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AGITATING THE VOID: DRAWING AND PHENOMENOLOGY

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This paper is adapted from a presentation given at the Drawing Research Network PGR conference on 11 September 2018 at Loughborough University. It takes elements of my PhD research, completed in late-2018, to develop void-like connections between phenomenologic observation and the dichotomy of certainty and uncertainty in the act of drawing. Grounded in Edmund Husserl's characterisation of phenomenology, I postulate and advance a link between conscious experience – of cognitive and remembered impressions of the void – and its materialisation in drawing. This link, in my approach as an artist, is explored through my own memories of experiences observing geological rock formations at wild and remote places in the world.

Introduction

Our conscious experience of things is what gives them meaning distinct from the things themselves. Through an analysis of drawing as an exploratory, immediate, and intimate embodied form of mark making this paper develops connections between phenomenological observation and the dichotomy of certainty and uncertainty in the act of drawing as being void-like. I am interested in the void because, as a subject, it is ambiguous in definition, and fluctuates in presence and meaning. Similarly, I feel these characteristics when I observe certain types of landscapes and when I am engaged in the act of drawing. The void I explore involves intensity and fragility as well as gaps where ideas relating to phenomenology; such as remembering and forgetting, emotion and the senses, combine. In these circumstances, the void agitates connections between thinking, feeling and material things. Within this, the paradox of the void in drawing is revealed – it is empty yet full, it is both form and nothingness, and in a pictorial sense it is both representational and abstract. This approach creates a new pathway to gain tacit knowledge and understanding of phenomena, experience and their interpretation and expression through artistic practice.

Husserl's Phenomenology

Phenomenology is the study of the essential nature of the conscious experience. My work is contextualised through reading works of phenomenology in relation to experience and memory by German philosopher Edmund Husserl. Crucial to Husserl's phenomenology, as developed in his book *Ideas: General Introduction to Pure Phenomenology*, is that it articulates an essence of experience as a method for observing, objectifying, reflecting and enriching, through faithful and rigorous recording (Husserl 2012, pp. 84-85).

I use a phenomenological approach to drawing to compose essences of experiences of the world that I observe with intentional thoughts through sense perception. This occurs by my being in and moving through the world and remembering it. I consider my experience through writing, photographing and sketching before finally making a drawing of it sometime later. The first phase involves fieldwork, as experiential understanding, followed by re-evaluation and re-contextualising as a way in which to provoke the memory through drawing. It is, in itself, an act of transformation, of observing, imagining and proposing – a combination of my mind and my body sensing things as they are formed in the world. This is where French philosopher Maurice Merleau-Ponty's views on phenomenology are important; that the meaning of conscious experience is emphasised by the sensing body as a conduit between the perception of the thinking mind and things (or in my instance, the geological rock forms I seek and observe) as they exist in the world (Merleau-Ponty 1964, p. 17).

For the most part, my phenomenologic inquiry responds to Husserl's writing. I am interested in Husserl because a major component of my thought process involves my mental aptitude of observing specific things in conscious experience. Although, I do not deny the importance of Merleau-Ponty's contribution, my aim is to attain an understanding of psychological impressions of the void, and the effect these have on my relationship to site and drawing. For the purpose of my inquiry, Husserl's insights of reality, memory and imagination, with fragments of the later tenets interspersed with reality, offer a more practical and workable framework (Husserl 2012, p. 66).

To experience, Husserl writes, one must be conscious (Husserl 2012, p. 3). But not all experiences are the same. Perception plays tricks; memory is a dilution of fact; imagination can never fully grasp the totality of empirical fact. This is what Husserl refers to as the 'transcendental' of reality (ibid. p. 3). Within the transcendental of reality is the essence of my exploration of void.

An example of this involves British archaeologist Christopher Tilley's practical application of Husserl, and Merleau-Ponty's, phenomenology as a method for him to gain propositional insights into the meaning and purpose of ancient rock formations in Europe, and of the people who built them (Tilley 1994). I apply the process of phenomenology engaged with by Tilley and Husserl, by using their theories and practice of phenomenology as a method to advance my own knowledge when observing, recording and interpreting the content of my own streams of intentional conscious experiences of the rock forms that I visit, either *in situ* or in memory. A process of personal and existential observation, reflecting the emotive content of each experience on site, is followed by remembering when in my studio drawing at a later date.

