

# DRAWING ON A DREAM

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## Themes

This paper engages two conference themes. As *Drawing and Notation*, drawing is addressed in its capacity to translate, through symbolic notation, sensations from beyond what appears to the naked eye - in order to record what is glimpsed by an inner eye. Then *Drawing: Recording and Discovery* is linked to the inventive visions of various artists who engage drawing as a means to discover and describe from memory, dream, and other scenes of interior life.

## INTRODUCTION

*“At times when we believe we are studying something, we are only being receptive to a kind of day-dreaming.”*  
(Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space*, xxxviii)

Drawing allows an individual to transcribe visual variation. In this study, it is applied to intentional consideration of perceptual anomaly, those inputs from outside of what is expected or acknowledged as normal operations of *vision*. As drawing itself is a mysterious faculty, it is fitting device for probing other day-to-day puzzles, particularly our sleeping life. Sleep - constant along life's continuum, repository of perceptions habitual and enigmatic - encompasses the routine and unknown together. Assessing drawing and sleep, or sleep through drawing, may hint at the circuits of imagination or the *imaginal* within and through the everyday. This research reflects a yearning to discern and dwell within broadened fields of experience – broader than culturally-constructed rational rule books would have us believe or inhabit. Awareness comes not only from focused attention, but flashes from the periphery of the visual field as well. Drawing and sleep - with its dreaming visions - can glimpse the marvelous within or against the measures and materials of daily living.

To draw represents a mode of thinking about and around engagement with the visual field, facilitating meetings of curiosity with the ordinary. Drawing registers particulars of external experience as filtered through an interior lens. Drawing can suggest wonders alongside and inside us - often overlooked or discounted - as we move across our days.

I've drawn a long time, stumbling over that aptitude at an unusually early age. It came in a manner sudden and unexpected, as knowing rather than learning. I'll explain momentarily, mentioning it now only to emphasise that an early encounter with mystery informs my ideas about drawing. Adding sleep, as subject, then orients this study through another event of what is common but curious. We all sleep and we all dream – whether or not the dream is recalled. We all draw as well - outlining plans, sketching ideas, doodling in the margins. When we take up pen to write, we draw. We use an acquired facility to reproduce coded shapes of alphabet and numbers to communicate ideas, externalise interior reflections. We may remember beginning to write, but do we possess memories of learning to dream?

## DRAWING AND DREAMING

## Grammars of Imagination

*“In a sense one can say that drawing is the most fundamentally spiritual – i.e., completely subjective – of all visual artistic activities. Nature presents our eyes with coloured surfaces to which painted areas of pigment may correspond, and with inflected surfaces to which sculptural surfaces may correspond. But nowhere does it present our eyes with the lines, and the relationships between the lines, which are the raw materials of drawing. For a drawing’s basic ingredients are strokes or marks which have a symbolic relationship with experience, not a direct overall similarity with anything real.”* (Rawson, *Drawing*, 1)

How have we come upon a capacity to read messages of *symbolic* representations in drawing or written word? Philip Rawson demarcates drawing as the *most spiritual*. He does not infer *sacred* or *religious* import, so it seems a puzzling word choice given familiar connotations. (If I use that word *spiritual*, my discomfort is concealed within brackets of air quotes, or prefaced with a qualifying “for lack of a better word”.) Nonetheless Rawson writes this on the first page of his seminal work, thus declaring drawing as pursuit apart and beyond mere enactment or faithful replication of objective views. As visual practice and interpretive phenomena drawing resides wholly within the imaginary. Painting, by contrast, *could* mimic representations so photographic as to match the physical environment. Sculptural works *can* coincide with factual apprehension of surface, volume, mass through senses of *sight and touch*. However, there is no corresponding direct perception to match the marks and tones that comprise a drawing. We admire technical skill in drawing, and translate their imaginative reference from the visual world. But what we perceive in drawing is never conflated with real-world real-time perceptions.

