

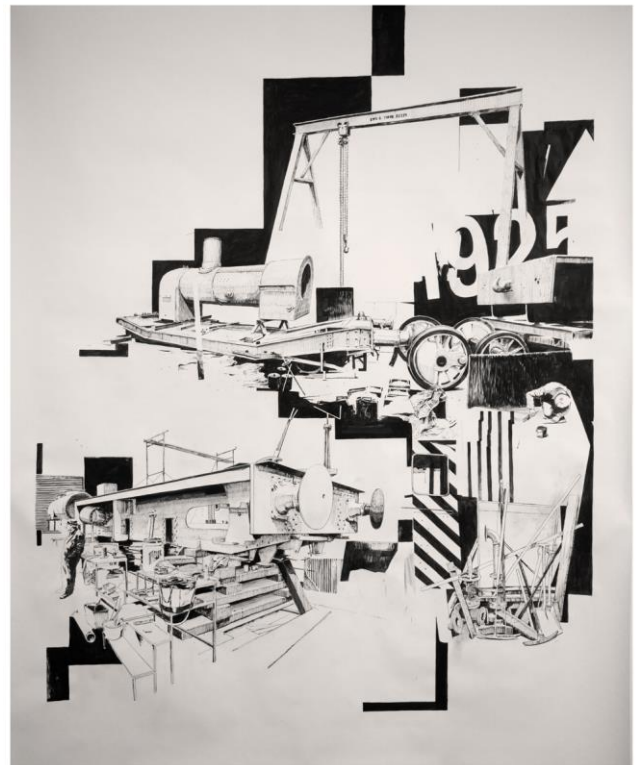
Drawing Narrative

As part of the Courtauld National Partners Programme, artist and illustrator Gavin Renshaw was commissioned by the Harris Museum, Art Gallery and Library as part of a series to create works in response to aspects of Courtaulds Ltd heritage in Preston. He uncovered the fascinating story of Caliban, a steam engine brought into commission in 1937 to shunt raw materials around the Courtaulds Ltd Redscar plant in Preston. After 30 years of neglect, the engine is currently being painstakingly restored by The Furness Railway Trust.

In this resource, Gavin explains a number of observational drawing techniques and uses his work documenting the restoration of Caliban to show how they can be used to help depict the narrative of a subject.



Caliban in its former glory: Ribble Steam Railway and Museum; drawings: Gavin Renshaw, 2020



“ I have depicted Caliban in its current state, spread across the engine works in various levels of assembly. Some parts untouched while other sections are fully painted and refurbished. The imagery, like Caliban in Shakespeare’s *The Tempest*, is fragmented: some components are massed together while others sit in isolation, corroded abstracts from a larger hulk. ”

In context

Here's an example of how the exercises that follow and other graphic techniques can help to drive a narrative within your drawings. This is a study from my drawings of Caliban in the workshop at Ribble Steam Railway and Museum, featuring two engineers inspecting some components. I initially made a number of sketches on site and took some photographs for reference.



In the finished drawing you can see that some of the scene is practically abstract and certain elements have been completely removed.

I want all of the focus to be on the steam engine components and the engineers, like surgeons, discussing the refurbished parts.

All detail has been isolated to those areas. The men have been simplified so most of their bodies are in shadow to give the image contrast. The long table has become a single suggestive line.

The negative space now frames the scene with a suggestion of an engine in the background. They are absorbed with inspection.



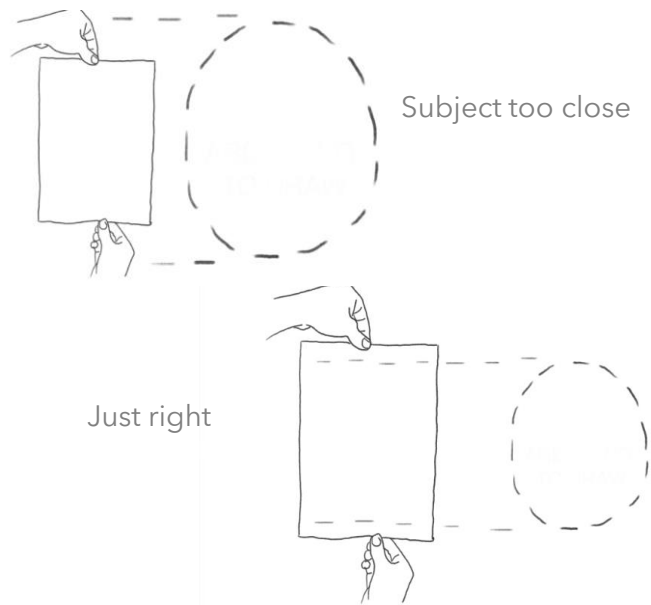
Tips and techniques

These techniques are useful for students in developing sketchbook work and communicating aspects of their subject, or anyone wishing to develop approaches to drawing and observation.

