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Seeing Clearly Through a Charcoal Maze

Erin Johnston

University of Southern Mississippi

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As a child I spent many hours in classrooms unknowingly searching for a means of self-expression.

Seeing Clearly Through a Charcoal Maze

Erin Johnston

work and identify it as “art,” the organization of elements within each format must

Art was one of the few areas of study that allowed me to harvest my own thoughts and ideas, and it seemed very realistic to grow up and become a rock star, an artist, or a poet. However, as an adult, that realistic dream is often shattered by the pressures of conforming to the regularities of our society. Nearly ten years after I graduated from high school, I decided to return to college to pursue my true passion for the arts. There was always a part of me that felt connected to the idea of creating, whether it involved a pencil, a camera, or a simple extension of a wistful thought. In the fall of 2005, I enrolled in the University of Southern Mississippi. I later left the university not only with a Bachelor of Fine Arts degree, but also, more importantly, with a brand new way to examine the natural beauties of the world.

When I was first starting out at USM, I thought I had a fairly decent grasp of the basic, fundamental concepts of art. Upon entering my first drawing 101 course, I immediately realized I had to abandon many of the false, preconceived notions that had been with me for so many years. Suddenly I was finding out that art was not about making something appear picturesque, rather it involved a sort of internal sense of expression. As I began to gain a better understanding of how to visualize objects as something other than their originally intended purpose, I slowly started to realize that altering the perception of form was one of the key elements to constructing a successful work of art. All roses should not be painted red, not every single leaf must be sketched in order to capture a tree in its entirety, and before a bicycle tire becomes a rotating device, it is nothing more than a circular form which could easily be translated into another given function.

Many people have often asked the question what is art? Art does not necessarily have to convey a great metaphor, nor must it contain an elaborate narrative. Although many abstracted forms may become difficult to define through words, the foundation of almost any work of art should be hatched from the essential ingredients that formulate a strong composition. For my senior project at USM, I composed a series of figurative charcoal works which embody the dynamic interplay of space, line, and form. Before each of my drawings evolves into a figure, an arrangement of lines and forms are established in order to provide a substructure for the drawing as a whole. Therefore, to uphold the integrity of my

work in harmony with one another. Prior to the senior project, I had been working under the guidance of Professor James Meade for approximately five years. He taught my first figure drawing class in the fall of 2006. Through his teachings, I steadily learned how to observe the intimate details of my surroundings, which would have otherwise gone unnoticed. From the moment I started drawing from the figure, I knew that I had immediately discovered my niche. I did, however, struggle immensely throughout my first couple of semesters of drawing, desperately trying to obtain a grasp on composition and how it is used to strengthen the visual contents within each piece. After years of extreme frustration, I had finally reached a point where I was able to connect the structural details of my work with the expressive characteristics behind each pose.

I have always been fascinated by the emotional language of line. When looking at a person in real life, there is no visible line around them. However, when communicating the vitality of the human spirit through drawing, the subtle changes of line weight have the ability to evoke a powerful statement. The tender nature within the lines of my work has been



influenced by the soulfulness of twentieth century Expressionism. One of the artists who helped catapult this movement is an Austrian figurative painter named Egon Schiele. The impassioned trait within Schiele's execution of marks intoxicates the viewer. I have been particularly inspired by the theatrical nature of his work, and I perpetually strive to attain similar characteristics within my drawings. The intent of my artwork is to capture the essence of sensuality and classical beauty by transmitting a sense of energy through the interaction of form.

My drawings are constructed using charcoal and pencil. Prior to applying the thick amounts

of compressed charcoal, numerous hours are spent mapping out the compositional problems through the use of a soft pencil. I often prepare several thumbnail sketches for each piece, which allows me to correct certain mistakes before moving to a costly piece of drawing paper. The focal point of my figurative works utilizes a figure-ground approach. The darkness of the charcoal assists in contrasting the figure against the negative space, so that the shape of the figure is reinforced. The negative space refers to the area between or around an object, which is just as much a part of the drawing as the object itself.