The visual grammars of drawing and dreaming share characteristics. Both, as products of the imaginary, can access impossible, improbable, fantastic images. This imagery speaks of and from interior life, from what we might call *the psyche*. Drawing and dreaming are sites of ordinary magic – unique, experiential, and discernible without mediating narrative, dogma, or necessity of faith.

This drawing (*Fig. 1*) was made at a 2004 residency at an atmospheric chateau in Brittany. It depicts the grand crumbling room where I was housed. One morning, after bathing in the equally crumbling adjoining bathroom, I sat down to quickly sketch this space. I looked up four hours later, only then noticing I still wore the towel from my bath. Besides a peculiar alteration in sense of time, this example illustrates another distinct quality discovered from long engagement with drawing - and that is, whenever I re-visit a drawing, I am imaginatively transported back in place and time. In a vivid visceral way, I recall in my body what it was to be in that room, what it was like to be me making this drawing. This piece is not exceptional. It’s included because it shows a bedroom, thus fitting a discussion around sleep. The same applies to various observational recordings and subjects spanning decades. Regardless of degree of accuracy or detail, drawings do not function or freeze a moment as photographs do. Drawing is not about externalised views, but rather internal impressions and response.

Thus drawing is like dreaming – those dreams elaborately recollected, carried into the day, the ones cherished with attention. This occurs because to draw is to perceive an *absolute* present; otherwise it’s impossible. To draw is to see what exists before us, rather than what we believe is there. In his essay, “*Eye and*

*Mind*" (1961), French phenomenologist Maurice Merleau-Ponty describes the painter as one leaning or lending his body toward the world in order to perceive without preconception. Similarly, the dream holds the dreamer within its present moment. While dreaming, external concerns do not distract from the container of the action – causing one to ignore the dream's narrative. Outside input will either fold into the landscape of that dream, or hasten awakening.

Hence, we sleep, we dream, we draw. Yet how have we come to the capacity to recognise dreams or to scrutinize accretions of marks on surfaces and see what is visually represented and communicated?

*"(O)ur normal waking consciousness, our rational consciousness as we call it, is but one special type of consciousness, whilst all about it, parted from it by the filmiest of screens, there lie potential forms of consciousness entirely different. We may go through life without suspecting their existence; but apply the requisite stimulus, and at a touch they are there in all their completeness, definite types of mentality which probably somewhere have their field of application and adaptation. No account of the universe in its totality can be final which leaves these other forms of consciousness quite disregarded."* (James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, 388)

In *The Mind in the Cave: Consciousness and Origins of Art* (2002), anthropologist David Lewis-Williams offers a theory for the origins of human image-making, and supports his premise by citing William James and evolutionary psychologist Colin Martindale in their efforts to delineate a *spectrum of consciousness*, the possible variations spanning states of awareness within daily existence that move between wide-awake and dreaming. Lewis-Williams' focus is the Upper Paleolithic transition, the moment when fully modern human beings appeared. These emergent modern humans were exactly like us, save for less or different information. Lewis-Williams contends that image-making in cave drawings arose as response to interior visions caused by ordinary alterations of consciousness – changes in awareness that originate in the individual nervous system. Such alterations are common still. Sometimes, we see things that do not reach our visual cortex through retinal impression. We rub our eyes and see patterns, we experience migraines aura. Other times the visual confounds interpretation – as in discrepancies between perception and explanation in the presence of optical illusions. Perhaps the most persistent differential within the visual experience occurs in dreaming.

Lewis-Williams suggests that first images were nothing more or less than the need by image-maker to fix fleeting internal imagery externally - to contemplate such visions once outside the altered moment and to share these visions with others. That the images were communally legible indicates that such visual experience was universally known.

His hypothesis supports an understanding of imagination and imagery born at the peripheries of attention - and explains my own initiation into drawing through one such visual anomaly. This inclination arrived age four, as a seemingly innocent ability to view an object before me and then cast the product of perception onto blank paper, like a projector. I'd grab a pencil and trace the projection, even as it faded from the page. Then I'd repeat the process: look, project, draw. I thought everyone could do this, learning otherwise when I tried to explain. By age eight I needed eyeglasses; by then this nifty little trick of the eyes had faded as well. But by then a pastime of feverishly mapping evaporating ghosts served to secure drawing as central passion. Much later I understood this visual anomaly as *palinopsia* or after-image, a species of migraine aura, and only in adulthood would I know the accompanying headache.

