

Drawing through Travel Experiences

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Abstract: This study through drawings investigates whether travel and different experiences have a direct impact on the making of art.

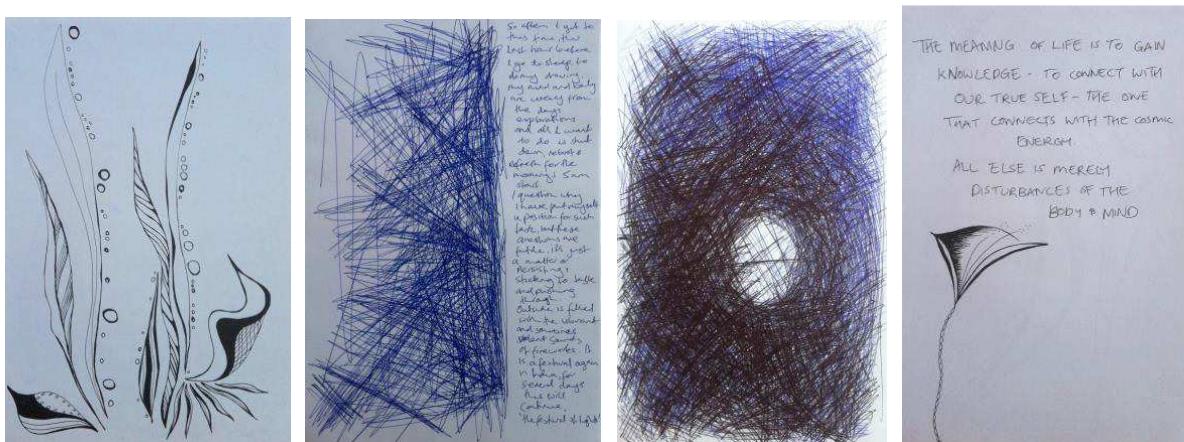
Key words: Drawing, Travel, Experience

Drawing through Travel Experiences is a body of work that is made up of drawing journals, which act as a timeline of reflective data expressing my accounts of an outward journey that took me on an exploration of three countries and an inward one to a deeper spirituality. The journals were part of the research methodology; my investigation was to see if the experience of my immediate surrounds was reflective in the drawings. As my journey progressed so did the concept behind the journals, eventually evolving into a final body of drawings that reflected notions of experience and memory and juxtaposed it to reality.



Over the duration of three months I visited India, England and Spain, respectively. Even before I had begun, I had felt that if environment was going to show an effect on the drawing then the diversity within these countries would surely be able to produce it as everything from flora and fauna to customs and language were different. The choosing of the countries wasn't haphazard, I had a different purpose in each of them: India – to study for a yoga teacher-training certificate; England – to re-connect with friends and Spain – to conduct this research for the scholarship that I had received through university, so I was there for my passion and love of the arts.

The journals formed the basis to engage with qualitative research methods, whereby each day of the three months is represented with a drawing. The intention behind each drawing was to remove the constructive and didactic formulations of the mind and allow the drawing to come from an interpretation of surroundings through a deeper more sensitive space, a space that is more expressive of the moment than it is a depiction of place or externalised representation. I used the methods set out by the Surrealists when they devised 'automatism'. André Breton defined automatism in his *Manifesto of Surrealism* (1924) as "psychic automatism in its pure state". This automatism was "dictated by thought, in the absence of any control exercised by reason, exempt from any aesthetic or moral concern" (Gibson 2009). The interest in drawing from the subconscious mind that they had is along the lines of the space that I was creating from. Minimalist artist Agnes Martin also uses this method, although she doesn't label her practice as using automatism specifically. In an interview she explains how she is more interested in emotions than ideas, describing her method, "I don't have any ideas myself, I have a vacant mind in order to do exactly what the inspiration calls for" (Currie 2014: 234). This attitude comes from exposure to Buddhism: "I used to meditate before I stopped thinking. Now I don't think of anything, I have an empty mind so once something comes into it you can see it" (Currie 2014: 234). It is a place of Zen, of ego-less-ness, a space of purity true to the moment to create from. To enable this freedom in application, the choice of materials was also important to my methodology: watercolour pencils, graphite, ink pens and water brushes were used as they allowed for an uninhibited transference of expression of experience as their usability didn't impede my creative process.