Firstly, a few thoughts before picking up the pencil. Drawing is fundamentally about looking at your subject, its surroundings, proportion, weight and how light hits its surface. I recommend spending a few minutes just observing the key characteristics of what you are about to draw. We all think we know what things look like but it is only when you look at something with fresh eyes, really inspecting its shape and form that we are ready to draw it.

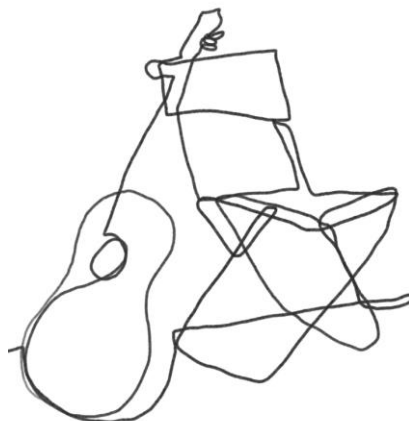
Getting started

Always try to draw the subject in front of you at the same size you see it. This sounds simple and obvious but it is surprising how close or far away we sometimes sit from the subject we are about to draw. To check this, simply hold the paper you are going to draw on in front of you and next to the subject in your line of sight. Will it fit on the page? If not, adjust your position accordingly by moving either closer or further away.



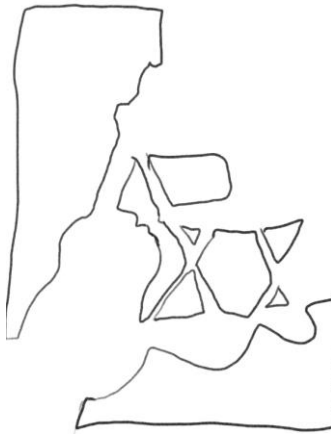
Exercise 1: The one liner

Draw your subject in one continuous line, try not to take your pencil off the paper. If you do, don't worry, just continue from where you left off.



Exercise 2: Negative spaces

Let's look at negative space. Negative space is everything which is not the subject you have chosen to draw. In this case the floor, the wall and the spaces between the chair legs, for example. Draw these shapes as you see them around your object.



Exercise 3: Shadows

Draw your subject looking only at the shadows. To help you see these easier, try half closing your eyes, like you are squinting. This will help separate light from dark and eliminate detail.



Exercise 4: Simplify details

Let's look at a complicated bit of your image and how you might simplify it. Look at the key objects you want to represent in your drawing. If the subject in front of you has many detailed areas, focus on the parts which are important to you, ensure that these take preference over everything else. Leave all the other parts out.



How do these techniques help to construct narrative?

There are particular elements to all these exercises which can help you to construct a drawing and also add narrative. Lets look at how each one can benefit you.

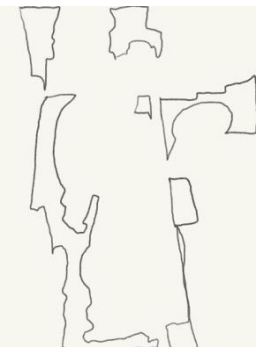
The One Liner

A continuous line is great for freeing up your mark making, often we make lines using a series of small strokes, using a continuous line looks bold and confident. It also gets our brain into gauging and measuring distances between objects in front of us even if the drawing looks a bit wonky.



Simplify Details

Taking detailed areas and simplifying them is a technique artists employ all the time. It can take many hours to copy all the details of a subject when sometimes we can hint at them instead. Great images often have only a few areas of detail to grab our attention. Too much detail and your image may become confusing. The main thing here is to only include what is relevant.



Negative spaces

Mapping the negative spaces of your subject can help in two ways. It initially helps us to judge proportion and measure distance between objects and secondly it allows us to abstract the scene before us and potentially use some elements to aid our composition.



Shadows

Blocking in your shadows is a great way of seeing how much contrast you have in your drawing. Contrast excites the eye in a similar way detail can add interest. If your picture is too light, see if you can adjust your position and likewise if your image has too much shadow. This is often the main reason people move around their chosen subjects before settling in a particular place. They are looking for a nice balance between light and dark. If you are unable to change your position or there is no way of adding or subtracting light/shadow then we must decide whether we keep those elements in our drawing or whether we omit them using our artistic license.



Remember, you are the artist. You are allowed to add and take away at your discretion if it does not enhance your picture and help tell your story.