In my drawing

Ode to Ms. Sayers, the negative space between the left leg and horizontal line provides a strong articulation of triangular shape. By allowing the triangle to be repeated within the overall posture of the figure, the drawing is able to provide a more stimulating aesthetic to the viewer. Another contrasting agent that assists in maintaining a visually appealing perspective is the disparity between organic and geometric forms. Because the figure innately contains the makeup of curvilinear features, I decided to juxtapose a sharp horizontal line in order to intensify the opposing forces. The organic elements within this piece are also repeated, as the shape of the left calf is re-

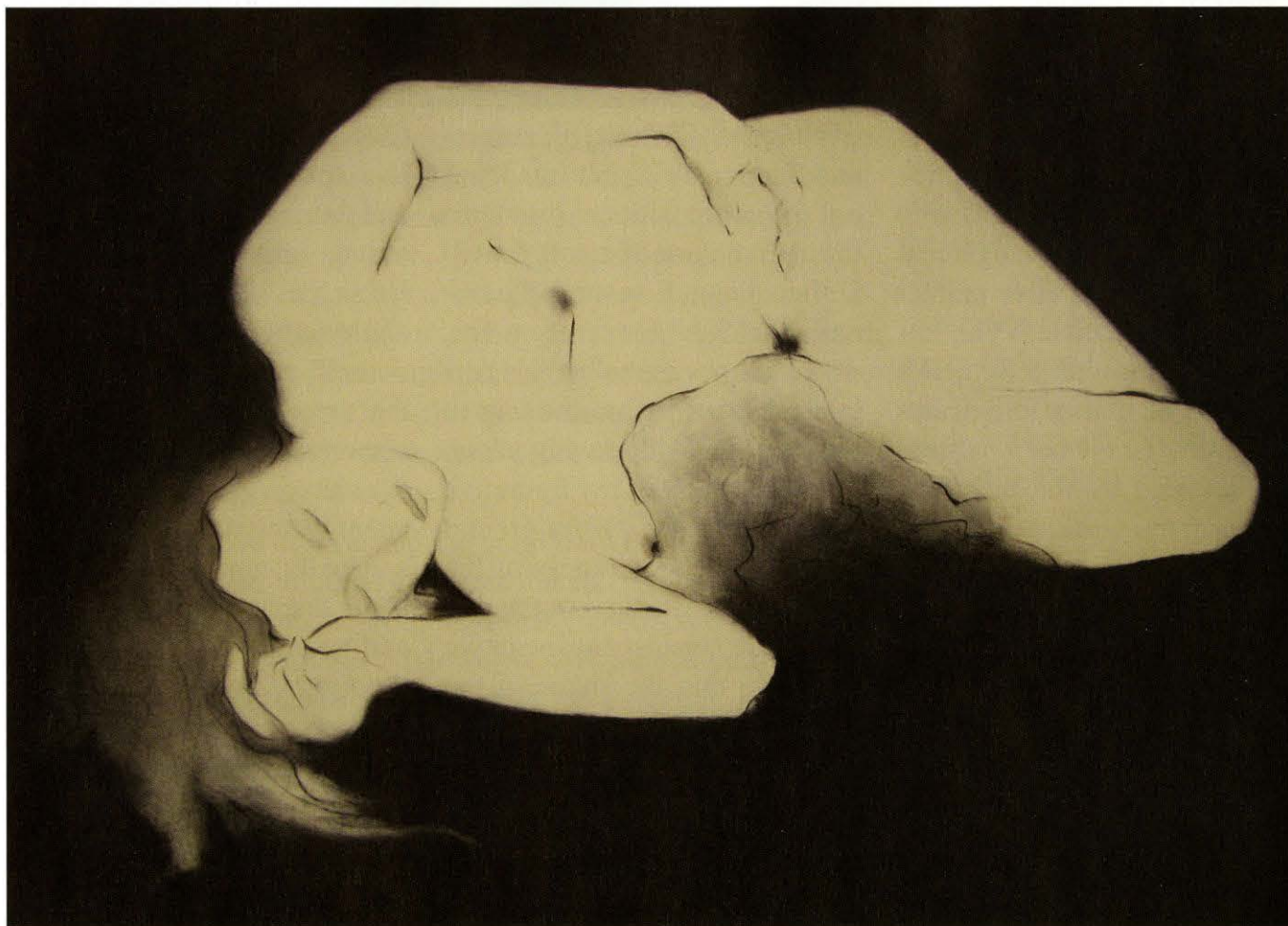
sembled in the swirl of the figure's hair. As the curl of the hair leads the viewer's eye in a diagonal direction, it becomes easier to acknowledge the presence of triangular shape.