Agitating the Void

Void is a concept integrally linked to the thinking interior mind – which has parallels with Husserl's theories of articulating conscious experience within the transcendental of reality, memory and imagination. The void I explore is located in the relationship of elements, or essences, of my experience in the observation of things (geological rock forms in a landscape), together with emotive moods and atmospheric states.

Throughout this paper, the terms 'void' and 'void-like' are frequently used and refer to the fluid, ambiguous, unknowable and uncertain qualities of the void as a phenomenon. These terms are unravelled and expanded upon in relation to drawing and phenomenological experience. For example, I use drawn scribbly lines to explore palpable corporeal forms of energy that I have experienced; or, being on edge by picturing a corner or an edge of a rock form. Further, these rock forms characterise the unknown of the void as they refer to a sense of deep metaphysical time relative to their formation.

Void-like qualities are also developed as forms of emptiness with fullness. These qualities include negation, as flat or yielding areas of tone or as loosely drawn open-ended space. Emptiness with fullness is an expression coined by Susan Sontag, in her essay *The Aesthetics of Silence* (Sontag 1978, p. 6), and is a binary term used to consider the way artists broaching the perception of emptiness, or the void, in the world should consider it alongside that of fullness, which marks it off. It is a way to subtly provoke the void; to engage with emptiness and the unknowable, and the contradictions of these as material entities. Sontag explains, to create a sense of emptiness in art, the artist must focus on the fullness of that emptiness to enrich its meaning (Sontag 1978, p. 4).

Integral to Husserl's phenomenologic method is that there is a lag or gap in time from when the experience occurs and its retracing as memory. Acknowledging the effect of this gap in relation to the void is important. Husserl defines this as the 'second level' (Husserl 2012, p. 97) of seeing, or the direct focus on reflective experiences, such as the memory of immediate experiences, or the recall of long past experiences.

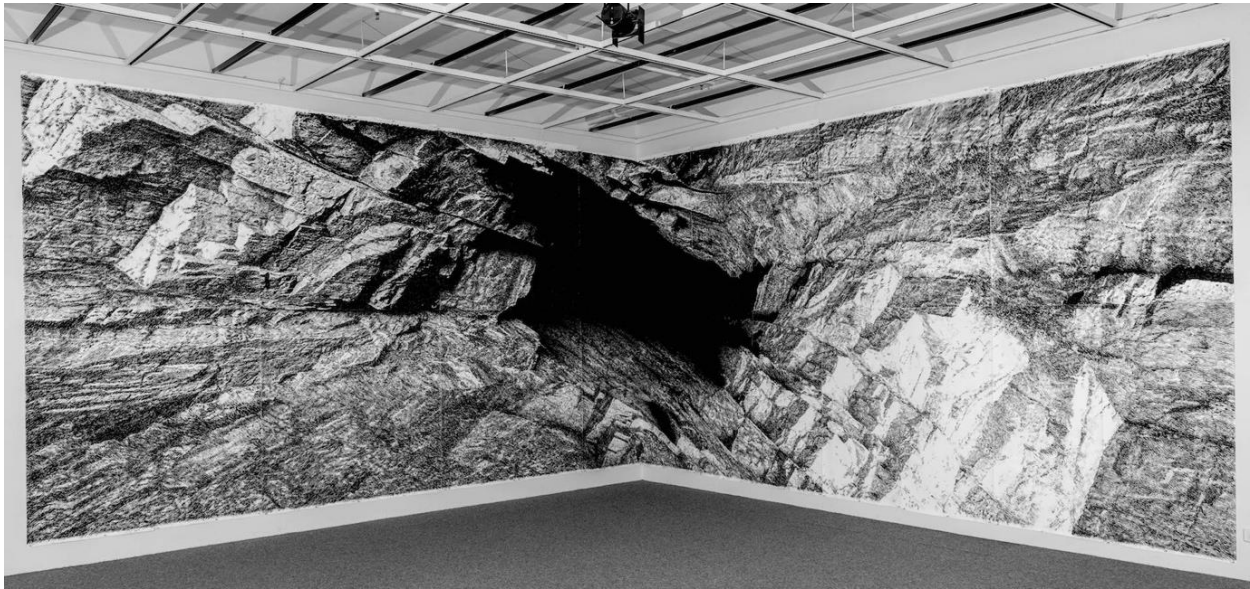


FIGURE 1: DAVID EDGAR, *REMOTE EXERTION 2*, 2015. CHARCOAL ON 28 SHEETS OF PAPER, 300 x 1050 CM.

