

Workshop: Action Figurative Art for Cavers and Non Cavers

June MacLucas
Cave Exploration Group (SA)

Abstract

Life Drawing: You don't have to be a caver.

Learn to capture on the spot cavers in action in or out of caves. This could assist in drawing figures at any time; in any situation.

Introduction

The Australian Speleological Federation Conference of 2007 witnessed the last of the Australian Speleo Art Exhibitions. It had been running consecutively at each Conference since 1999 and although the main work was always new and the exhibitions were always greeted with much interest resulting in substantial sales, it was suggested that it was time for a change. This time for the 2009 ASF Conference I was asked to present something different as there was no space for an exhibition, would I therefore be interested in presenting an Art Workshop.

I hesitated at first but eventually agreed, as there is so much work involved in arranging and presenting an Art exhibition and when I thought about the prospects of giving an Art Workshop it gave me a chance to present a workshop that perhaps would be of interest to both cavers and non cavers. In Australia there are very few cavers confident enough to try their hand at sketching what they see before them in caves. Here was my chance to encourage this aspect by teaching the simple techniques of elementary figurative drawing while using charcoal, pencil or some other easily applied medium to create an image. Just a little knowledge of learning to sketch what you actually see and transporting that onto paper by extending the use of various art materials to portray that image, can be very uplifting when used for the first time. Hopefully those who attended the workshop have used and achieved a greater interest in their own artwork to portray what they see, whether it be figures in caves, landscape, portraits, or whatever.

Action Figurative Art - Some quick and effective materials to use

After pencil, charcoal is one of the oldest and most basic drawing mediums available. It is easily erasable on most papers, allowing changes to be made at any point and enabling the drawing to be kept fluid and free. Large charcoal sticks can be used on their side to cover large areas of the paper with dense tones, while sharpening the ends of the charcoal are used to portray detail.

Red chalk or conte is another great and interesting way to create an image quickly. Used by important artists, such as Raphael (1483-1520) and Da Vinci (1452-1519) who both exploited its qualities for their precise figurative work by using the red warmth of the conte to enhance the fleshy qualities of their drawings.

Pastels are another quick and useful addition to the artist's arsenal. They can be used dry without oils or solvents. With only a dozen colours you have the scope to make paint-like studies of your model or cave.

Pens produce flowing drawings as seen in Figure 1, but there is not much scope for hesitation or change of mind, pens need a quick and steady hand. I feel it is not as useful and adventurous as the above media if you are not accustomed to it. There is a certain amount of confidence needed with using pens before venturing into this medium.



Figure 1: Ceris Jones UK – Pen & Wash

Papers

Dry media, such as pencils, charcoal, conte and pastels work well with textured papers. Wet media, such as ink and watercolours work better with harder papers. Please don't use thin paper or lined paper. If you intend to do some art work take the time to purchase a better quality paper from an art shop.

We have a model - Let's get started - Using tone

Tonal values are the gradations from light to dark seen on any solid object under the play of light. Observing tonal relationships between objects or parts of an object is a way of conveying a sense of structure. It is a traditional method that works well. To get started, half close your eyes so that the colour effects are diminished and tonal values are made simpler to read. Rendering tonal values requires materials that can produce a wide range of gradations from dark to light and back again. Charcoal fits the bill, especially compressed charcoal with its wide tonal range (Figs 2 & 3). Conte and graphite offer some flexibility but are not as quick and as affective as charcoal.

Let's look at the use of high-contrast or light and shadow to give form and shape to your subject

Light sources are a strong influence on your ability to see the form of your model. Light and shadow are impor-

tant indicators of form and harnessing them allows you to create the effects of three dimensions on the flat surface of the paper. The use of a dramatic light source may also give the drawing impact, adding a sense of excitement to the drawing. While working in a cave, the light source from the cave entrance can give a sense of excitement to



Figure 2: Ceris Jones UK - Charcoal



Figure 3: Robin Gray UK - "Abseiling" Charcoal

a figure set against a very dark background. Another way is by placing a lamp on the ground near the figure either to lighten the figure or lighten the background; this will add drama to your work. The best way to create form in your figurative work is to use light on the figure itself. Light gives shape and form; it rounds the figure giving it strength in its shadows of darkness, while giving life and form in the lighter areas. Harnessing the essence of light and shade is the secret of dramatic figurative work. Another way is cover the page with charcoal smearing it all over the paper smearing it with the side of your hand, then lightly trace in your figure. After establishing some proportions, begin lifting out the lights with the corner of a rubber while continuing to strengthen and clarify the shadowy areas giving strength and character to your work. This way of 'pushing' charcoal can be very exciting while bringing to life the image you wish to portray.

Hard and soft edges

Hard and soft edges are usually what give a drawing its two-dimensional quality. Too many hard edges usually flatten your drawing. By hard edges, I mean the actual outline of the drawing. Soft edges or just gentle shading, by comparison, creates a stronger sense of reality. These soft and hard edges are usually carried out by shading and lifting out using a rubber and can be used on both the inside and outside edges of a figure.

Measurement

Measurement is important, especially if you wish to use the figure to indicate the size of a cave or landscape. You may find this a bit daunting at first, but it soon becomes second nature and will be seen as a useful tool. The tool most commonly used, is to take continual measurements using your pencil and thumb as a guide. You can use these measurements in two ways: sight-sizing and comparative measurement. To measure the distance between two points extend your arm fully and hold the pencil vertically. With one eye closed align the tip of the pencil with the upper point and tip of your thumb with the lower one. Take a measurement from your model i.e. the size of their head and in this way you can measure how many heads fill the length or width of the body. For example: is it four or five heads down and one or two heads wide. This method is quick and easy and really works. It also works when measuring the figure in its surroundings, by taking the height of a full figure you can use this as a guide as to how large or how small an area you are placing the figure in that you wish to portray.