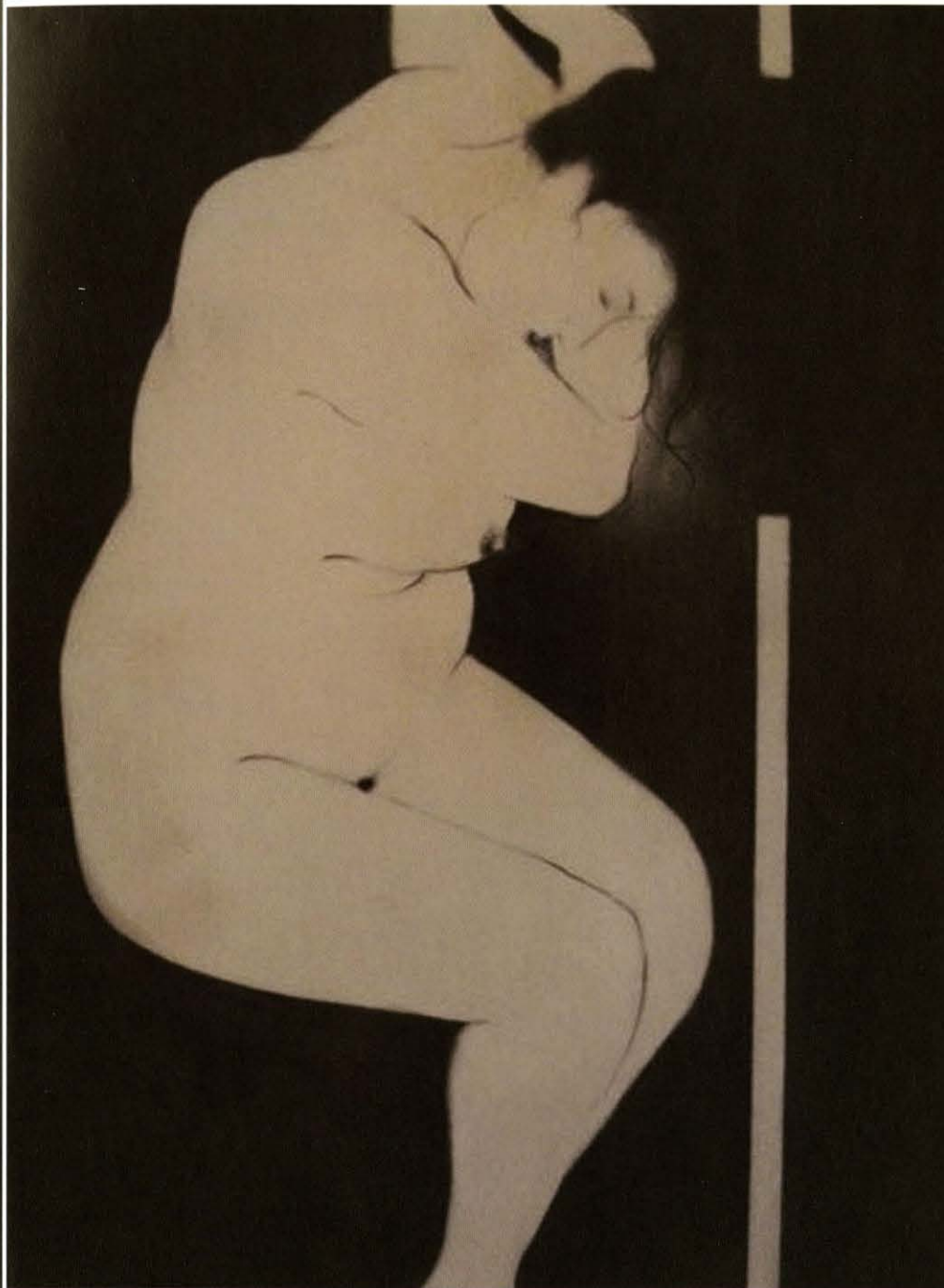
As previously stated, I always strive to focus on the quality of line within each piece. In *Nine Days*, the expressive nature of the line is meant to heighten the emotional tones of my work. Due to the fact that the articulation of shape can become quite rigid through the extreme contrast of light and dark values, the distribution of line weight must maintain a sense of fragility in order to synthesize the mood of the drawing. The

thickness of each line is controlled by the amount of pressure released from my hand. At times, the charcoal barely grazes the surface of the paper, much like a drip of rain, slowly running down a leaf. As the figure in *Nine Days* grasps a strand of hair, a sense of longing fills the atmosphere, alluding to the drawing's title. The viewer is then left to ponder the feeling of sentiment within the piece.

