TRACEY
Contemporary Drawing Research

Towards a Syntax of *Visual Delight*: The Tension between Surface Qualities and Illusory Depth in Drawing - Howard Riley

Abstract

This paper correlates a fundamental insight about drawing articulated by a disparate range of thinkers associated with the visual arts: the historian Richard Brettell, the visual psychologists Richard Gregory and James J. Gibson, the expert on children's drawings John Willats, the drawing theorist Philip Rawson and the philosopher Richard Wollheim.

The term *contraperception* is coined to describe this common insight, and is explained as the visual equivalent of a contradiction: the dichotomy between the material surface qualities of a drawing and the illusion of spatial depth produced by the combination of marks upon the surface. The tension between these two is what Wollheim termed the *visual delight* factor in drawings.

The paper proposes that nurturing an awareness of such tension could be a prime objective in the teaching of drawing, and offers a taxonomy of drawn visual elements, their combinations upon a surface, and what those combinations might represent in the virtual space of a drawing, as a basis for a curriculum of drawing activities. Students' drawings illustrate how sensitivities towards scale, proportion and contrast, for example, might be developed as components of an *intelligence of seeing* (Riley 2001) which would enhance the widest range of contemporary visual arts practices.

Introduction

(This paper is an extended and revised version of *Enhancing Visual Delight,* presented at the *4th International Conference of the Centre for Learning and Teaching in Art and Design*, New York City, April 2008.)

It is surprising, to say the least, that the most fundamental condition defining a drawing as an artefact is rarely articulated in art school teaching studios as a central tenet in the pedagogics of drawing, even though it has been alluded to by a range of thinkers working in a variety of disciplines, as we shall see below. The paper sets out to illustrate through students' work how the pedagogy of drawing can be enhanced by the exploration of such a fundamental condition.

The Dialectics of Drawing

What is this fundamental condition which defines a drawing? It is what I shall term a *contraperception*, a visual equivalent of a contradiction: the dialectical relationship between the material qualities of the marked surface which constitutes a drawing, and the illusion of spatial depth conjured up by those marks upon the surface.

Richard Brettell (1999:12), working within the discipline of art history, identifies this insight as the basis for a "…simpler and more flexible binary system of aesthetic classification…" for artefacts such as paintings, photographs and drawings which could enhance the conventional chronology of Modernist 'isms', by using the categories "transparent realism" and "mediated realism" (Brettell 1999:14). Transparent realism plays down all indications which would otherwise draw attention to the surface qualities of the artefact, so that the viewer's gaze is transported directly into the virtual space produced by projective geometries and tonal and textural contrasts. A good example of this is Robert Newell's pencil drawing *Glaciated Rocks: Nant Ffrancon* (Figure 1).

Figure 1

Mediated realism, as the term implies, mediates access to the virtual space represented, through a literal foregrounding of the surface qualities of the artefact – the materiality of the mark-making medium and its supporting textural surface. The author's *Surfaces and Edges: Perth Zoo* (Figure 2) epitomises this, in which the texture and consistency of scale of the crayon marks, and the bared textural surface of the paper demand the viewer's attention before allowing contemplation of the scene depicted.

Figure 2

Although Brettell makes no reference to him, the opposition between transparent and mediated realisms had already been alluded to - albeit in other terminology - by the Cornell psychologist James Jerome Gibson (1979), whose explanation of visual perception involves what he termed an *ecological* approach. Gibson sub-divided his exploration of the visual perception process into two parts: the perception of the world of surfaces, edges, colours, textures and slopes; and the perception of the world of signification – of signs made upon surfaces. He argued that perception of the one is radically different from the perception of the other (Gibson 1980:xi), setting up the notion of a "duality of picture perception" (Gibson 1979: 280-1):

> A picture, photographic or chirographic, is always a treated surface…a plaster wall, or a sheet of canvas, a panel, a screen, or a piece of paper… The picture is both a scene and a surface, and the scene is paradoxically *behind* the surface.

Even earlier than Gibson, Richard Gregory (1970:32), as Director of the Brain and Perception Laboratory at the University of Bristol, had pointed out with neat alliteration the "peculiar"… "paradox of pictures":

> Pictures have a double reality. Drawings…are objects in their own right – patterns on a flat sheet – and at the same time entirely different objects to the eye.

John Willats, a polymath of a man whose intellectual inquisitiveness and generous willingness to share ideas I would here like to acknowledge personally, gave in his last book before he died in April 2006 (Willats 2005: 209), an account of depiction in terms of the contrast between the marks upon a surface and the

pictorial image (and, incidentally, champions painting as a source of pleasure over photography)

> … for us to take pleasure in (a painting) there must be a balance between the domain of the marks and the domain of the pictorial image. There is not much pleasure in looking at an artist's palette, however bright the colors, in which no pictorial image exists, nor is there much pleasure to be gained by looking at the contrast between the depicted scene and the mark system in a photograph because all the balance is on the side of the depicted scene. Again, the greatest pleasure comes when there is a balance between the two domains.

