

Getting started on drawing outdoors:

Tips and exercises

Introduction

Over the last couple years plein-air sketch-booking has become a key component to my practice. It provides a way to intimately explore, observe and experience the sites and environments that inspire my studio practice.

There are distractions and intrusions that must slip away before I can fully settle into that space and mind-set. There is a balance between finding focus whilst being free of over-consideration. I find that a good primer is a wild-walk to greet the sunrise, somewhere that I need only talk to the birds and the wind. In these quiet, early hours the modern world seeps away – there is nothing more than what is present and tangible in that moment.

With patience – comes serendipitous rewards. Sit long enough in quiet and you merge with the natural world and then it will remerge for you.

What to take

Have a handy pocket-sized sketch kit that you routinely take with you – do not make it too cumbersome or difficult to set-up. I use a hardback A6 sketchbook and bring a small selection of drawing materials in a wrap; I make sure I have a variety of pens and pencils but not the full range I would use at home. I often carry a larger sketchbook in my bag – but it is the A6 that I will pull out first and more frequently. Make sure you have something waterproof to sit on; sometimes my rucksack suffices but I've also an old mac that acts as my groundsheet.

People are watching

It takes time to settle, time to get into the routine, and time to build the confidence to sit down and draw. Other people might be interested in what you are doing – and yet your sketches are the first drafts of an idea and far from representing your finished pieces.

I often sketch in the early morning, or places with few passers-by as a way to find peace and solitude. It has taken many trips to be able to keep sketching with confidence when I feel that someone is looking over my shoulder. Take it as a compliment, I tell myself, they are intrigued in what you are doing.

It can be an opportunity to engage with the public and gain new audiences with a common interest; if they are visiting a stone circle, or hiking across the open moors then they will likely have a connection to that subject as well. Tell them about your wider project and share your socials or website details so they can see the finished work.

Before you start drawing

An open landscape can present endless possibilities; a routine or checklist creates an easy way to start sketching. I often set a routine and soon stray – but it has served its purpose in breaking that blank page and creating the right mind-set.

Putting pencil to paper may not be the best way to start drawing. First, I sit a while, often with a cup of tea. I consciously work through my sensory experiences as a way of forging a deeper, more mindful, connection to the environment.

Here's are some cues and prompts:

- *What has made me stop here?*
 - What is your primary interest – is it the light is playing on the sea? Is it the character of those two cottages huddling together? Is it the gnarled texture of the tree? The way the rivers meet in the valley below?
- *What do I see?*
 - look around for what other points of interest; whether they are objects that connect to your primary focus or tell a story, or subtler aspects of the scene such as points of contrasts, juxtapositions of colours, pleasing geometries.
- *What do I hear?*
 - try focused listening for a couple minutes and tease apart the soundscape. What sounds are close, what are distant. Orientate yourself to the different types of bird and the characteristic of their song, pick out the different pitches in the tune of water as it moves in different ways.
- *What do I smell?*
 - I often feel it's one of our most neglected sense – but the aromas of the natural landscape can paint their own picture of the season, time of day type of environment.
- *What do I feel?*
 - Consider tangible sensations and your emotions - A gentle wind, a soft heat, a tug of nostalgia, a sense of loss, a feeling of calm.

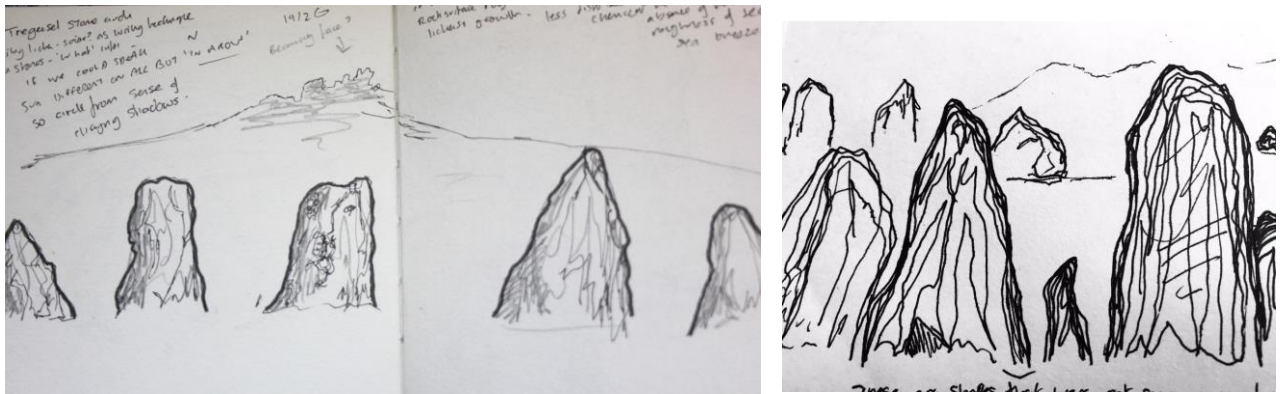
On days when I am particularly restless, I will set myself a timer (for example 5 minutes, 10 minutes) as a way to stop and settle.

