the oil sketches on paper or the painting on canvas.

Outlined edges that behave as penciled line flatten forms and work against the development of gesture by isolating or "localizing" the form. Even when outline is later overpainted the isolating format remaining devastates actions of both calligraphic strokes and the figure. Instead of line use a wide brushstroke through the axis of all major forms of the figure first, leaving the brush on the surface for as much stroke extension as possible.

You will find that calligraphic strokes shaped to characterize action tend to form their own shapes as a natural result of the process. Background spaces, likewise, are to be painted with similar action strokes that start at the axis of the shape. Use dull light colors to lay out the axis of the figure action. Follow through with the one light and one dark set of colors as described during the assignment presentation.

Your goal is to quickly characterize the stance and implied actions of the pose and to relate these characteristics to background forms as well as figurative areas of the sketches and painting. Passages that include both figurative and background areas should sustain a common stylistic treatment and be in proportion to the full picture plane. Colors and tones used in the background areas should also be used in the figurative areas and vice versa. This contributes to the cohesiveness of the picture plane. As with the modulation assignment, you must remain acutely aware of the tonality of all colors to do well in this assignment.

The oil sketches are to be completed during the first two sessions. The oil painting should ideally be completed in one session (one day).

Special materials needed are (sizes are in inches):

1 stretched canvas, approximately 40 x 34

8 sheets of oak tag paper, 36 x 24

1-3 bristle brushes for oil, 2 x 1-1/2 wide (hardware store).

Pre-mix three light colors of the same value and three dark colors of the same value. Other colors may be mixed as needed. Dull to bright and hue variations should be available when you start the sketches.

Reference:

Kimon Nicolaidis, *The Natural Way to Draw*, pp. 188-221.

Record of model use dates:

Oil sketches on oak tag paper.

Oil sketches on oak tag paper.

Oil on canvas, one pose, full period.

Oil on canvas, one pose, full period.

(If needed)

HANDOUT TWO

GESTURE AND TONAL PROGRESSION

General Notes:

- 1) Each step of the following progression is intended to include and be based on all preceding steps. Complete each step layer by layer before going on to the next step. View the work on the entire picture plane rather than in segments.
- 2) Technical completion, in itself, is not the main criterion by which your work will be judged. What is important is the full-page effect of the drawing's expressive qualities, achieved by the process of working through the layers in the following stages.
- 3) Use charcoal. Students in 236 may use other media (washes, paint, pastels, etc.).

Step One:

With charcoal, lightly indicate the gesture and placement of the figure on the picture plane. Start with the figure's axis, and make successive passes through the figure to rough out the form, improve its animation, body language, and proportion.

- Note:
- 1) Gesture is the action of the form, not its surface, edge, or likeness.
 - 2) Proportion, while important, is secondary to the action.

Step Two: Work dark tone over light to link, reduce and shape the tone inside the figure.

Note: Outline is counter-productive.

Step Three:

Emphasize the tonal relationships between positive and negative areas. Use grouped tones across edges of images to link areas into "passages" of light or dark that relate positive to negative, or positive to positive segments of the picture plane. This creates a range of sizes of these passages on the picture plane.

Note:

- 1) In this stage, develop the background and the grouping of tones, extending the grouping into the background space.
- 2) Use a kneaded eraser to improve tonal relationships among light areas. Once you have established tonal relationships, you may strengthen them with white chalk, thus achieving better control of value nuances in the light areas.