

the Already the Not Yet

an essay on the practice of walking through the unseen as an art & design student

Henrik Søderstrøm | 2012



Luke 17:20-25

20 One day the Pharisees asked Jesus, “When will the Kingdom of God come?” Jesus replied, “The Kingdom of God can’t be detected by visible signs. 21 You won’t be able to say, ‘Here it is!’ or ‘It’s over there!’ For the Kingdom of God is already among you.”

22 Then he said to his disciples, “The time is coming when you will long to see the day when the Son of Man returns, but you won’t see it. 23 People will tell you, ‘Look, there is the Son of Man,’ or ‘Here he is,’ but don’t go out and follow them.

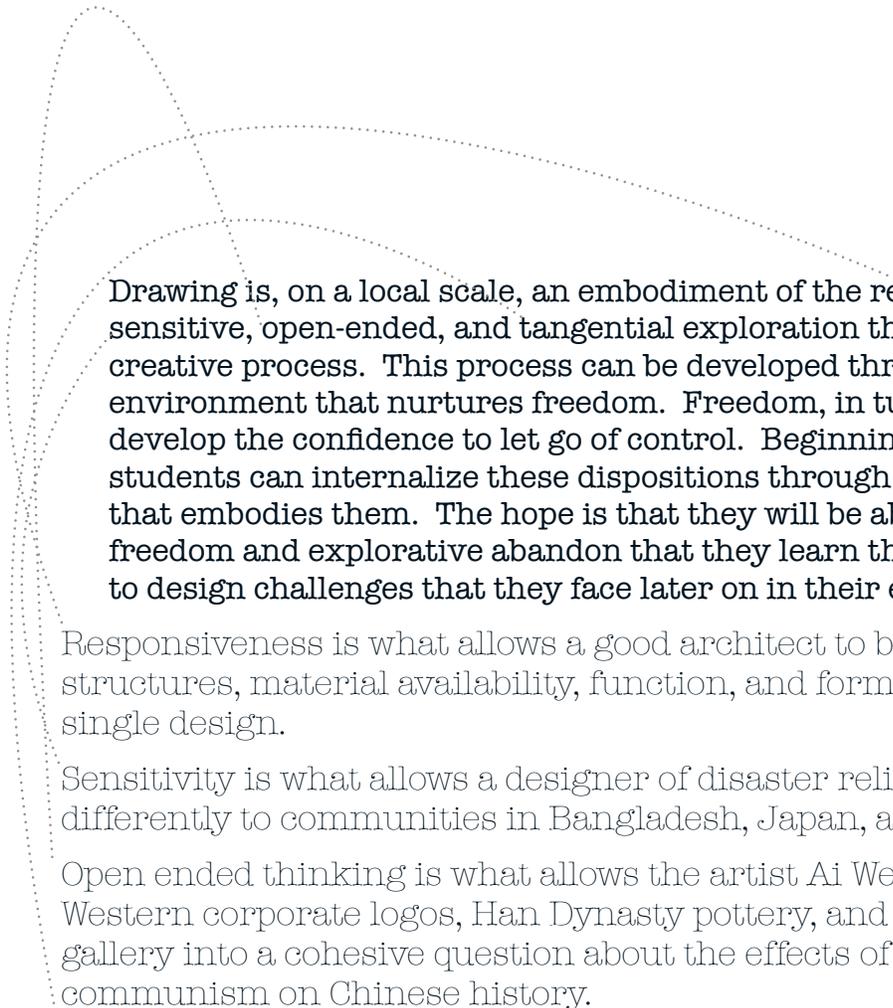
24 For as the lightning flashes and lights up the sky from one end to the other, so it will be on the day when the Son of Man comes. 25 But first the Son of Man must suffer terribly and be rejected by this generation.

Luke 17:33-33

33 If you cling to your life, you will lose it, and if you let your life go, you will save it.

John 12:24-24

24 I tell you the truth, unless a kernel of wheat is planted in the soil and dies, it remains alone. But its death will produce many new kernels--a plentiful harvest of new lives.



Drawing is, on a local scale, an embodiment of the responsive, sensitive, open-ended, and tangential exploration that we call the creative process. This process can be developed through a studio environment that nurtures freedom. Freedom, in turn, grows as we develop the confidence to let go of control. Beginning art & design students can internalize these dispositions through a drawing studio that embodies them. The hope is that they will be able to apply the freedom and explorative abandon that they learn through drawing to design challenges that they face later on in their education.

Responsiveness is what allows a good architect to be sensitive to existing structures, material availability, function, and formal innovation in a single design.

Sensitivity is what allows a designer of disaster relief housing to respond differently to communities in Bangladesh, Japan, and Afghanistan.

Open ended thinking is what allows the artist Ai Wei Wei to integrate Western corporate logos, Han Dynasty pottery, and the context of an art gallery into a cohesive question about the effects of commerce and communism on Chinese history.

