

• Turning Lines Into Likeness

Sigmund Abeles has shown several generations of artists how to draw with organic lines, logical compositions, and lots of empathy. | **by Bob Bahr**

New York artist Sigmund Abeles paints well and enjoys working with the color of pastels, but drawing is at the core of his art. “It’s what I do,” he says. “It’s not out of habit or because of a lack of imagination to do something else. No—there’s a sort of magic in seeing a jumble of lines take on form and even the likeness of a subject.” At a recent workshop in his studio in Kinderhook, New York, the artist made several big points about the art of drawing—and his own work spoke eloquently on two topics: line and composition. Abeles doesn’t assiduously eschew tone; it shows up in his oil paintings and in certain pastels where the artist is depicting planes rather than lines. But his drawings—even those made with pastel pencils—stress line, and they are always placed on the surface in an intriguing and aesthetically pleasing way to form a strong composition.

One way Abeles coaxes students to consider composition is by having them draw a simple border on the surface, which will act as the boundary for the drawing. It reminds people that they are drawing a picture and that they need to place the subject in the box in a meaningful way. Another way the artist emphasizes composition is by having students start many drawings. Quick drawings of five minutes or less only let a person just begin—and practicing good beginnings is vital. “You must see things

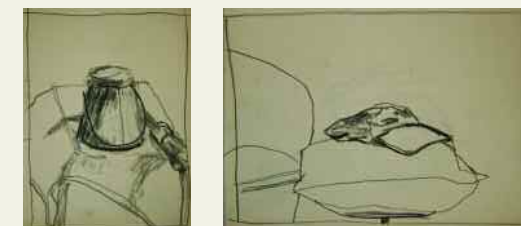
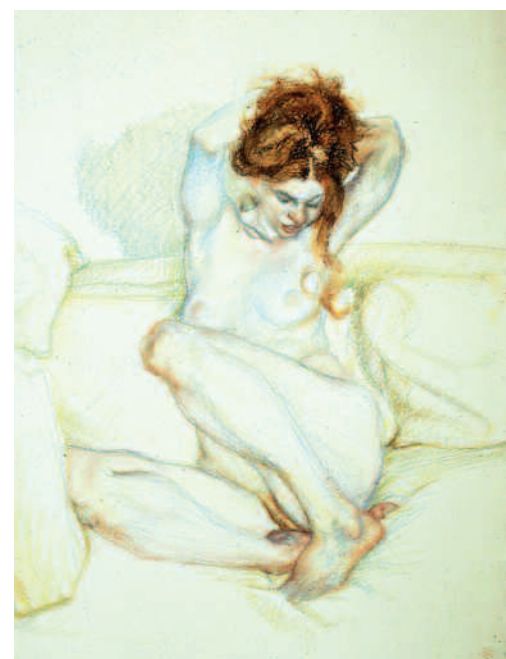


as an ensemble, then work from large to small,” says Abeles. “Big shapes first.” He tells the story of an experiment he tried on a sophomore figure-drawing class some years ago: He purchased a box of crayons and handed one crayon to each student to use to draw from the model. After five minutes, he blew a whistle and had each student move to the next student’s easel. After

**Sometimes I Have
Difficulty Telling
Art From Reality**
2005, etching, 18 x 24.



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Five-Minute Drawings

In a recent workshop, Abeles stressed the importance of good beginnings by having the students execute five-minute drawings of various nearby objects. “This will teach you to compose,” he said. “You must be able to see things as a whole instead of a collection of details. Working for such a short time, you are forced to do that. The quick drawings revealed fundamental problems in each student’s approach, enabling Abeles to address the basic issues. By having each student draw a rectangular border on the paper to delineate the limits of the composition, the instructor reinforced the notion that compositional choices are crucial in these quick sketches.”

Hand With Feathers

“Lighten the top of the thumb and define it,” suggested the artist. “Darken the underside of the hand to give it form. Because the rod holding the feathers is cylindrical, have your marks follow its form.”

Turpentine Pot

“Use more values—a larger range,” commented Abeles. “This is like an underexposed photograph.”

Pillow and Hat

“The success of this drawing would be through the overlap of edges, which shows depth,” said Abeles. “Clarify lines to show the weight of things—perhaps darken the center line on the pillow because it is closest to the viewer. Make sure your lines are closed so objects are complete.”

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT

Thoughtful Rene

2000, pastel on toned paper, 24½ x 21½. Collection Coastal Carolina University, Conway, South Carolina.

Holding Her Hair Up

1997, pastel on paper, 40 x 30. Collection the artist.

Maurice Reflection

1987, charcoal, 20 x 16. Collection D. Phillip.

Mare Pulling Herself Up

2004, pastel on prepared panel, 16 x 16. Collection the artist.



everyone had touched everyone else’s papers, they examined the colorful results. “The strong students weren’t able to bring up the drawings that had weak starts nor could a weaker student ruin a strong start,” Abeles recalls. “The lesson is that the decisions made in the first five minutes of a drawing make the biggest difference.”

Abeles also considers the action or potential action depicted in a composition and adjusts accordingly. When depicting a glove, for instance, an artist should show its opening so the viewer can see how one puts it on. A walking horse needs to have room to walk. A rising horse has to have plenty of ground from which to rise. If a subject is looking in a particular direction, there must be a sufficient amount of surface in the direction he or she is gazing.

To ensure that he is thinking about the big shapes

FROM TOP

Sayida Rising

2003, pastel, 18 x 24. Collection the artist.

Caroline Holder, Ceramist

2000, graphite, 24 x 20. Collection Caroline Holder.