Memories are imperfect but they can reactivate and accentuate traces and rhythms of things previously experienced. Memories can also merge the past and present. Memories can be built on with other memories as connections between experiences and can be built upon further into infinitum. They can be mixed and added to current experience in their reproduction (Husserl 2012, p. 296). We are prone to augment significant memories in order to preserve them. But in doing so can also lose track of the original experience, perhaps even altering older memories with such distance that they can become disturbed or disconnected, almost beyond recognition. Memories thus describe things previously experienced, “replete with absences, silences, condensations and displacements” (Radstone 2000, p. 11). The characteristics of memory explored here, as remembering and forgetting, creates something else. This something else is akin to imagination where a different type of perception develops. Husserl suggests memories behave this way because they are “a modification of perception” (Husserl 2012, p. 212).

My experience moves from observations in the world to reflection and re-evaluation many times over whilst I am in my studio preparing to make drawings. Absence as gaps in experience occur through this process, such as experiences that may be forgotten over time, as well as the physical gap or dislocation from the source site. These gaps conjure qualities of the void, like a missing memory. The drawing process enables an engagement with these gaps. A mark made is a trace of a remembered conscious moment, its erasure, an absence. The act of my representing rock forms with drawing develops its own void-like qualities.



FIGURE 2: DAVID EDGAR, *UNWILLING*, 2018. CHARCOAL ON 2 SHEETS OF PAPER, 145 X 253 CM.

Representing by Means of Drawing

Geoffrey Bailey, in his PhD thesis on drawing and phenomenology, writes of drawing representation as a becoming of the relational structure of an artist's vision of the world (Bailey 1982, p. 49). Bailey's assertion suggests the artist fashions his drawing from his own unique vision (ibid, p. 49). This is reached via careful observation of the subject matter being drawn and the context to which it is placed. Of importance is the relationship to and application of the medium to enhance the subject matter and context. With these many levels of engagement feeding into the drawing, the process is arduous, and as Bailey notes calls "for prolonged and concentrated guided vision" (Bailey 1982, p. 42). The manner in which I make a sketch or a drawing either *in situ* or in my studio after fieldwork involves a process of drawing made up of many different glances of the thing being drawn manifest from the "residue of many visions always from memory" (Bailey 1982, p. 40) with each of these continually changing as the drawing process progresses. Philip Rawson acknowledges that a drawing conveys meaning "... not by a general similarity of surface but by a structure of symbolic elements which are formulated as method" (Rawson 1969, p. 24).

As I start to draw, building-up marks, form and tone, my sensory experience and memories of the rock forms deteriorate and fade further as the act of drawing continues. What is crucial is that I create various types of forms from marks as illusions of three-dimensional form. This is one of the fundamental problems I have to deal with when drawing objects with verisimilitude from observation in the world – the ability to reinterpret the three-dimensional world as one dimensional marks into a two-dimensional illusion. Drawing, in this instance, presents itself as an artificiality of the world where tensions in pictorial illusion lurk. This is a persistent issue for me at the time of making a drawing. Dewey writes, this "demands abstraction from the usual conditions which they exist" (Dewey 1980, p. 98). An abstraction that modifies each drawing and gives it added meaning. Hence, the rock forms that I draw do not always conform to the observed qualities of the rock forms as recorded *in situ*, rather they interrelate with

other ambiguous spatial forms and marks made relative to the qualities of void that I am seeking to represent.

The rock forms in my images are viewed separately from the process (the marks made) that go into making a picture. Dewey writes of this as the “individual contribution” (Dewey 1980, p. 85) of the artist, which makes the picturing of the rock forms something new. Things, that is the rock forms that I draw, are not merely represented, rather, they picture the presentation of:

“a material passed through the alembic of personal experience. They have no precedents in existence or in universal being. But, nevertheless, their material came from the public world and so has qualities in common with the material of other experiences, while the product awakens in other person’s new perceptions of the meanings of the common world” (Dewey 1980, p. 86).

