

CLAUDE HEATH

It was an anecdote about Sol Lewitt, the well-known American Conceptual artist, which first drew my attention to the fact that drawing and thinking are very closely connected. He drew out the designs for a woodcut print called *Four Arcs from Four Corners*, 1986, which were then sent to a workshop in Japan to be used as templates for the print. When the proofs were eventually returned to him and seen from close up, there were small wiggles in the outlines that formed the arcs. These had clearly been deliberately and very expertly cut, following every small wobble of his drafting pen in the design sketch. In time, Lewitt decided to keep these errors, since they had evidently been part of his original concept.

Reading this story as a student, I concluded that if you have an idea for a drawing and execute it with consistency, all of the so-called imperfections and 'wobbles' become part of the idea. It was partly with this in mind, when in 1994 I decided to make a series of drawings by touching objects while wearing a blindfold and drawing what I felt. This had the advantage that I would not be concerned about what looked aesthetically 'right' or 'good' and I would be able to directly concentrate on what I was sensing. My drawing arm simultaneously recreated on the paper what it was that my feeling arm was discovering—and my attention was operating somewhere between the object and the sheet.

The issue was how to draw without being compromised by anything that I might have known about these objects. I would also constantly shift the position of my objects and alter the choice of medium so that I would not relapse into habitual mark making. I would place a piece of Bluetac on the sheet, to act as a starting point and use first green, red and finally black biros, on sheets of paper big enough so that I would not easily run into the edges. (These colours later showed me how things changed over time). All of this had the effect of mixing chance and control in a way that allowed neither of these forces to dominate. It also got me to visually interesting places that I would not have been able to reach otherwise. Sometimes it was like looking at my work as if it had been made by someone else.

By 2001, when I was in residence for one term at Wimbledon School of Art, I wanted to see if this sensation of being directly in touch with my subject, could be achieved while using my eyes. So I used them as if they were fingertips exploring the surfaces of plants, moving over contours one by one. All this was drawn onto paper that was taped to the underneath of the table that the plants stood on, so that I was working on the underside of the table. My arm followed wherever my eyes went, compressing what was seen into marks drawn on to the upside-down sheet. These upside-down drawings were therefore back-to-front, as I found out later, when looking at where I had notated and signed them.

As the series progressed it was clear that my left hand was not doing very much in comparison to the work it had been doing while I was blindfolded. So it made sense that it was free to make another drawing of the same plant from a



ABOVE *Ben Nevis*, 2003, acrylic inks on triacetate film, 42 x 59.4 cm. Courtesy the artist.

OPPOSITE TOP LEFT *Atlantic Wall, Pitcher Plant*, 2003, acrylic inks on triacetate film, mounted onto Perspex, 30 x 30 x 30 cm. Courtesy the artist. Photo: Peter Abrahams.

OPPOSITE TOP RIGHT *Head Drawing 157*, 1995, ink on paper, 70 x 50 cm. Courtesy the artist.

OPPOSITE BOTTOM *Young British Artists VI*, Saatchi Gallery, London, 1996, four canvases, 383.5 x 317.5 cm, alkyd resin, chalk powder, acrylic, plaster life-mask, blindfold. Courtesy the artist. Photo: Stephen White.





Willendorf Venus, 1997, alkyd resin,
chalk powder, acrylic on canvas,
150 x 339.5 cm, Walker Gallery,
Liverpool. Courtesy the artist.

different angle. For example, the left hand worked onto upright boards that faced the plants. So now both hands were drawing simultaneous projections of the plants onto different sheets, in what you could call “plans” and “elevations”. After a while this became quite natural to me, like steering a bicycle with both hands on the handlebar. At the time, I wrote:

When you follow the movements of a football across a flat TV screen, you sometimes have the sensation that the ball is going in a certain direction when it turns out to have a different arc altogether and ends up at the feet of a different player than you had first thought. Its true movements are hidden by the flatness of the screen until it arrives at some particular part of the pitch. This same kind of sensation sometimes happens while drawing, when you attempt to compress the sight and touch of a solid object onto various parts of a flat surface. Working from plants now, it will also be interesting to see whether it is possible to set them down just as they are, but as if rendered by a three-dimensional computer programme that has taken a holiday from mathematics.