A demonstration of this is shown by Elery Hamilton-Smith when he states Burke in his 1757 essay, (Hamilton-Smith, 1997:8) from *The Sublime and Beautiful*, that things which frighten us by their scale or mystery become transformed in our mind into something sublime and beautiful. This meant that landscapes were often reconstructed as much bigger and more grandiose than they are in reality by making the figures appear small and tiny compared to their surroundings. Hence using the figure to distort reality.

Balance – changes in tension of the muscles

No matter which position the model is in, it is important to develop an awareness of where the centre of balance of the body lies in order to make your drawing convincing. To establish the equilibrium of a figure in

any pose, be it standing upright, sitting, hanging from a rope or whatever, you will need to determine the line of balance that travels down the centre of the body. This is done by looking where the centre of the clavicle (collar-bone) is and drawing a line down the centre of the figure while looking to see where the weight is distributed in regards to this imaginary line. This is an important observation and one that can give the drawing a quick likeness and a sense of strength as to the positioning of the figure. Whether the figure is the front or back view, twisted, or leaning against a support, always check the weight and balance against a straight line down the centre of the figure.

Capturing the Essence of Movement

When studying movement, the essence is more important than detail. It is about the bigger picture; don't become bogged down in facial features and fingers. You can look at that later. Moving figures are not easy to draw; you need to be quick and simple in order to form a basis upon which to build. By focusing on the bigger issues and keeping them simple, you can make the freezing of action more convincing. If the pose is particularly difficult you can ask the model to rest and then repeat the pose several times as in Figures 4 and 5, or you can take a photograph and freeze the action so it is realistic. This can be seen in Figures 6 and 7. Degas (1834-1917) employed photography to capture his models in ballet movements. However, don't rely entirely on photography as sometimes the form is lost and figures can look weightless with no sense of balance.



Figure 4: June MacLucas – “Peter Ackroyd laddering down Thampanna Cave, 6N206 Nullarbor”. Charcoal, graphite pencil and water colour pencil.

Proportions of the head.

Although this workshop was never meant to be a portrait class here are some guidelines about the proportion of the head. Artists throughout history have noted that the proportions of the head are almost identical for every person regardless of gender or ethnic origin. As you learn the parts of the head and how they relate to each other, you will notice how age and gender change these relationships. For instance, in a male figure, the jaw line and the area between the eyebrows are more angular and pronounced. A woman's face is softer and oval while a child's face is rounder with eyes proportionally large for the rest of the face. Of course there are always some variations but mostly these guidelines are rules you can work from.

Barrett (2008:80) gives an excellent study of the proportions of the head when he states that the eyes are set at a halfway point between the top of the head and chin. The tip of the ears are set at the same level as the eyebrows and the base of the ears at the same level as the base of the nose. I have drawn many portraits and this rule is correct in every aspect of portraiture and no matter which way the face is turned up or down or sideways, if you draw a line across these areas and look at your model you will see that it works, it is correct and an easy guide to the proportions of the head.

The body as landscape

Finally, dealing with the complexities of the human form can be daunting. Rowlands (2005:126) claims a useful exercise is to regard the body as a landscape whether you are working on a figure set up in a cave, at home drawing your friends or you actually do have



Figure 5: June MacLucas – “Ray Gibbons abseiling down Thampanna Cave, 6N206 Nullarbor”. Charcoal, graphite pencil and water colour pencil



Figure 6: June MacLucas – “Frank Hankinson abseiling down Murra-el-Elevyn 6N47 Nullarbor”. Charcoal, graphite pencil and water colour pencil.

someone set in the landscape. Think about what we have talked about, light illuminates the body while the shadows help to reveal the form. Don't worry too much about drawing detail. Concentrate on where the figure is in that so-called landscape. In a cave the landscape is as important as the figure. Try to capture that essence and let the work flow freely. Don't worry too much about detail; it's more of a feeling of presence that you are after. Even if you work quickly, remember that your model cannot stay too long in one pose; change the pose and start a new drawing. Take your camera and take shots while you are drawing, this way you will have a great source of material to work from.

We have a model, so let's get started on our drawing.

Many thanks to Sue Bateman of Sydney who kindly volunteered to be our model for this workshop and who wore the complete caving outfit, helmet and headlight. All participants at the workshop completed two drawings of Sue in different poses of which Sue on completion of the workshop gladly collected as a reminder of the event.

References:

Barrett, Robert, 2008 *Life Drawing: How to Portray the Figure with Accuracy and Expression*. North Light Books, Cincinnati, Ohio, USA.

Hamilton-Smith, Elery, 1997 'Perceptions of Australian Caves in the 19th Century: The Visual Record'. *Helictite*, 35 (1 & 2) Journal of Australasian Speleological Research. pp 5-11.



Figure 7: June MacLucas – “Frank Hankinson prusiking out of Murra-el-Elevyn 6N47 Nullarbor”. Charcoal, graphite pencil and water colour pencil.

Rowlands, Ian 2005 *Life Drawing*. Cassell Illustrated. London. E14 4JP.



June & George MacLucas Photo B. Downes.