The philosopher Patrick Maynard, on page 152 of his 2005 book *Drawing Distinctions* which Michael Podro (2008: 347) insists "…should be obligatory reading for anyone in an art school teaching drawing", reminds us that Philip Rawson (1987:79) made a similar point in his seminal, yet under-cited(1) book, *Drawing*:

> …in most of the world's best drawings a very large part of their vigour and expression derives from a kind of tension or conflict between the two-dimensional and the three-dimensional… My point here is that in those drawings which are universally recognised as masterpieces there is a vigorous conflict between a highly-developed two-dimensional surface unity, and a highly- developed three-dimensional plasticity. The higher the point to which both are developed, the stronger the drawing.

It should be apparent by now that all five of the writers quoted so far have identified what I termed earlier as the fundamental condition which defines the nature of a drawing, but how does this fundamental condition relate to the title of this paper?

Richard Wollheim's Concept of *Visual Delight*

Willats mentioned the delight that can be experienced when we become aware of the tension – what I have termed a *contraperception* - between our perception of the drawing's surface qualities and our perception of the virtual space apparent in the scene depicted. He acknowledged his source as the philosopher Richard Wollheim (1998:98) who asked the questions: "What is the source of visual delight? What aspect of painting gives us the pleasure that we characteristically derive from it?" Wollheim's answer to his own questions is elaborated in the second of his 1984 A.W. Mellon Lectures delivered at the National Gallery of Art, Washington, DC, where he proposed three perceptual capacities that the artist relies upon any viewer to exercise: firstly, *seeing-in* (2), triggered by looking at a differentiated surface, when two levels of perception occur – in Wollheim's word *twofoldedness* – an awareness of the surface qualities and an awareness of something represented within that surface; secondly, *expressive perception*, the capacity which enables the viewer to perceive meaning within the composition of visual elements; and thirdly, *visual delight*, the pleasurable experience of the tension between perceptions of surface and virtual scene, illustrated in Figure 3:
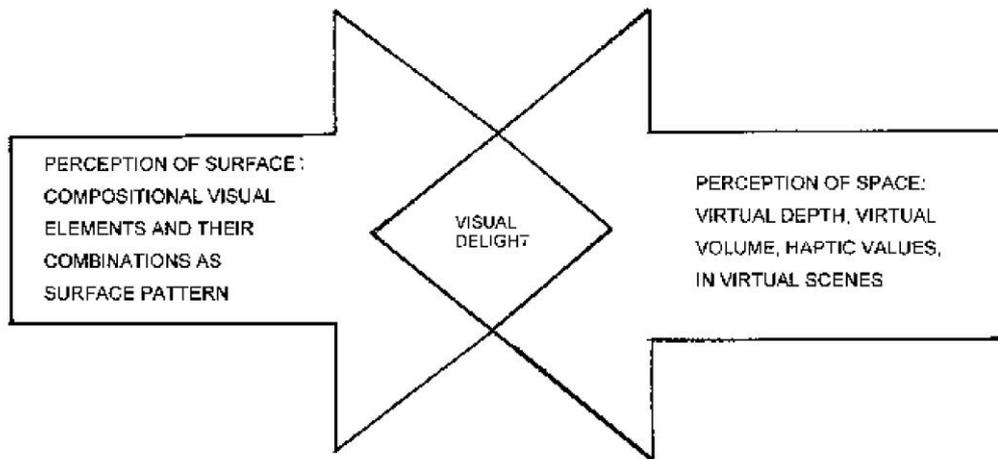
Figure 3

Wollheim correlates these three perceptual capacities of the viewer with three powers belonging to painting (and here I would extrapolate from his argument to include drawing): firstly, the power to *represent* external objects; secondly, the power to *express* mental or internal phenomena through compositional devices; and thirdly, the power to induce *visual delight* in the viewer.

Now, readers familiar with the systemic-functional semiotic model of language theorised by the socio-linguist Michael Halliday (1973, 1976), and developed to analyse visual modes of communication such as painting, sculpture and architecture by Michael O'Toole (1994), narrative film (Hughes and Riley 2007) and drawing (Riley 2001; 2002; 2004), will immediately recognise the congruence between Wollheim's three artistic powers and the three functions of visual communication elaborated in those sources: Wollheim's 'power to represent' is congruent with the *representational,* or *experiential* function, the capacity to represent a range of experiences of the world, be they perceptual, emotional or imaginational; his 'power to express' (ie.the potential for realising in visible form) is congruent with the *compositional* function, the capacity of the artist to select and combine visual elements in order to realise and share in visual form those experiences of the world; and Wollheim's 'power to induce visual delight' in the viewer is congruent with the *modal*, or *interpersonal* function, the capacity to position the viewer in terms of mood and attitude towards those experiences represented in the work.

