

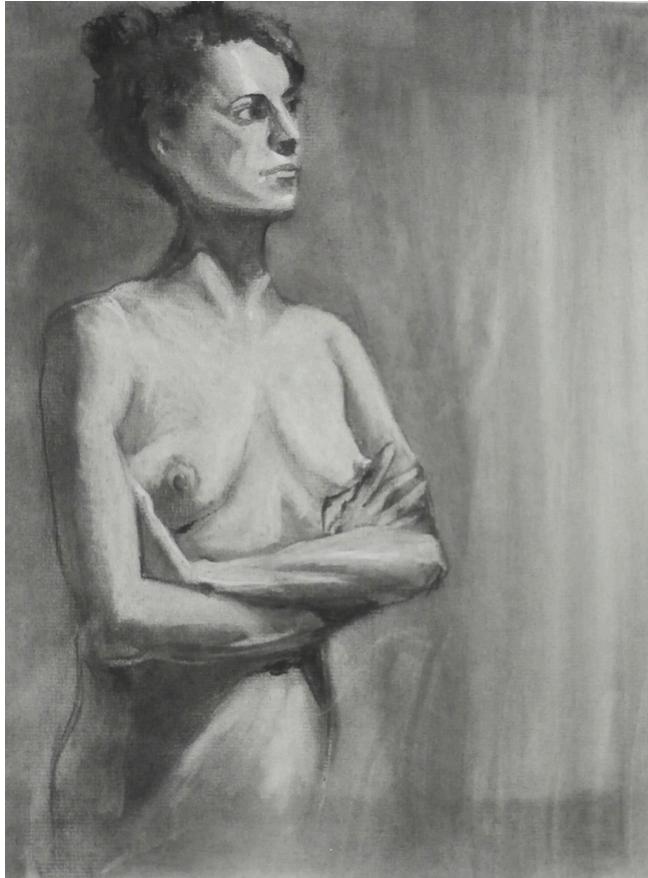
ALL ABOUT CHARCOAL

PART 2 Using the Medium

In this my second article about charcoal I describe my own experiences in discovering and using this lovely medium. There are as many ways to use charcoal as there are artists who create with it, and my approach is only one of a multitude. I hope though that this article's content may help inspire others and perhaps encourage new converts to experiment with the medium to find their own ways and styles.

For many people charcoal is perceived as purely a drawing medium. However there are now many different types and forms available (see All About Charcoal Part 1) and it can be used as a paint, a powder and added to mixed media work etc. I now think about charcoal as having potential for much wider application to create many different types of work.

My own early use of charcoal was indeed simply as a drawing medium which I used to capture the contour and modelling of form when drawing life models. This introduced me to the range of tones that it can create and the huge variety of marks that can be made with it.



I am left handed and one thing I learned early on is to work a charcoal drawing from right to left on my paper to avoid smudging or disturbing marks that I had already completed by accidentally brushing over them with my hand. This sounds pretty obvious but the softness of the medium and its responsiveness to the slightest touch increases the importance of this consideration when drawing.

Tools

I started to use different tools in applying it and I describe a number of these below. Using tools to apply the medium in different ways helped me to extend my vocabulary of marks and tones/effects that I now use in my work.

On the left below is a **Derwent Sprinkler and Grater** - a very useful little device that allows you to literally grate sticks of charcoal to create spots of powder on your paper. This helps you to apply fine layers of material onto your ground that you can then manipulate to create broader areas of tone and generate different textures.

On the right is my homemade **charcoal sachet** that is filled with charcoal powder that I use to rub or knock onto my paper to create tones and textures as the fine powder passes through the material onto the paper. This one is made from an old sock!! This is useful for creating larger toned areas with a variety of texture.



On the left below is the **Nitram Sharpening Bloc** used for sharpening sticks and pencils - a great tool that helps you achieve sharper points so you can create finer linework and detail in your pieces. Below it is a **chamois leather** used to lift charcoal off the paper and cut into charcoal to create highlights when drawing by reduction methods i.e. removing charcoal rather than applying it to the drawing. Next you see the **torchons** that are used to move charcoal around on the paper or blend it. The picture on the right is a **putty rubber** that has been carved to a particular shape for use. Putty rubbers are essential for cutting into charcoal to create highlights and lighter areas, and can also be used to draw into the charcoal to create a large range of textures.



You will need to experiment with the tools to find out what you can achieve. The more you play and practise with them the more you will find ways of developing your application techniques and enhancing your style.

Dance Themes

My experience of life drawing and study of human form led me to develop an interest in the theme of dance, working in a range of mediums including oil, coloured pencils and graphite. I used charcoal to make quick studies to capture dance movements in note form when watching live dance and soon realised it could also help me create atmosphere and movement.



My dance subjects have developed in a number of different ways. Initially I was interested in the line and shapes dancers create and my drawings were slightly more graphic in style. I used images from the internet or stills from dance competitions as my first points of reference.

The above drawings were completed using charcoal pencils then pastel pencils for the highlights on toned paper. I start this type of piece by producing a detailed contour drawing of the subject to define the whole shape and gesture of the dancer. I then build up the charcoal in layers developing the tones and finally add highlights. This type of drawing needs to capture the angles and the gesture/balance of the dancer to ensure it looks realistic.

Another approach focuses on the movement and energy of a dance. The references for this type of piece are usually taken from dance films or videos or from notes taken when watching a live show. These works are much looser in style and are more about atmosphere and movement than definition. In the detail below I am building up the tonal range and shapes in charcoal. In this type of work the way the shapes fit together and the way light hits the models are essential considerations. I loved the shapes created by these dancers in this performance.



In the composition below I captured the movements of the dancers by reviewing a dance video again and again and taking a large number of stills which I then developed as reference drawings.



The dancers are caught mid-move in the dance and the dramatic light and dark tones add to the atmosphere and dynamics of the piece. The charcoal has been applied loosely on a toned paper.

I hope these two articles will provide you with some inspiration for your own charcoal pieces. If you would like to feedback or ask me anything about the content I would love to hear from you. Enjoy your charcoaling folks.

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