To add to the uniqueness of the drawing, Patrick Maynard writes, “... representations are things with the function of mandating that we imagine in certain ways, mainly depending on their relevant properties” (Maynard 2005, p. 88).

The marks I make respond to my own unique existential emotive moods and temperaments as recorded in my diary, and when remembering the experiences as they subtly alter over time. These marks are fragile in representative qualities as they either counteract with other marks to reveal marks existing independently from the rest of the picture, or as they interact with other marks to create the illusion of a rock form. The loosely drawn marks inform the presence of the rocks in the pictures. But they also suggest a peeling away of the representational qualities of the rock formations, like the peeling away of memories over time. Avis Newman writes, “Only during the process of marking is a cohesion found, a somewhat precarious frame constructed, almost as the byproduct of the articulation of marking thoughts, which by definition are open-ended in a state of flux, and suggestive of a perpetual potentiality” (Tate Gallery. et al. 2003, p. 169).



FIGURE 3: DAVID EDGAR, *MIRROR*, 2016. CHARCOAL ON PAPER, 150 X 80 CM.

Drawing, Void and Phenomenology

Conveying a deeper engagement with these complex and fragile interpretations of drawing is French thinker Alain Badiou, who, in an essay published in 2014, examines drawing as a type of 'seeming' (Badiou 2014, p. 76). Badiou's thinking about drawing indicates how drawing transforms things by giving form to deeper and alternative types of understandings and expressions of the world. Badiou attempts to explore an 'essence' (Badiou 2014, p. 77) of drawing, and in doing so provokes characteristics of the subtlety of the void. He conjures this as relationships between imagining things in the mind, by acknowledging the blank space of a drawing's surface paper for example, and as the space or gaps that occur between the thinking mind and the act of making marks.

In Badiou's essay, titled *Drawing: On Wallace Stevens*, he cites examples of verses in Stevens' poem *Description Without Place* where Stevens is writing of the sun in the sense of it as being and as seeming (Badiou 2014, pp. 75-82). Badiou, in relation to the poem, considers when one thinks of the sun, there is the real sun and then there is an impression of the sun as poetically manufactured by writing.

In a sense, Badiou matches Husserl's example of imagining an essence or a construct of things as perceived in one's consciousness. Badiou reiterates his point by quoting a short passage of Stevens writing: "description is composed of a sight indifferent to the eye". However he also argues that the poet is attempting to "fix a point where appearing and being are indiscernible" (Badiou 2014, p. 77).

In relation to drawing, Badiou argues that this is where the mark or trace coalesces with the white background or surface (ibid, p. 77). Where the mark is at once a being and a seeming, thus, they are the equivalent of existing and not existing. He continues that the paper as surface exists, but the marks do not exist by themselves rather they compose something on the surface.

Badiou also declares that a background as surface does not exist, "because it is created as such, as an open surface, by the marks" (ibid, p. 77). This 'moveable reciprocity' (ibid, p. 77) of material, mark and space is Badiou's essence and fragility of a drawing. This description of drawing also encompasses Mark Levy's view about the void occurring in the space or gaps between words. Levy, a westerner, has researched and practiced eastern spiritual traditions for more than 30 years particularly in relation to the void. He writes of manifesting the void through subtlety, and considers the space between words or two objects, or of blank spaces in an artwork, or as marks activating as an 'energy field' (Levy 2006, p. 2), to characterize qualities of the void.

Expanding on Badiou's notion of mark and background as surface, Derek Pigrum asserts the studio similarly acts as a kind of surface, with both studio and background surface (paper as example) acting as membranes from which a drawing emerges (Pigrum 2010). The studio is a place where the examination of questions occur - where the mind and body, and experience and memory, interacts – or, as Daniel Buren suggests, where we can "practice metaphysics" (Buren 2010, p. 107).

An artist, whilst drawing, fuses with the drawing medium and the surface as they are absorbed in the act of drawing as a mark is made onto a surface. John Rajchman writes, "the act of drawing dismantles consciousness and plunges the self into a zone of experience or sensation liberated from the closures of representation and open to the free play of possibilities" (Tate Gallery. et al. 2003, p. 220). Thus, a drawing is the manifestation of a fragile relationship that binds the thinking speculative mind with the body, in my case generally the arm and hand, etc., and the medium (for example charcoal), to a surface

and a studio. If, at the time of making a mark, consciousness is dismantled, then what occurs? The act of drawing has encompassed the void.

