Drawing is Seeing

Margaret Rew, Masters in Architecture Applicant
Turned off by the vacant tourism of the street level in Florence, I turned my attention upwards. The ancient buildings of Florence fit together, framing one another as they frame our experience of the city. Each alley was an abstraction, the negative space was complex and ancient and essential. I was mesmerized.
Experimenting with forms and impressions. The ceiling fit into the heads of the crowded room. I often find myself thinking of such silly things - and carry my sketchbook everywhere just in case.

John Singer Sargent was a master. He is very slick - he focuses your attention on the glamour of his figures and the beauty of his brush-stroke by using the space behind them to heighten drama. I was attempting to paint in his style when frustration led me to this study. He hides his subtle genius in torrent greys scraped from old palettes and throws drama to the corner of the room.
These pages were drawn during a visit to the Uffizi in Florence. I had just read Erle Loran’s *Cezanne’s Composition: Analysis of His Form with Diagrams and Photographs of His Motifs*. That idea of systematic visual analysis led to these informal studies deconstructing the meaning of the masterworks at the Uffizi. Trying to rationalize the diagrams rather than sketch the details was a deeper kind of looking, zoomed out with big questions.
Light occupies a figure. Stark contrasts between highlight and shadow allowed me to exaggerate the relationship and heighten the drama of the figure in space. The figures fit together and refer to one another, one highlight echoing the next.

It was about developing this instinct for gesture - editing to communicate a body clearly and assertively. Gesture is instincts and movement, accessing the ephemeral nature of the thing. Pen to paper, communicating the inner nature of a figure. Scant lines tell a different kind of information, a deeper truth from form.
The radius rotates around the ulna, setting perfectly up against the odd compilation of tiny bones that make up our wrists. Our bodies were made up of millions of little structures that are efficient and exactly functional even though they can be as odd-looking as a pelvis. Structural and formal, essential and eventually detrimental. Bone fitting to bone, a mandatory efficiency.
These drawings were almost cathartic. Trace the body that you see. Just look. Be attentive. And respectful. Graze the skin with that ballpoint pen. Build up the form - don’t ignore shadows. Draw exactly what you see. Which, of course, means to edit what you see.

His feet tip over towards us. A body lying diagonally away teeters gently on the edge of gravity. Physical, taking up space but ungrounded so that he takes on more than the sheet beneath him and lifts off the page.
With paint I could explore the boldness of an angle or a muscle without sacrificing the subtlety of the surface of the body. In this red/green man I pushed, wanting to declare his existence within the space of the chair. I pushed his head off of the canvas, allowing the neck to take over as it led into the chin. I carved his shoulders out of a deep ultramarine blue that led down his arms to angular fingers. The arms contain and strengthen the body, their potential energy becomes the subject of the painting. The curtain in the foreground tips backward into the platform of his stomach, which tips up against the angle of that blue elbow. The structure is in place, held around the the solidity of the fingers of his right hand ruling the arm of the chair.

The assignment for this painting was to paint the figure in an expressive way. It became an expression not of emotion but of the structure of the body and this one body's immutable strength.
Bold lines turn into bold shapes. A bold model struts her bold body. Paint follows her gesture and brings the lines of her shoulder into the strength of her chest. The elbow rests and anchors the composition - the knee echoes, while the hips flatten into the next thigh and push off the page. Her limbs fit together in her frame on the page.

Paint flows from one angle to another, defining a shape rather than a line. Shapes that are fluid, pieces of a body rolling into one another, over the crevices and mounds that define them.
Faces are dominated by eyes and lips and noses, but they are not made of eyes and lips and noses as Picasso lets you think. They are made of soft skin draped over cheekbones and jawbones and baby fat. Follow the shape of a cheek and you know her.

An eyebrow fits into the bridge of a nose. The space beneath the brow is just a cavity that creates the shadow but that becomes structure - visual structure.