Step 1

Abeles took off his eyeglasses for his first broad sketch of the figure, which he drew loosely with a charcoal pencil attached to a long handle. "I usually have to erase most of this," he said. "But I am just looking for the big shapes first. I'm always worried about having the right proportions of the head to the rest of the body." The artist concentrated on the shoulders, neck, and torso, and how the figure would be placed on the page. "Most poses have an active and a passive side," explained Abeles. "She is looking out the window, so I'm going to put more paper between her and the window—I'm giving room for the action to act." Note how Abeles drew some lines through the model so he could see the structure of the supporting chair.

Step 2

The artist put his glasses back on and began closing up the shapes and cleaning up his construction lines next. He was careful to get the lines of the chair right. "If I get the angles of these lines right, the whole bottom of the drawing will work," said Abeles.

Step 3

Abeles picked up his mahlstick and braced his hand as he drew in details. He began shading areas with hatching and loose scribbles. The artist then began drawing the model's hair. "Draw hair in masses rather than in strands, otherwise it looks like spaghetti," he explained. "I like the hair to flow with the form." While the model took a break, Abeles turned the drawing upside down to work on it from a fresh perspective. "I was working from a mental after-image of the model," the artist commented. "When the after-image started to fade, I had to quit." Abeles hadn't drawn in the model's right eye at this point; he was not concerned with it. "It's there for me," he said. "I'll put it in."

Step 4

Next, the artist drew the model's right eye, sculpted the nose, and emphasized the lines in the chair. Almost all of Abeles' construction lines were erased. The artist decided to strengthen her cheek line, which had been partially obscured by her hair. "I'll echo her cheek line with a sinuous line on the right side of her neck," the artist said. He then shaded the entire socket of her left eye. "There are no highlights in that area," Abeles said. "I want to drop the whole thing back."

ABOVE LEFT

While the model took a break, Abeles worked on the drawing upside down.

ABOVE RIGHT

Abeles used a mahlstick to avoid smudging the image.

THE COMPLETED DRAWING:

Stephanie
2006, charcoal, 24 x 18.
Collection the artist.





and the overall composition, the artist sometimes takes off his eyeglasses and uses a long pencil-holder to keep those first marks loose and in concert with the rest of the picture. Big shapes and accurate proportions are paramount at this stage. As he refines the image, he seeks to connect with the model through close observation. Abeles places much importance on empathy for the subject, describing it as the third step in one's development as an artist. "All sighted persons can and do look—often superficially," he says. "The trained and the sensitive truly see. A few artists empathically feel—they read into the unique personality of the sitter. Deep, meditative observation is the goal." Nevertheless, the artist's drawings are quite honest. (He encourages his students to draw what is there, reminding them of the idiosyncrasies of the sitter's face—and the fact that the model is getting paid to sit.) In the end, the model is honored by the honesty and empathetic observation. And Abeles finishes with a drawing that communicates something human and recognizable about the subject.

The ability of drawings, devoid of the more emotional aspects of color, to unambiguously communicate with the viewer appeals to Abeles. "These works speak to us

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CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT
Hung Yu Ji, Artist
1986, graphite, 15 x 11. Private collection.

Carol Sitting Facing Couch
1987, graphite, 14 $\frac{3}{8}$ x 22 $\frac{1}{4}$. Collection Portland Museum of Art, Portland, Maine.

In Red Slip
1998, pastel on paper, 31 x 41. Collection Marion Fulk.

OPPOSITE PAGE
Max Drawing at the Asia Society
1995, ink, 15 x 11. Collection the artist.

because they are so direct," he says. "Great drawings just completely overwhelm me. Once I saw a drawing by Sargent in a show—it was a baby with a bonnet on—and it was so on, it was so right, I was floored. He really hit it—and he never had kids. It wasn't familiar territory, but he was able to make an iconic image—something comprehensible to all people."

The secret is clearly not in simply careful rendering. Sargent often exaggerated proportions in order to say something crucial yet intangible about his subjects. Egon Schiele let his meandering lines push features and bone structures far beyond their actual appearance to evoke moods. Abeles loosens up in a similar way. Consider the drawings of his son, Max, a subject that he surely knows better than just about any. Some of his portraits of Max edge into the expressive realm of Lucian Freud and that artist's ability to represent the personality, not just the exterior. Drawings speak explicitly, but they are also able to imply much with few lines, as evidenced by Abeles' delicate-yet-strong drawings, engravings, and lithographs.

"Most people walk right past drawings as they are on their way to, say, an Impressionist exhibition," says Abeles. "Maybe drawing is an acquired taste—at least in this society. It is monochromatic, usually. Perhaps it takes a special mindset to be led to it." ❖

About the Artist

Sigmund Abeles earned an M.F.A. from Columbia University, in New York City, and taught for 17 years at the University of New Hampshire, in Durham. The artist also taught classes for several years at the Art Students League of New York, in Manhattan, and he still occasionally offers workshops through that organization. He was the 2004 inductee into the Pastel Society of America's Hall of Fame. Abeles' work is in numerous private and public collections, including those of the Arkansas Arts Center, in Little Rock, Arkansas; The British Museum, in London; Fogg Art Museum at Harvard University, in Cambridge, Massachusetts; The Metropolitan Museum of Art, in New York City; and the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston. He is represented by Thomas Williams Fine Art, in London, England; Hampton III Gallery, in Taylors, South Carolina; and The Cheryl Newby Gallery, on Pawleys Island, South Carolina. For more information on Abeles, visit www.sigmundabeles.net.