Such a close congruence makes Wollheim's (1998:44) insistence upon distancing his own self-defined position in the psychological camp of meaning-making from "…those schools of contemporary thinking…structuralism and semiotics" rather puzzling, since he could have reconciled the psychological and the semiological, thus eliminating the falsity of the perceived philosophical divide between the two, and, in the process, facilitating the opportunity outlined below:

Towards a Syntax of *Visual Delight*
This correlation of the philosophical reasoning of Wollheim with a systemic-functional visual semiotics adumbrated above affords a practical pedagogical opportunity: since a drawing's capacity to induce visual delight in the viewer can now be understood as a function of the compositional choices made by the artist engaged in representation, any teaching strategy which elaborates a syntax of composition – clarifying how the selection of visual elements and their combinations might render both a coherence of surface qualities and illusions of spatial depth – has the potential to expand students' capacities for enhancing the visual delight factor in their work, should they so desire. (Of course, such potential may remain unfulfilled should the student wish to explore an 'anti-delight' aesthetic!) Figure 4a sets out to show diagrammatically how the potential for visual delight might be realised through the contraperception between the combinations of compositional choices upon a surface, and the virtual scene representing experiences of the world, Figures 4b and 4c illustrating such potential in practice:
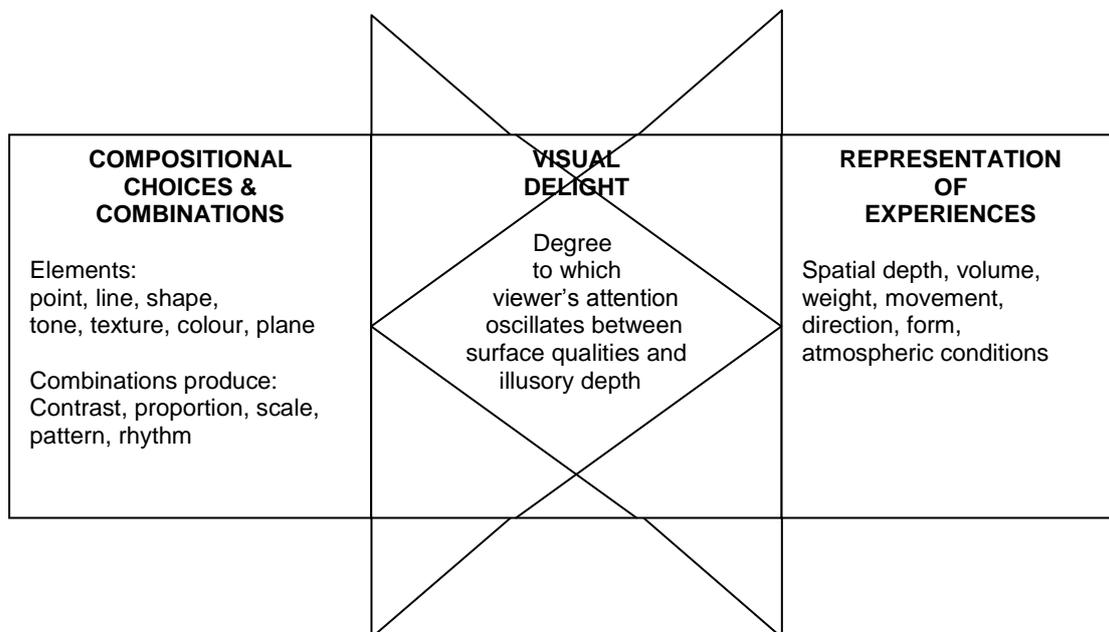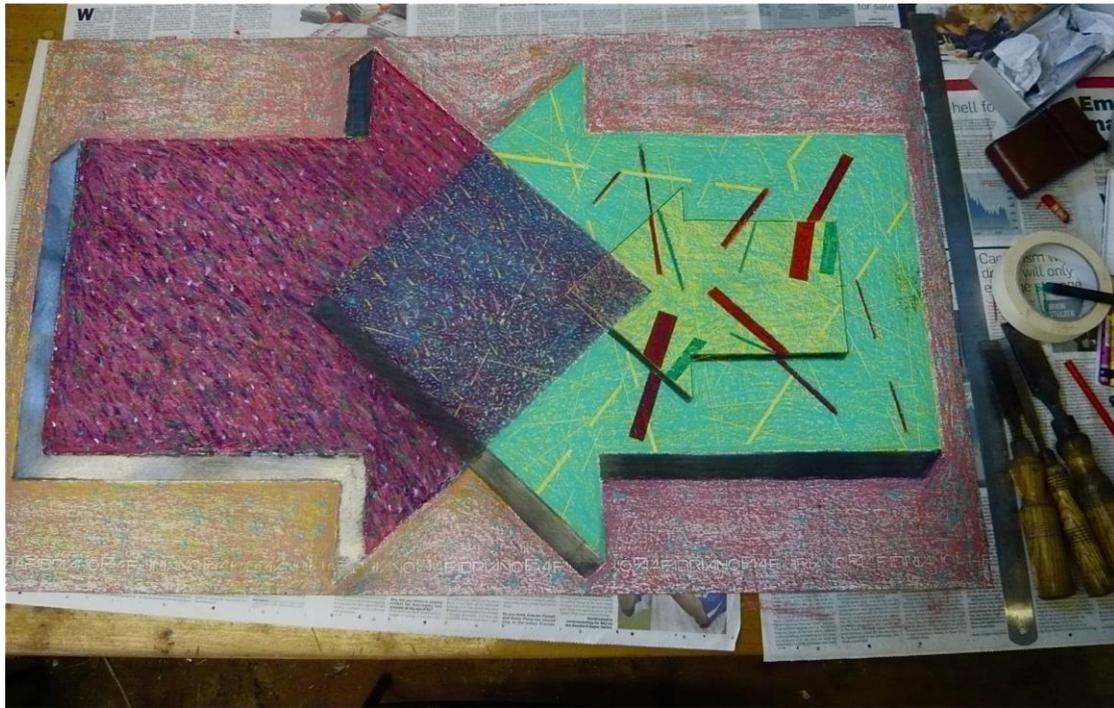
COMPOSITIONAL CHOICES & COMBINATIONS	VISUAL DELIGHT	REPRESENTATION OF EXPERIENCES
Elements: point, line, shape, tone, texture, colour, plane Combinations produce: Contrast, proportion, scale, pattern, rhythm	Degree to which viewer's attention oscillates between surface qualities and illusory depth	Spatial depth, volume, weight, movement, direction, form, atmospheric conditions