The journals provided drawings that seem to transverse through subtle shifts as the journey progressed. For the section that was conducted in India it is interesting to note the amount

of bold abstract sections of colour and text used within the drawings, as if the explosive sensorial impact that the country was having on me needed to be expressed through words. The words reflect the in-depth investigation of self-inquiry that yoga was presenting to me, they are addressing questions and states of mind brought about by the meditations. Artist Shirazeh Houshiary uses text from Sufi doctrines and from 13th century Persian poet Rumi written in Arabic script in her paintings *Touch* (1999) and *Presence* (2006–07) to express her ideas about spirituality. In an interview with Elizabeth Fullerton she says, “I’m trying to really get beyond what we experience with the three-dimensional senses we have, because we see the world in a limited way. Much of reality is what we don’t see” (2013). Her thoughts relate to the spiritual inquiry that I was having in India, and it was only in this period that text appears in the journals. Theorist Nick Currie makes ties between Eastern religions and Minimalism: “In the Buddhist conception, the dissolution of self and ego is happening constantly, even in the midst of life. Meditation encourages it. In Zen Buddhism, as in Minimalism, there’s an acceptance of blankness, emptiness, silence.” There are minimal qualities to the pages that were drawn whilst in the environment where the people surrounding me practiced Hinduism from which Buddhism stems.

The transition period between India and England was described through ink-only drawings. Noticeably the shift between experiences brought about a move from colours to monotone, from expressive gesture to tighter-conformed shapes and patterns. This could be read as a transition from an open spiritual space to that of one preparing for new surroundings, being precautionary and readying for the change. A marked shift in the drawings from the time in India is that they begin to develop a more line-based quality; the shapes are more identifiable and further executed with patterning. The colour scheme doesn't have any drastic changes but the use of colour slips into selected highlights and accents within the drawings, as opposed to the bolder elements of the Indian drawings. One event that I would have to make note to whilst I was in London was the exhibition by English artist Grayson Perry;, his analytical, multimedia works *Who are You* at the National Portrait Gallery in London were somewhat pop yet skillfully rendered, socially topical and fascinating. He is able to negotiate through traditional mediums like ceramics and etching, combine them with the use of digital technologies, to create pieces that have a linear drawing style, filled with textures that articulate a strong social commentary. Seeing these shifted something in my perception of art and I can see through the progression of the journals that they developed different elements after being exposed to his work. Theorist Jacky Klein describes his work, “Perry's subjects are topical and contemporary, ranging from consumer culture and kinky sex to teenage crime and religious extremism” (2009: 8)



The period spent in Spain is represented through similar characteristics to those which the drawings had developed through England, yet they become more detailed, the intricacies and negation of space on the page seems to be more harmonious. This shift to higher detail and spatial awareness is something I would attribute to the time inspired by the city of Barcelona. The streets are filled with Art Nouveau architecture, a delicate balance between stone, cement and wrought iron, in which every detail of the cityscape from the light post to the pavements tiles are highly decorative. The architect Antoni Gaudí's influence on the designs within parts of the cityscape are very noticeable; he creates a sense of playfulness through his use of curves reflective of nature and his hypnotic use of colour and scale. To see his work published in a book does nothing when you compare it experiencing it for yourself. His creations led me into somewhat of a fantastical wonderland, by the time I had visited his cathedral, his buildings and strolled through his park, my spatial perception had totally shifted, and become joyous and surreal. The way that he captured elements of nature through his lines and structural forms, curving and flowing, he found a unique balance between aesthetic and function that inspires a surreal quality. This along with the leisurely time I spent strolling the streets stopping for coffee and croissants at many a café, indulging in the delicious hot chocolates that were like no other I had had before, the pace of the city really grew on me.



