
Walt Stanchfield 53

Notes from Walt Stanchfield's Disney Drawing Classes

"A Sense of Story"

by Walt Stanchfield

A SENSE OF STORY

When I was young, studying drawing was difficult. The studios where I worked didn't have life classes, so I copied drawings from anatomy books and illustrations from magazines. In those days the magazines ran a lot of stories that were profusely illustrated by some A-1 artists - Mario Cooper, Harvey Dunne, Peter Helck, Wallace Morgan, etc. But somehow it wasn't jelling. I couldn't seem to connect with the drawings, and with my memory, it was hard to remember what I had copied and why. It wasn't until I got interested in caption cartooning that my study began to make sense. Why? Because I had a story to put over (a gag). Now if I had a difficult or special gesture to draw, I made many sketches and did some research - having a goal. It was that sense of story that fired me up and enabled me to grapple with gestural problems. Anatomy, size relationships and bodily movements seemed to fall into place.

Now that I am conducting some drawing classes, not knowing what each student's personal problem is, I draw on my own experience in hopes it will click with them -- so I encourage them to have a one drawing story in mind as they draw from the model so the essence of that story will project itself into their drawing.

Drawing a figure (or copying one) just to be drawing a figure can be mind-numbing experience. But to draw one that is acting a part in a story can be extremely exhilarating. The feeling can be likened to acting on the stage and/or writing a story.

There is something in us, whether it be biological or spiritual that urges us to
become better "us's"

Author: Me
(who else would invent a word like "us's.")

Using a touch of story in your drawings can quicken them into life -- like zapping them with a magic wand.

There's no need for a whole story plot for a one drawing story. All you need is a character responding characteristically to some real or imagined motivation. It has been said that you can't save a bad story with good animation, but no matter how good a story is, it still takes a series of well gestured drawings to capture the interest and involvement of the audience.

I think the chapter on story in Thomas' and Johnston's book **DISNEY ANIMATION THE ILLUSION OF LIFE** is a reading must for all aspiring artists at Disney's. I don't care how well a person can "draw", if he can't marry his drawing to the story he is in trouble. The time to grasp the importance of the oneness of story and drawing is early on in one's training. An artist must feel comfortable with interpreting a story point, whether it is comical or dramatic.

A drawing class is the perfect setting for experimenting with those requirements. We have models who pose as both comical and dramatic. To merely copy the model with the same emotional involvement as one might copy a recipe is sinful. He/she should "take the ball and run," that is, carry the gesture as far (caricature) as possible, always conscious of a sense of story.

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Call forth a sense of story. Story will bring life to your drawings. Story is everything that is taking place in your drawing, especially the motivation for the gesture, which isn't something that disappears after the pose is struck, it is still there activating the muscles balancing the figure, causing emotions to emanate from the character as he or she plays to the imaginary audience.

Conjure up a sense of story as you draw. Let it swirl around on the page, in and out amongst the lines and shapes, let the story influence every mark you make. And, hey, your drawing will come to life before your very eyes, and to your utter delight.

Recently we enjoyed a session where the students took turns being the model. It's good for them to experience that side of classroom drawing. It also provides many different characters to draw. I urged the students to be aware of the differences: tall, short; thin, plump; male, female; husky, frail, etc. I supplied several props each could choose for their 2 short poses. I encouraged them to "hang loose," that is, draw loosely and expressively; to concentrate on story, rather than on making a photographic copy of the models.

The spirit of this concept caught on like wild fire. As you will see in the several drawings that I remembered to "confiscate," the students called up some reserve energy and went straight to the essence of the story, even adding a little of their own imagination. Check out these fabulous drawings by David Pimentel and Whitney Martin:



David Pimentel





David Pimentel



David Pimentel



Whitney Martin



This is Whitney's
caricature of
David Pimentel





I thought these two drawings by Whitney Martin were worthy of a closer look. Let me help you fully appreciate them with a short, positive critique: notice on the girl drawing how Whitney lifted her left shoulder high because the left hand is on the elevated hip. This lowered the right shoulder and tilted the whole chest area to the right. Then, and this is a wonderful touch, he straightened the neck for balance, drawing it closer to the left shoulder. That's stretching things anatomically, but, boy, is it effective, gesture-wise. There is a powerful straight from the left shoulder out to the elbow, which works strikingly against the curve of the right shoulder and arm which bends around to her front.

