

# Drawing Phenomenological Parallels through Practice-Based Research

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## Phenomenology and Drawing

In investigating the inter-relationship of memory, imagination and the construction of meaning through, and within drawing practice, Huebler's (1914-1997) explication of the centrality of art:

...as an activity that extends human consciousness through constructs that transpose natural phenomena from that qualitatively undifferentiated condition that we call 'life' into objective and internally focused concepts... (Huebler, 1992:173)

offers a paradigm within which drawing can be seen as a desire to engage with a speculative, conjectural space for understanding, imagining and reverie; from undifferentiated world into visually mediated interpretation. It is proposed that drawing, as a reflexive and reflective cognitive process, gives rise to an articulation of embodied relational knowledge within the world and, as a process of engagement reveals, a 'subjective truth' (*Wahrheit*) as something that '...opens up a world.' (Heidegger, 1971: 40).

Phenomenology, as a philosophical methodology, is '...identified as a manner or style of thinking...' (Merleau-Ponty, 2006: x), developed by Edmund Husserl (1859-1938). Its primary concerns are with the structures of consciousness and the phenomena that appear within them, as objects for systematic reflection and analysis. In examining their role in constituting or giving meaning to the world, such reflection can be '...defined as the study of the essence of consciousness as experienced from the first person point of view.' (Woodruff Smith, 2007:1) engaging the self in considering the meanings things have in our experience. Maurice Merleau-Ponty (1908-1961), in his introduction to *The World of Perception*, declared that phenomenology enabled a consideration of levels of consciousness in order to '...seek an understanding from all [these] angles simultaneously, everything has meaning, and we shall find this same structure of being underlying all relationships.' (Merleau-Ponty, 2004: xxi).

Thus, phenomenology and drawing, each offer the possibility of an account of space, time and the world as we live them, from the first person point of view; in that embodied and perceptual experience constitutes feelings and experiences explicitly through the activity of drawing. Therefore, the paper will explore the phenomenological parallels witnessed in the author's practice-based research.

## Embodied World

The world we live in, our relationship to it and the objects that inhabit it are founded on our perceptions. The senses provide our entry into the world through vision, touch, smell, taste and sound. The questions that began to be considered, within my drawing practice, were the

seemingly innate structures of perception and the interpretation of these experiences in relation to immersion or absorption within the drawing process:

- What is the relationship between perceptual experience and the reinterpretation of an image through drawing?
- What is the connection between imagination and memory within a subjective experience of drawing in the landscape?
- Can meaning emerge through an embodied knowledge contained within drawing?

The ideas that emerge attempt to relocate the paradigms of my drawing practice within a subjective relational world, *my world*, at a given moment.

We, as objects, are integral to the world and its phenomena, our 'sense experience' (*Sentir*) (Heidegger, 1962) furnishes us with the ability to enter into this world as sensate beings; to interact, affect and engage with the world in both time and space. The body is, therefore, *in* the world at the same time as being *of* the world, simultaneously remaining detached from the world, through the consideration of our experience, and being immersed within the reality of that world.

John Dewey (1859-1952), in *Art as Experience*, considers that the artist's subjective experience of the world, as self and world, can '...qualify experience with emotions and ideas so that conscious intent emerges.' (Dewey, 2005:36). The potentialities of experience, explored in Dewey's writing, offer glimpses of a vision that brings '...to living consciousness an experience that is unified and total.' (*Ibid*: 14) through not only [the artist] being in the world, but within the activity of making. Dewey's conception, considered in relation to my own practice, elucidates the connection between the external and internal, world and thought, object of experience and object [drawing].

Within this embodied context, drawing can be said to visually articulate a particular way of coming to know the world, and as '...human beings manifest an implicit capacity for a comprehending interaction with entities, as actual, and as possessed of a distinctive nature.' (Mulhall, 1996:3) so drawing utilises this comprehension. This capacity which, Heidegger (1962,1971) defined, as an implicit understanding of what it is for a subject to *be*, orientates our existence within the world, and is, by its very nature, subjective.

In attempting to elucidate the issues within my drawing practice, Heidegger's ontology of Being (*Sein*) (Heidegger, 1962), within the context of understanding the human kind of being, or 'Dasein' (Being-there) (Heidegger, 1962), offers a



Figure 1  
Pencil, graphite and water-colour drawings from artist's sketchbook



fundamental principal of 'Being-in-the-world' (*In-der-Welt-sein*) within which it is possible to begin to locate my drawing activity.