Neurologist and author Oliver Sachs' first book, *Migraine* (1974), includes drawings of migraine visions (Fig.2/3). Dr. Sachs himself described his own visual auras, commencing at age four, which his physician mother called 'visual migraine'. Migraine manifests its own spectrum; visions or auras can appear without headaches. Dr. Sachs even attributes the visionary works of 12c Christian mystic Hildegard of Bingen as outcomes of her experiences along the migraine spectrum.

### Syntax of Spaces

*"Enclosures define areas of the drawing surface... which have an existential value in that they can be either positive (defining the full) or negative (defining the void). That is to say, they may represent on the surface of the sheet either the presence of objective bodies or the empty space between bodies... Negative forms must be studied even more vigorously than the positive ones. It is normal for the physically present to demand definition, whereas the 'absent' needs far more effort to perceive and define... Thus if one begins by drawing the negative areas without first diagramming the positive shapes, artistic results rather than inartistic must automatically emerge."* (Rawson, *Drawing*, 141-142)

In drawing's terminology, *named* strategies can expand *metaphorical* conversation between vision and consciousness. American psychologist James Hillman wrote: "Essential for working with what is unknown is an attitude of unknowing. This leaves room for the phenomenon itself to speak. It alone keeps us from delusions" (*The Dream and the Underworld*, 194). Hillman addresses a disposition for dreaming, but this statement is equally apropos of the attitude of attention requisite for drawing. Artists are taught to seek *space* or *shape*, to locate *the positive* and *the negative*, never to favor one over the other, and strive to adopt Hillman's "*attitude of unknowing*". For Rawson, shapes are "either positive (defining the full) or negative (defining the void)" and advises "if one begins by drawing the negative areas without first diagramming the positive shapes, artistic results rather than inartistic...emerge."

Drawing is a dialogue of shapes, named and unnamed. It succeeds *when* the artist assumes a view of world as mystery, comprised of figures and forms unknown, that is, as they actually appear in time and space. To draw is to purposefully withhold aspects of cognition and recognition from perception, in order to apprehend what we strive to observe. Before I acquired any formal grammar of art, I viewed paintings and drawings as spaces to enter - like dreams or sleep. Growing up near New York City brought school trips to the Metropolitan Museum. Paintings there summoned imaginative entries, a disposition for looking that likely came from knowledge of dreaming. Works appeared as portals piercing the solid walls; openings onto magical territories within and beyond their frames.

*"Space is not the setting (real or logical) in which things are arranged, but the means whereby the positions of things become possible. This means that instead of imagining it as a sort of ether in which all things float, or conceiving it abstractly as a characteristic that they have in common, we must think of it as the universal power enabling them to be connected."* (Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 284)

Jules Bastien-Lepage's *Joan of Arc/1879* (Fig.4), earnest and romantic, was a favourite for make-believe adventuring. Life-size Joan stands in her garden post-vision, with the ghostly visitors at her back rather than looming before her eyes. When we conjure up an image or remember a dream, phantoms of reverie do not materialise in front of the eyes but within regions in the back of the head. The childhood habit of imaginary travel led me to question concepts of full and

void. Perhaps there are richer descriptors than 'negative space' to embrace the potential of such expanses. Because whenever I pretended to enter a work, I wouldn't imagine walking into any illusory solid -whether wall, tree, or poor doomed Joan herself. I'd aim into unnamed unoccupied space. I'd aim into possibility.

While drawing skills came without effort, there was still the issue of *what* to draw. Then I dreamt of making large charcoal drawings, so I started making large charcoal drawings from my dreams. I did not draw to interpret, but to return myself to oneric space, to continue dreaming. (Fig.5/6) Later still, in a prolonged bout of insomnia, drawing addressed images of the unmade bed – as performance of devotion, a prayer, a plea to re-enter into this lost and longed-for place.