As the work in the journals continued I began to think about my physical body as the conductor processing my experience, the medium which was creating the narration, the

depiction of time and place translated through my body into the drawings within journals. Maurice Merleau-Ponty's theories on *Phenomenology of Perception* revolve around these ideas of embodiment, described as the unity of consciousness, the world and the human body, all one in the same, all working together in a mode that allows each aspect to be exchanging and receiving, unanimously enabling the body to perceive. He describes how our body perceives through our sensorial motor functions, detecting the world in that present moment through the intangible elements from this union (Caracciolo 2014). These ideas developed through the course of the trip expanded my focus from that of the immediate experience to the understanding of what pertains to our ability to experience within the moment: the history that we carry with us through our lifetime of experiences, the reactions that are set within the layers of our muscles, our subconscious conditioning, our animal instincts, every fragment of our being that enables us to perceive. This 'Experientiality', Monika Fludernik describes as,

... the quasi-mimetic evocation of 'real-life experience' or the evocation of consciousness. Correlating this with narration stating that narration can only exist with this element, as without it there is no way in which the story can be told or similarly received by an audience, as for an audience to receive they are consciously or subconsciously relating their own experiences with the narration in order to make sense of it (quoted in Caracciolo 2014).

When adapting this term to visual arts, I am using it in the context of my practice being a trans-medial narrative. The term encompasses the ideas of the body as a medium, something that gathers and uses accumulated information to then output or receive data, or in my case, art.



Working through my journals and beginning to look at the body as a medium within the experience shifted my research from that of immediate moments to that which includes memory and the perception of reality. Expanding on working from the journals to larger works on paper I began to create images based on these three elements. Experience, being represented by utilising the research drawings from the journals, transferring some of the more intricate pattern works via photocopying and transfer release techniques, working back into the transfers with ink pens to pick up and highlight sections and also further extend the patterns in places. To incorporate the use of colour created through the journals I used subtle, semi-transparent layers of acrylic paint which are applied through mono-printing and very diluted brush application.

Taking the view that each person experiences any given moment from an individualised perspective, each event is engaged with from such a vast body of accounts that any moment can be described in so many ways depending on what the individual was focusing on within it. It introduces the concept of reality into the works to create the constant in which experience and memory plays off. Reality is defined as the world or the state of things as they actually exist, as opposed to an idealistic or notional idea of them. To depict this I have used a relief or sculptural element on the paper, attaching a form to contrast against the other two aspects that are variable in nature. Memory is the third element, the thing that is generated from the first two. Memory is apparent in all layers of our being, from the levels that we use it for recollection to all of the data that is stored within our bodies, working on the conscious and subconscious layers. I look at memory as a varying factor, how it can be recalled and remembered with different elements being prominent at different times and how over time it can be interpreted and adjusted to suit the person's recollection or story. I want to translate the altering nature of memory through the use of shadow. I cast light on the work to hit the sculptural element that describes reality; the shadows emerge across the paper playing between the form of reality and the pattern of experience, and like true memory the shadows shift in their quality depending on the degree of light projected and the angles in which they hit.



The works become a metaphor for the interplay between reality, experience and memory. They are derived from my accumulation of embodied experiences, my searching through subconscious and conscious states, influenced by my engagement with present-ness and the preoccupation of using my body as a conductor. Artist Tamara Henderson explains how she doesn't think it is possible or necessary to draw divisions between conscious and subconscious, or reality and dream state:

I don't think you can separate those incidences from a conscious or sub conscious state, or rational or irrational state. I think they are one and the same. I guess for translating that object or moment experience, be it an encounter while walking down the street or an encounter in a dream state or trance state. Those elements leak into reality and almost become a statuary presence that represents and embodies the subconscious. I don't think there should be a differentiation as to whether these incidental incidences, when they occur, matter at all (quoted in Gruijthuijsen 2014: 266).

Her statement questions the nature of being able to separate one moment from another whether it be real or imagined, and aligns the conclusions I have been able to make about the impact of cultures and countries on the drawings.

Through the traversing nature of the journals I began to notice how one experience or set of experiences wasn't specifically possible to be isolated from the journey as a whole. The narrative that they were creating was that each moment was interpretative of the last, that each experience did create new elements within the drawings but the changes were subtle as they developed along with all of the other information that my body acted as a conduit to express. Artist Robert Gober very simply explains it in this statement, "you travel and you see things and unconsciously you are affected by them (Obrist 2014: 167).



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