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## Drawing||Phenomenology: tracing lived experience through drawing 2019

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### GAINED IN TRANSLATION: DRAWING ART HISTORY

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Drawing from drawing is a centuries-old practice. Emerging artists have typically started their journey to mastery faithfully transcribing the work of their predecessors. Today however, in the wake of post-modernism's reaction against the authority of the 'master', transcribing another artist's work feels outdated and has thusly been erased from Higher Education fine art programmes in the UK.

Since 2014 the Bridget Riley Art Foundation (BRAf) at the British Museum has worked with nearly 2,000 university art students to revive and interrogate the value of drawing from drawing as a contemporary research method. In the process of over 250 workshops BRAf found that students who initially dismissed the practice as 'servile copying' began to legitimise the process with the language of translation.

Building on qualitative research collected through questionnaires and interviews, this paper examines the practice of drawing from drawing through the lens of translation theory, specifically in the manner of Walter Benjamin. By examining drawing from drawing as a phenomenological practice, this paper describes experience rather than the product. Ultimately, it argues for the potential of this practice to create empathy by dissolving ahistorical neoliberalist notions of individuality and originality.

## Introduction

Drawing from another artist's artwork has long been a staple of an academic artistic practice. Historically, students were expected to produce drawn copies of a masterwork as evidence of skill development and progression toward mastery. This process of transcription is still at the core of most GCSE, A-Level and entry-level further education fine art courses. These associations with academic tradition and basic proficiency have made this method of learning irrelevant in the theory-based curricula of contemporary higher education fine art courses in the UK. Drawing from drawing has been confined to the role of skill acquisition limiting its potential as an analytic exercise and a medium of reflection. To reclaim it from this relegation, drawing from drawing must be reframed and re-conceptualised as a meaningful research tool.

The Bridget Riley Art Foundation (BRAAF) at the British Museum began in 2014 with a two-fold intention: to encourage emerging artists to draw from the Museum's graphic archive and to create an exhibition on drawing that highlighted its diversity as a medium, inspiring people to actively draw from drawing (Seligman, 2017). This is the legacy of Bridget Riley, artist and teacher who, when emerging as an artist, developed her style by drawing/learning from other artists (Klee, Seurat, Rubens), working from primary sources in places like the British Museum's Prints and Drawings Study Room (Riley, 2015). Seeing a shortage of taught drawing in contemporary university education, Riley wanted to specifically reinvigorate the practice of drawing from drawing for the benefit the current generation of art students. The artist encapsulates the foundation of the project at the British Museum and the transformative possibility of working from another artists' work in her 1997 lecture 'Painting Now\*':

*'If one regards these [artistic] achievements not just as historical events in the past but as a basis for the present, one can discover points of departure which are different from the ones taken by earlier artists, and that certain parameters which have been historically established can now be reconsidered, or even challenged. It is not a question of there being only one route from there to here, as it were, or that the last stop on this route inevitably the most advanced. Alternative directions may have been overlooked or obscured and these may be worth exploring.'* (Riley, 1997, p.620)

Riley's description presents the potential of historic works to speak with the present through the artistic experience of a contemporary viewpoint. She essentially describes the speculative phenomenological possibilities latent in the experience of working from another artist's work that will be explored through the theory of translation in this specific case study.

This paper traces the pedagogical development of the Bridget Riley Art Foundation at the British Museum that I have overseen as project officer and lead educator since 2014. It aims to provide a meaningful theoretical, primarily phenomenological, framework for the transformative processes involved when drawing from another artist's drawing by changing the language traditionally used to describe it. By shifting the term from 'transcription' to 'translation' the artist working-from gains an agency in the process.

