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An Automatic-Response Approach to Drawing

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AN AUTOMATIC-RESPONSE

APPROACH TO DRAWING

(TITLE)

BY

CLYDE W. SIMS, JR.

THESIS

SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS
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PREFACE

While there is a relatively large number of books available concerning Expressionistic painting and the Expressionistic phenomenon, the number of books concerned exclusively with Expressionistic drawings or an analysis of Expressionistic and Abstract-Expressionistic techniques is sorely limited. There is also a very limited volume of work dealing with mixed media drawings. Considering the enormous role that Expressionism has played in the development of our "modern" era of art, and in the liberation of drawing as a legitimate and autonomous art form, this neglect is unfortunate.

Since the approach to drawing to be described here is considered to be expressionistic in origin, it is appropriate to offer an explanation and analysis of that technique in this text.

The title of this paper is somewhat misleading because it reads like many of the step-by-step books that can be found on the shelves in many hobby and craft stores (i. e. Oil Painting Made Easy, Drawing in Five Easy Lessons, ad infinitum). A professional, however, knows that there are no easy ways of mastering a medium; his key rules are effort and experimentation.

It is hoped, therefore, that the reader understand that a step-by-step guide to action drawing is not offered. This text offers only an analysis of a drawing method, employing mixed media, that has been found useful in the author's artistic development. It is an uncomplicated method that has provided several insights into the author's approach to drawing in general and into the maturation of his technical ability.

Thanks are extended to the author's advisor, Dr. Lynn Trank, and to Dr. Calvin Countryman and Mr. Ronald Hinson, faculty members at Eastern Illinois University, for their advice and criticisms which have aided me in increasing the quality of my work and for their assistance in completing this paper.

INTRODUCTION

"...delineation by pen, pencil, or crayon...
distinct from painting."

-Oxford Universal Dictionary

"The word drawing covers in general all those
representations in which an image is obtained,
simply or elaborately, upon a surface which
constitutes the background."

-Encyclopedia of World Art

Above are two definitions of the word drawing; the first definition conveys the more traditional or conventional concept of drawing and conjures up a picture of an artist with pencil and sketchbook in hand, while the second is a more encompassing definition which allows for a wide diversity of media and approaches which are to be considered integral aspects of the work discussed herein.

The drawing techniques to be discussed here are considered to be both relevant and true to the experimental spirit and nature of our times. As Daniel M. Mendelowitz states in his book Drawing,
"... (the drawing method should be concerned with the nature of art as a social process and as a psychological manifestation."¹

¹ Daniel M. Mendelowitz, Drawing (New York: Holt, Rineholt, and Winston, Inc. 1967), p. 416.

If it were necessary to simply state the technical and psychological aspects of this method in a compact formula, the formula would appear something like this:

1. Stage I: Automatic Response/Beginning by an Automatic Statement
2. Stage II: Inspiration/Decision of Direction to be Taken
3. Stage III: Technical Refinement/Resolution

The text of this paper will concern itself primarily with explaining and analyzing the details and procedures involved with these three basic phases, accompanied by illustrations of the method applied to the creation of one particular drawing. Following, in the Appendix, will be a brief description of two drawings which exemplify this approach to drawing.

STAGE I

AUTOMATIC RESPONSE/

BEGINNING BY AN AUTOMATIC STATEMENT

Webster's Third International Dictionary of the English Language defines an automatic action or response as "...acts which do not seem to engage the mind... (the action) stresses promptness in a response to a given set of stimuli (such as the marks on a paper), as from long habit or repetition, often implying training or discipline, and sometimes a precision of response."

This definition is considered accurate in reference to the first stage of this approach to drawing. The automatic response should, however, be carefully differentiated from a mechanical action or response, such as writing shorthand or typing a letter. Webster qualified a mechanical response by stating that it "...denotes a lifelessness and perfunctoriness of response..."

When attempting to understand the definition of an automatic response, one must be wary of the word "seem" because it can be misleading. Webster states that the automatic response does not seem to engage the mind, implying a totally involuntary action or a deception of the thought process. He does, however, go on to explain that the action involves training or discipline.