It is the shadows that make the faces that we know so well - to know how the arch of an eyebrow fits the bridge of a nose on a familiar face. At first looking scientifically to remember what is there and then abstractly to remember the looking.
"Memory is redundant - it repeats signs so that the city can begin to exist" - Italo Calvino, Invisible Cities

I wanted to show the world how I saw that city, Florence. I wanted to show its bleak arcades and darkened doorways as the empty psychological landscapes of deChirico. This emptiness was not greeted by a heavy bright blue sky, it was cradled in the contemplation of a skyline. The pieces of facade and glimpses of gable are fragments of a memory of place.
Walk by the south side of that ancient dome that Brunelleschi conquered, looking towards the Arno is a block of tiny buildings lining the oversized square. Walk along on your way to the Bargello and, if you're looking, you'll see the crack in the block that is Via dello Studio. The street is dark and you can't see Zecchi's or Mangiarino until you wander inside.

The city is layers, folding its best secrets within cracks and crannies, beneath facades of disuse.

Framing angles of an ancient street

Via Dello Studio (2010), oil on canvas, 12 x 18"
I was interested in rationality, and the structuring of a painting around a series of decisions. What of art is arbitrary? What kinds of aesthetic values do we employ when we make anything at all? I was, and still am, interested in the systems that artists use to generate their work. A system in theory, is more dependable and more rational than no system.

Through my borderline obsessive use of the golden ratio in this painting, I found myself to be entirely aware of the arbitrary and instinctive nature of my decision-making. I was sparked by Alberti’s Spedale degli Innocenti, where simple perfect arcades hold up simple perfect windows and embrace a simple empty space that is now casually filled with flats and recycling bins.

But my canvas was not a building, so though it was an elevation I could control much more than the facade, and my decisions could be ghosts of one another. The spheres of my arches could bounce lightly on the horizon line and my landscape could be an impossible forest of Leonardo. and my shadows could reflect not the negative space of light, but instead a space that might have been. This experiment resulted in a silly building that is only a facade and a sightline, but the restrictions that I placed on myself liberated my hand and my eye, and to me Alberti will never be the same.
Art for Breakfast was conceived as a sister site to the daily music blog One Song Today (onesongtoday.com). The idea is to let you into one piece of art every day with a little bit of context and honest description. Our contributors write about whatever art moves them, from ancient to contemporary; iconic to obscure.

For now, I do most of the writing myself and find contributors whenever I can. It has been a great way to force myself to sit down and think about the work at hand; bringing each out of an isolated art context so that they can be accessed for their essential qualities of beauty, truth, and humanity. I’ve always had a problem with the way art has a tendency to segregate itself from others - Art for Breakfast is my small protest against that.
The sea is on fire. Yellow, red, orange; color churns and spits. The sky spills into the ocean, the ship lifted and tossed. On the left, a storm builds, a fist ready to pound. Above the storm a dirty red smoke rises, as if the blue grey were not a storm but water on an angry furnace. And in the bottom right of the canvas, a shackled foot gracefully and terribly prepares to sink.

Joseph Mallord William Turner (English, 1775-1851) originally intended this painting to be titled “Slavers Throwing Overboard the Dead and Dying, Typhoon Coming On.” It was painted in 1840 response to an incident in 1781 when an illness on the slave ship Zong caused the slavers to throw sick slaves overboard to their deaths, as their insurance covered the “losses at sea” and not losses from illness. The painting was sold to an abolitionist from Boston, where it has remained at the MFA Boston since 1899.

The painting is brighter and lighter than I remembered it. The right half of the canvas is almost a buttercream yellow. That perverse color moves clockwise over the canvas, caressing the drowning foot, continuing to mirror the sunset and finally rushing upwards again to join in the typhoon. Is that putrid buttercream simply formal, so that the canvas comes together in a cohesive whole? To think that in depicting horror, such things could even matter.

Murky brown and mud red, small upward strokes poke out of the gentle curve between breaking waves. The hands are very small, almost could be a texture in the stormy sea. But they have fingers.