Transcription is the systematic representation of form (e.g. copying) and is one of the primary means of training and assessment in foundation art programmes in the UK. Defined in education manuals as '... a visual analysis of a source aimed at exploring formal characteristics or how materials and techniques could be used to progress a creative journey' (GCSE Art and Design Portfolio task guide, 2017),

transcription is undoubtedly a valuable tool in developing technique and formal skill. However, students coming out of foundation art programmes into Higher Education are reticent about repeating the transcription exercises used to assess their technical development. Making the perceptual shift from transcription/copy to translation emphasises interpretation over replication. Instead of a 'top-down' assertion of a master's authoritative technique, translation stimulates an empathetic communication between peers. This paper will use translation theory in the manner of Walter Benjamin to reclaim the usefulness of drawing from drawing, asserting that working with art history in this way is a powerful, communal act that dissolves the toxic notions of individualism that pervade our contemporary neoliberal context.

## Drawing from drawing: a (very) brief history

The Bridget Riley Art Foundation is unique in its direction as it focuses almost exclusively on drawing from drawing. This distinction is important. Drawings to draw from have had a special pedagogical function for artists in history. Drawing provides a greater insight into artistic process whether the work is a highly finished presentation drawing, preparatory for a larger work, a quick notation or a doodle. The immediacy of the media and, often times, scale offer more pathways to dialog between artists than historic (pre-modernist) painting and sculpture, which tends to dissemble the media and individual gesture by using what Clement Greenberg (1994) explained as 'art to conceal art.' Described in this way a drawing, more than print, painting, sculpture, or photograph is an open system that incites external interaction.

Deanna Petherbridge (1991) describes a drawing as an invitation to draw explaining that it is 'open to appropriation, both as act and subject' (p.20). This openness is reflected in the methods in which drawings and drawing have been used to teach. In the artist's workshops that emerged out of the Middle Ages (and continuing on through the 17th century) the master would tack their drawing to the wall of the studio and have students draw alongside on the same page as a method of imitating their own style. While some artists stayed working in the manner of the master, others developed their own voice through this method of learning, their master correcting and conversing within drawings exchanged and critiqued. Rembrandt, for example, habitually reworked the drawings of his students as a method of instruction; he also asked former pupils to instruct his workshop students with this method. The resulting drawings, such as Figure 1, where the dark wash to the right of the figure has been added after the initial sketch was completed, reveal the drawing of multiple hands as an exchange of ideas.

During the establishment of art academies in the 17th and 18th centuries drawing from another artist's work continued to be a skill building exercise, but it was also believed to stoke creativity. Addressing students of the Royal Academy in 1769 Joshua Reynolds (1997) argued for the relevance of working from past artworks:

*'The more extensive therefore you acquaintance yourself with the works of [predecessors], the more extensive your powers of invention; and what may appear still more like a paradox, the more original will be your conceptions'* (Reynolds and Wark, 1997, p. 28).

Alongside these social structures, drawing collections were amassed by individual artists like Reynolds and, famously, Edgar Degas who collected hundreds of drawings as instigation of personal, private study, reflection and development (Dumas, 1997). So when did this change?



FIGURE 1: SCHOOL OF REMBRANDT, LIFE STUDY OF A MAN STANDING (c. 1646), PEN AND BROWN INK, WITH BROWN AND GREY WASH, TOUCHED WITH RED CHALK AND HEIGHTENED WITH WHITE, OVER BLACK CHALK. COURTESY OF THE TRUSTEES OF THE BRITISH MUSEUM

Because drawing from/working from another artist's work has this long, academic history entrenched within art institutions the practice became more restrictive than constructive. Rejection of what had become status quo artistic training and art historical knowledge was written very clearly in Charles Baudelaire's seminal manifesto of modernism 'The Painter of Modern Life':

*'It is doubtless an excellent thing to study the old masters in order to learn how to paint; but it can be no more than a waste of labour if your aim is to understand the special nature of present-day beauty'* (Baudelaire and Mayne, 1986, p.13).

Here, Baudelaire creates a hierarchy that privileges contemporary expression over skill acquisition while summarily dismissing the study of 'old masters' as irrelevant. Although not all modern artists obeyed Baudelaire's dictum, the 'cult of modernist originality' advocated in this period shapes Western artistic systems throughout the 20th and 21st centuries.