An example of such training and discipline might be the years an artist spends learning composition, techniques, and the limits of different media, or the time a musician practicing his instrument. Their artistic knowledge can then be called upon to present itself at a moment's notice.

The actual time involved in the automatic stage of the drawing method discussed here is short; that is, the time involved in establishing the initial forces and movements of the composition can often be thought of in terms of minutes. This is probably surprising to the traditional draftsman who spends almost as much time sketching and planning his composition as he does with finishing and refining it.

It should be noted that, although this preliminary phase may appear motor-oriented and somewhat mindless to the unfamiliar, the usual aesthetic decisions that are normally involved in composing do take place. They are not as noticeable because they are being carried out at a much faster pace; many of the decisions are a product of the subconscious.

There are pitfalls in this approach, just as there are pitfalls in any approach. The artist who decides to attempt this method of drawing must commit himself to becoming totally involved in the process; there should be no deviations from the

chosen path. The initial notations or statements should be made with an unbroken pattern of mental activity and physical movement. If the mind wanders, the response is short-circuited and the drawing is, more than likely, destined to have its original character changed. Just as Man is never the same at any two given instances, the odds are greatly against the artist approaching one particular drawing with the same inspiration, emotional involvement, and responses twice.

Technically, Stage One begins when the need or desire is felt to express an inner feeling pictorially. There seems to be an almost childish need to make marks on the paper's surface, a need for expressive creativity and almost primitive conceptualization. A more clinical definition of the beginning of the drawing would probably place it at the moment when the pencil or other drawing implement meets the surface of the paper or ground.

A description of the termination of this initial process is more difficult to give; it cannot be described simply as when the pencil leaves the paper because a more complicated process is actually involved. Although the tool being used may leave the paper's surface several times in the course of Stage One, it is possible for the psychological continuity to remain constant. The termination of the automatic-response phase should

be placed at the moment when the artist intuitively feels that the ground has received sufficient notation and that enough force and movement have been established to warrant further development. It should be an innate feeling of accomplishment, combined with a knowledgeable feeling of compositional correctness, that terminates the initial meeting of drawing tool and ground,

The results of the automatic-response stage can be seen in Plate #1 on page seven. They were obtained using a #4 wide-lead sketching pencil on a medium weight Grumbacher drawing paper. The pencil was moved around the paper quite freely, establishing the lines with a sense of informality. A variety of pressures are exerted with the pencil in order to achieve a diversity of lines and textural effects.

The choice of media is of notable importance during this initial phase of the drawing. Numerous grounds have been tried (i. e. Grumbacher 200 lb. watercolor paper, various light-weight drawing papers--usually Strathmore--, cardboard, poster board, canvas, etc.) with a wide spectrum of drawing implements (drawing pencils ranging from 7B to 4H, charcoal,conté crayons, pen and inks, oil pastels, etc.) and it has been discovered that a generous variety of effects are possible. This is due not only to the inherent differences of the materials but also to the

PLATE #1

AUTOMATIC-RESPONSE



friction or lack of friction that is present when pencil and ground meet. In achieving a diversity of line and value in the initial statements (which is desirable), the artist exerts many different pressures with the drawing tool. Therefore, a ground is needed which will accept multifarious pressures equally. For example, a lightly-placed, subtle line should be as effective in its function as a heavily-placed, dark line is in its. The artist can only decide which paper or ground will suit his needs through experimentation, but it should be remembered that, regardless of the type of ground that is used, it should be a quality material. By choosing a quality material as a ground, the artist reduces the number of things that can go wrong unnecessarily, such as paper tearing under very little pressure, or an excessive amount of wrinkling and stretching.

The author's personal choices of materials, when initiating this preliminary phase, have remained fairly constant, relying on a #4 wide-lead sketching pencil applied to a medium to heavy-weight Grumbacher paper. (Drawing paper is generally used, but interesting textural effects can be obtained by using a rough water-color paper.) With the wide-lead pencil more than satisfactory results can be obtained in terms of pressure variance. By utilizing the narrow side of the lead, smooth delicate lines can be obtained.

Then, by using the wider, flat edge of the lead, the artist can get dark, heavy-black lines. (All of the lines present in Plate #1 on page seven were achieved with this one pencil.) Aside from its versatility, there is another advantage to using the one pencil. Using only one drawing tool is less time consuming than stopping to pick up different pencils and pens and, consequently, the artist's entire concentration can be centered on the project at hand.