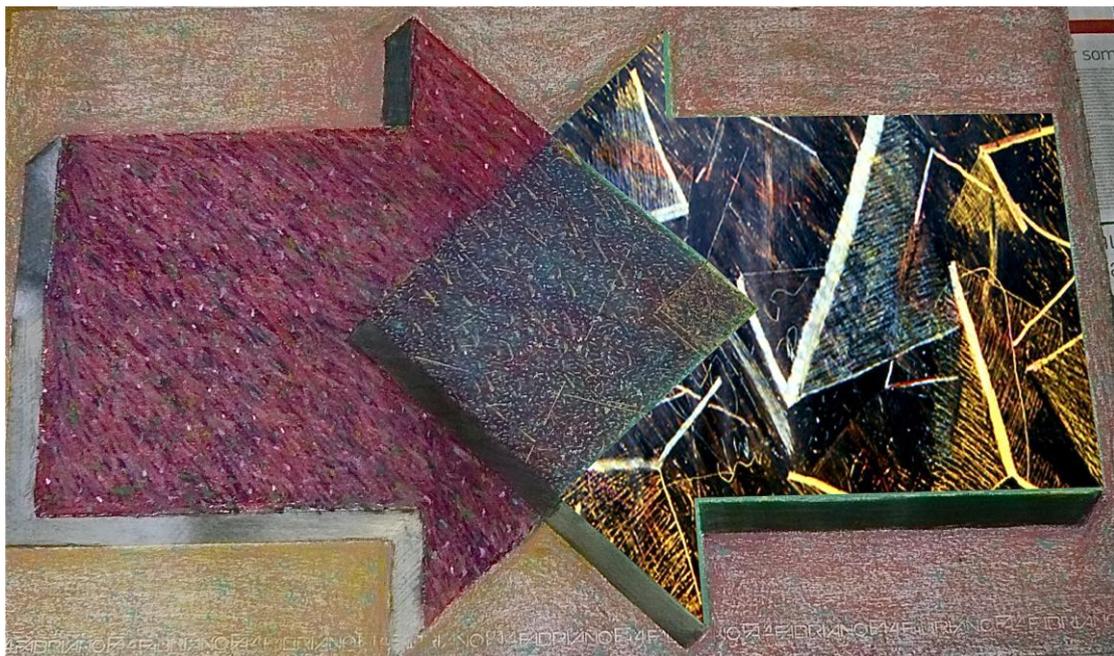**Figure 4a**

Figure 4b

Figure 4c

And Figure 5 shows a fully-articulated version of a systemic-functional semiotic model of the whole domain of drawing (Riley 2001), most recently elaborated in Riley (2008):