Tangential designing is what allows a concept like 'Cradle to Cradle' to actually push the world of mass-production towards sustainability.

With uncanny and graceful balance, the Bible explores what it means to let go of control through stories and images that are themselves responsive, sensitive, and tangential. It teaches us tremendous lessons about freedom in the creative life. Since drawing can be seen as a microcosm of this artistic life, we will begin by exploring how God's word informs the process of drawing.



starting: **BIG** & working towards the details.

"For from him and through him and to him are all things. To him be glory forever!" (Rom. 11:36). But since he is one God in three persons we also believe -- as the scriptures teach -- that "Christ is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn over all creation. For by him all things were created: things in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or powers or rulers or authorities; all things were created by him and for him" (Col. 1:15,16; cf. 1 Cor. 8:6; John 1:1; Hebrews 1:2). God the Father through the Son created out of nothing everything that is not God. The great mystery of creation is how something can come from nothing. Yet Paul writes in Romans 4:17 that "God calls into being things that are not as though they were." "God commanded and they were created," the psalmist says (Ps. 148:5). God addresses his command to nothingness and even nothingness obeys his voice and becomes something (cf. Hebrews 11:3). If you ever start to doubt the word of God think on this:

God can issue a command that is so powerful that if nothing is there to obey, the word itself brings forth its own obedience through creation out of nothing.

from John Piper's sermon
at Bethlehem Baptist church, October 4th, 1981

God spoke and the universe was. As this process involved the creation of time, its own timeline may be beyond our cognitive capacity, but the raw sequence of events given to us in Genesis carves out a phenomenal map for the drawing process. (As we are made in God's image, can our creating echo a piece of His creative process?)

Genesis begins with huge brushstrokes as God breathes out things along the lines of atmosphere, water, night and day (the fabric of time and space). Only after this foundation is laid does God move on to details like leaves, fins, feathers, and lungs. He moves from big to small; from gestural to detailed. A drawing process that teaches artists & designers to let go of control in generative ways works the same way. Merlin Szaz¹ affectionately calls this process "pulling details out of the fog." There are of course no formulas in drawing, but here is a rough attempt at something like an order of operations for drawing a figure from observation in what we can call the fog method:

¹ Merlin Szaz has taught foundation studios at the Rhode Island School of Design for decades. His impact on the Art & Design world is beyond the scope of a footnote.

Cover the surface of your paper with charcoal. Allow rough, uneven textures to remain. Just push the material around and pay attention to the textures that begin to emerge.



Look at the figure in front of you. Find major shapes and gestural lines from the head to the hips; from the shoulders to the knees. Map these out quickly and calligraphically on your page. When you make a “wrong” mark, do not stop to erase it. Just put the right mark next to it and smudge the first. Make a mess. Draw with abandon.



Start blocking out major areas of light and shadow falling across the figure with your eraser (to reclaim the white of the paper as light) and charcoal (to darken areas of shadow). Allow the textures emerging on the page to overtake the figure at points. Do not catalogue detail.



Begin paying more attention to minor shadows and highlights, slowly working your way towards individual details. Do not tighten up; find the ways in which the directional force of each finger and toe flow from the torso.

The movement here is from large to minute. God followed the same process in creating His world. This is not a lockstep pattern, but a gesture of process.

An architect might follow a similar arc, addressing big questions like cultural context, traffic flow, massing, and general spatial function before entertaining debates about window spacing or hallway width. Drawing is a microcosm of both creative practice and God's work.

Drawing as a Visionary Process

navigating things already  not yet

The seen needs the unseen. Together they make a barely perceptible but unforgettable odor, the smell of time, of fermenting mud, meat, and roots pressed firmly together in decay. It is fossilized memory, buried. Miraculously, drawing reverses the process, strips layers away, and reveals what has been hidden. As layers are revealed, as the scent grows stronger, things go transparent, weightless, and make a disquieting kind of no sound.²

-Thomas Lyon Mills

Drawing is a process that allows us to explore the world of forms that we can see at the same moment that we explore imagined ideas that we cannot yet see. It helps us to envision possibilities where they do not yet fully exist. What if that building had a roof made of grass? What if fog flooded that valley? What if that abandoned bridge in Manhattan were turned in to a overhead park? Drawing can help us to answer these questions and foster a visionary spirit in young artists & designers.

Kingdom Theology (which has its roots in inaugurated eschatology) frames the church's role as one of embodying the kingdom of God in a world where it already exists but not yet in its fullness. Jesus is making all things new; this is a forceful statement about both the present and the future - the already and the not yet. To be a part of this work of God in-and-outside-of time, we have to cultivate a visionary spirit. What if there were no poverty in New York? What if God's love overwhelmed the tight minded hatred of the LRA in Uganda? Shane Claiborne

² **Thomas Lyon Mills** (Catalogue published on the occasion of the exhibition "73 Prayers in the Underground" in the Luise Ross Gallery, 568 Broadway, New York, NY, 2004).

calls this a “prophetic imagination,” and it is a spirit-filled kin to the “what if” questions that drawing allows us to explore.

