

Recording Edges: Contour Drawing

"I started out with the wire, and I couldn't even do that. I wasn't focusing. A lot of us feel not quite sure of what we're doing, the way we do with anything new."

—STUDENT PUSHPA KAPUR

Try out an adventurous "let's see what happens" attitude in approaching the contour exercises that lie ahead. Here, at the very beginning, you aren't expected to know anything and you can't fail. There's no competition involved. You're learning to draw, a specific, accessible skill, not searching for talent. Your final drawing is simply a record of your learning process.

EXERCISE: WIRE DRAWING

Read these directions through once completely, before you begin to draw. After that, don't read and draw at the same time; to remind yourself of the exercise sequence, just refer to the following

Summary of Essentials:

- Use pencil for drawing #1.
- Use pen for drawings #2 and #3.
- Slow down and observe carefully.
- Use one, slowly executed, continuous dark line.
- Record every twist and turn in the wire.
- Change the shape of your wire after each drawing.

1 Place your open pad in front of you. Remove a piece of drawing paper and put it on the table next to your pad (to the left for righties, to the right for lefties).

2 With scissors, cut a 15" piece of wire from the roll and bend it into a shape that appeals to you, leaving the ends loose. If you've made something that sticks way up, flatten it down a little.

3 Put your wire on the loose paper next to your pad to see your wire more clearly. Move the wire around until you find a view that you can settle on. You're going to draw on the pad. Tilt the pad if it feels more comfortable that way.

4 Look at your wire. You don't have to memorize the shape, just begin the process of observation, taking in bends and bumps from one end to the other.

5 Hold your pencil naturally, as you would when writing. Put your pencil point on the paper at a spot that will correspond to one end of your wire. Once your pencil point touches the paper, don't lift it until you've recorded the entire wire, from end to end.

6 Slowly, very slowly, begin to record what you see—every change, every bend in the wire, with one dark, continuous line. If you're a speed demon who charges through intersections you'll have a challenge here. The slower you go, the more you'll benefit.

7 Look back and forth between pencil and wire as you work, keeping your pencil on the paper at all times, without lifting it. Proceed v-e-r-r-y slowly. You are not going to erase, so make your marks show. Press down and watch a nice dark line emerge from your pencil point. Record the wire until you reach the end.

8 Do at least two more drawings—but use your black pen this time. Maintain a slow pace. Eraser is forbidden—so be bold!

Reminder: Now that you've read the exercise instructions, begin to draw. So you can draw without reading, refer to the **Summary of Essentials** (left).

RE-VIEW YOUR WIRE DRAWING

One myth about artists is that creativity flows from their fingertips. However, art flows principally from the artist's mind, and numerous techniques are used to improve the work. One of the most fundamental tricks of the trade is simply stepping back to evaluate work, and then developing a strategy for further action. Artwork is routinely re-viewed—literally, viewed again and again—in every creative field; any experienced artist will confirm that time-honored strategy. So, put on an artist's beret, if it gets you more in the mood, and let's re-view.

GAINING PERSPECTIVE ON YOUR DRAWING

Stand up and look down at your drawings. Do they look somewhat different from that distance and perspective?

Did you:

- *Slow down (no speed demons here) and observe carefully?*
- *Record what you saw as specifically (no generalities) as you could?*
- *Make continuous, dark, firm imprints (no sketchy, light, or broken lines) with your pencil and pen?*

Did you fulfill any of the above objectives? If you did, then fulfill one more: Admit it if you did *anything* right. Out loud is good! That last objective is the single most important one.

Over the years, the wire-drawing exercise has shown me that each person, given a choice of thousands of possibilities, will tend to replicate certain shapes, with variations. While I can't tell you what the shapes mean, they do indicate personal aesthetic preferences, unique to each of us, and as individual as our thumbprint. How do you like *your* own lines? If they are continuous and firm, they will be strong, definite, confident-looking, rhythmic—and handsome.

Contour drawing has its own way of communicating, comparable to a dialect. As you progress through these pages, you'll see that different qualities are conveyed by different types of line, similar to nuances in speaking. If you hear muffled, hesitant speech, the speaker may appear confused or shy, reluctant to communicate. With drawing, pen lines may seem more confident than pencil lines because they show up more boldly. If they are relatively fluid and unbroken, they're like confident speakers—those who express themselves fluently, self-assuredly.



When you begin to evaluate your work constructively, you're going to be less afraid of mistakes. Once you learn more about technique and can identify what doesn't work, you can take an active part in improving your drawing, rather than being a passive onlooker when it comes to fixing problems.

If you didn't fulfill the objective of the above exercise but you understand why, wait a day and try again. Lots of us find it hard to slow down the first time. Beginners often associate a fast, sketchy approach with the ability to draw well, and they equate slowness with incompetence. Sketches improve after we learn to slow down and observe with care and precision. When you allow yourself time to look, you give yourself time to learn.

Consider taking a break then starting again, once you've digested this much. A break is an art sorbet; it refreshes you between drawing courses.