It was Robert Rauschenberg's *Erased de Kooning Drawing* (1953) that was the death null of drawing from another artist's work. With the masterstrokes of his rubber Rauschenberg meticulously erases the presence of the master, making concept far more relevant than gesture. *Erased* was the ultimate denunciation of the need to transcribe the master's mark. The fact of the matter is that the erasure of art historical works and 'academic tradition' still dominates contemporary art education nearly 70 years later. Petherbridge (1991) references the expense of such rejections on drawing:

*'In contemporary art schools in Britain, the process whereby students are encouraged to lose the "academic" pencil drawing skills they have acquired at school and discover personal expression is not so much a reversal of the former system, as the shadow side of authoritarian practice. It is equally manipulative'* (p.22).

In other words, a suppression of drawing skill (in part developed through transcription) does not equate to a freedom from repetition and derivation. What is suppressed is replaced by new systems of authority.

More recently in a synopsis of contemporary UK curricula Nick Houghton (2016) discusses the contradictions inherent in contemporary post-secondary Fine Art education that reinforce ahistorical, anti-academic approaches to artistic development. University curricula:

*'...often includes a core that it does not believe in. It encourages a Romantic adoption of an autonomous, artistic persona, but also stuffs students full of theory which contradicts this. It has become the last resting place of an exhausted avant-garde, which, loaded with postmodern baggage, has turned into exactly what it once opposed: an academic discourse'* (p.12).

Both Houghton and Petherbridge point to the hypocrisy of a system that reinforces a 'cult of originality' while simultaneously critiquing such authoritative notions with post-structural theory. This structure compartmentalises drawing practices into oppositional categories: drawing that builds artistic skill versus drawing to reflect creative expression. This is the context in which the Bridget Riley Art Foundation (BRAAF) emerged.

## Developing a Relevant, Contemporary Context

BRAF drawing workshops were initially designed to open up a dialogue about the place of drawing in current fine art practice. The Department of Prints and Drawings at British Museum holds approximately 50,000 drawings made by European, American and Australian artists, encompassing the years of 1400 to the present. The workshops include approximately 15 drawings from different eras, usually based on a theme suggested by the tutor to correspond with their specific curriculum. In the sessions each of the drawings are discussed in relation to the theme and then students are invited to draw from them. Themes tend to be more about cultural theory than practice. For example: the tutor-chosen theme of 'hierarchy and power' made the drawings illustrations of theory more than the subject of practical, artistic enquiry.

The first year of workshops (2014-2015) was heavily theoretical and discursive rather than practical. Students listened and provided insightful comments to conversations about drawings, but they did not make drawings themselves. Many students photographed the works and when probed about why, explained that they did so to make an accurate copy. Students wanted an accurate copy, but the idea of drawing from the drawings in order to remember the work was called 'a scam', 'not necessary', 'stealing' (Questionnaire, 2014-18). What also emerged from these first sessions was that students were drawing as part of a preparatory practice or finished work; some kept sketchbooks, others photographs, blogs and other digital materials related to drawing, but few saw drawing from another artist's work as a valuable research method.

To encourage drawing from works in the Museum collection BRAF provided students with sketchbooks and pencils at the start of workshops. Again, a majority did not draw. It is, of course, the student/artist prerogative and right to not be forced into 'making art' on the spot, but it seemed curious that a majority of artists who have been invited to draw, were resistant to the opportunity. Anonymous questionnaires were introduced so students could honestly express their aversions and apprehensions about the practice. These surveys asked what part drawing played in their practice and what types of drawing(s)/artists might help them in developing their practice. Most important to the development our pedagogy were the questions: before this workshop what were your thoughts about working from another artist's drawing/artwork? And, has the experience of the workshop changed or confirmed your thoughts about working from another artist's work?

By the end of the 2015-2016 academic year nearly 700 students from universities around the UK had completed questionnaires. Trends emerged in their responses; explanations as to why some students did not draw at all and why almost all of them rejected drawing from drawing as a valid research methodology. Most cited sixth form and GCSE as shaping their perception of drawing from drawing/working from another artist's work. 'During GCSE we were made to only ever create work by copying or being directly inspired by another artist without developing our own styles' (Questionnaire, 2016). The emphasis on skill acquisition and master mimesis in foundational fine art education was explained as something to 'get through', something that suppressed artistic voice, reiterating the 150 year old modernist division of traditional skill from original concept. Student apprehension is backed up by looking at teaching manuals for GCSE preparation that place the 'transcription, response, annotation' formula at the centre of their assessment protocol (GCSE Art and Design Teacher's Guide, 2016 and GCSE Art and Design Portfolio task guide, 2017).

