

Bradford and Ilkley Community College visual arts exhibition Summer Sketchbook John Jones

This is an exhibition of 30 pages taken from a sketch book carried on a three-week holiday.

Sketchbooks have a bad name with artists, and 'sketching' is a word that my generation deplors. It implies a sloppy rendering of things half-heartedly observed ("Oh, it's just a sketch"). 'Drawing' sounds more responsible although 'drawing book' smacks of classrooms of the past. 'Work-book' is too often merely an alias for a scrapbook of colour magazine cuttings and enigmatic phone numbers hastily jotted. So, lacking something better, 'sketchbook' it is.

Drawing was the first thing I was set to do at Art School when I was 16; 'the antique', 'memory', 'anatomy', and then 'life'. Sketchbooks were to be carried everywhere, as obligatory as our gas masks (it was wartime).

In those days I went to Art School by train - the 8 o'clock from Midsomer Norton, and my first sketchbook drawings were of my carriage companions: bowler-hatted Mr Everett, homburg'd Mr Griffiths and trilby'd Mr L, (I can remember the curl of his lip but not his name). They didn't think much of my efforts to draw them and neither did I at the time but their amused disdain saddened me. Always I have been shy of drawing in public. I do it out of the corner of my eye, pretending to be drawing the view from the window or a distant cat. I try to find subjects who are immobilised by what they're doing, musicians playing or people with their mind on a meal. My present drawings are mostly done in restaurants from the shelter of my family and companions. My sketchbooks are cluttered with wine glasses.

Reticence about drawing in public has resulted in my postponing by decades that habit of work which is the artist's justification. Drawing or its equivalent, each day, is to the artist what barre practice and rehearsal are to the ballet dancer; it isn't just exercise, not to do it is to cease to be a dancer.

Picasso, according to Brassai (one knows it's true), drew all the time in some form or another; tracing images on any surface, fiddling with bits of wood and scraps of this and that, tearing and bending and devising. This compulsiveness, this restless

minute-by-minute stream of making is not simply a mannerism to be imitated just because Picasso did it, it's much more. It's the nub of the artist's life and work, his existential identity, the action which defines what it is to be an artist. It isn't a mere trait of temperament but the daily nature of the job, not as a means to an end but an end in itself, the substance of a life in art.

In art, action takes precedence over attitudes of mind. This is not to say that art is anti thinking but rather that action gives rise to the really valuable thoughts and mental attitudes in art, in fact I believe that one can only discover what art might be, and learn what matters in it by making it.

The artist may not be specially endowed. Anyone can be an artist probably; all they have to do is spend 12 hours a day at it all their lives. In this we are all like jugglers and pianists, racing drivers and tennis players and anyone who learns or becomes by doing. What one aspires to is the pen finding its own way over the paper rather as it does when one writes, each letter being formed without conscious deliberation. "At last," Toulouse Lautrec exclaimed happily, "I have forgotten how to draw!"

There is one sense in which the word 'sketch' is tolerable and that is its hint of speed and spontaneity – the quality of faster-than-thought decisions. These are helped by having living, ie fidgeting, subjects which provide just the right amount of frustration to generate the intuitive spark that leaps the gap between past experience and present urgency.

The holiday is not only a real group of days but a metaphor for the neglect of breadwinning and social duties in favour of making art which is how the artist must live all the time.

The result of these opinions which make up the exhibition, what are they? What do they hope to bag, these shots from the hip at prey on the wing?

People seem to want drawings to be more profound than I do. Or they want them to do things which I think they aren't able to do. It's much more appropriate for a drawing to speak about the material presence of its subject than spiritual topics. I do not look for the character of the subject, or try to record mood or atmosphere nor to make a souvenir of the moment, although these are all welcome (perhaps unavoidable) by-products. The drawing is not simply a display or demonstration of manual dexterity; in fact I try to make graceless marks if I think about it at all. As to the relationship between the drawing and its motif, the pen strokes are not twins of lines and tones in nature, as a mirror duplicates things, but it is always possible to point to the visible

parts in nature which give rise to and prompt the marks I make.

In the end these unambitious marks on paper made with little in mind but a guess at the length of a nose or a tilt of an eyebrow do somehow illogically (ie magically and mysteriously) evoke or embody the physicality of something seen, and one can't help finding that interesting though for the life of me I don't know why.

John Jones