In summary of Stage One, it should be re-emphasized that there is no formula that will guide the artist's hand; that must come from within him. It is suggested only that he become totally involved with his project and that he use quality materials.

STAGE II
INSPIRATION/
DECISION OF DIRECTION
TO BE TAKEN

As stated in the previous chapter, the automatic-response stage terminates when the psychological rhythm and fluid pencil movements become inhibited by a more conscious, objective appraisal. At this time, the drawing implement should be set aside and the role of the artist should become contemplative rather than physical.

There is quite a variance of time involved with this stage of the drawing; as little as thirty seconds has been spent on some drawings in attempting to choose the most advantageous direction to follow in refining them. On the other hand, as much as a year has been spent on other drawings which failed to warrant further development at the time, either because they elicited little enthusiasm from the artist or because the initial statements, at the time, were felt to be strong enough to require no development.

This stage of the drawing technique involves basically, three mental processes of decision making: a preliminary

critique of the effectiveness of the lines and values that resulted from the automatic-response stage; a decision concerning the evolution and development of formal subject matter versus a non-representational continuation; and finally, more practical decisions concerning which areas are to be developed, and to what extent, and which areas are to remain relatively undeveloped. It should be noted that the dividing line between this last decision-making process and the final stage of refinement is rather nebulous and often overlapping.

The first decision-making process, that of evaluating the results of the initial statement, is quite simple in concept; the artist feels, almost intuitively, whether there is enough resulting from his first spontaneous markings to warrant development or whether the drawing is lacking either compositionally or in generated interest. It has been noted by the author that few drawings are doomed in this initial stage. Most first statements, by merit of their freshness alone, justify refinement or, at least, partial development. On occasion, however, one may be confronted with initial statements that are capable of standing alone and require no further work. Conversely, many works will show little, if any, spark or sense of energy in the preliminary stages. When having been confronted with the latter case, the author's

usual course of action has been to destroy the results and start fresh. Again, it should be emphasized that failure at this early stage in the drawing is not the usual rule. Therefore, students of this method of drawing should study their first notations carefully before abandoning them. Often it means putting a drawing aside for a period of time in order to gain a new perspective. Even turning the drawing around and looking at it from different angles can offer new insights.

The second step involved in this contemplative stage of the drawing is the making of a decision of whether to develop it with a subject-matter or representational approach or whether to resolve it in a non-representational manner. At this point, no formal subject matter had been established in the example given (see plate #1 on page seven).

In the more traditional drawing methods, the artist generally begins with a particular subject or concept in mind and then continues to elaborate on and refine that subject. With the method discussed here, any evolution of the representational is accidental. Often, however, the character of the lines or their placement will suggest a certain form or subject. Jagged, subtle, heavy and forceful lines or even a certain combination of values can suggest a mood or can take on the appearance of a recognizable image.

Conversely, the preliminary lines and values that have been created, even though they may be fresh and exciting and worth developing, fail to present any imagery. The course then is to develop the lines and forms freely without regard to any formalized subject or concept.

The evolution of subject matter or of an image can occur at a later point in the drawing's progress. It is the drawing's capacity for surprise that makes this particular method of drawing flexible and, consequently, interesting and challenging.

As has already been pointed out, step three of the decision-making is not as readily definable in terms of scope as the other two. It should be considered a transitional move into Stage Three, the refinement and resolution of the drawing.

It involves an unrestricted and uncommitted decision about which areas of the drawing are to be developed and to what extent they will be developed. Uncommitted because, in this approach, as has already been stated, the artist should be free to change and adapt at any point in the drawing's progress. This moment of preplanning affords the artist a certain amount of confidence with which he can proceed. He, therefore, is more likely to retain a sense of freedom and take more liberties in the initial steps towards refining the drawing.

The decisions involved with the drawing in Plate #1 on page seven were relatively uncomplicated and easy to make. In regards to the preliminary critique, the author was satisfied with the initial statement and decided in favor of further development; there seemed to be an interesting variety of lines, effectively counterbalanced by the areas of value (which were created by artificial texture). It was also felt that the circular nature of the composition provided certain possibilities for development.

