

GRAPHIC IMPRESSIONS

BOOK REVIEW



Reviewed by April Flanders,
University of Florida

Drawing from Observation: An Introduction to Perceptual Drawing

Brian Curtis

McGraw-Hill, 2002

ISBN 0-07-241024-8, 324pp, \$30.00

BRIAN CURTIS' NEW BOOK, *Drawing from Observation*, makes me wish that I were teaching a drawing class this semester so that I could try out his methods. The book, clearly the result of years of direct classroom experience, is printed in black and white and comes with a CD of Power Point slide shows (you may choose either PC or Macintosh format), that may be used as lecture material in the classroom. The CD is broken up into lectures that correspond to the chapters in the book. These lectures have text and images taken from the book and several include animation that illustrates specific points.

In his preface, the author acknowledges "...that dozens of fine books on the subject already exist." Indeed, there is no lack of quality drawing books. The problem I have often encountered in teaching drawing is that there are too many different books that simply take the same information and reorganize it in such a way as to suit that particular author. This text however, goes further than just a reorganization of the basics; line, value, form, and perspective etc. The usual suspects do appear but they are integrated into a personalized and challenging methodology. Although this methodology has obviously proven successful for Curtis, as evidenced by his student's drawings, some sections are quite daunting in their scientific approach.

Drawing from Observation paradoxically combines an intuitive approach to drawing with systematic devices aimed at improving a student's basic rendering capability and spatial understanding.

Instruction begins with a thorough explanation of basic tools and the mechanics of drawing, and continues with a clear explanation of intuitive gesture. In the chapters that immediately follow, Curtis outlines specific techniques designed to achieve a basic understanding of placement and perspective using intuition and techniques such as sighting with a straight edge. In a first look at perspective, the straight edge tool becomes one hand of a clock and "clock angles" are used to determine the angles at which objects recede. Used together and in the given order, as Curtis insists, these tools can very effectively create the illusion of three-dimensional space.

Although this information doesn't really break new ground, it is presented in an understandable and natural sequence that fosters good drawing technique very quickly.

As the text progresses, the material becomes both increasingly personalized to Curtis' own teaching style and more analytical in nature. In a section entitled Cross-Contour, the reader must create an official "drawing from observation" flag which is then manipulated and used in numerous drawings to gain an understanding of cross contour and to introduce what Curtis calls "monocular clues". He states "These are two-dimensional, one-eyed visual techniques that...include chiaroscuro, cross contour, contour line variation, overlap and converging parallel edges."

Curtis has a penchant for analysis that allows him to dedicate thirty-three pages to the idea of foreshortened circles. While this chapter starts out innocently enough, I soon found myself overwhelmed by the scientific language and illustrations that denote almost every possible change in the appearance of circular forms in space. His approach to linear perspective is equally exhaustive and analytical in nature. The two chapters on perspective provide an excellent explanation of the limitations of the system and how to avoid its pitfalls; however I found myself reading the material several times to understand his points.

The book sets out with the clear and practical purpose of teaching perceptual drawing techniques. Thus, I was surprised to come across two chapters that are primarily historical. The first of these addresses the Golden Mean and follows a very practical-minded chapter on proportional relationships.

While this discussion of the Golden Mean is the most comprehensive of any drawing or design book that I have read, I wonder if the author goes too far in dedicating nearly thirty pages to a philosophical and artistic ideal that is removed from a practical approach to rendering three dimensional space in a drawing. The other such chapter discusses linear perspective and historic philosophies towards pictorial illusion. This chapter also interrupts a very practical flow of technique, but seems more appropriate because it begins with the idea of linear perspective as a system and it introduces its creators.

The book is, in large part, a very successful effort. Many of the chapters maintain an easygoing accessible writing style that works well for the intended audience of art students. Curtis includes many pertinent historical references, such as a brief history of paper but also uses modern examples and a sense of humor to convey his points. The drawings and illustrations are numerous and exhaustive and these alone make the book well worth reading. The format of the book however, is very distracting. Each page is laid out on a two column grid and nearly every page has either large or small illustrations with captions so that there is typically only one full column of text on any given page. On some pages this results in large awkward white spaces and on other pages, the columns are so small that they appear to be part of the illustration caption. Once or twice I actually lost my place!

Drawing from Observation is a methodology book that builds skills through a combination of intuition and scientific analysis. It would best be used as a textbook for a drawing course as long as you are comfortable with extensive analysis. Used in this way, the CD of Power Point slides would be an invaluable tool. However, if like me, you aren't teaching a dedicated drawing course, this book does still offer some high quality gems for printmaking students struggling with drawing techniques.