Luke 17:20-25

20 One day the Pharisees asked Jesus, “When will the Kingdom of God come?” Jesus replied, “The Kingdom of God can’t be detected by visible signs. **21** You won’t be able to say, ‘Here it is!’ or ‘It’s over there!’ For the Kingdom of God is already among you.”

Drawing as a process of “pulling recognizable things out of the fog” helps us to understand this paradox by being a part of it in a small way. In the middle stages of a drawing, the artist needs to operate like a visionary, pushing as-of-yet unrecognizable marks around on the paper with a hopeful optimism that envisions still-invisible details in the interaction of shapes. Seeing what is not yet as if it already is, and working on with forceful optimism is a piece of the creative process that helps artists to enact the already and not yet of the Kingdom of God in a small way.

Imagination and the Holy Spirit

IMAGE

The kind of forceful optimism that ‘drawing images out of the fog’ requires of the artist is deeply similar to the kind of hope and faith that believers are to have in this interim period before Christ returns. As we must lean on the Holy Spirit to guide us in all truth while we wait in faith for our Lord, a drawing student must lean on imagination in the middle stages of creating an image in order to keep their creative momentum. They must learn to see what is not yet as if it already is. This is like leaning on a promise, or a guarantee.

Ephesians 1:13-14

13 And you also were included in Christ when you heard the message of truth, the gospel of your salvation. When you believed, you were marked in him with a seal, the promised Holy Spirit, **14** who is a deposit guaranteeing our inheritance until the redemption of those who are God’s possession—to the praise of his glory.

The Holy Spirit is God’s ‘guarantee’ or pledge, by which He undertakes to bring His people safely to their final inheritance. “Guarantee” here is *arrabon*, which is originally a Hebrew word which seems to have come in to Greek usage through Phoenician traders. It is used in modern Greek for an engagement ring. But in ancient commercial transactions it signified a *first installment, deposit, down payment, pledge*, that pays a part of the purchase price in advance, and so secures a legal claim to the article in question, or makes a contract valid (AG). In this case the guarantee is not something separate from what it guarantees, but actually the first portion of it. An engagement ring promises marriage but is not itself a part of the

marriage. A deposit on a house or in a hire-purchase agreement, however, is more than a guarantee of payment; it is itself the first installment of the purchase price. So it is with the Holy Spirit. In giving him to us, God is not just promising us our final inheritance but actually giving us a foretaste of it, which, however, 'is only a *small fraction* of the future endowment'.³

-John Stott

Leaning on a deposit, or a foretaste, as John Stott writes, is part of our existence in the now-and-not-yet of the Kingdom of God. Prophecy, which is a gift of the Holy Spirit operating in believers, gives the church glimpses into God's perspective. (1 Corinthians 14) This is one facet of revelation, validated by harmony with God's word in the Bible. We have these two sources of guidance in the body of Christ, and part of our work is to wrestle with them to deepen our faith. The method of drawing that we have been exploring also operates in response to two sources of input: the observed world and the nature of the medium (charcoal). This connection deepens studio practice and provides something like a parable for our life in the Kingdom.

Scenario:

I am making a charcoal drawing of a landscape in Western New York. There are trees, fields, and sky in front of me. The sound of charcoal scraping across the dry piece of paper on my easel is a subtle friction between sibilance and crisp shuffling. The mark is irregular, fluctuating from foggy gradients to crumbly shades of gray. Moisture from occasional drops of rain from leaves overhead augments the tone, thrusting it towards sharp edges and deep blacks. The process of drawing with such a tactile and unpredictable medium produces waves of visual feedback, forcing me to respond to both the trees that I am rendering, and to the irregularities of the drawing media itself. This tension generates steady streams of possibility. What if the left side of that pine faded off in to the surrounding space? (The charcoal just smudged that way.) What if a crumbling texture crowded the sky on the left side of the image? (The charcoal just broke in my hand and made that happen.) This simultaneous responsiveness is challenging. If I were to become an architect, it would teach me how to respond to social context, geography, and existing buildings.

Our faith pushes us to respond to simultaneous influences as we pray God's Kingdom to earth, reconciling the physical and the spiritual, the seen and the unseen. We are in this world but not of it. Drawing helps us to practice these paradoxes on a small scale, working responsively to what Thomas Lyon Mills (in a secular sense) calls the seen and the unseen.