The decision concerning the evolution of imagery was somewhat more difficult to make. The drawing was definitely organic in nature and several different elements suggested a type of abstract landscape. The overall imagery, however, was felt to be a little weak at this point. Rather than reach too far in an attempt to become representational, an approach was taken that would develop the forms in a non-objective manner.

The preliminary decisions concerning which areas to refine centered on the lower half of the drawing; it was felt that the openness and simplicity of the upper section of the drawing provided an agreeable contrast to the intricacies of the lower section and seemed to provide the composition with an interestingly indistinguishable sense of depth. It was then decided that more specific decisions in regards to the refinement of the lower section would be made as the drawing progressed.

STAGE III
TECHNICAL REFINEMENT /
RESOLUTION

This, the final stage involved in this drawing technique, is probably the most crucial point in the creation of a drawing. It is the skill and decisions involved in this particular stage that are most responsible for realizing the subsequent success or failure of the piece. It is during this phase of refinement that all of the artist's skill and knowledge must work in full co-operation with his emotional involvement. This is also the point where the use of a variety of media is encouraged and, consequently, where a number of surprises should occur.

Since the problem or challenge of refining the drawing and bringing it to its final solution involves literally thousands of possibilities both in media usage and in personal treatment, only a few of the possibilities will be enumerated, along with an explanation of why they were used.

If one looks at Illustration #2 on page sixteen, one may readily perceive a noticeable difference from the earlier illustration; namely, the addition of several tonal areas. (It should be pointed out that some of the areas that appear as gray in the photograph are actually a light brown.)

TECHNICAL REFINEMENT



The addition of these tonal areas is usually one of the first steps taken in the procedure of refining the drawing, they are added as a contrast or counterpoint to the starkness of the lines. In establishing these basic areas of value, one of two methods is usually used. One method involves a process of blotting and smearing ink (either india black or a sepia-type brown) and the other method involves a controlled smearing of pencil lead or powdered graphite. Often both methods are used in unison.

In initiating the first method, a #5 or #6 camel's hair brush with a quality black india ink is generally used. Whenever areas are desired that are warmer in feeling, the same brush is used with a sepia brown replacing the black ink.

After loading the brush with a generous supply of ink, the tip of the brush is touched to the surface of some clean water in another container; it is important that the brush is not immersed in the water completely. In that manner, the brush trades some of the ink for some of the water and, consequently, the ink, when applied to the ground's surface, will be neither too opaque nor too transparent; hopefully, the ink will be the proper consistency for the blotting procedure. (It would be to the novices' advantage to practice loading and emptying the

brush on a trial sheet before attempting the drawing.) After the brush is properly loaded, the ink is then ready to be applied to the ground. Unless an attempt is made to fill in a specific area, the ink should be applied freely. A soft cloth (flannel works excellently) or a piece of paper towel is then used to smear it, while the ink is still wet, in a manner that, hopefully, complements the compositional concept of the drawing. It is also possible to blot the ink and, depending on how wet the ink is, obtain an interesting variety of textural effects. For example, if the newly-applied ink is allowed to dry partially for thirty or forty seconds before blotting, the cloth will pick up random amounts of it, giving the area an irregular spotted appearance.

In the illustration (plate #2 on page 16), the ink has been smeared rather than blotted (see areas marked #1 on the plate) in various outward directions in order to create an explosive effect and maintain the consistently ragged motif.

The second method of achieving value or tonal areas involved simply rubbing or smearing pencil lead or powdered graphite into the desired areas. In the plate on page 16, pencil lead smears appear in three different areas (those marked #2). Even though the singular tonality of the photograph doesn't permit

TECHNICAL REFINEMENT



a proper comparison between the pencil smears and the ink smears, one can notice that the penciled tones take on a much softer appearance. The penciled tones also blend better into the background.

These two methods of adding value (used independently or together, as in the case of the illustration) usually comprise the first step in the refinement of the drawing. From this point on, efforts are concentrated on area development, solving individual problems as they arise.

