

**The Value of the Text:  
A Review of *Drawing: Space Form and Expression***

For a couple of months now a debate has been ping ponging back and forth in my head: To text, or not to text. The recent arrival in my mailbox of the newest edition of Entice and Peter's *Drawing: Space Form and Expression* has only served to further muddy the waters of my already murky mind. I have gone the last ten years without requiring that my beginning drawing students purchase a book to accompany the course. Back then, my decision was precipitated by what I perceived as a dearth of truly useful drawing texts that could justify their substantial cost on top of the pricey list of supplies that drawing students already have to absorb. But even more important than this economic consideration was the conviction that I held (and still hold, although perhaps a little less vehemently) that it is fundamentally impossible to learn the intricacies of drawing from a book. The process is too synthetic and too experiential to be effectively broken down into a linear progression of "how to" steps and exercises. Besides, even the best text can't supply the various kinds of one-on-one assessment, encouragement, cajoling, praise, modeling, and even the occasional admonishment that is truly required to break the mental habits and facilitate the perceptual transformations that most students must undergo in order to dramatically improve their drawing ability. I've never been an "anti-textite", but after my first three years of teaching with a text, I dropped it from the supply list because, in the final cost-benefit analysis, a drawing book seemed to me a bit like ginko biloba- an expensive but not really essential supplement whose benefits seemed to be based more in belief than borne out in actual experience.

However a couple of recent events have encouraged me to reconsider my position. The first was attending Cedar Nordby's pleasant and enthusiastic session, *Reading in Foundations: What should our Students Read?* presented at the most recent FATE conference. It reminded me of the many benefits of helping students to build their own personal library of art and design texts. I had been working under the assumption that the serious students would do this anyway, whether or not I required them to purchase a text. However, I am now wondering if my own bookish tendencies may have led me to overestimate my students' interest and initiative, and blinded me to just how chronically bibliophobic many incoming students have become in recent years.

The second event that has put me squarely on the fence is the publication of a book that goes a long way towards addressing many of the misgivings that I have had regarding the usefulness of drawing texts. Weighing in at over 350 pages, the third edition of *Drawing: Space Form and Expression* is one of the most comprehensive publications available to the beginning art student. Most of this heft is due to the over 500 illustrations and the expansion or addition of chapters dealing with important subjects often omitted or glossed in other beginning texts, such as the relationship between drawing and design, abstraction, drawing from the imagination, and figure drawing. Although presumably adding to the expense of the book, the inclusion of all

this additional material has two distinct advantages: It greatly increases its continuing value as a resource for students as they progress to their more advanced studies while offering art programs the student-friendly possibility of using a single text for both beginning and intermediate level courses. Secondly, the breadth of information, the wealth of well-chosen and varied illustrations (the best selection I've yet encountered), and its modular organization makes *Drawing* amenable to "cherry picking" sections out of sequence to suit almost any syllabus. This should appeal to those instructors, such as myself, who have developed a somewhat less linear and conventional curriculum. These additional resources could cut a few hours normally spent prepping in the computer lab, copy room and slide library.

For those who favor a more traditional approach, the third edition retains a logical sequence of material that could serve as the basis of a complete course. The first five chapters opt for the familiar "elements and principles" format to present such concepts as figure/ground, negative space, and spatial clues; reading more like a 2-D design text than a drawing book. *Drawing* hits stride in chapters six and seven where the emphasis shifts away from the analysis of individual elements to focus on processes that are more synthetic and experiential. Tactility, mass, value, line quality and the like are examined in a more contextual and holistic fashion. Here the discussions of topics become shorter, relying on the illustrations to carry more of the burden of instruction.

The real value of *Drawing*, however, lies in chapters eight through fourteen. In these sections the conceptual aspects of drawing come to the fore, tackling such topics as source material, abstraction, troubleshooting, color, and working from the imagination. Because I introduce the figure early, and continually return to it throughout the semester, I really appreciated chapter eleven, which does a respectable job of condensing an entire life-drawing course into just over forty pages. Its inside-out, anatomical approach to the figure would serve as a nice foil to the observational methods that I stress. The book concludes with another forty pages devoted to presenting examples of contemporary artworks and advanced student drawings to offer students inspiration and novel solutions to the types of work commonly assigned in beginning courses.

Structurally, my primary criticism of *Drawing* concerns the ancillary role that gesture drawing is assigned in the early, "developmental" stages of the book. In the first five chapters only twelve pages are devoted to gesture drawing. Initially, this might seem like sufficient coverage, however, all of these discussions emphasize gesture drawing as an end in itself or as separate analytic and preparatory studies. There are no discussions or examples of how gesture can function as the foundation and framework upon which to build more sustained and detailed drawings, a process usually referred to as working general to specific. Now this might seem like a fairly minor or idiosyncratic criticism on my part, and perhaps it is, but in my experience I have found that the ability to work general to specific to be an indispensable skill, and the single most consistent common denominator of successful student work. In contrast I have found that a thorough grasp of the principles of the more mechanical techniques such as using a viewfinder or linear perspective to be a far less reliable indicator of potential student success. So when I compare the twelve-page coverage afforded to gesture to the full twenty-three pages devoted to linear perspective, hopefully I can be excused for briefly lamenting another opportunity lost.

Despite this and a few other quibbles with questions of priority, I found *Drawing* to be well written, only occasionally lapsing into the kind of textbook doublespeak and pedantry that can glaze over even the most attentive reader. Enstice and Peters use language that is accessible and straightforward yet surprisingly nuanced, in the end, striking a good balance between supplying practical demonstrations of technique, while taking the time and effort to delve into drawing's more conceptual dimensions. This same balance is reflected in the book's production values that favor quantity only somewhat over quality. The reproductions are not state of the art, even for textbooks, but they are largish, clear and contrast is consistently good.

For me the biggest surprise was the general thoughtfulness of the drawing exercises that conclude each chapter. This assessment might simply be a function of the fact that my expectations have become so low in this regard. As a rule I have found these sorts of review exercises to be reductive and mechanical assignments, amounting to so much "busy work" that lack the opportunity for sophisticated exploration and synthesis of the chapter's concepts. Certainly a few of *Drawing's* exercises could fall into this category, but many others actually had me taking notes with an eye to adapting them to my course.

So this brings me back to my initial quandary. Do I take my notes from *Drawing* and run, content to continue as I have been, adapting and appropriating from a plethora of sources, or do I take the plunge, and pledge my students and myself to a long-term relationship with Wayne Enstice and Melody Peters? I'm a hard sell, but there is much here to ease my fear of commitment. So for me it has come down to a question of lasting value justifying the immediate expense. If my students corroborate the authors' hopeful intentions for *Drawing*, that it become a "prized resource companion for the serious student", then it will be money well spent. My order is in for this fall. But as for next fall? I'll wait to see how many used copies turn up on the shelves of the local SBX.