³ John Stott, God's New Society, pg. 49, Intervarsity Press / Downers Grove, 1979 Illinois 60515

This responsive process is intimately related to a lens that searches for glimmers of God's Kingdom piercing through cracks in the world and seeks to strengthen them. It is an awareness of possibility and a posture that constantly asks "what can be?" Drawing fosters this as the charcoal propels an artist to ask the same questions.



Letting go of control in the beginning stages of a drawing

A vital first step in the process of learning to draw is letting go of control. Elinore Hollinshead, one of the artists under whom I had the privilege of studying early on in my career, worked fervently to prevent her students from "cataloguing detail" in studies of living forms. When I began to dryly render detail in the beginning stages of making a drawing, Professor Hollinshead would make me smudge the image with a piece of cowhide, turn the paper sideways, and begin again. A tight approach would, she insisted, yield exceedingly dry, lifeless, and dull drawings.

The alternative to making such boring drawings is deceptively difficult. These are the sorts of phrases that echo through a studio filled with Elinor Hollinshead's beginning drawing students:

Let go of control.

Be more messy.

Drop the temptation to control every detail of a drawing from the beginning, and leave details until the very end.

Feel the major proportional shifts and massings of the form and ignore the minutia for now.

Draw blind and feel the motion of the form.

Look at the thing you are drawing 70% of the time. Look at your drawing 30% of the time.

"Wrong" marks will add texture later on when you draw over them.

Let your charcoal float across the paper as your eyes float across the shapes in front of you.

Be fearless and draw with reckless abandon.

Draw fluid gestural lines with bold strokes that come from your shoulder and torso, rather than nitpicky hatchmarks that come from your wrist and fingers.

Details come last; gesture comes first.

Capturing gestures with life is simply not possible when you are clinging to the false sense of control that comes from rendering details one after another. When you begin with 'fog' and pull details from loose gestural marks, you lay a foundation of lively texture, solidly lifelike masses, and confident composition. Details can actually function in meaningful ways when they hang from this sort of a skeleton.

The idea of letting go of control abounds with connections to the abundant life we have in God's Kingdom. To the extent that we joyfully relinquish control to God, following the truth of His word and the guidance of the Holy Spirit, we find renewed purpose, energy, and freedom.

Luke 17:33-33

33 If you cling to your life, you will lose it, and if you let your life go, you will save it.

John 12:24-24

24 I tell you the truth, unless a kernel of wheat is planted in the soil and dies, it remains alone. But its death will produce many new kernels--a plentiful harvest of new lives.

Drawing with a sense of explorative abandon and learning to derive energy from letting go of control are practices that help artists to enact a principle of God's word in the studio. They are the same dispositions that allow a good graphic designer to be sensitive and responsive to a client.



Drawing and following Jesus have a tremendous amount in common. Both inform and deepen the rest of creative practice in the visual arts. This essay has sought to explore one facet of these connections, but it is only a fraction of the depth that God has woven into the world through His creative process. The more we seek to echo our maker in our making, the more resonant our impact will be for the Kingdom of God.

From a Syllabus:

I have three main expectations of you as a student.

Hard Work

The first expectation is that you work hard. Learning to draw well is not possible without hours of practice. Specifically, this course carries the expectation that you will spend at least six hours a week in addition to class time working on drawings. You will have a homework assignment each week which is designed to fill this time, but if you finish this assignment in less than six hours, it is expected that you will fill the remaining time with drawings of your choosing in your sketchbook. Keep every drawing that you make for this class, from large works to thirty second sketches, as we will review your work each week in class and again at the end of the semester.

Explorative Abandon

The second expectation is that you develop and maintain a strong attitude of explorative abandon. In short, this means that you must be willing to sacrifice any drawing that you create in order to spur on further discovery. This will sometimes be incredibly difficult, and you will need to trust me when I ask you to take risks with your work. If you spend six hours on a detailed drawing, you may be asked to dump water on it and smudge the charcoal with a sponge before continuing to draw. Remember that every drawing is just one of many and that in order to gain control over the process of drawing, you must first let go of your control over a specific drawing. You will learn to pay attention to the materials that you use as well as to the objects or spaces that you are rendering. Abandon is necessary to unleash the potential of drawing.

Balance & Tension

A violin string makes sound when it is pulled into tension, with one end pulled towards the bridge of the instrument and the other towards the head.

In an analogous way, the third expectation in this class is that you foster a tension or balance in your work between playful exploration and disciplined, technical rigor. At times, these two will seem to be in opposition, but if you foster both in this class, you will find that they work well in tension with one another. It is important not to lean too heavily to one side or the other. When you take a risk, a drawing may initially spiral into chaos and it takes work to harness the energy of that chaos while bringing the drawing back into a stable state. Simply presenting an unresolved experiment can be lazy, while

not experimenting at all can be fearful. Neither of these extremes will lead to growth or a high grade in this class.