This painting is scary. It is fairly small, but it hits you like a truck. It captures the violence of nature, both of humans and of the sea, in a revolting way. It is hot and messy and unforgiving. The light doesn’t make sense, it seems to release the colors of heaven and hell rather than those of the sea. A triumph in matching the terror of a moment.
In most of the panels you cannot see her through the blur. She is a ghost. And her ghost defines the materiality of these virtual doors and windows. She gives substance to the imaginary spaces by leaping through them.

Planes in space. The marks seem random, her body teeters exactly between on side and another, bisected. But they are only as random as the placement of a person in an empty room, which is never random. Then that person moves around the space. Start to move, and you start to push the boundaries. Spend time on the floor. See the corners. Live close to the wall, outside the center. The corners of our rooms so often are forgotten. Woodman makes us aware of these boundaries of rooms, and of our expected behavior. Do we ever really use the spaces that we occupy?

I discovered Francesca Woodman this spring. I saw an image and read an article and, inspired, travelled to see her solo exhibition at the Guggenheim. Woodman graduated from RISD with the prospect of a promising career just before she committed suicide at the age of 22. The medium of photography will never know what might have been. What it gained was a photographer of eternal youth.

Woodman worked mostly with self portraits during her six year career, often bending and breaking and juxtaposing our expectations of photography, exposing her own vulnerable nature. She speaks perfectly and exactly to the terror and impatience of adolescence. She is an art student whose short career has been the focus of several large retrospectives, and whose work has plucked at the hearts of millions.

But I don’t need to validate her. The work speaks for itself. It speaks to me. I see her shapes and I feel the marks of her sharpie and I know her. I know her space and her shadow and her movement. She is the artist that lives inside me – surely she lives inside you, too. Jessica Brier, a young curatorial assistant who worked on her retrospective at SFMoMA, says that younger viewers seem to “intuitively understand the work.” Intuitively. Innately, unconsciously, viscerally.
What you see is cow bladder, stretched and sewn into drywall with surgical thread. Behind that, set back into the wall, you can just see delicate pairs of shoes – the shoes of women who have disappeared in Colombia. From far away the composition looks like photographs, carefully pinned. Walking closer, the details of the shoes do not become clearer, as they should, but instead start to blur, as if you were zooming in on an image far past its resolution. Instead, you see the sinewy surface of the cow bladder, and the careful stitching of the thread into drywall. The shoes are hidden, out of reach.

“When a person disappears, everything becomes impregnated with that person’s presence. Every single object as well as every space becomes a reminder of absence, as if absence were more important than presence.”

– Doris Salcedo, Institute of Contemporary Art/ Boston Wall Text

Doris Salcedo is an internationally renowned contemporary artist from Bogota, Colombia. Since the eighties she has been making sculptures and installations addressing the political violence in her country. Salcedo looks to show the depth within the universal and incredibly personal nature of loss and mourning through sculptures and installations. The artist often works with objects that once belonged to someone who disappeared, and affects them so that the object reflects its intangible history. Atrabiliarios is a series that Salcedo created after a rise in abductions by a controlling government in the early nineties.

Salcedo’s work operates outside the realm of talk. It peddles the charged silence that death deserves. This is the silence in which families were forced to grieve, fearing another attack on their family.

There is something beautiful and tragic about shoes. Everyone wears shoes. These shoes are small, delicate – a dancer’s shoes. Yet the details are obscured, access definitively and forever denied. That frustration mimicks, for just a moment, the ache that comes with loss.
The brown paper curls over itself – the crest of a wave. The corners guide up to the ceiling, slowly. The shadows lay flat beneath the silent, hovering cradle. The surface is imperfect, you can determine how the piece was made if you’d like. You can just barely see the ghost of the balloon in its form before the structure popped and collapsed.

The pieces above are studioworks found in Hesse’s studio after she died. They functioned almost as three dimensional sketches through which she played with new ideas and shapes. They are made of layers of paper and cheesecloth and thus are incredibly delicate – a theme for Hesse. The paper has changed color slightly – Hesse wanted her materials to react to their environments and to change with time.