With some dynamically forced perspective in the drawing of the "painter, Whitney increased the sensation of space and depth. There's a nice touch where the paint pail seems to be swinging - as if he had just rubbed the brush against it. Usually I recommend something heavy like the pail be hanging straight down to show its weight, but this swinging pail bit is right in line with the story being told, and adds some excitement to an already exciting drawing.

In a recent class session we concentrated on the sensation of depth and space in a drawing. To awaken that sensation I had the students hold one fist close to their face and the other at arm's length. First they looked at them with one eye closed, which produced a 2 dimensional view - no depth. On opening the other eye, suddenly there was space around each fist and between them. It was more than a visual fact - it was a sensation.

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We have lived with the sensation all our lives and it has become so familiar that we take it for granted, meaning we no longer notice it. We no longer experience that fantastic sensation of depth. An artist should be aware of the sensation and use it in his/her drawing. John Aquino placed the model in settings of his own devising to create the feeling of space.

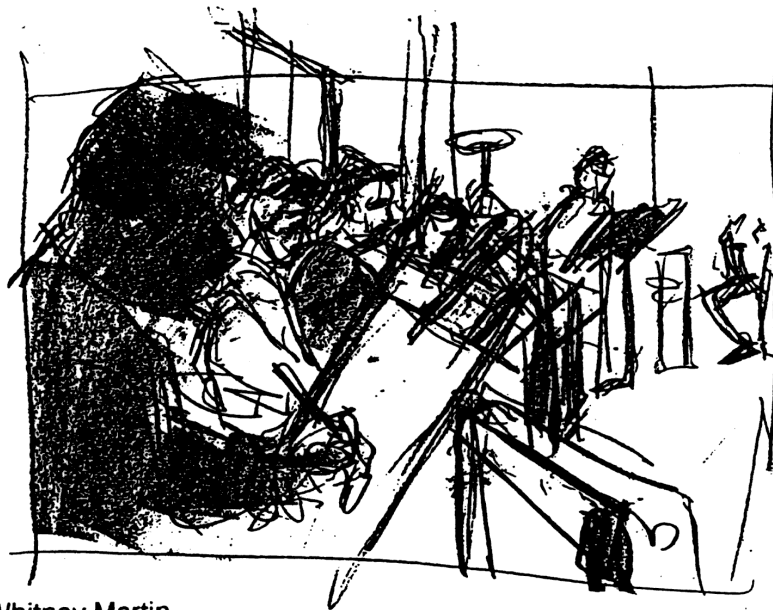


John Aquino

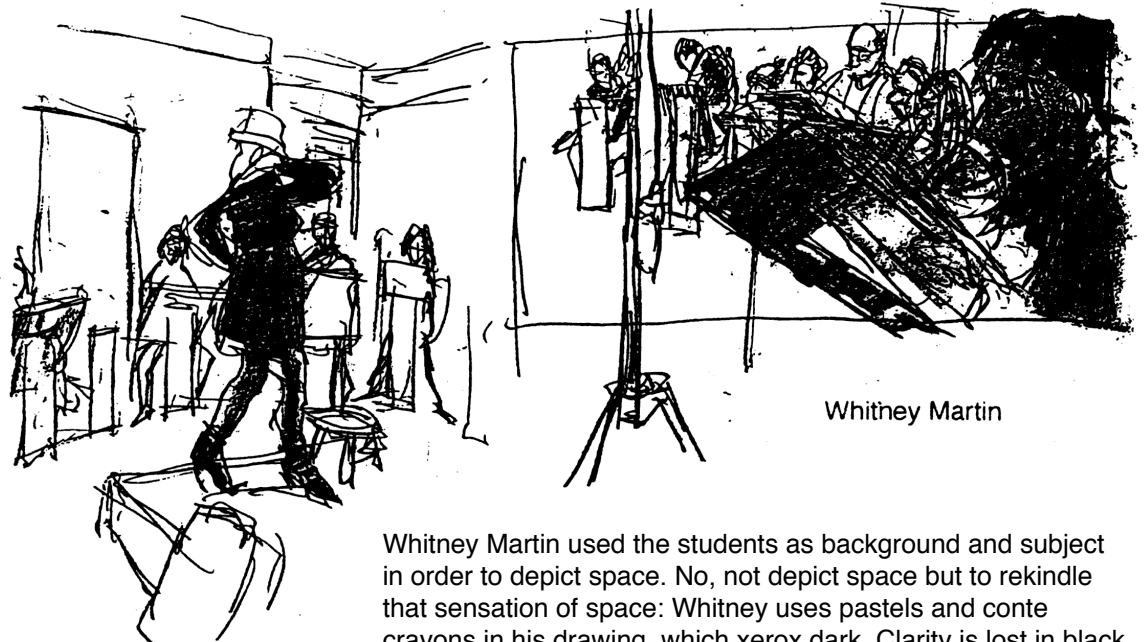




John Aquino



Whitney Martin

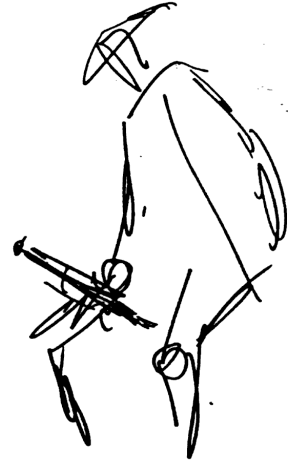


Whitney Martin used the students as background and subject in order to depict space. No, not depict space but to rekindle that sensation of space: Whitney uses pastels and conte crayons in his drawing, which xerox dark. Clarity is lost in black and white, but they are gorgeous in color.

I have a few critiques to show you, and as always, want to explain these are not "how to draw" pointers - they are designed to help awaken your own acting abilities as you draw, based on the premise that all drawing is acting on paper.

The first one, which is a fairly attractive drawing, shows a sea captain who is supposed to be leaning to his right. However the student shifted the hips and legs over to the left, even beyond the axis with the head, which canceled out the lean. Also he drew a straight right arm which would indicate a stretch, but with the right shoulder lowered a stretch would put the hand down below the knees. Even if he is using that arm to support the lean it would bend to suggest the feeling of squash on that side, as I have indicated in my sketch. His left shoulder is high so causes a stretch/tension from shoulder to hip. (I omitted the left arm to feature that stretch). I also corrected the problem of the parallel lower legs, which helped the feeling of spreading the legs apart, which naturally occurs when you want to make room for an object being held there. (No matter how small the object is).