Questionnaire responses also showed that the cult of originality is deeply entrenched in the popular consciousness of contemporary UK art students. One student explained: 'I remember I stopped drawing because I was feeling guilty by copying' (Questionnaire, 2015). Another declared: 'I am against the art of people recreating past artworks; be original!' (Questionnaire, 2018). Secondary school's emphasis on accurate copies and connections to an historic artist as a basis for assessment understandably concretises a rebellion against the past. The only way to make art history relevant is to reconceptualise its value thereby changing the experience of the process. This became the focus of BRAF workshops.

The students who push past their resistance and actively draw from drawing find the benefits are immediate. The time and space to draw from the work of another artist proved transformative to their thoughts on the practice and research. Many tutors began to see creative shifts in their studio interests. No two artists work the same; some make faithful transcriptions, others work on mark-making or scale, or place focus on a tiny detail on the page. For student, performance artist and sculptor Daisy Wooley (2018) drawing from drawing allowed her to explore her practice in new ways:

*'Drawing, rather than performing, allowed me a freedom of expression by moving outside of my physical limitations. The gestures made while drawing wove their way into the physicality of my performance.'*



FIGURE 2: PETER PAUL RUBENS, ISRAELITES WRESTLING WITH GIANT SNAKES; STUDY FOR THE PAINTING 'MOSES AND THE BRAZEN SERPENT' (c. 1607), BLACK CHALK, PEN AND BROWN INK AND BROWN AND GREY WASH, HEIGHTENED WITH WHITE, ON BUFF PREPARED PAPER, HEAVILY CUT AND MADE UP IN VARIOUS PLACES, COURTESY OF THE TRUSTEES OF THE BRITISH MUSEUM



FIGURE 3: DAISY WOOLEY, (LEFT) UNTITLED DRAWING FROM RUBENS (2018) GRAPHITE ON PAPER, (RIGHT) TWIST (2018), PHOTOGRAPHIC STILL FROM PERFORMANCE, BOTH COURTESY OF THE ARTIST

The drawing of Peter Paul Rubens (Figure 2) was particularly inspirational for Wooley. The lines created by tangled drama of entwined bodies were translated through drawing and into her performance piece *Twist* (Figure 3). Drawing from Rubens Wooley places herself within the milieu of her art historical peers rather than at the bottom of a hierarchical scale she must ascend by copying.

The most significant trend to emerge from the questionnaires was the language students used to legitimise the practice of drawing from drawing. Dozens began to explain the process through concepts of dialogue, conversation, the merging of different languages. 'I can accelerate productivity of thought when engaged in dialogue [with another drawing]; it encouraged me to consider aspects that I thought were unimportant' (Questionnaire, 2017). Students were also trying to convey conceptual complexity of finding one's own language through the text of another. Their descriptions of a language exchange were more closely related to notions of translation rather than transcription. What translation, or the conversion of one text into another, allows that transcription does not is a level of difference between the source and what is produced. Translation gives the process of drawing from drawing a theoretical framework that better conveys what the practice is: interpretation developed through practical knowledge.

### Gained in Translation

Concepts related to translation have been used in explaining art for quite a long time. It has been argued that the creative process is an act of translating the natural world, what is observed or felt, into art. However, it has not been thoroughly applied to working from another artist's work, nor has it been extensively used to understand the complex interaction of what is undertaken during the experience. Furthermore, the actual artwork is typically considered a translation, while the action has not fully been explored. Using the term translation removes the implication that working from another's drawing is limited to reproducing a 'servile copy'. Translation suggests a depth of knowledge prior to the action and with it the ability to generate new, wholly-valid interpretation to/from another language.

