

Unit 1

Making a start

Introduction

I have already told you that this course will encourage you to learn to see. You will be translating what you see into drawings and paintings; but before you make a start on recording your visual experiences, you need to become familiar with the materials you will be using to do it. In each course unit you will be asked to do practical work which is presented in the form of 'activities'. Your first activity, which I describe on the next page, will take you about 2½ hours. It is divided into five sections, which I have called 'stages'. Each stage will take you at least ½ an hour. You don't have to do all the stages immediately after one another. Each can be done on a different day.

Activity 1: Drawing experiments



Aim

The aim of this activity is for you to try out your drawing media and see what kind of effects you can create accidentally.



Resources

You will need your drawing board, at least five A2-size sheets of white cartridge paper, and pins, clips or tape to attach your paper to the board. You will be using all your drawing materials.

Don't forget that you will need some distilled water to dilute your drawing ink and a small, wide-topped container for the water. The container can be a small glass jar or a plastic carton like the ones you buy cream or yoghurt in.

You will need your fixative and spray and a small stick about the length of a knitting needle and as thin as possible. A reasonably straight twig will do.



Preparation

Set out your drawing materials on a table or similar surface. You can lay your board flat on the table for this activity. I'm not going to ask you to draw from objects but to see if the marks you make on your paper create objects by accident.

Accidental drawing

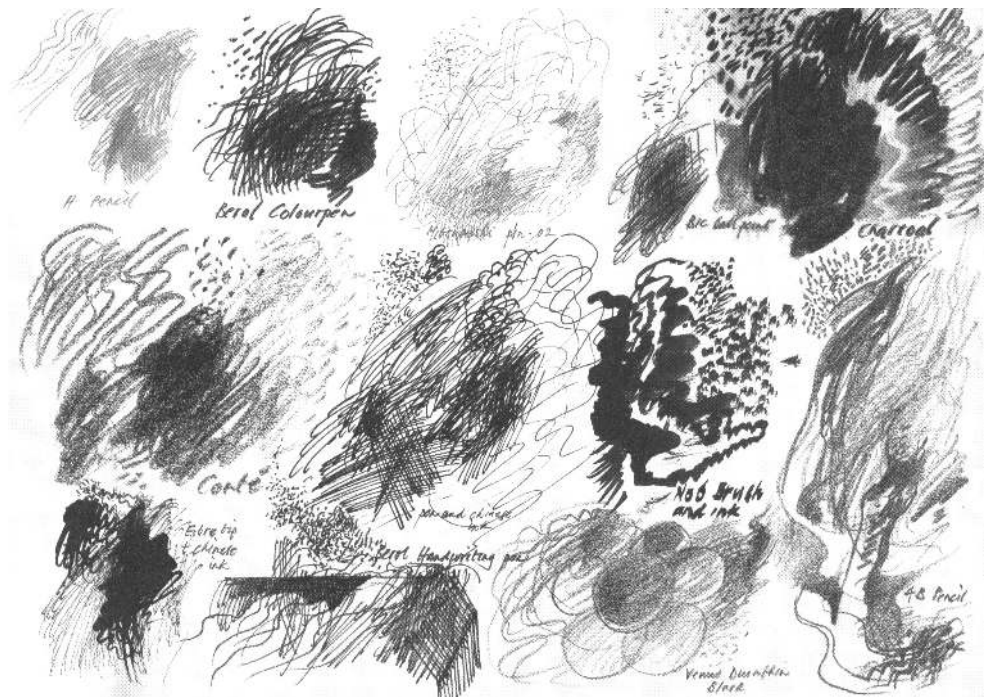
Surrealism has a long history in art. Artists such as Bosch in the fifteenth century and Goya in the nineteenth century expressed the weird and fantastic, but we usually think of Surrealism as being a twentieth-century form of art. The work of two of its leading exponents, René Magritte (1898–1967) and Salvador Dali (1904–1989) is familiar to most people, if not through the actual paintings, then from adaptations of them in advertising.

The Surrealists have taught us that the subconscious plays a very important part in art. A few strokes made with charcoal over a textured paper, for example, may by chance suggest a bird. When they draw, artists look out for such accidental effects and try to exploit them.

Stage 1: Experimenting with drawing media

Start by drawing on your paper with all the drawing media you have. Don't try to draw anything. Just become involved in the kinds of lines, dots and areas of shading each medium will produce (see Figure 2). Spend at least 30 minutes trying every possible way of making marks that you can think of. Making marks in this way is rather like practising handwriting. Once you are confident about making them you are on the way to being able to use them to describe what you see.