One of the things I enjoy most about working with charcoal is the way the medium is able to naturally produce such a wide range of marks. In *Nine Days*, the patch of charcoal near the right torso becomes quite

atmospheric. The graininess begins to offset the flattened dark areas of charcoal that lie within the majority of the surrounding space. Manipulating the medium allows the mood of the drawing to shift while at the same time breaking up the monotony between the flat areas of the figure and ground. The most challenging part of *Nine Days* was constructing the position of the head. The posture was very difficult to capture, yet I felt it to be the most compelling part of the piece. I have often turned to observing the unconventional postures within the work of the French Sculptor, Auguste Rodin. I admire





his ability to produce a tranquil yet flagrant atmosphere. I spent nearly eight hours composing the tilt of the head in *Nine Days*. The figure's eyes are closed, as they are in most of my drawings, so that the viewer is able to gaze at the figure without any sort of threatening persuasion. We often shy away from a person who is staring back at us, therefore I intentionally allow the viewer

to be able to feel as if no one is watching them, permitting each individual to absorb every intimate detail in its entirety.

The drawing that challenged me the most throughout my senior project is entitled *Gravity*. This particular piece contains several open voids between the limbs of the figure. The influence of the Greek

vase painters can easily be seen in this work. The power and clarity of the silhouetted figure is one of the most prominent features in Greek art. In *Gravity*, the figure grasps full possession of the paper, dominating the picture plane. This particular drawing is derived from a photograph that I had shot from my model. Photography was my first love, which led me to discover the work of an American portrait photographer named Annie Leibovitz. The rawness and honesty behind her depictions have helped me remain true to myself. Although the approach to drawing and photography differ, many of the design aspects remain the same. My inspiration also comes from previous sketches that I have composed in my earlier semesters at USM, while other times I work directly from a live model. On various occasions I will set my model against a black sheet in order to gain an awareness of the type of position within the figure that will offer the strongest visual facet. This approach helps me visualize the purity of shape contrast against a dark space. In *Gravity*, the figure is carefully squeezed into the vertical format. The right leg is set at the diagonal of the whole, which is an area inside the format that administers an active

relationship with the viewer. The position of the left leg helps square off the format, as the foot begins to kiss the edge of the border. The implied square then repeats the shape of the entire drawing from one edge to the other. The upper left portion of the drawing is set free from shape, so that the complexity of forms have room to breathe. The vacancies of this piece then become just as important to the drawing as the figure itself.

Often, I intentionally set the figure against an uninhibited space that contains no specific setting or time. In doing so, the viewer is allowed to focus on the sensuality of each drawing without the distraction of hindering elements. In *Message to Khristina*, a warm glow emerges from the darkened space, providing the piece with a flavor of salaciousness. Because most of the surrounding areas of the figure are dark, the modulated tones within the hair become amplified immensely, similar to how a song may inhabit certain quiet spots in order to counterbalance the resonance of the drums. *Message to Khristina* also offers a strong repetition of triangular shape, comparable to the contents within *Ode to Ms. Sayers*. The rhythm of a smaller triangle between the right arm

and breast, to the larger triangle that is formed within the position of the legs, adds a sense of fluidity to the composition. The figure then repeats the shape of the horizontal format as she