LEVELS OF ENGAGEMENT	FUNCTIONS OF DRAWING		
	COMPOSITIONAL	INTERPERSONAL	EXPERIENTIAL
The drawing as displayed in context	• Inter-textuality • Systems of Geometry: persp. orthographic, oblique, inverted persp., & topological • Size and format • Framing devices • Location options	• Systems of modality: Mood, attitude, positioning: viewer-centred, object-centred • Public/Private • Intimate/Monumental	• Systems of Theme: Physical, emotional, imaginative experiences. narrative, Historical genre • Realistic/Abstract • Interplay between objects, poses, events
Sub-divisions of the drawing's surface	• Secondary geometry • Gestalt relationships: horizontal, vertical, diagonal axes • Proportional relationships • Tonal passages (aerial persp.)	• Systems of gaze: Eye paths, focus points • Dynamic/Static • Calm/Excited • Balance/Unbalanced	• Primary geometry • Actions, poses, events, objects • Awareness of distal and proximal perceptual values
Combinations of drawn marks	• Relative size of marks • Relative orientation of marks • Relative position of marks • Colour, tone and texture contrast – boundaries • Pattern • Rhythm • False attachments	• Deep/shallow range of depth illusion • Foreground/Background range of positioning • Stability/Instability • Scale • Heavy/light	• Distance between surfaces • Edges: occlusion of one surface by another • Direction • Transparency/Opacity of surfaces • Atmospheric conditions • Quality of light • Time of day • Awareness of haptic perceptual values • Weight
A drawn mark	• Size relative to picture surface • Orientation relative to picture surface • Position relative to picture surface • Combination of surface texture and drawing medium • Picture-primitives	• Psychological orientation • Range of textural meanings: wet/dry; hard/soft; matt/gloss • Denotation level of meaning	• Spatial depth • Effects of gravity and other forces • Effects of light and water upon material surfaces • Scene primitives

(left vertical label: MATRIX OF SYSTEMS OF CHOICES)