In regard to a sense of story, I picture this sea captain as showing off or acting in front of his crew, letting them know how manly, debonair, masterly, self-confident he is. In other words how captain-like he is - even while just resting. Artist, actor, writer, director, whatever - should have a pretty good idea of the character he is portraying. In the gesture drawing class we have models that suggest a character, but the artist has the opportunity to fine tune it to suit his or her own liking. An artist, other than myself, may have chosen a captain who hates the sea, is sticking by the rail because he's going to be sick; maybe he's gruff and boisterous, a tyrant; maybe he's an inbetweener having his picture taken at a carnival photo booth. (Drawings on next page):



In this next pose the model was opening an umbrella. That would require one shoulder up on the pulling up side, the other shoulder down on the pushing down side. Sounds normal, doesn't it? But you see, this gal is just like the sea captain in that she wants everyone to know she can work this gadget with expertise, élan, grace, and in proper kinesthetic mastery. In other words, she's play acting. She has to bend over to push down on that left arm, and any time you bend over from the waist your fanny protrudes. (Stand up and try it). And though that area may be partly hidden, as in this case, you must draw the feeling that this is happening, that the legs are connected to the hips and the knees are bent for stabilization. If you call forth your sense of kinesthesia, these problems will disappear in a flurry of joyful and expressive drawing:



In this next critique sketch I took some liberties with the pose. The model was leaning on his left elbow to steady the telescope, but I felt viewers should be shown a little more of the interest or urgency the captain is experiencing, so I introduced some angles in the gesture. Angles invariably create tension, and intensifies emotions, in a word, grab the attention of the audience. Also I wanted to show that he was on a ship that was perhaps violently rolling on the high seas, so he had to keep his knees bent to steady himself (sea legs). Stare at each drawing for a minute. The student's drawing will appear glued to the paper, and your eye will stay where you plant it, while my sketch will undulate. You experience a sense of kinesthetic activity and your eye will wander about, following the movement of the gesture:



Rumi wrote, "Let your impressions be the clarity; your pens and pencils be the language that tries to say it."

And, "True seekers keep riding straight through, whereas big, lazy, self-worshipping geese unload their pack animals in a farmyard and say, 'This is far enough.'"

Walt