Translation studies is a relatively new area of philosophy (from 1980s onwards) that emerged out of post-structuralist, feminist and post-colonialist narratives. It is currently a major focus in comparative literature and cultural studies courses. Translation serves different needs of different agendas, time

periods and individuals. Lawrence Venuti (2000), in the introduction of *The Translation Studies Reader*, differentiates the translated product from the function of translation. 'An equivalence' (or a copy) can be defined by its accuracy, correctness, correspondence, fidelity to the original. Whereas translation as a function is:

*'the potentiality of the translated text to release diverse effects, beginning with the communication of information and the production of a response comparable to the one produced by the foreign text in its own culture'* (Venuti, 2000, p.5).

It is this second definition that students tap into when they describe the act of drawing from drawing in terms of language acquisition and interpretation. For example, one student explained drawing from drawing as a process of 'developing a personal language in relation to another artist's practice' (Questionnaire, 2014).

Although the historical discussion of translation is riddled with questions of what type of translation is accurate, subjective, or truthful, (Venuti, 2000) it was Walter Benjamin who first engaged with the phenomenological possibilities inherent in translating. His 1921 essay 'The Task of the Translator' is less concerned with training someone to make an accurate rendering of an original text and more concerned about critiquing the cognitive processes of the individual who undertakes translation and the historical implications of speaking through another's point of expression. Following Benjamin, translation does not produce a finite replica; instead, it becomes a mode of experience. Translation is a phenomenological act in which the artist is faced with the various subjectivities that emerge when in dialogue with another artist's work. He describes this as a 'critique of cognition':

*'... It is a question of showing that in cognition there [can] be no objectivity, not even a claim to it, if this were to consist in imitations of the real; in the former, one can demonstrate that no translation would be possible if in its ultimate essence it strove for likeness to the original'* (Benjamin, 2002, p.256)

Benjamin frees the translator from associations of replication by underscoring that translation legitimately creates both difference and harmony. Framed in this way students are better able to consider their subjectivity as they draw from drawing rather than 'transcribing' an original. This greater insight is concisely summarised by a post-workshop student revelation: 'I always expose my emotions honestly, even when mimicking other artists' (Questionnaire, 2018).

Benjamin rejects a singular authority, pointing to the absurdity of believing one can actually make a copy at all. Under his terms translation is an unlimited field of experimentation deeply rooted in skill that is already present in the translator; if the original is definitive how can there be room for copies?

*'The traditional concepts in any discussion of translation are fidelity and license. . . These ideas seem to be no longer serviceable to a theory that strives to find, in a translation, something other than reproduction of meaning. . . . What can fidelity really do for the rendering of meaning?'* (Benjamin, 2002, p. 259).

This is essentially the question students ask when they feel they are being asked to transcribe: how does replication add to the conversation? Benjamin answers: translation does not reproduce meaning, it creates meaning. By explaining the act of drawing from another's work as translation rather than transcription, a new, conceptual dimension is added to the process.

Drawing from drawing is the meeting of two artistic languages in conversation. '[Translators] must expand and deepen language by means of the foreign language. It is not generally realised to what extent this is possible, to what extent any language can be transformed' (Benjamin, 2002, p.262). Benjamin presumes no fixed outcome from this dialogue other than a greater awareness of individual experience in process; his description places emphasis on pathways not products. In the foreignness of another's language an artist confronts their own. This again, has resonance with a student insight: 'I use the process to find my own interpretation of the original drawing' (Questionnaire, 2016).

Benjamin's translation theory provides a description of the structure of this experience, which one undertakes by placing oneself within the social dialogue of history. The task of translator is to be loyal to one's own context and to the historical work; past and present are not in opposition. They are dependent on one another in the process of making meaning. For Benjamin (and later Venuti) the relevance of translation lies in how it resonates in the present, not how well it replicates the past.

*'Translation is so far removed from being the sterile equation of two dead languages that of all literary forms it is the one charged with the special mission of watching over the maturing process of the original language and the birth pangs of its own' (Benjamin, 2002, p.256).*

In working from the past our present is enriched rather than suppressed. Shifting the frame from copy to translation, one student was able to articulate the new relationships gained in translation: we are 'developing a personal language in relation to another artist's practice' (Questionnaire, 2015).