Drawing, in this way, involves qualities of 'flow', whereby, as an artist, I am consumed in a state of self-consciousness – in which I am deeply immersed and concentrating in what I'm doing – that a sense of time and self-awareness, such as emotional problems, are put aside (Csikszentmihalyi, M, and Csikszentmihalyi, I. S. 1998, p. 5). Mihalyi Csikszentmihalyi suggests this sensation is an "exhilarating" feeling of transcendence, because the experience involves "a sense of union with the environment" (Csikszentmihalyi, M 2002, p. 63) as it is being pushed to the limits of its boundaries.



FIGURE 4: KÄTHE KOLLWITZ, *SELF-PORTRAIT*, 1933. CHARCOAL ON BROWN LAID INGRES PAPER, 47.7 × 63.5 CM. NATIONAL GALLERY OF ART, WASHINGTON DC, (WIKI COMMONS).

Drawing thus fuses ideas, memories, temporality, emotions, the senses, surfaces and the body. There is an intriguing example of this implied in a self-portrait by German artist Käthe Kollwitz from 1933. In the work, the artist has drawn in a realistic fashion, her portrait in profile and her hand holding a piece of charcoal in the act of drawing. Near her hand is a drawing board in profile represented by a simple line.

The fascinating part of the work is the way Kollwitz has drawn the internal contours of her arm, the conduit between her head and hand, with rapid abstracted marks suggestive of the energy of a compressed coiled spring. The drawn treatment of the arm, made with loose, vertical scribbly mark making, entices my reading of the picture as the physical manifestation of this void-like state of flow whilst in the act of drawing. The picture captures the fragility of the process of drawing as the speculative artist's mind is caught in the act of thinking about making a physical mark. Kollwitz's drawing of her own arm in this way suggests wavering ideas that extend the act of mark making during its transition from thinking mind to hand.

The drawing of the arm represents abstract mark making; the potential of drawing itself. The arm embodies the possibilities of drawing, located midway between the realistically drawn representations occurring in the mind when being translated and transformed via the hand. The arm, in scribbled form, embodies the space or void-like gap in between.

Badiou continues, "Drawing is something that is composed", therefore it is an artificiality. A drawing "is not a copy of something. It is a constructive deconstruction of something, and much more real than the initial thing ... [it is] intenser than actual life. A drawing is fragile. But it creates a very intense fragility" (Badiou 2014, p. 79).

When I draw, there is a relationship between presence and absence, an instability of the figure and ground relationships in the unravelling placement of related yet unrelated marks that I make onto a surface. To highlight this effect, in elements of some of my drawings, the paper is intentionally left blank to allow a tension between the surface, as a non-existent background and as a surface to develop. As Avis Newman describes, drawing is the externalisation of "vague thoughts" (Tate Gallery. et al. 2003, p. 78). I would argue that these vague thoughts are conscious manifestations of the void.

Jacques Derrida, like Badiou, writes of the act of drawing as being a search for the translation of objects through the body, hand and eye, with the use of materials (such as charcoal) and surface (paper). For Derrida though, drawing's 'vague thoughts', as proposed by Newman, and its 'artificiality', as identified by Badiou, are the traits of a thing, or traces, which is the ruin of that thing. Not ruin as in destruction, but as in defacement. Or as a rearrangement or shift/change in the thing being drawn, such as the way drawing re-interprets three-dimensional objects through mark making qualities into two-dimensions. A ruin of the object remains invoked in the drawing.

Derrida ponders this as a type of non-seeing and presents an analogy of the blind. He writes of the blind as, at times, having a greater sensory awareness than those with clear vision (Derrida & MusÉE du Louvre. 1993, pp. 4-6). For example, a blind person may have a more attuned sense of hearing, or in their reaching out for clarity with touch and feeling their way around things with their hands held out in front of them, they parallel with the mark maker when making a drawing. As a blind person might do, I am an artist who uses drawing to find (and represent) by holding out my hands and arms in front of me and feeling my way around a surface.