Eva Hesse was an incredibly influential post-minimalist artist from the 1960s. She had a tragically short career – she died at the age of 34 of a brain tumor. Her work lacks any signifiers for your brain to categorize and recognize. Hesse was accessing new elemental shapes through a simplistic playing – finding the essence and the humanity in the new industrial materials like latex and fiberglass.

The pieces have an aura. They are individual, unique, human. I stood in a room with these works for an hour and a half at a time every shift during her solo show at the ICA Boston last fall. At first I hated it – I found the work frustratingly inaccessible and silent, no one seemed to be able to engage. But then I caught myself staring at them. Their subtlety had crept up on me – I was beginning to memorize their sneaky forms. A paper mache bowl was a cloud one day and a cave the next. The forms were so simple, perhaps accidental, but it is this very suspect of accident that suspends belief.

Soft, floating, hovering, unassuming. Hate them, but they will not hate you back. They will pull you in if you let them. Soft whites, delicate human texture, marks of the accident of making. Imperfect but pure. They are untouchable, they are so delicate that they cannot be harmed. They are radical, but so simple and so mortal. They are a contradiction. They are the human contradiction.
"Experimental Geography," a term coined by artist/geographer Trevor Paglen in 2002, is a hybridized discipline exploring humanity’s engagement with the Earth’s surface. The subject of a traveling exhibition organized by iCI (Independent Curators International), and curated by Nato Thompson, experimental geography has, as a method, become a tool for exploring the distinctions between geographical study and artistic experience of the Earth, as well as the juncture where the two realms collide and, possibly, make a new field altogether.

Currently on view at the Carnegie Mellon University’s Miller Gallery in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, Experimental Geography exhibits works ranging from interactive media, to sound, to video, to cartography, created by 19 artists or artist teams from seven countries, including USA. The increasing democratization of technology, including Geographic Information Systems (GIS), Global Positioning Systems (GPS), and Google Maps, has proved a fruitful ground for the bottom-up mobilization of mapmaking tools. Particularly illuminating is Jeffrey Warren’s Armsflow, which charts the global arms transactions from 1950-2006, implicating 228 government entities. Similarly, Lize Mogel (co-editor of An Atlas of Radical Cartography) and Dario Azzellini’s map The Privatization of War: Colombia as Laboratory and Iraq as Large-Scale Application (2007-2008) details the monetary expenses by world governments on private military contractors.

The introduction of geo-spatial relationships into data organization and visualization updates the influential, Deleuzian networks of Mark Lombardi’s drawings from the 1990s, which intricately chartered flows of capital. Similar to Lombardi, many of the artists in the exhibition make use of a narrative framework to help structure their investigations. The New York-based Center for Urban Pedagogy (CUP), working with high school students, produced Garbage Problems (2002-08), which, through a series of maps, interviews, and video, draws attention to...

Maps are the visual representation of research. Saturated with information, they connect people visually to the spaces they inhabit. Their visual nature allows them to communicate complex ideas and messages in a way that people can process and relate to. Maps provide context. They are an interface between people and their world. They are rife with power relations, making choices for the public about what places are important and what are not. They structure our perception of our world. Maps can question and create new spaces by recycling forgotten information into new knowledge. Because of those powerful qualities, maps are an effective tool for artists looking to question the status quo in our relationship with the spaces they inhabit.

I threw myself into the work of contemporary artists utilizing cartography as a medium. I found that this work was often socially motivated and lived outside of our conventional understanding of the role of the artist. I was especially interested in the map as a creator of new knowledge, opening doors for artists to push into new spheres of influence in our society.

I continue to be drawn to art and architecture that creates circumstances within which new knowledge and meaning continue to surface long after the artist has parted with the project.
In this paper I explore the rewriting of histories, specifically colonial histories, using art historical tools to examine colonial photographs. Critically, photography is a malleable medium that lends itself to documentary and aesthetic analysis, qualities that give us particular insight into the social paradigms of colonial cultures. The methodological approach to the analysis of a historical photograph is an essential aspect of the outcome of the study. This inspection will illustrate how various methodologies can impact the ways that colonial photographs are interpreted. The exercise not only gives insight into the methodologies but also into the malleability of histories over time.