Heidegger's determination of Being, and the understanding of this existence, can be explicated within the ontology of 'Dasein' (Heidegger, 1962), that brings into focus a primary mode of Being, *not* as the subjective or objective, but of the coherence, or unity, of Being-in-the-world; as the horizon in front of which all of our knowledge and understanding is placed. This embodied 'Dasein' orientates our entry into the embodied world, as unity or coherence. For Heidegger (1962), all ontological enquiry is relational to 'Dasein', as '...the entity which we are ourselves...' (Mulhall, 1996:13) through which '...we shall point to temporality as the meaning of the Being of that entity...' (Heidegger, 1962: 38). Thus, conceptually, 'Dasein', and temporality, provide a stepping-stone for the consideration of what it means to *be*, indicating a way of thinking about experience; as a coherence or unity within drawing.

Investigations of Being-in-the-world, temporality and embodiment, within my own practice, are initially explored through drawing directly from, and in the landscape. Coherence emerges through the physical relationship of drawing to the environment itself. The activity of mark making, outside in-the-world, begins to dissolve the boundaries between the self and the landscape in working towards a unified whole; marks are transposed externally, onto the paper, and internally, as memory. The images (Figure 1) use gestural, spontaneous and free-flowing marks to convey the fleeting impressions of the transitory experience within an ever-changing environment; dissolving and shifting positive and negative space plays across the surface.

Exploration, within the drawings, attempts to capture the essence of the experience of 'being there', within a few, seemingly deliberate, strokes of graphite; the marks expanding, within the areas of positive and negative space, to express and interpret the uncertainty of this temporal experience (Figure 2). The absorption, within the narrow confines of the activity of each drawing, enhances the experience; heightening perceptions of light, colour and of being *in* a specific moment.

The relationship between perceptual experience and the reinterpretation of an image through drawing is explored through the metaphor of 'ambiguity' (*Zweideutigkeit*) (Heidegger, 1962), or uncertainty.



Figure 2  
'Niederau' - Graphitem Charcoal, pastel and watercolour on Fabriano

*To move towards abstraction is to be able to move towards uncertainty, and is itself a subjective construction. Does this move then represent a different level of thinking?*

*The reinterpretation of form more 'abstractly' is achieved through being able to embrace ambiguity, a move beyond appearance. The mark becomes the embodiment or essence of the thought. Whilst the mark may be abstracted from figuration it still has resonance in terms of its reference to experience, constructing meaning within the making process. (Extract from artist's journal).*

Against a background of an embodied and relational world, my creative practice, articulates attempts to expand, or layer experience. These intentions emerge within a series of digital drawings (Figure 3) that endeavor to capture the multifaceted nature of these connections; between self, embodied relational world and the temporality of experience, being at one and the same time, *in the drawing*, as well as expressing an interpretation *through the drawing*. Line repeatedly traces form, inserted successively, overlapping and intermingling. Images, that are a direct response to the immediacy of the location, are layered, with each drawing interpreting a series of viewpoints; articulations of the same space that capture varieties of possible aspects and appearances. The intention was to try to move from one response to another, between the layers of reality and memory, literally and metaphorically, as the drawings progressed. The drawings, at this time, are predominantly linear, the layers slip and play over one another, implying a fragility or 'moment' (*Augenblick*) (Heidegger, 1962), through the varying line weight, intensity and spontaneity of mark (Figure 4).

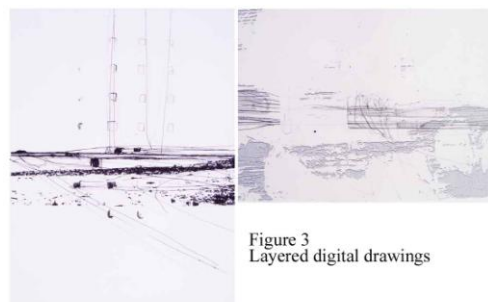


Figure 3  
Layered digital drawings



However, on reflection, I felt that the images were becoming too considered and at some point the reflexivity of the process had been lost. The consciousness of each image affected the previous and subsequent one, becoming contrived and beginning to obscure the experience rather than elucidating it. There was a need to identify more clearly *what* characterized 'being' within an embodied, temporal and relational world, to locate more specifically 'place' within the process of my drawing.

### Place and Time

'...nature appears not only as outside me...but it is also discernable at the centre of subjectivity.' (Merleau-Ponty, 2006:403)

Landscape has, traditionally, been a fertile ground for artist's; much has been drawn, painted or written about the importance of landscape in defining ourselves, society and our place within it. Hooker (b.1941) discusses the concept of imagery that is rooted in landscape as '...a way of entering each attentively, and exploring what is there, as it enlarges the world,

and introduces a feeling of awe, which emphasizes the bounds of one's knowledge and descriptive powers.' (Hooker, 1987:3) and in doing so it '...relates the person to the *other*, instead of reducing the *other* to the confines of the self.' (Hooker, 1987:3).

