

# Exploratory Drawing (Handout)

## introduction

Have you ever done this? You go out to some location to sketch or paint, but it's really hard to settle on what to sketch or paint—there's too much, and you don't have the skills to capture it all in a sketch or painting, so you take a bunch of photos of all the options to "paint from" later. But then, when you get back to the studio, the photos are either not all that exciting, or you can't figure out how to paint them there, either?

Painless planning starts with an idea, while you are still on location (or sometimes before you even go out to collect reference material). You have to get past the intimidation and overwhelm so you can make better choices about what to photograph and how. You have to take off your "tourist glasses" and put on your "artist glasses".

Exploratory drawing is a tool for doing that.

We are NOT

- "making a drawing"
- practicing our drawing skills
- capturing things to show to anyone (or even really to look at them ourselves)

We are using pencil and paper, or pen and paper to get our heads in "artist mode".

Something about tracking your eye movement with pencil and paper makes you notice things and think differently than just looking around for "good subjects for paintings".

## the practice

- work on expendable paper (I usually tuck a few folded sheets of copy paper in the back of my sketchbook; these mostly get thrown away when I get home.)
- use a drawing tool that you find comfortable, but no erasers!
- simply let your eyes and hand explore wherever they want, whatever they find appealing
- the hand tracks the eye movement, but also, the eye cooperates with what the hand finds appealing to draw
- don't overthink where to start, just start
- spend 5-60 seconds on each exploration and then make yourself move on! turn around, shift your focus from big picture to detail or vice versa, change your angle (you can come back to do an actual sketch later, if you want)
- if you feel yourself getting bored or frustrated with a subject, move on
- try to do 10-15 explorations before you settle down to take photos or make sketches

## give it a fair trial

Exploratory drawing will be hard, at first. You will want to “make a drawing”. Keep reminding yourself, this is something you *do* to explore the scene, **not** something you *make* to record the scene. It may help to keep telling yourself “Exploring, not recording.”

- this is a big mental shift
- try multiple times before you decide it's too hard; it takes practice
- 10 explorations is 1-2 minutes will save you time and give you better results when you actually start sketching or photographing
- eventually, you'll be able to do it mentally, in a pinch (please, not while driving!)

## discussion

- What did you learn about what attracted your eye?
  - \* What did you learn about how much various “subjects” appealed to you, once you started drawing? If the subject was complex, were you relieved to move on or did you want to dig in and spend time with it?
  - \* What if you were there to paint a postcard, what options would feel most appealing?
  - \* What if you could take as many photos and make as many sketches as you wanted to create a studio painting? (One!) What would you make the focus of your painting? What photos would you want to take? (Different angles, different light, zoomed in or out, etc.)
  - \* Were there subjects you dismissed as “too difficult”? Is there a way to make them less difficult and still effective (or more effective) as paintings?
  - \* Do you see some possibilities *within* photos for simpler, but very effective paintings?
  - \* What about things to emphasize? Eliminate?

## extension to personal work

Even when you didn’t do this on location, you can often use it to reassess projects you’re working on, or about to work on.

*Too many times, we spend hours trying to figure out how to render something that doesn’t even need to be in the painting! Before we start figuring out how to “reserve those light-colored weeds” or “paint maple trees”, let’s make sure they actually contribute enough to the painting to make that effort worthwhile.*

You want all the elements of the painting to do their job! Ask yourself, *Is this the star of the show? Supporting cast? Extras? Set dressing? Annoying gawkers that need to be escorted off the set by security?*