MATRIX OF SYSTEMS OF CHOICES

Figure 5

Theory into Practice
The approach to a drawing practice and pedagogy which advocates a conscious, purposeful manipulation of the surface qualities of the composition together with the illusions of depth resulting from the contrasts of tone, colour and texture, does not necessarily imply work which is realist in its representation of experiences. There are numerous historical examples of abstract work in which the visual delight factor is enhanced: for example, much of the Abstract Expressionist *oeuvre* (evident in the major galleries of New York City, where an earlier version of this paper was presented) demonstrates this, as do the author's drawings illustrated in Figures 6 and 7, (albeit on a rather more modest scale ;-)
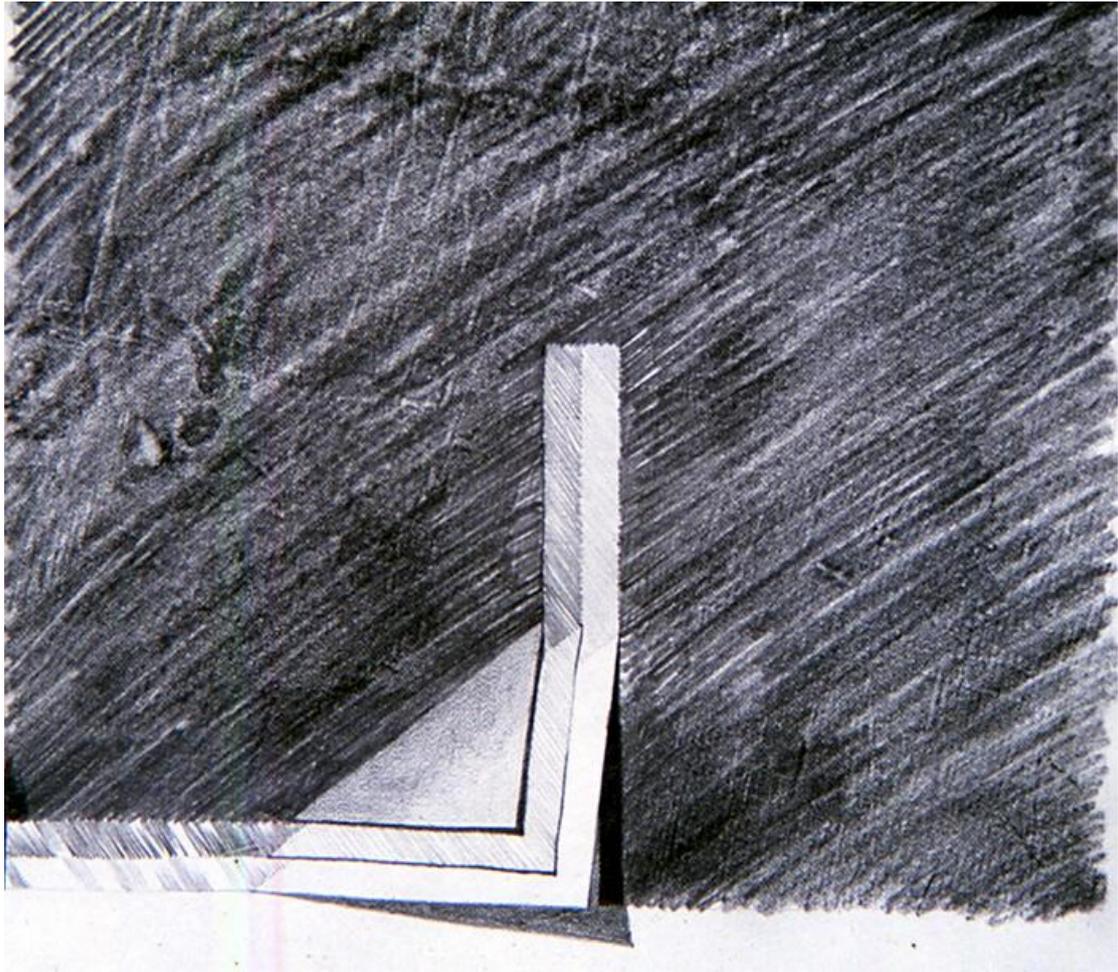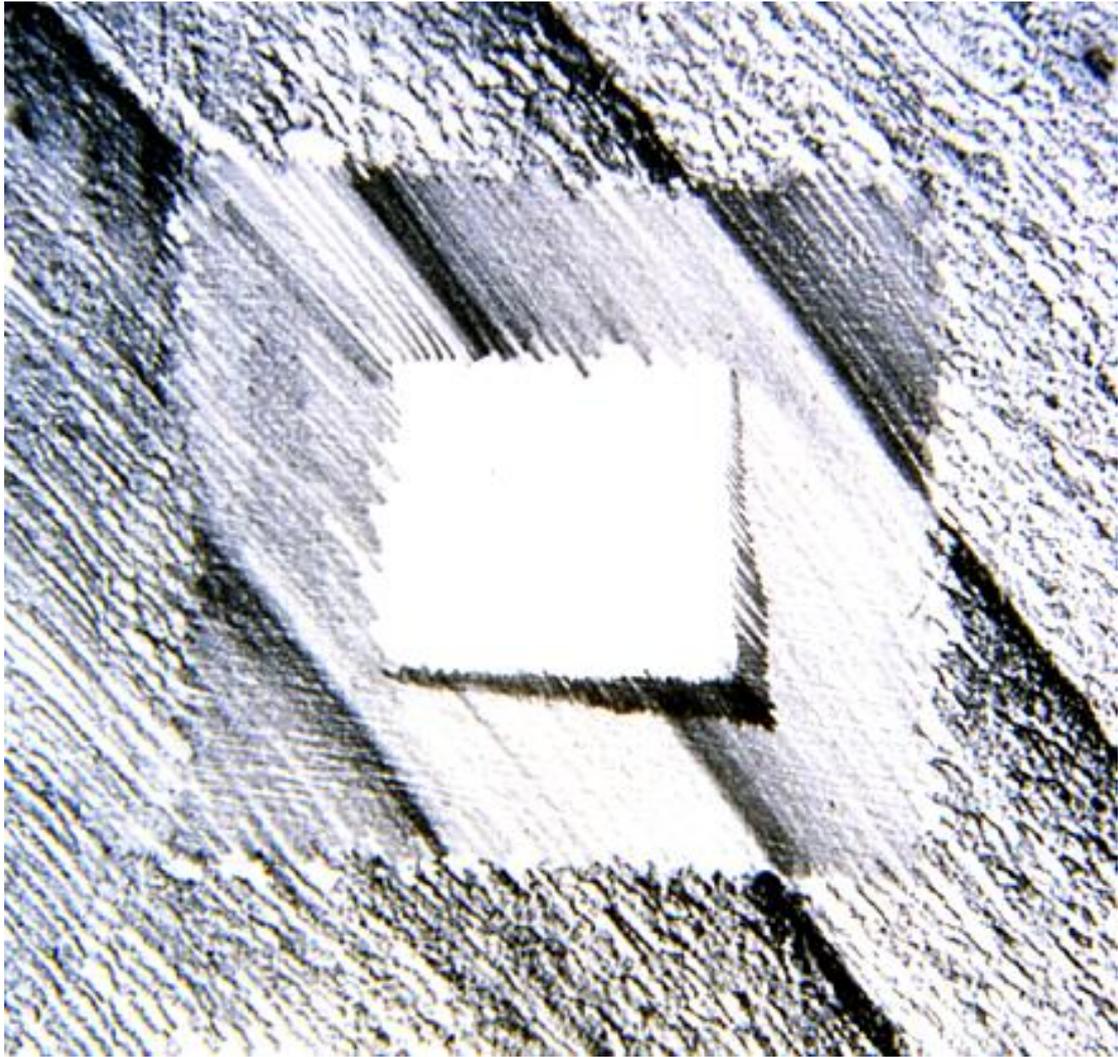
Figure 6