In a small library in the small New England town of Duxbury resides a small box of photographs by Manville Lewis. Mr. Lewis was a rogue missionary in Congo from Boston in the late 19th century who history has since all but forgotten. His photographs are a visual key into his fractious view of the Africans that he was sent to ‘save’. In the vein of Nathan Price of the Poisonwood Bible, Mr. Lewis was not a good missionary. The records are littered with racism and sexism and I will not defend him. But I enjoyed pinning together his history, deciphering his handwriting, and contemplating the new meanings that I was prescribing to the images. I leapt into the heart of a man that I could not like and I carried much of the depth of that exercise into my thesis the following semester.

Revisiting the Other: Rewriting Histories through Colonial Photography
Did the Katoka mission function as a site of cross-cultural exchange? The primary sources at my disposal give particular insight into the missionaries’ perspective through their navigation of interfaces between themselves and the state, and between themselves and the local population. I will ask whether the Africans exercised agency in their exchanges with the Rew. Did the missionaries rely upon that local support to thrive? If so, how did they navigate this interface to cater to African needs? In the end - was the relationship mutually beneficial?

In 1923 my great-grandfather moved his Scottish family to the Belgian Congo to serve as Brethren Missionaries. The mission that he founded was eventually taken over by his son, who continued to run the education and humanitarian functions of the mission through Independence in 1960 and the violent unrest that followed. Over the years the mission thrived, and in the late ’90s my great uncle William turned it over to local leadership, under whom it has continued to be a force of education and peace in the region.

I spent my political science career at Tufts thinking about the biggest of problems. Geopolitical balance, systems of democracy, the seemingly inevitable crush of corruption in African political economies. As that career came to a close, I sought a way to reconcile those huge ideas with my local perceptions of humanity. I situated that challenge within the reconciliation of my own family history with the embattled reputation of European missionaries in 20th century Africa.
Curating a life after school

Curate is a overused word in the art world today. Everyone is a curator, a chooser, a designer. But to curate isn't just to pick - it's a calculated decision weighing positives and negatives, choosing not just a path but its implications. At least that's the idea - to be conscious of these larger forces so that each decision is a result of your own intelligently formed opinions.

I graduated from Tufts. I wanted to keep thinking, keep learning, keep exposing myself to interesting people and environments where my questions could flourish. Just as I constructed a diverse program of study for myself at Tufts, I began to build my life after school. I worked for six months at the Institute of Contemporary Art/ Boston on the gallery floor, talking to people about the exhibitions and absorbing as much as I could about contemporary art scene. I developed complex relationships with the work on view. I learned to look in a more elemental way. Time will do that. I became intimately acquainted with the way people navigated through that space. I watched as subtle variations in the placement of sculptures pulled visitors into the corner of a room, or how a bench pushed them to circumnavigate an exhibition that before had felt like a hallway.

I took the patient passion I had established at the ICA and moved on to become a gallery director at Howard Yezerski Gallery in Boston's South End. Howard is a very well respected player in the Boston contemporary art world with a roster of 40 excellent artists. Every day is different - I engage with the artists in each show, ordering their cards and write our press releases. I manage all outgoing brand design - including our website, our social media, our envelopes and our invoices. My 'taste' has developed into something more complex - I recognize elements that make various pieces saleable, challenging, weird, or powerful. The job has shown me the complex deluge of forces that inform success in the art world - and in the real world.
I have tried to access that place where aesthetics, history, reality and space meet. I have tried to draw it, to read it, to write it - but it evades me. I can feel the slippery thing just beyond my grasp in a line of Calvino or in the depths of political theory and I reach for it; but my tools are not yet sharp, and my eyes are not yet tuned to the right places. I hope to use architecture school to leap into a life-long career tracing the sinewy forms of that place and pinning its shadowy truths to that eternal corkboard of the concrete.