If one looks at the illustration (plate #3) on page 19 and compares it to its earlier stage as shown on page 16, there is a noticeable variety of changes; the character of the drawing has remained essentially the same, as has the composition, but the addition of a few elaborations gives a new sense of interest and energy to previously lifeless areas. (These areas have been numbered for easier identification on the photograph.)

One element considered to be essential to an interesting work of art is contrast. In this method, the contrast can be created by a sense of ambiguity. By this is meant that the drawing which is being fashioned in a particular style or motif can have its interest value greatly increased by the introduction of contrasting elements, which take the form of elements that are foreign to the motif. The unexpected or the out-of-place

always elicits interest. One method which is employed with this approach to drawing, in order to capitalize upon this element of contrast, is the introduction of geometric components (in the form of rule-straight lines) into the composition which otherwise is essentially organic in nature.

The fact that the addition of these lines to the drawing does create certain amounts of interest in the areas to which they are added makes them quite valuable as compositional devices. An example of this usage appears in the upper left-hand corner of the plate on page 19. Prior to the addition of the lines, the empty space caused the drawing to retain a feeling of improper balance. It was felt that some element of an uncomplicated nature should be included in the space to provide a better compositional balance. By adding a vertical line and extending it from the form into the empty space and then smearing the penciled line in a movement to the left, interest was generated while maintaining the area's general simplicity. Then, by the introduction of a heavier, doubled line juxtaposed horizontally at the base of the vertical line, horizontal force or movement, which was generally lacking, was re-enforced.

Another useful device in creating interest by contrast is the use of stylized forms, some of which find their origin in nature

and others which are found in geometry. Most of the forms in the drawing occur spontaneously and are, consequently, very fluid, free, and non-representational. The insertion of a stylization, which is a simplification of a recognizable image, can cause the desired contrast.

An example of an organic stylization appears on the plate on page 19 (see area marked #2). A pencil-smeared area has had segments drawn into it; the segments are very similar to those found in the abdominal area of various insects (i. e. grasshoppers, caterpillars, etc.).

On the other hand, an example of a geometric stylization appears in the same plate (see area marked #3). The shapes have been introduced freely, but their origin is the circle, which is a geometric shape. These shapes were added to the area in order to ease the transition from the very light-valued area below them to the extremely dark-valued area that appears directly above them.

It should, perhaps, be pointed out that, the partial isolation of the forms from their background which were present at this stage of the drawing's development was remedied somewhat by the smearing of powdered graphite into the areas marked #4 and #5 on the photograph.