Tip: write this list in the cover of your sketchbook so it is easy to refer to. This can just be a thought exercise or you may prefer to jot down some notes.

Pencil to Paper: sketchbook Exercises for the field

Quick-fire sketches

I choose an object of primary interest; an interesting tree, a standing stone, an outcrop of rock. I start by making quick, successive sketches of the shape from different viewpoints. These will be mostly blind contour drawings. This can give exaggerated and 'untrue' shapes but I find that the technique captures the personality and expressive qualities of the subject.



Tips:

- Move around the scene: experiment with angles, move closer or further away, try standing up or crouching down.
- Avoid as much as you can, looking at your page. Instead visual follow the outline of the objects you are drawing, and let your pen follow as if tracing.

Zooming in

I create a page of small details extracted from the scene: this may be the buds on a twig or the texture of a rock surface. I try to look closely at the character of different elements within that environment and draw those shapes a textures separate from the whole.

These details feed into the specific character of the environment. The surface of granite is different to that of schist, the growth pattern of the oak is distinct from the ash. Some elements may inform my studio practice – but it is also a lovely opportunity to familiarise yourself with different aspects of the natural world and learn from it.

Tips:

- Write yourself a checklist of things to spot and draw in the environment, for example – two types of leaves, two seed heads or flowers, two rocks, two insects. Or, you could set yourself the challenge of filling a page up under a list of different titles, for example: decay, geology, litter, wildlife.

Abstracting the landscape: a compositional plan

At some point, I will start forming an idea of how I might paint the subject. I will have identified primary focus, some interesting elements and potential viewpoints. I make compositional thumbnails of the overall, basic geometry and shapes - keeping it very simple. At this stage I do not include details or tonal variations – this is quick, visual brainstorming. The two techniques I will use at this stage are line drawing or notan.

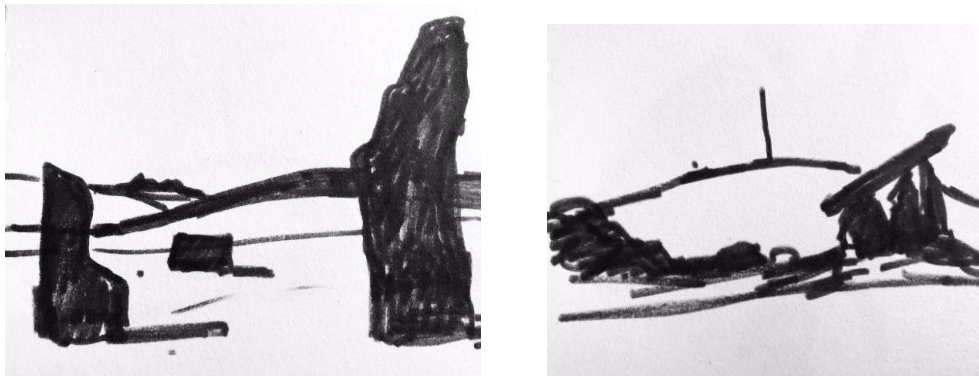
I will include annotations; such as direction of light and wind. I find referencing compass points on the horizon, and any distant features (like the names of tors) useful for when I am working on the painting later.



Above: Examples of quick thumbnails to experiment with composition ideas



Above: examples of annotated sketches developing composition ideas



Examples of notan drawings (black and white, looking at the overall visual design/pattern)

Tips:

- Use your thickest pen or darkest pencil
- Divide the landscape into broad shapes – try and see it as blocks of tone or colour rather than features and objects. Squinting helps with this
- Refine the composition: if it almost works but not quite try something similar but tweaked a little.
- Keep trying new ideas: we are often tempted to draw that first ‘postcard’ view, but moving around and trying a range of ideas can lead to a much more interesting and original piece of artwork.

What is notan?

Notan is different to a tonal study. It uses just two values (a black/white or light/dark). It is useful in looking at the overall design of a composition in its most abstracted form, as a means to judge whether it will work – i.e. is there balance, is it striking, it is pleasing?

I find it a useful tool in quickly abstracting the landscape: extracting the key shapes and patterns that define the geometry of my picture. Use a thick pen, felt-tip, charcoal or the side of a soft pencil.

You may choose to move onto a value study after this as a way of understanding the scene in preparation for a painting or a more detailed drawing. Divide your picture into broad shapes or zones of value – i.e. white, light, mid-tones and darks.

The long draw

It is a satisfying experience to have the dedicated time to sit in one place and draw what it before you – to get lost in the textures and have time to notice quirks and details. This type of drawing will follow after I have explored possible compositions with quick sketches – because I know it will work.

How you approach the long draw very much depends on your personal style – the only advice I can give is that if you have the opportunity to sit and sketch in a peaceful place for half an hour or more then take it and enjoy it.