Figure 7

A teaching strategy informed by the theoretical propositions discussed above has been utilised to benefit students in the Dynevor Centre for Arts, Design and Media at Swansea Metropolitan University. For example, it can be demonstrated that an understanding of two of the fundamental sensibilities required for the production of visual work; 1) organisation of the surface pattern relationships between the scale of a drawing and the size and format of the paper (or any other support), and 2) the understanding of how to produce illusions of depth by the manipulation of tonal and textural contrasts, can be easily developed through basic life drawing exercises, illustrated in Figures 8 and 9:

Figure 8

Figure 9

Developing an awareness of the *tensions* between the surface pattern qualities of a drawing and the illusions of depth is crucial to the production of work that is both conceptually intriguing and perceptually intriguing. Figures 10 and 11 demonstrate such awareness, resulting in drawings that invite the viewer's gaze and enhance visual delight:

Figure 10

Figure 10 illustrates a charcoal and chalk pastel study, one of a series which explored illusions of depth balanced by careful treatment of the overall surface pattern qualities of the drawings. The attentive viewer is intrigued – delighted – by the fluctuation possible between the textural liveliness and the delicate balance of the surface layout, and the sharply-defined layers of illusory depth available to the eye.
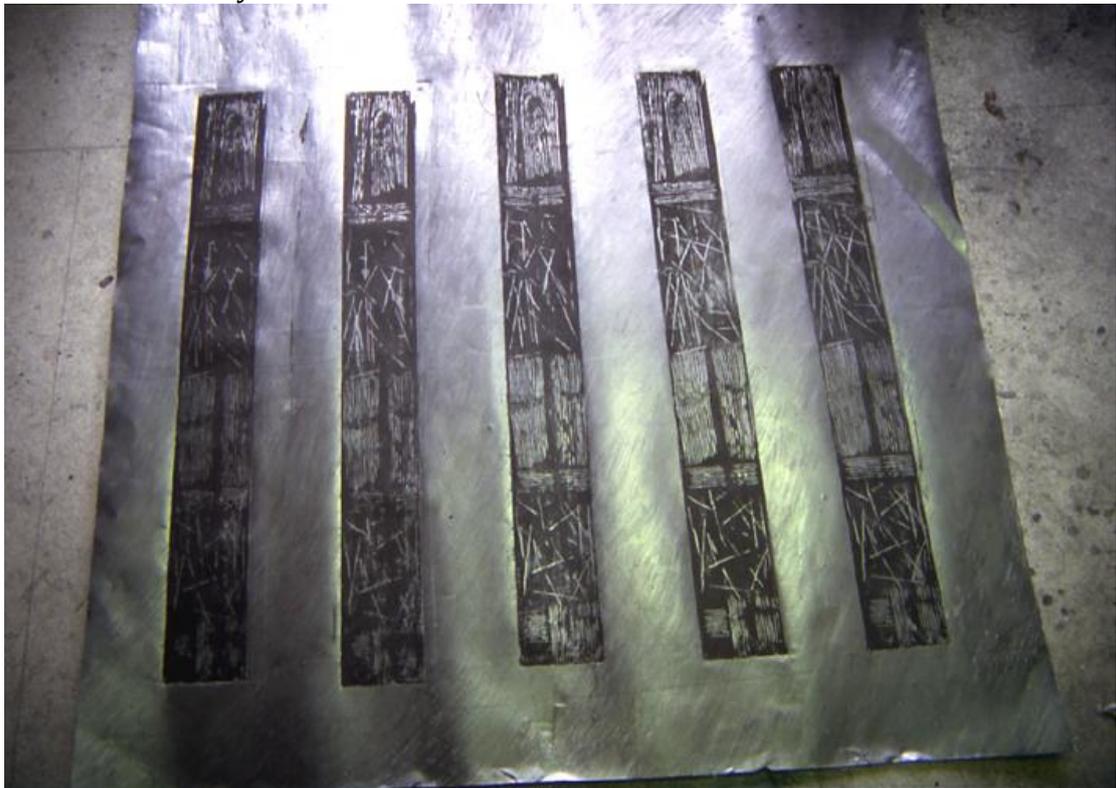
Figure 11

Figure 11 illustrates a drawing, some two metres square, which exploits the effects of manipulating surface textural qualities (matt, gloss) upon the structuring of the light reflected from the surface, even in reproduction. Coupled with the ambiguities of the depth illusions, (perceived reversal of figure/field relations), these effects greatly enhance the levels of perceptual and conceptual intrigue, and hence the potential of visual delight for the attentive viewer willing to engage with such work at the perceptual and conceptual levels.