## ARTISTS

### Bill Viola

To illustrate the mutable dialectic of spatial encounters I begin not with drawing, but with the *fluid* video imagery of artist Bill Viola (Fig.7-9), whose moving tableaux hover between animation and stillness, images that physically and metaphorically engage ambiguities of full and void, named and unnamed. In a 1997 interview with Lewis Hyde, Viola acknowledges: "...something above, beyond, below, beneath what's in front of our eyes, what our daily life is focused on. There's another dimension ...and the quest for connecting with that ... is the whole impetus for me to cultivate these experiences and to make my work...There is an unseen world out there and we are living in it."

Renaissance and medieval devotional art are Viola's inspirational source. This influence is apparent in the polyptych structures of "*Small Saints*" (2008), with installation transforming gallery into chapel.

Viola films through veils of water - rendering *negative spaces* as presence while obscuring *positive forms*. Grainy figures advance within granulated black-and-white formats , like old television static. Clarity and colour materialise as surprise once figures pierce the water wall to face unsuspecting onlookers before turning to retreat back into spatial ambivalence. This watery filter creates the effect of occupied *negative* and indefinite *positive*, thus contradicting conventional expectations of pictorial space while updating and honouring the "unseen" motion of transcendence implied in devotional references.

### William Kentridge

William Kentridge (Fig.10-14) infuses drawing with motion and mutation to confound ideas of space and storyline. He favours drawing's "provisional quality", its capacity to depict "the world as process rather than as fact". Kentridge fashions low-tech animations from serial charcoal drawing, smudging, erasing, re-drawing – then photographing stills of each morphing as figure and ground, positive and negative shift. The resulting films from these tracings depict interior narrative fictions based in external histories – particularly Kentridge's own

experience as witness of apartheid in his native South Africa. He models for two recurring alter-ego film characters, calling these 'self-portraits in the 3<sup>rd</sup> person'. Their names, Soho and Felix, came in a dream.

Other Kentridge drawing works play on notions of optics and optical illusions, "machines that tell you what it is to look". "Stereoscopes" mimic operations of vision, converting pairs of flat retinal reflections into images of depth –conjured reminders that a belief in objective sight is illusory. "Anamorphic Cylinder", another optic device, calculates distortion into the drawing so corrected images are cast upon the cylindrical mirror. Kentridge's practice articulates his belief that "...the absurd, with its rupture of rationality, of conventional ways of seeing the world, is in fact, an accurate and productive way of understanding the world." (art21: "Anything is Possible")

### **Louise Bourgeois**

French/American Louise Bourgeois used various media over a long career. The late artist was insomniac for most of her life, and during a particularly intractable period in the 1990's this condition became focus for drawing. Between November 1994 and June 1995, she set out to draw herself to sleep – or at least into some measure of rest. The resulting 220 works , *The Insomnia Drawings*, came of direct and deliberate engagement with *not being able to sleep*. Defying medical fads of sleep hygiene, Bourgeois took to bed, scrawling on ordinary lined notebook paper or blank sheet music, usually in ballpoint - mostly red - performing soothing gestures, in patterns intentionally *different* from themes of daytime studio pursuit. Obsessively scribbling on front and back, sheets crumpled and strewn around bed and floor, these drawings articulate a graphic version of counting sheep.

*The Insomnia Drawings (Fig.15/16)* were Bourgeois' attempt to overcome sleeplessness, a strategy to substitute sleep's quality of rest. Drawing's haptic immediacy is ideally suited for such attempts to reproduce the comforts of dreaming.