For Heidegger, the possibility of being (as entities) (*Möglichkeit*) is tied to place, (Malpas, 2008), in engaging *with* the world, the objects and events within it; being finds itself *in* the world. The connection between Being-in-the-world, embodied knowledge and landscape can be considered as a structure that is intrinsically tied to place and revealed through the drawing process (Figure 5).

If, as Heidegger proposes, Being is foundationally tied to time (Heidegger, 1962), then it becomes possible to examine Being-in-the-world as an ontological function, or horizon, against which 'Time must be brought to light – and genuinely conceived – as the horizon for all understanding of being and any way of interpreting it.' (Heidegger, 1962:39). Being is then made visible through its temporal character. Thus, it is possible to say that, as Being can be grasped through considering time and as such, '...Dasein's Being finds its meaning in temporality.' (*Ibid* :41), drawing can reveal, or grasp, *its* being through *its* own temporality. Drawing clarifies its *own* Being through 'opening up'; exploring and expanding what is there, in enlarging the world.

This experience of 'opening up' (Heidegger, 1971: 71), and of engaging with 'uncertainty' (Merleau-Ponty, 2006) within the world, enables drawing to render visible the experience of things within a 'lived encounter' (Husserl in Moran 2005: Dilthey, 1985, 2010), as my world reveals the primacy of 'place', as opposed to the generality the landscape. Establishing the relationship between perceptual experience and the reinterpretation of an image through drawing.

The drawings that emerged from this period mark the move towards a more explicit articulation of this specificity of 'place', in that the world is determined by the way *I* understand it, how *I* am practically involved with it. The connection between imagination and memory within a subjective experience of drawing in the landscape exists as a response to specific events and locations, through which it became possible to isolate colour as a principal form. The act of drawing within a specific



Figure 4  
Graphite and charcoal drawings from artist's sketchbook



Figure 5  
'Bremen' - Pencil, graphite and watercolour drawings from artist's sketchbook



place provided a horizon, or background, through which memory's visualisation was given through colour (Figure 6). It pervaded my memories of 'place' and, working on a larger scale, watercolour, graphite and ink were used on layered rice paper, to exploit the fluidity and openness that came from this expanded world. By drawing more instinctively and gesturally it was necessary for me to 'open up', mentally, to the immediate and remembered experience, as a world and as a memory, which is saturated and defined by colour ;

*I was remembering a walk at East Head. It had been a blustery and overcast day; a complete contrast to the previous few days that had been hot with a bright bleached light.*

*As I began to relive the walk around the dunes, I remembered exactly the spot where I had stopped to take in the view around me. The dunes behind me, the wind whispering through the tall, silver green grass. To the side and in front were marsh beds of yellow and ochre reeds sprinkled over the acid green, boggy moss. A ribbon of white sand and pale grey/blue seawater ran from the far embankment through the marsh before emerging in a swathe at my feet. The far embankment was crowded with dense, velvet green, scrub, with the occasional deformed tree, bent and contorted by the wind over time. Tall dry grasses, turned straw yellow by the summer heat, swayed and bobbed against the background of the dense green moss. (Extract from artist's journal).*

The drawings engaged the self, myself, within an enlargement of the world, attempting to interpret my relationship to 'place' through the use of colour. These experiences within the living, changing and moving landscape emerge, within the drawings, though a unified structure or rhythm, as it occurs within a moment. A point of coalescence emerges from within the drawing process itself, integrating the internal and external.

In this way, '...the space of inner and outer – of mind and world - are transformed...' (Malpas, 1999:5), the *Other*, as external space, is internalised and inner space is itself externalised. Drawing engages with the possibility that our 'inner' selves can be revealed in relation to 'place' and the embodied space in which we dwell, which, in turn, is incorporated within us as memory and as activity, connecting imagination and memory within a subjective experience of drawing in the landscape.

Embodied knowledge retreats into subliminal memory, utilised as a foundation for intuition within drawing itself. Bachelard's (1884 - 1962) proposition that the mind is given form through the places and spaces in which we dwell, reinforcing this reciprocity in that, it is those places themselves, that shape and influence our memories, feelings and thoughts; '...*Je suis l'espace où je suis* (I am the space where I am)...' (Bachelard, 1994; 137).



Figure 6  
'Bremen 2010' - Layered digital drawing on Arches

## The Place of the Studio

Hooker (1987) believes that as ‘...the artist is inward with the otherness of the landscape...’ (Hooker,1987:11) this ‘inwardness’ enables the paradox of the intimacy of experience to be explored from a distance, and so it is ‘...this degree of estrangement [that] renews the world, and may transfigure it.’ (*Ibid* :11). This distance can be utilised to separate the immediate involvement with landscape, from the ‘lived experience’ (Husserl in Moran 2005: Dilthey, 1985, 2010) that considers or is conscious of that ‘place’ and its subsequent interpretation through drawing.