Derrida argues that the void in the notions of drawing is a ruin of a thing and a type of non-seeing. He provokes the theory of phenomenology, in acknowledging that drawing cannot holistically record experience but is used as a method to engage a deeper understanding of things. For Derrida drawing is based in the idea of Husserl's 'second level' (Husserl 2012, p. 97) of seeing – as the memory of the just remembered short term, and of various levels or layers of remembering. For example, if I am walking into the entrance to a dark cave in a rocky landscape the stability of my perception of it from one perceptual layout to the next alters. My memories of it are thus always dislocated from itself as it disturbs the next view layered upon the next and so on and so forth. However, when I remember the rocky cave entrance, I identify the essence of the things in it that I was spatially engaged with, such as the rocky edges or darkness. This is crucial to my understanding and comprehension of what it is.

Further, when confronted by an experience of intensity, such as entering into the unknown darkness of the cave, the amygdala part of my brain awakens commandeering other parts of my brain to attend to the situation at hand (Eagleman 2015, p. 70). These parts of my brain are where memories are laid down

in explicit detail. Thus, when intense experiences/memories are embedded into my brain they are laid down in more detail. When I recall the experience, it appears to have great clarity, and I feel like I have slowed down what I think I have experienced even though this is not the case. David Eagleman writes, “conscious awareness is nothing but lots of fast memory querying: our brains are always asking “What just happened? What just happened?” Thus, conscious experience is really just immediate memory” (Eagleman 2015, pp. 72-73).

Derrida writes of this ‘what just happened’ moment in relation to drawing: “As soon as the draftsman considers himself, fascinated, fixed on the image, yet disappearing before his own eyes into the abyss, the movement by which he tries desperately to recapture himself is already, in its very present, an act of memory” (Derrida & Musée du Louvre. 1993, p. 68). The coiled scribbly line in Kollwitz’s drawn arm acts as a metaphor for the abyss or blindness that occurs in the act of Derrida’s description of drawing. Within this is a void-like gap between the thinking mark and the actual mark made.



FIGURE 5: DAVID EDGAR, *THE ABYSS*, 2018. CHARCOAL ON 8 SHEETS OF PAPER, 250 X 500 CM.

The act of drawing can be likened to an act of unravelling streams of consciousness. Drawing can invoke layers of experience into a whole, and embed broader and deeper levels of information from the mind into what is being drawn. Drawing, like phenomenology, is an inaccurate means of holistically describing experience but it can be used as the framework and method to better understand it as it engenders a process of deeper learning about things, being drawn by the act of getting to know the things better, through the translation of those things into marks.

The great mystery of drawing, Avis Newman writes, is its fusion of the “infinite space of sensation in both the sensations of the body and the sensations of the mind” (Tate Gallery. et al. 2003, p. 233) in relation to the material world. I use drawing to explore representing qualities of the void as located in the experience of things. When I start a drawing, I use exploratory and suggestive lines. These lines relate to the types of marks I observe existing at each site. These lines also explore the interval between my felt experience and memory. Deanna Petherbridge proposes artists use drawing, particularly loose forms of sketching, to explore new ideas, render thoughts and emotions visible in an immediate way, and to

capture “nuances of the observed world” (Petherbridge 2010, pp. 2-4). John Willats writes of the artist relinquishing “the object to the obscure necessity of drawing as such,” (Tate Gallery. et al. 2003, p. 218) and John Ruskin wrote in similar terms stating this is the artist seeking the “leading lines” of things, “that embody in their very formation the past history, present action and future potential of a thing” (Ingold 2007, pp. 129-130).

Phenomenologically speaking, each suggestive mark that I make projects my embodied knowledge and memory of the observed world. Each mark has its own personality, mood and rhythm. A drawing evolves as the marks continue against and over each other over time. A mark made activates against another mark made. A drawing becomes and develops an overall personality. The drawing thus is embedded with the observation of physical and existential qualities of experience. Paul Crowther notes, “the image affirms itself through the autographic presentation of spatiality more than through signification” (Crowther 2017, p. 6). The act of drawing concerns an uncertain spatiality whereas the outcome presents, and is embedded, with signification.

Drawing is a type of visual alchemy, a concoction of energy and expression, pace, flow, movement and duration, intimacy and immediacy, a description of experimentation with form, play, memory and embodied knowledge, exaggeration, informality, additionally dreaming and imagination. When these things coalesce and something else emerges, is when I find drawing comes alive.

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