Figure 2



Stage 2: Automatic drawing

The Surrealists also developed the practice of ‘automatic drawing’. They believed that if you allow your hand and arm to move freely, without conscious control, you will draw the subconscious. Some degree of automatic mark-making is evident in the work of many artists who are not Surrealists. Henri Matisse and Pablo Picasso provide good examples. You can find their drawings in books on twentieth-century French drawings or in books on the individual artists. See if you feel that some of the lines in these drawings have been drawn with an automatic sweep of the artist’s hand.

Now try automatic drawing for yourself. Make some drawings on a new sheet of paper. Use any or all of the media you have and move your arm and hand freely. First, just try out the different lines that you can produce with each medium. Next I want you to think of the foliage of a tree and use lines to describe it. Don’t try to draw a tree. Allow your hand to be guided by impulse, prompted by imagining any kind of foliage. The result might be something like Figure 3, but it could be completely different.

Then make a drawing of an imaginary town. Describe the features of the town as fast as you can without stopping to see how you are getting on. Don’t take your drawing instrument off the paper more than is absolutely necessary. Draw as far as you possibly can with one continuous line. See Figure 4.

Finally make a second drawing of the townscape in your imagination, but this time keep your eyes tightly closed as you draw. See Figure 5.

Figure 3



Figure 4

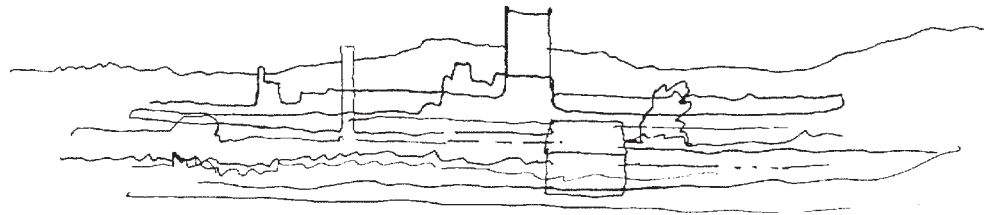


Figure 5



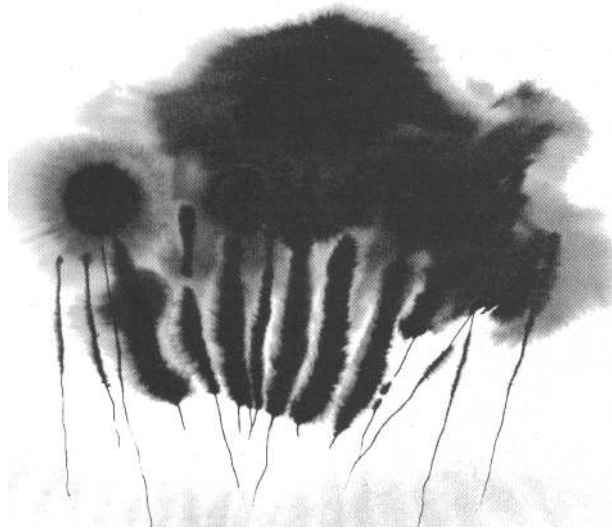
Stage 3: Blot drawing

Recognising that accident is an important feature of drawing isn't a new discovery. Alexander Cozens (1717–1786), an English painter who spent much of his time as a drawing master, developed an idea taken from the fifteenth-century Italian artist Leonardo da Vinci. He showed that blots dropped at random could, for example, suggest a landscape, which could then be developed in greater detail. Cozen's system of using blots was set out in his book, *New Method of Assisting the Invention in Drawing Original Compositions of Landscape*, published in 1785/6.

Try dropping ink from a pen, a brush or a stick on to your paper and developing the blots either by adding more blots or by marks made in ink with a pen or a brush. You may see the marks as foliage, for example, or as reflections on a lake. Let your imagination wander freely.

Repeat this experiment with ink blots, but this time wet the area of the paper where you intend to drop the ink. See if you get effects anything like those in Figure 6.

Figure 6



Stage 4: Line drawing

Pencils and pens lend themselves naturally to drawing lines.

Lines can be thick and heavy or thin and light. They can be assertive or tentative. Lines can be fluent and continuous or short, broken and dotted. All these kinds of lines can be used to create visual effects in drawing.