Once you've started to observe closely, record carefully, and appreciate the quality of line that emerges from contour drawing, you're ready to move to the next step. But be sure to keep your wire drawings and all your drawings from now on. We'll use them for an important exercise at the very end.

Looking at these wire drawings of fellow beginners, do you see differences among them—a repetition of certain shapes by each individual—long lines, curled ones, loops, angles? Often there is a consistency of shapes on a page that looks something like handwriting. Do you see that on your page?

STUDENT DRAWINGS,
FROM LEFT, BY BARBARA
KOPS, ANNE BALLANTYNE,
SANDY FITZMAURICE.

Recording Shapes Upside Down

No, you don't have to stand on your head to do the next exercise! Copy the image on this page, then later, the one on page 18, just as they are, upside down; if you turn them right side up, it will put you at a disadvantage. These images are already exaggerated and somewhat goofy, so don't be concerned if you make them look strange or out of proportion. They already are. In fact, you'll probably improve them.

Avoid identifying parts of the image in words. Just imagine what you see as made of wire. Think *wire* if it keeps your mind away from other words. Don't be concerned if what you produce is larger or smaller than the original. Any scale will do. If you happen to run off the page, it means your concentration is focused on line, which is fine. Forget about proportion, because you don't have the tools to deal with that yet. Since the original drawing is already out of proportion, yours will be too. Thinner, fatter, longer, smaller, or missing some line is fine.

Sustain your firm, slow line. Stay with "slow and steady"; it wins the race for this exercise. You'll build up necessary understanding. Take time to develop a strategy before you begin. You need to lift your pen with this exercise, but only when you want to.

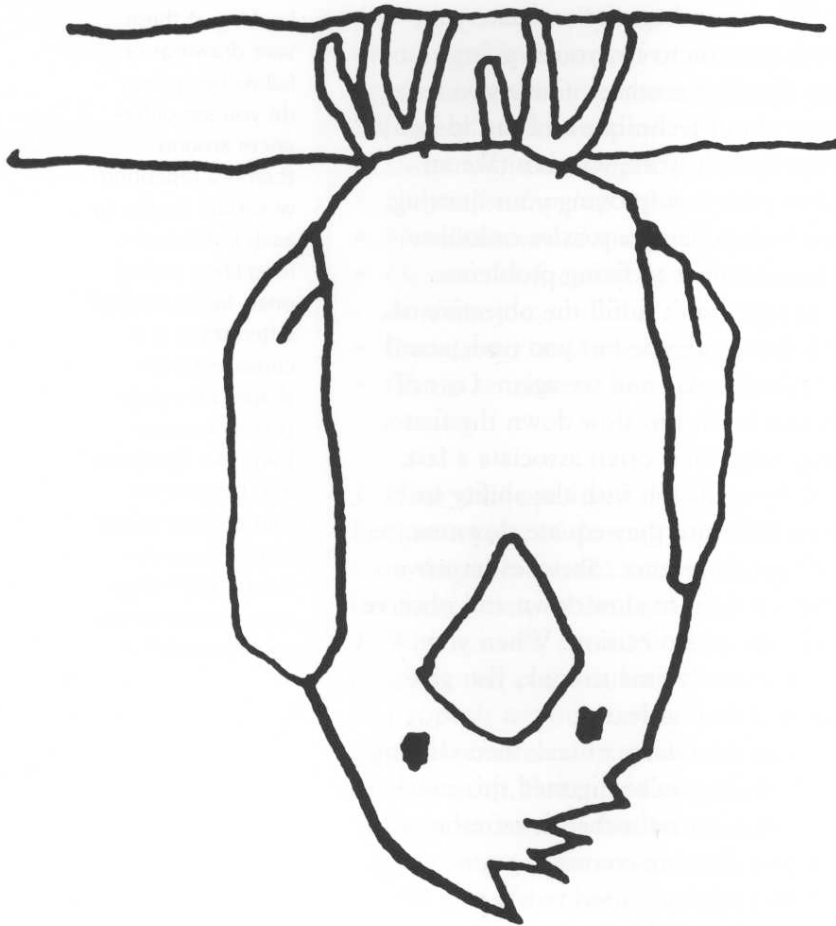
EXERCISE: UPSIDE-DOWN DRAWING

Read the following material through completely before you start to draw the image on this page. Reread the exercise if you need to before copying the image on page 18. Continue working with your pen to help you avoid pale and hesitant lines. To avoid reading while drawing, refer to this

Summary of Essentials:

- *Maintain your slow pace.*
- *Observe carefully.*
- *Record every change you see in the drawings provided.*
- *Use as many long lines as you need.*
- *Lift your pen when it makes sense to do so.*

1 Begin with a long line that starts at the top of the page, and follow it until you reach the end of that line. If you find intersecting lines or ones that



Keep your paper upside down until you finish drawing. If you turn it around before then, you'll defeat the purpose of this exercise. Upside-down drawing is a technique that will help reinforce your growing ability to see and report on shapes and edges.