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Communicating with Plants and Place through Sensory Drawing

Article, Drawings, by Elvira Hufschmid



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Abstract

Sensory drawing is the aesthetic practice of recording a cognitive process through tracing mental imagery that emerges in a different state of consciousness. Images are drawn with eyes closed as they appear in the mind's eye while visiting distinct sites or while sitting across a plant. By blocking out the visual senses, sensory channels are opened up for intensified perception and the sketches evolve from the reverberation with a place or plants. The drawings are conceptual in nature as the mark making comes about as the outcome of a perceptual activity, not an act of physical seeing and representational depiction. Hence, the art practice embodies a post-humanist subject positioning that renders the subject of knowledge –the experiencing self– as embedded in the world and intertwined within a web of relations with non-human others.¹ Through the potential emergence of unexpected elements beyond one's own embodiment, the practice epitomizes a pattern of 'thinking with' (in a Haraway's sense) or rather a 'feeling-with' when the world is sensed in its abundance of storied places and beings. The drawings visualize a multi-species attunement in form of a portray of intuitive communication and enchanted co-creation.

Keywords: Sensory drawing, posthumanism, other-than-human, sympoiesis, conceptual drawing.

Sensory drawing is the aesthetic practice of recording what is not visible to the naked eye. Images are drawn with eyes closed as they emerge while visiting chosen sites or while sitting across a plant. By blocking out the visual senses, I am able to focus on mental images which appear in the process. The aim is not to depict a representative verisimilitude or what is physically seen, but rather that which manifests as a mental picture in the mind's eye. The cognitive process unfolds in the tracing of mental imagery that emerges in a different state of consciousness and within this altered state of consciousness, that is similar to daydreaming, I tune into the reverberations of a place or a plant, intentionally seeking for a mindful connection.

The drawing process proposes a deepened sense of interconnection between the human, the non-human and the earth, as well as a materially embodied kinship with the living world, and in this way, the artistic practice of sensory drawing resonates with post-humanist concepts of a reciprocal relationality between subjects, other-than-human persons² and the world in general. Although easily dismissed by rationalism as sheer happenstance, the immanence of experience expressed through sensory drawing may communicate a sensed understanding of the world in its self-sustaining, living complexity.

By following a preparatory protocol, the mind is 'emptied' and sensory channels are opened up for intensified perception. I approach places with great respect that usually involves a protocol of greeting, gratitude and request for permission to engage, a communication that is facilitated intuitively. By considering the colonial realities of Canada/Turtle Island, any form of place-based artistic activity needs to acknowledge colonial dispossession (of Indigenous lands) and ask the question whether settler artists might transform through their practice the ways settlers work and think.³ The sensory drawing practice may be seen as an attempt of a revitalization of a Westerner's lost relationship of reciprocity with land by claiming that a place might indeed possess agency or memory that can be respectfully approached through intuition and empathy. In any case, sensory drawing can only be seen as a decolonial praxis if it is embedded in a context that responds to the Truth and Reconciliation Committee of Canada's calls to actions which state, for example, "[...] for Indigenous and non-Indigenous artists to undertake collaborative projects and to produce works that contribute to the reconciliation process."³

The results of the sensing practice do not necessarily render representative in a discernable aesthetic form. The images are vague, sometimes ambiguous, sometimes concrete, while the stroke of the pencil conveys a vivid expressiveness. The drawings are created with eyes closed, and a fragmented mark making represents the outcome of a perceptual activity not an act of physical seeing. As the outcome of a process, the drawings are conceptual in nature. In order to catch the fleeting figuration in my mind's eye, I often note down written descriptions of what I have seen on the back side of the drawings. The emerging images are very different from place to place and from plant to plant. The occurring imagery form patterns or storylines, and I am trying to catch them in their volatileness. For me, sensory drawing is way to connect to the world that is vital and sacred by tapping into an assumed existing fleeting texture. The process requires me to be fully present and to 'be with' whatever appears in the moment of delightful co-presence.

As an immigrant of European descent and uninvited guest, I am grateful to live and work on the traditional territory of the Anishinaabe, Wyandot and Haudenosaunee peoples.

About the Author

Elvira Hufschmid is a queer immigrant artist of European ancestry and a PhD candidate at Queen's University's Cultural Studies program, Kingston, ON. In her research, she applies an Aesthetic Transformation strategy to investigate settler narratives of colonial land enclosure. In 2020/21 and as a Doctoral Research Fellow at the Agnes Etherington Art Centre, she facilitated a series of interdisciplinary workshops and conversations between artists and physicists, titled 'Understanding the World through Aesthetics', about the ways in which metaphor acts as a common code between the disciplines. Elvira has an extensive place-based conceptual drawing practice that emerges from a deeply felt (inter)-relationship with the living earth and a sensory approach of communicating with the other-than-human world. She holds an MFA from the San Francisco Art Institute, US, and taught as a Visiting Artist at Emily Carr University of Art and Design, Vancouver, BC, and as a Guest Professor for 'Artistic Transformation Processes' at the Berlin University of the Arts, Germany. For the 2022 term, she will engage in a Teaching Fellowship in the Film and Media Department at Queen's University, Kingston, ON.

1. The term 'other-than-human' stems from a translation of the Ojibwe concept of 'mnidoo' into English by the Western Anthropologist Alfred I. Hallowell, originally depicting other-than-human persons, such as thunder beings. See Manning, Dolleen Tisawii'ashii. "Mnidoo-Worlding: Merleau-Ponty and Anishinaabe Philosophical Translations." Electronic Thesis and Dissertation Repository, University of Western Ontario, 2017, 17. See also Hallowell, A. Irving. "Ojibwa Ontology, Behavior, and World View." In *Teachings from the American Earth: Indian Religion and Philosophy*, ed. by Dennis Tedlock and Barbara Tedlock, 141-178. New York: Liveright, 1975.

2. See Price, Jill. "When Research in a Research-Creation PhD Discourages Further Research or Creation in Academic Spheres and the Public Realm." Paper presented at the Universities Art Association of Canada conference, 2020. Accessed July 6, 2021.
http://www.academia.edu/44803459/When_Research_in_a_Research_Creation_PhD_Discourages_Further_Research_or_Creation

3. "83. We call upon the Canada Council for the Arts to establish, as a funding priority, a strategy for Indigenous and non-Indigenous artists to undertake collaborative projects and produce works that contribute to the reconciliation process." In TRC. *Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada: Calls to Action*. Winnipeg: Depository Services Program (Canada), 2015, 9. Accessed July 6, 2021.
https://trc.ca/assets/pdf/Calls_to_Action_English2.pdf