Another attempt at a three-dimensional drawing was made in Majorca in 2000. Firing a laser rangefinder towards a large tree that was opposite a fence, I gathered measurements one by one to build a coarse representation of the tree, like a homemade 3-D scan. I noted the numbers down on paper. The idea was to make other work based on this, later on, when more time was available. It is a static drawing but depicts at least one side of a three-dimensional tree. The blank spaces are where the laser passed through the trunk, branches and leaves, while the layout of the numbers show the general outlines of the tree. As to where the laser missed the tree, there are probably some half-blinded sheep stumbling around in Majorca somewhere.

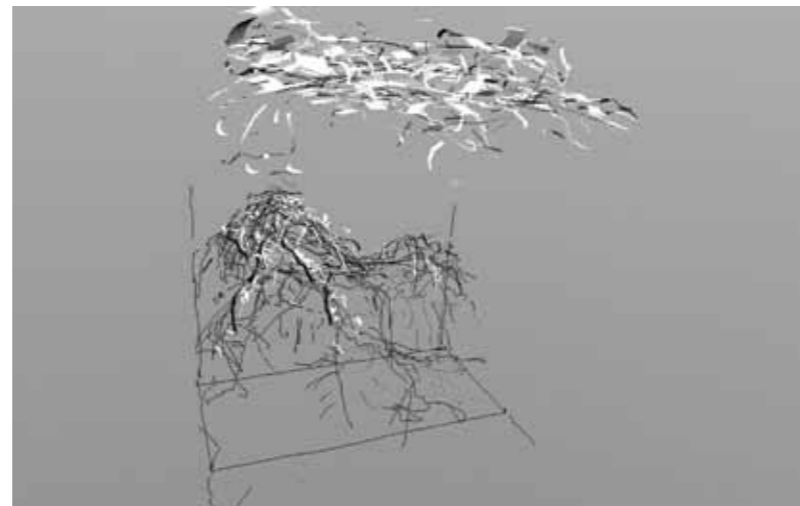
In this way I could visualise the tree from all sides, if I wanted to, as if it were a virtual 3-D model. With the benefit of hindsight, this drawing and others like it, seem to be forerunners of my present interest in using gesturally made freehand three-dimensional drawings, which are digitally recorded.

I have also used aerial photography of a quarry, of an oil refinery and the Ben Nevis mountain range in Scotland, as source material to work from. These pairs of photographs can be viewed with the mirrors of a stereoscope and make the scene appear with apparently real depth to the eyes, as if it were a miniature virtual model of the mountain Ben Nevis. In a similar approach to the technique I took when drawing plants, I drew on surfaces at right angles to each other. The ‘plan’ of the mountain is on the lower half of the sheet and on the upper part are the heights and depths that I felt while looking at the 3-D view.

By 2004 I was invited to be a guinea-pig for new software that could digitally record my hand movements in 3-D. This was a mind-bending experience, where I had to put aside a lifetime of making marks on flat sheets, to make full use of the actual 3d space that I could now draw in. Now it was possible to make a drawing and choose to see it from any point, by rotating it. I could also make a mark in space and return to ‘feel’ it with

the drawing apparatus, which gives the impression that it is physically present (‘force feedback’). But old habits die hard, sometimes I prefer to draw first and look later, so as not to lose my bearings as I see the drawing through physically.

What do all these drawing processes have in common? I think at a relatively early age I must have picked up on the idea that ‘facility’ or skill in drawing was something to be on my guard against, that it could replace meaningful content if you were not careful. “Draw what you see, not what you know” had been the advice I was given. But how is this achievable, and how to avoid the pitfall of displaying and relying on too much skill? The answer for me has been to keep moving the goalposts for myself, changing the rules along with the subject matter, placing obstacles in order to make life interesting, without making it impossible to work.



ABOVE *Ben Nevis*, screenshot from Tacitus three-dimensional drawing software, Edinburgh College of Art, 2004. Courtesy the artist.

OPPOSITE TOP *Ben Nevis (3)*, 2003, acrylic inks on triacetate film, 59.4 x 42 cm. Collection John Talbot, UK. Courtesy the artist.

OPPOSITE BOTTOM *Ben Nevis*, 2003, acrylic inks on triacetate film, mounted onto Perspex, 42 x 59.4 cm. Collection Vincent Bazin, France. Courtesy the artist.