Once framed as translation (especially in the mode of Benjamin), the perceived hierarchies of the master/copyist system dissolve. In *The Ignorant Schoolmaster* philosopher Jacques Rancière (1991) identifies the power structures that we place ourselves in when we participate in learning. The situation of copying from a master sets up a power dynamic that places students in what Rancière calls a 'manifestation of intelligence' rather than a place of emancipation. He explains that there is 'no hierarchy in intellectual capacity' (p.27). Copy implies intellectual capacity needs to be expanded; translation implies an equal-footing, both sides coming together to be understood. This is Rancière's emancipation through learning:

*'Essentially, what an emancipated person can do is be an emancipator: to give, not the key to knowledge, but the consciousness of what an intelligence can do when it considers itself equal to any other and considers any other equal to itself' (p.27).*

Historic work is irrelevant without contemporary interest. The task of the translator is not to make a degraded simulacrum of the past to prove their technical worth and progression toward mastery. Nor is the task to dominate and reject the past for some myth of originality. The task of the translator is to see themselves as equal contributors to the conversation of human expression in the visual arts; the simplest, most effective and immediate way to do so is to draw from art history.

The qualitative data gathered from BRAF questionnaires and discussions has made the programme reactive to student needs. Insightful feedback has very much informed the evolving perception of BRAF workshop practice, allowing us to better articulate the relevance of drawing from drawing in our contemporary context. Removing authoritarian notions of copying, reclaims the validity of the practice by giving students an agency. Benjamin's singular text provides a theoretical framework through which to comprehend the hundreds of student comments given in BRAF workshop questionnaires. His ideas

address the apprehension of copying, the experience of actually undertaking the work and, most significantly, the empathetic relationship that can be stoked between two individuals from foreign languages and/or distant times.

## Drawing empathy

Although her essay 'Marking Politics: Drawing as Translation in Recent Art' focuses on drawing from documentary evidence, primarily photographs, Claire Gillman's (2010) drawing as translation stresses the cultural need for drawing from another artist that has been argued in this paper. She explains: 'putting pencil to paper might counter the disconnect that constitutes our experience' of the neoliberal agenda and 'reenactment is in this sense a productive, empathetic model. . .' (p.117). Gillman's assertion that drawing is 'a more patient form of investment' (p.120) is again echoed by student experience in the BRAF workshops: 'Drawing from drawing is like empathising with an artist through a practice that is relatable to my own work' (Questionnaire, 2016). Drawing from requires a new type of consciousness, which, in turn, gives rise to new self-understanding, shaking one out of complacency.