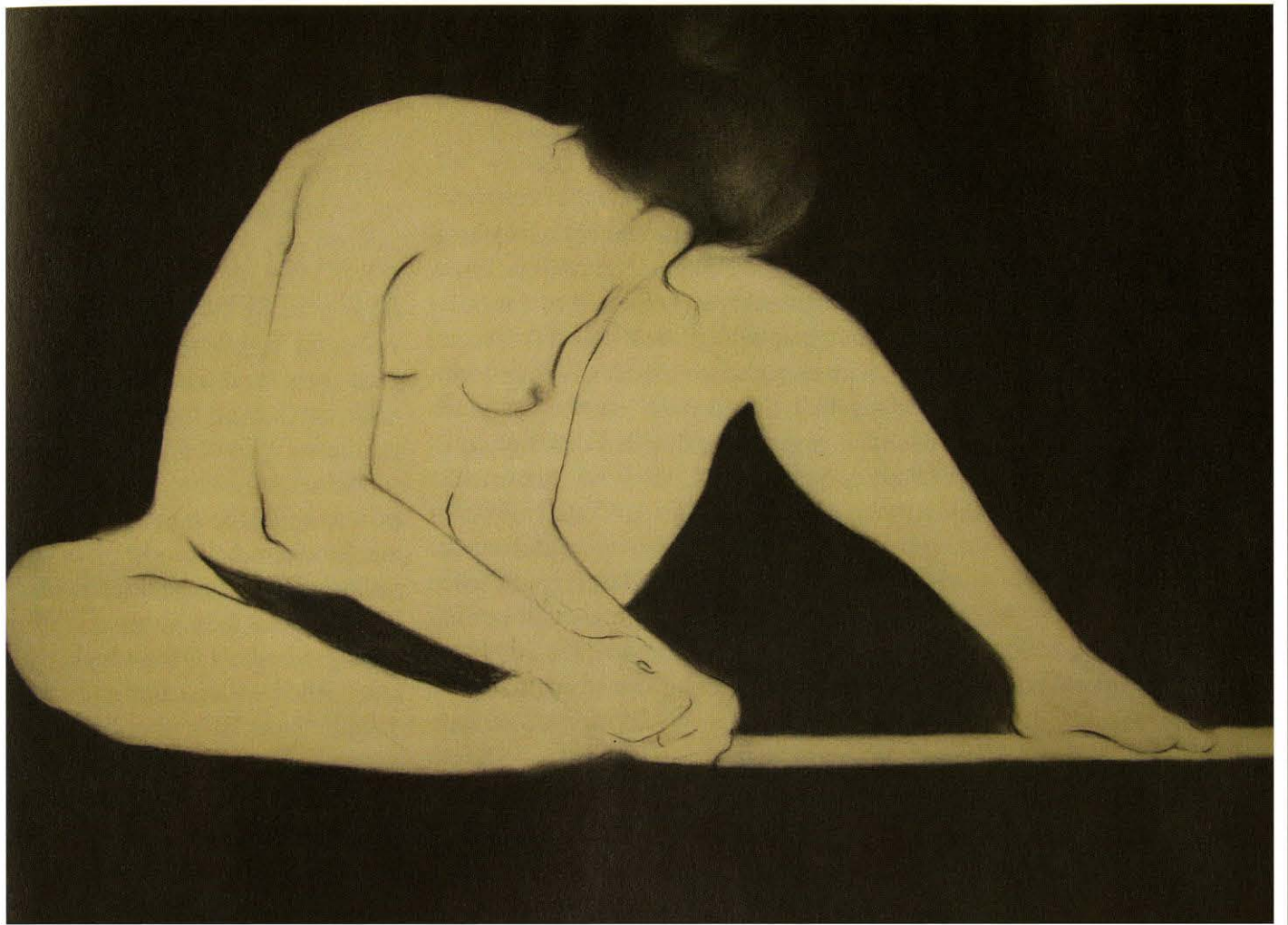
coal works is entitled *Naoki vs. Naoki*. The title literally translates into "docile tree." The organic mass of the figure is set against a strong vertical line, somewhat like the foliage to the



gracefully stretches across the surface of the paper.

The final drawing in my series of figura-

tive character-
trunk of a tree. The tension that exists between the figure and line is undeniable, yet they are both inherently intertwined. I



spent several sessions trying to figure how and where to add the contrast against the coiled figure. Then I realized the power of proximity to shape. By placing the thin vertical line so close to the figure, it immediately caused a direct swelling of the bulbous anatomy occupied by the figure. This work is heavily influenced by several Japanese prints. I have always been inspired by the graphic nature of the Japanese artists and their ability to communicate form with such direct precision and gentleness.

The orderliness of each of my works is somewhat of a direct reflection of my obsessive

nature. I pride myself on the purification of each piece. Considering that charcoal is my medium of choice, it becomes exceedingly difficult to maintain a clean shape, and at times I wish that my moves were not so calculated. However, hundreds of strokes from an eraser are applied to every drawing that I attempt. The processing of each piece is what is most important to me, not the finished product. I relish the fact that art is able to convey such a strong mood through the presence of color, shape, line, or form. There is always room for improvement within each work of art, a sort of unfin-

ished problem that provokes the artist to examine themselves along with their work.