Try making as many different kinds of line as possible on a new sheet of paper. Draw with charcoal as well as pens and pencils. You don't need to sharpen a stick of charcoal to draw lines with it. Once you get the feel of the medium you will find that you hold the charcoal at an angle to the paper so that you are able to draw lines with the edge of the stick. When the edge wears, you turn the stick in your hand until you find a new edge. This procedure is much harder to describe than to do. With a little practice you will find exactly how to draw lines with charcoal, and turning the stick will become automatic.

Don't attempt to describe anything in these drawings. Any objects that appear should emerge by accident.

Stage 5: Shading

It is possible to make drawings without using any lines but instead using areas of tone. Tone is often referred to as 'shading'. It can actually be built up by using lines (see Figure 7) but other methods, such as charcoal or diluted ink applied with a brush, create tone more easily. Try making light and dark areas of tone using all your drawing media. Experiment with smudging charcoal and also try dusting it off with a rag to get softer and softer effects (see Figure 8). Use fixative to secure any of the tones which are likely to smudge.

Figure 7

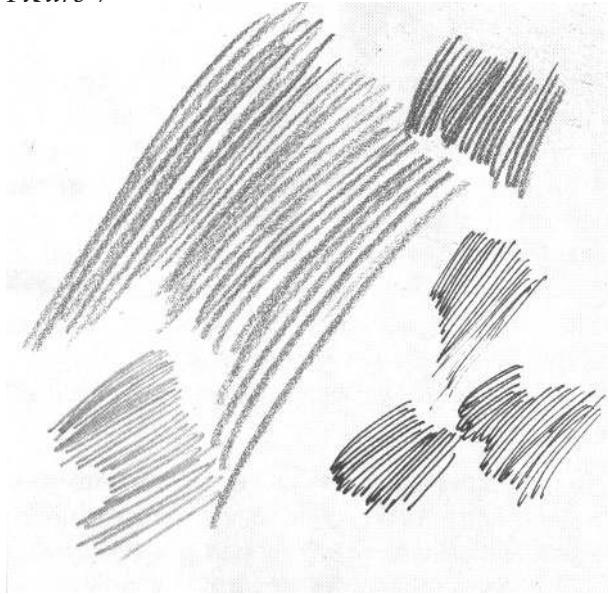
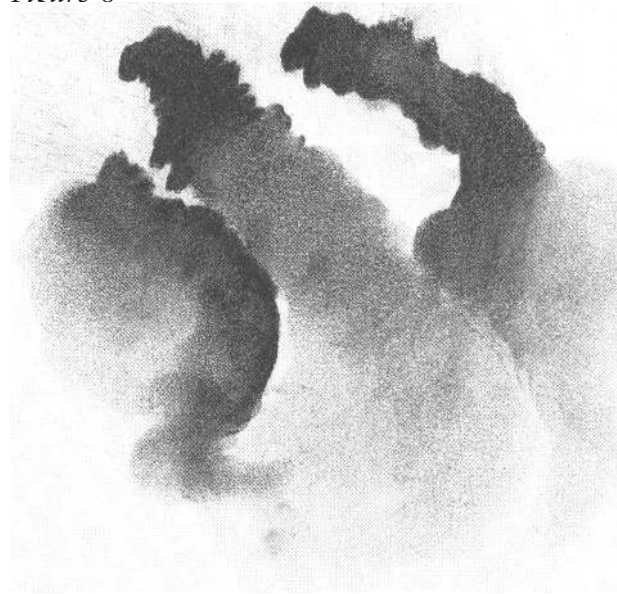


Figure 8



How did you get on?

When you have finished your drawing experiments, lay all your drawings on the floor and look at them for a few minutes.

Ask yourself:

- ◆ Looking at the drawings from stages 1, 4 and 5, can I see any realistic effects?
- ◆ Have I tried all the drawing media and produced all the effects I think are possible?

If you feel your efforts are rather limited or crude, don't worry: there will be opportunities for further experimentation later in the course.

In the next activity I will be asking you to try out acrylic paints.

Activity 2: Using acrylics



Aim

The aim of this activity is for you to mix acrylic paints to produce a range of opaque colours.



Resources

You will need your drawing board, at least two sheets of A2-size white cartridge paper, and pins, clips or tape to attach the paper to the board. You will need all your acrylic paints and brushes and a palette for mixing colours. Two jars of clean water, and clean rags or kitchen paper will also be required. Finally, you will need a table on which to lay out your materials and rest your board.