A student who recognises the potential for the play of metaphor through the complex layering of surface materials   and the resultant complexities of depth illusions, is able to produce drawings which represent the multi-layered social functions of the artist in a multi-modal social context in which a traditional material practice might be integrated with digitally-manipulated imagery disseminated in a virtual world. (Figures 12 and 13.)
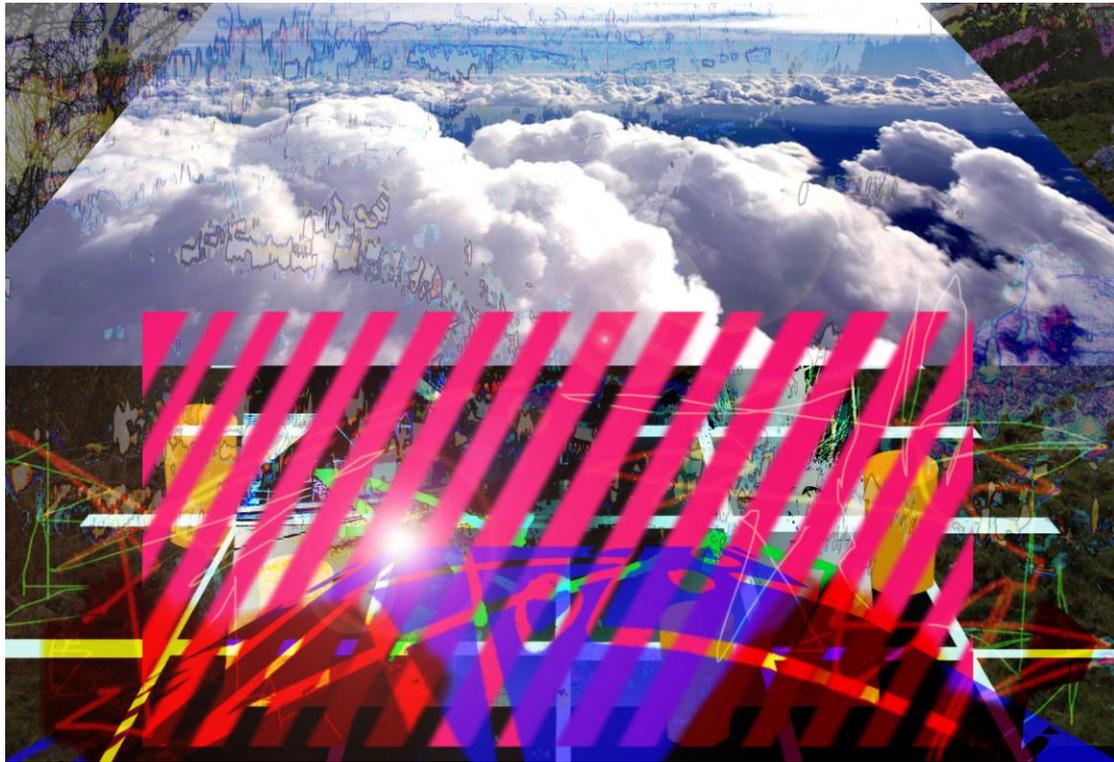

Figure 12

Figure 13

The argument presented in this paper is offered as a contribution to *TRACEY's* mission of enhancing debate and understanding of the value of drawing in all its forms, and also as a contribution to the pedagogical mission of enhancing the art school curriculum. All constructive comment and criticism is welcomed by the author.

Notes
1 I'm pleased to note that although I lament the under-citing of Rawson in general, Patrick Maynard (2005) does his best to rectify this single-handedly by citing him no less than nineteen times! Rawson is also cited by those esteemed writers and practitioners of drawing, Steve Garner (2008) and Deanna Petherbridge (2008) in a recent collection of essays on drawing practice and research, so perhaps my pessimism is unfounded.

2 It should be noted here that Maynard (2005) has challenged Wollheim's account of depiction as being based upon 'seeing-in'. Maynard argues that the opposition between an awareness of surface textural qualities and an awareness of the representation of depth is not unique to two-dimensional work: this dual perception is also a feature shared with sculpture, the surface/depth dichotomy being simply a sub-set of the more general medium/subject relation. However, Maynard's challenge seems not to deprive Wollheim's insight of its value in relation to the aims of this paper. Readers seeking an alternative account of depiction that Maynard prefers might enjoy Kendall Walton's (1990:293).

Illustrations

Figure 1 Robert Newell
Figures 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7 Howard Riley
Figure 8 Thomas Haarland
Figure 9 Laura Mason
Figure 10 Amanda Maria
Figure 11 Russell Maggs
Figures 12, 13 William Thomas

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