Working in the studio, interrupts the direct embodied experience of the landscape, and can be seen as a method for examining perception, memory and imagination. It allows a focus on those aspects of my intentional acts and their contents that do not depend on the existence of a represented object, ‘bracketing’ (*epoché*) (Husserl in Woodruff-Smith, 2007) the experience to enable a suspension of assumptions about the external world.

Drawing, within the studio, relinquishes the representation of the landscape, distancing experience, and in suspending assumptions asks instead for an interpretation of that experience (Figure 7) which reveals differing relational aspects. In remembering, the ‘forgetfulness’ (Heidegger, 1962: 69) of memory, elucidates structures and temporal relationships of place; amplifying the degrees of separation and the interdependence between landscape and place, context and content, other and self. Rawson (1924-1995) echoes these concepts, in considering the revelatory scope drawing, believing that it;

...shows us to ourselves, as it were in a mirror, at the heart of our own world of truth. Such a work is also an image of our own subjective experience of what it means to exist, an image not just taken at one moment but, gathered together from long stretches of time in to a sum which, is outside any individual time, and becomes mythical time. (Rawson, 1987:6).

As time moves at different speeds, consciously and subconsciously, perceptibly and imperceptibly it transforms, relationally, that which passes through it, affecting, literally and metaphorically, the drawing process. Within the studio, Heidegger’s (1962) conception of time (*Zeit*), that functions on a number of levels, is exemplified by the changing nature of the drawing activity (Figure 1, 5 and 7).

Drawing exists within a temporal flow; externally as world, movement, and internally as thought and embodied knowledge. As the temporal relationship to the landscape is suspended, it



Figure 7  
‘East Head’ -  
Watercolour and  
ink drawings on  
Japanese rice  
paper

introduces an embodied response through the immediacy of the activity drawing itself. Internal time slows as the process becomes consuming, each mark interprets the remembered subjective experience, building into a cohesive whole, metaphorically, through layers of translucent colour (Figure 8), meaning emerges through an embodied or intuitive knowledge contained within the drawing.

If we consider Heidegger's assertion that '...Being finds its meaning in temporality.' (Heidegger, 1962: 41) then it follows that Being can be grasped in time. Within these contexts, my drawing practice within the studio, as a reflexive and reflective temporality, incorporates, not only a horizon of an embodied world, in front of which, my engagement within the world is placed, but also a process through which its meaning can be grasped.

### In Conclusion

The research process has allowed me, as an artist, to engage in considering, philosophically and practically, my embodied and perceptual experience as it is brought to the surface of the paper by the process of drawing. Phenomenology has enabled a consideration of levels consciousness from the first person point of view, and as drawing, in reflecting and analyzing, mediates my relational embodied experience to the world, so a conception of temporality is embedded within the process of the creative act. Seen within these contexts drawing, as corporeality, provides a horizon against which it is possible to begin to examine embodied, subjective interpretation of 'Being-in-the-world'.

Thus, it is possible to say that, as time passes through all 'Dasein' (Heidegger, 1962), as Being-in-the-world, the subject or being, recreates the world, or grasps it, through its temporality (*Zeitlichkeit*). In grasping, our understanding reveals that everything has meaning, and we find that this same structure of being underlies all relationships (Merleau-Ponty, 2006). Drawing, through its temporal nature, reveals and grasps subjective truth as something that '...opens up a world.' (Heidegger, 1971: 40);



Figure 8  
'Singularity'

*How does time function in relation to the experience, the memory and the process? Initially I had thought time played only a minor role. On reflection it is inherently linked with not only the experience of external time, but with internal time, in relation to memory as well as the interpretation/capture of a 'moment of vision' (Augenblick) within the drawing. It governs all. (Extract from artist's journal).*



The coherence, or unity, of Being-in-the-world, the horizon in front of which all of our knowledge and understanding is placed, provides a phenomenological parallel, within which drawing embodies the past, present and future, existing alongside one another in that moment of creation. Drawing, in one instance stretching out within the horizon of Being, in another, parallel, instance, enmeshed in an imaginary future that has emerged from the its own past and ‘...in the way of *its* own being...’ (*Ibid*: 41).

The activity of drawing, in the way of its own being, generates its own source, driving itself; recreating the world, embodied in the world, as memory and as a conjectural possibility of the future. As a ‘moment’ coalesces on a surface, not as a *representation* of temporality but as temporality itself, *my* world, as ‘subjective truth’ (*Wahrheit*) is brought to light and meaning is grasped, within that ‘moment of vision’ (*Augenblick*) (Heidegger, 1962).

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- Extracts are taken from the author's, unpublished, artist's journal that documents drawing activity through phenomenological description and the development of a philosophical methodology, in considering personal drawing practice and its foundations from 2007 until the present.