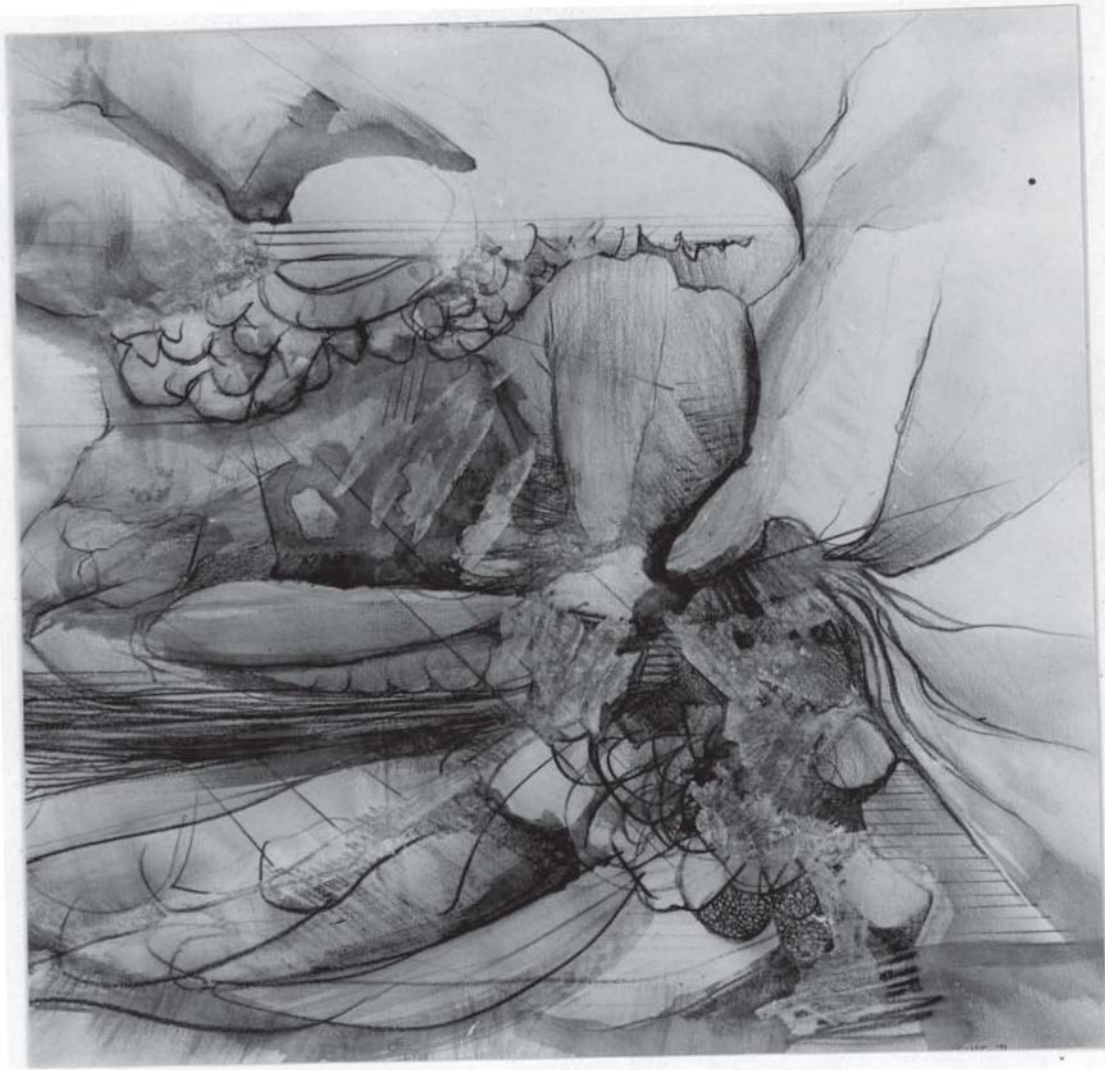
One last device that has been used quite extensively by the artist and which is worth noting is the use of white tempera paint or Chinese White watercolor paint. It has proven valuable for adding textural interest and reinstating light values to areas which have become slightly muddied. Harsh, darkened areas and lines can be softened by painting over them with the white tempera; the tones and lines will still be visible, in a subdued state, through the paint. The effect is one of increased subtlety. Also, by laying the paint on with a thicker consistency (achieved by diluting the paint less), and then blotting it with a cloth, interesting textures can be obtained superimposed on a valued area. By way of contrast, the white tempera can be used to produce soft haze-like or filmy transparencies by diluting it to different degrees of viscosity and opacity. The white tempera can be a very versatile medium with this technique. Unfortunately, the use of tempera in the illustration on page 19 is not represented very well in the photograph (see the area marked #6). Its addition, however, did aid in re-establishing some light value that had become lost.

CONCLUSION

It is hoped that the description of the materials and procedures that have been set forth in this text will prove useful to the venturesome draftsmen who are seeking new directions within the discipline of drawing. Again, it should be stated that this text is intended only to represent a point of departure from which many interesting paths lead. It is up to the artist to explore these paths by constant growth, experimentation, and evaluation. New combinations of materials are encouraged and the results of those experiments should be noted.

It is also hoped that this text will help to kindle a re-evaluation of the role of personal involvement with materials and methods.

APPENDIX



"UNTITLED"

The untitled, mixed-media drawing, pictured above was created with the automatic-response drawing method. Some of the materials used include: pencils, tempera, india ink, indelible ink, watercolor paint. The amount of time involved in its creation was approximately 4 days (three of those days were spent on its refinement). It is a non-objective work with a radial composition which suggests a type of explosion.

PLATE #5



"THINGEE"

This particular mixed-media drawing was executed with a variety of materials (pencil, charcoal, tempera, acrylic paint, ink, marking pen, etc.) but, unlike the drawing on the preceding page, had more formal direction. The subject matter is an imaginary insect-like monster; the monster form manifested itself during the Inspiration Stage and maintained its character through the stage of refinement.

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