### **Antonio Lopez-Garcia**

"I still remember a drawing of an olive tree. The lines moved gracefully across the paper, expressive and harmonious... lines moving over the paper hypnotized me. Now I know why: The mystery of the language of drawing had instilled itself in me and I intuitively perceived that energy, that magic spell." (Lopez-Garcia, *Antonio Lopez-Garcia: Drawings*, 12)

The contemporary Spanish master Antonio Lopez-Garcia works across the disciplines of sculpture, painting and drawing – but it is in drawing that he addresses his most deeply personal subject matter – portraits of family, familiar and intimate interior spaces of his art and life. Here he seeks the soul in his subject, and will spend years on a single drawing (*Fig.17-19*) - hand travelling, uncovering, creating eerie simulacra of dream worlds, of knowledge and mystery of where life takes us outside of the limits of time.

## C.G. Jung

In the modern discourse that underpins our notions of interior insight and meaning, where we trace our personal paths of devotion and discovery, we still acknowledge certain signposts mapped by early giants of psychology, for example, Freud and Jung. Freud unearthed his theories in masterful prose. Jung, it seems, crafted his psychological model from drawing and painting his inner life in a volume known as the *Red Book* or *Liber Novus* (Fig.20/21). Long guarded by his heirs, Jung's journal was neither published nor shown until 2009, when it was exhibited for the first time at the *Rubin Museum of Art* (NYC). Viewing the accomplished hand behind this work, one understands that Jung's contribution to the knowledge and conversation around matters of the psyche originates from a thought process of *image-making*, through his own efforts to fix of fleeting glimpses of an inner life in order to externalize his understanding, and to share this with others.

## SUMMARY

Drawing and sleep travel parallel routes in practice and habit, and provide opportunities to discern and describe moments of the mysterious embedded within the ordinary. Re-presentations, recurrences, accidental revelation, marks and moments of the unconscious and the unintentional bring novel and expanded insights. In the midst of my own research, I find too the most instructional work is not the formal intentionality of studio works – *art with a capital A* – but instead what arises in journal sketches (Fig.22-25). There I compose and conduct experiments. I draw things I've seen in dreams, and it seems at times that I will encounter in the *day/world* something I have previously sketched from dreaming vision. I draw from life as well as from reproductions of artists' work - and have later seen versions of such subjects inside my dreams. I draw, too, from the dream-like world of Renaissance art - to grasp more of how visual design might transcribe or translate the unseen topography of the soul. And I've drawn in the night when I cannot sleep, though I'd prefer sleep. Drawing – that is, the kind of drawing that engages eye and hand - continues to offer openings and possibilities of ever richer terrain – to moments of life transpiring in the imaginative edges - as do our dreams.

Or, to quote James Hillman again (*The Dream and the Underworld*, 200): “*All that we claim for the dream cannot be established by experience or be grounded in myth. Myth doesn't ground, it opens. We remain in the perspective of depth, with nothing more reliable under our feet than this depth itself.*”

In drawing, dreaming, in sleeping life we dwell inside mystery; beyond what can grasped or mapped, never definitively comprehended, the whisperings of imagination. Thus drawing, as media and tool, can be *notation* and *record* of something greater than the data of immediate observation. Drawing can unearth visual traces of memory and reverie, can even bring rest, and can lead to *discovery* of new knowledge - ideas that change the way we “see” the world we live in.

## REFERENCES SECTION

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### Images for PowerPoint

*Figure 1.* work of the author, *Figure 2-3.* Sachs. *Migraine.*, *Figure 4.* Bastien-Lepage. *Joan of Arc*, 1879, <http://www.metmuseum.org/toah/works-of-art/89.21.1> ,*Figure 5-6.* work of the author, *Figure 7-9.* Bill Viola "Small Saints", 2008, Kira Perov, *Mythologies*, Haunch of Venison ,*Figures 10-14.* William Kentridge, <http://www.art21.org/anythingispossible/resources/for-educators/on-theme/narrative-personal-history/>, *Figure 15-16.* Louise Bourgeois, *The Insomnia Drawings, 1994-1995*, *Figure 17-19.* Antonio Lopez-Garcia, *Antonio Lopez Garcia: Drawings, 2010* , *Figure 20-21.* C.G.Jung ,*The Red Book*, 2009., *Figure 22- 25.* work of the author.