

Blind Contour Drawing

An exercise practice to change your mind



Hannah Plank, [Blind Contour Exercise](#), Art 160, Fall 2013

Objectives:

Practice Hand / Eye / Brain

Develop a technique for fine focus

Decouple your symbolic left brain from naming what you see

Engage in experiential seeing

Draw what you see, and not what you know

Explore various media

Detach from judgement

Map your experience

Materials:

SURFACE to draw on:

Use anything to draw on (paper, cardboard, whatever) that is easily accessible. It's best to use material that is found and free, because you are doing this as a throwaway exercise, and not to produce a product. You can also paint with water on a driveway or any receptive surface. Whiteboards, and other erasable surfaces also work. The point is the practice, not the result.

TOOL to draw with:

There is nothing that is off limits, but the implement you use should FLOW easily and well, and you should enjoy writing with it. Play with various pens, pencils and

markers. There is a lot of variation in how you draw depending on the material—for example, a Sharpie will produce a different (and likely larger) result than a pencil, and require a larger range of movement. Also, if you use Sharpie (or any juicy inky marker), please make sure you have several absorbent layers of paper so you don't accidentally mark your surface

The benefit of the blind contour exercise is in its practice and not its outcome

RULES:

SET UP

It's important to take the time to set up your situation in order to create a relaxed drawing situation. Your goal is to eliminate cause for worry that will distract you from the task at hand. Think of it like a meditation exercise--set up an ideal studio moment where you can cross over into a "flow" mindset (see notes below).

1. Create a comfortable working space. Consider the cushion of your sitting surface, and the height of the surface you will work on.
2. Set up an ample surface space large enough for your shoulder to hand to make a generous circular movement. Move books, plates, phones and other objects off of the surface, so you don't worry about avoiding or hitting anything. Cover the surface with taped down paper (really do take the time to do this, so you don't worry about accidentally marking on the surface).
3. Consider asking the cat or dog or child to sit in the other room while you work, OR embrace the visual chaos that they will create include them in the drawing.
4. Tape down paper for "overdrawing" as well as the paper you will draw on, so you don't have to worry about going off the edge.
5. Set up a timer for each session, so you don't have to think about time
6. For your subject, find a COMPLEX object, or set of objects (still life) that is difficult to simplify. Organic objects may be better suited for drawing than those with simple geometric surfaces, but anything complex will work. This doesn't have to be exotic in any way, and can be something you enjoy looking at (flowers, motherboards). Draw from three dimensional objects and not flat images. The spatial changes are important for discovery.
7. Play music without lyrics (or experiment with types of music, discover what best takes you out of thinking and into being absorbed by the moment). Music really helps.
8. Be in a space that can remain undisturbed for the duration. Turn the buzzer off of the dryer.
9. TURN YOUR PHONE TO SILENT and turn it over. You may be using it for the alarm, but make it so that you are in no way tempted by someone texting you or another dang news headline. (this is just for ten minutes, try it, you may like it)
10. DO NOT try to make anything look like anything. This is a MAP of your looking experience and not a picture of the thing you are drawing.
11. Don't worry

When you are finished post your images, or a detail of an image, onto your process log in your portfolio and/or twitter, and add the tags and hashtags above. Reflect on the work. What do you notice that you noticed?

Method:

Your eye studies the contour of the object. The contour is NOT the outline, it includes the outline and any other place you see variation in light. So if you draw your hand, for example, it includes the knuckles, folds and wrinkles.

GO SLOW. Ideally, your pen acts like it is connected to your eyeball. Wherever your eye goes, your pen marks. SLOWLY look at the edges of the contours and record them.

Your pen never ever leaves the paper. This means you will backtrack and make extraneous lines—that's OK.

DO NOT LOOK at your drawing! This is the most important part. You can't look at the drawing while you are drawing, you are looking at the subject the entire time. If you can't help but look, put a newspaper or paper bag or box over your drawing so you don't look at it. Or set your still life object in the opposite direction of where you are drawing. It will be obvious that you have looked if you look, because your drawing won't look like a blind contour, but like you were trying to draw a hand, or cat, or toaster or whatever. In the result of a truly blind contour drawing, there will be shiny moments of absolute truth (like a startlingly realistic thumbnail, or petal) but everything else will be overlaid with double lines and funky proportions. That's what you want. Stretch yourself and slow down. Your mind will be pissed off at you, because it is in the efficiency, get the task done stage, but you must resist this and tell it to please settle down.

This is a lot like meditation. Eventually your efficiency brain will stop trying and you will become absorbed in seeing and marking.

Notes:

If you like the results it makes killer wrapping paper—use large sheets of newsprint, or any throwaway material and save it for wrapping gifts.

Understanding the Psychology of Flow, Very Well Mind, Kendra Cherry, reviewed by Steven Gans, MD, August 08, 2019
<https://www.verywellmind.com/what-is-flow-2794768>