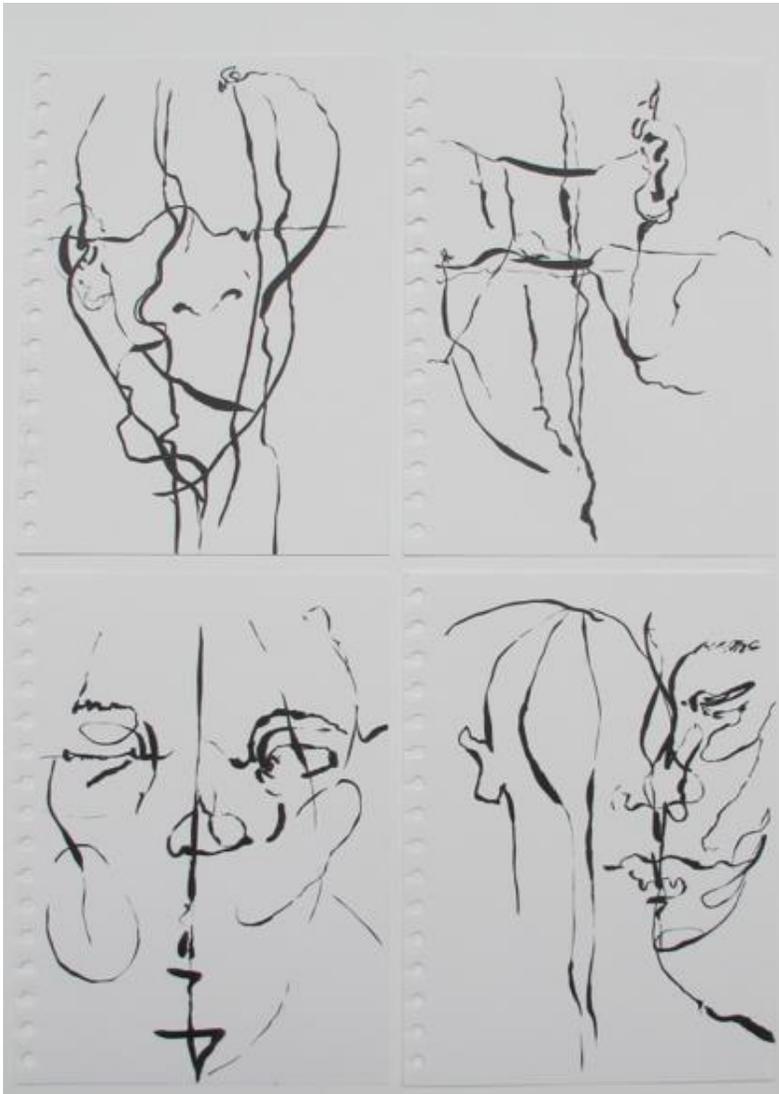


FIGURE 4 CRYSTAL CHIA, SELF-PORTRAITS (2017), INK ON PAPER, COURTESY OF THE ARTIST



FIGURE 5 (FORMERLY ATTRIBUTED TO JOHN EVERETT MILLAIS) PORTRAIT OF A DEAD CHILD (AROUND 1850), GRAPHITE AND BLACK CHALK; ON BUFF PAPER, COURTESY OF THE TRUSTEES OF THE BRITISH MUSEUM

Crystal Chia (2017) explained her transformation while drawing from drawing over a series of five BRAF workshops that focused on different manifestations of translation:

*'For a long time I had abandoned drawing as my form of practice. This project (drawing within the British Museum collections with BRAF) has freed me from my over-analytic mind, reminding me of the importance of connecting to the reality of looking and observing, putting sight onto paper and allowing me to return to the most simple and direct way of making art.'*

Upon seeing the drawing of a dead child, once attributed to John Everett Millais (Figure 6), Chia was moved to see her entire working process differently. After attempting a meticulous transcription of the drawing's soft lines and variations in tone she felt discouraged by her inability to replicate what was driving her interest in the drawing. After sitting with the experience, Chia began to experiment with concepts of sight and presence. Her abstracted series of self-portraits (Figure 5), created with closed

eyes, does not resemble the drawing drawn from, it represents the translation of what she found to be the most powerful aspect of its content: seeing and being seen.

Drawing from drawing is a simple proposition that has the potential to inspire expressive experimentation. However, it is loaded with complicated authoritative associations linked to basic skill and artistic hierarchy. Freed from these associations by translation theory, this research practice becomes an exercise in empathy that may help to dissolve the solipsistic individualism stoked by the neoliberal, ahistorical cult of individuality. Giving students the time to draw from art history through the lens of translation provides them with a valuable introspective site for communication with their historical peers. Rather than formal assessment of a product, the artist self-assesses the experience of undertaking the action.

To conclude with the thoughts of Riley (1997), echoing Benjamin's theory: translation is a necessary conceptual method that places the artist within the social sphere of their art historical peers.

*'The compelling and urgent task of a poet, a painter, etc. is to translate their text and it is this task which can be thought about, examined and discussed. . . . Whatever may –or may not-have happened at art school, the museums and art galleries can be relied upon as the great durable book of painting. Of course, one has to be willing to look, to find out. Without being willing, nothing can begin to happen'* (p.616).

Through art historical work in museums and galleries the artist can 'translate their text'. In other words, it is possible for an artist to manifest their personal expression within the social space of history. The BRAF project has tried to encourage the will to do so. We have found that transcription removes that will while translation inspires it.

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