Drawing in the Dark: Developing a Visual Language

By Andrea Butler

Artist Andrea Butler shares how she developed a more personal visual language in her drawings. She started with simple contour drawings and then began focussing on the moving figure, eventually taking her sketchbook to the cinema to draw in the dark, making drawings that were about the process of pure 'seeing' and developing a drawing trust between her eye/hand to make marks that recorded her visual experience.

'With a house move and family commitments, I haven't found much (if any) time for drawing during the last year but recently, I had the opportunity to attend some life drawing workshops which were linked to a local exhibition of figure drawings and portraits. As I hadn't drawn for quite a while, I realised that I needed to warm up my drawing skills before I got into the life room otherwise I would be going from a position of no drawing, to one of the most challenging drawing situations there is: drawing the human figure. If I wanted to get the most out of the workshops, I needed to take some action!
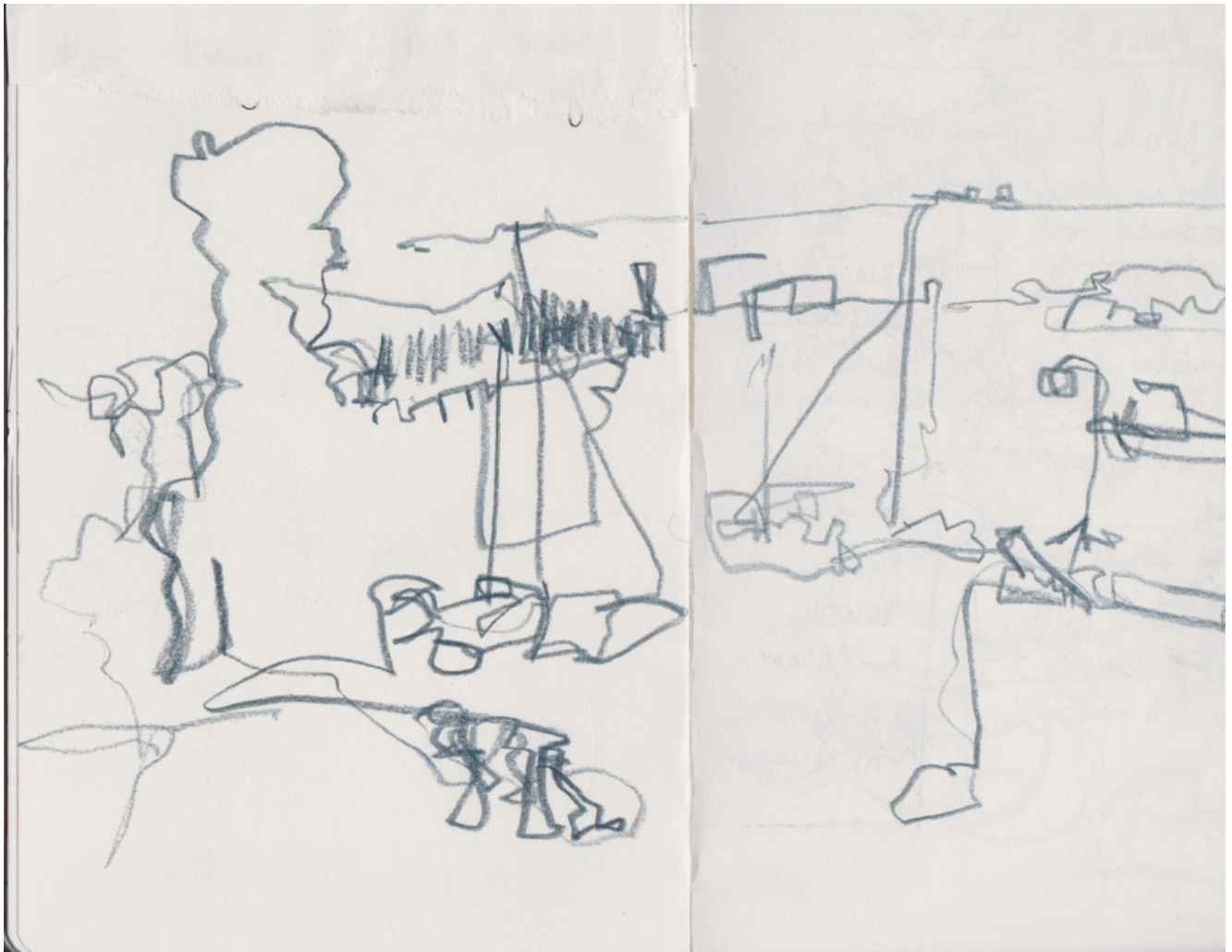
Starting with a Contour Line

Inspired by the Ten Minutes Five Times a Week, I began by making contour/continuous line drawings - an excellent way to get back into a regular drawing habit and a very manageable, simple first step.
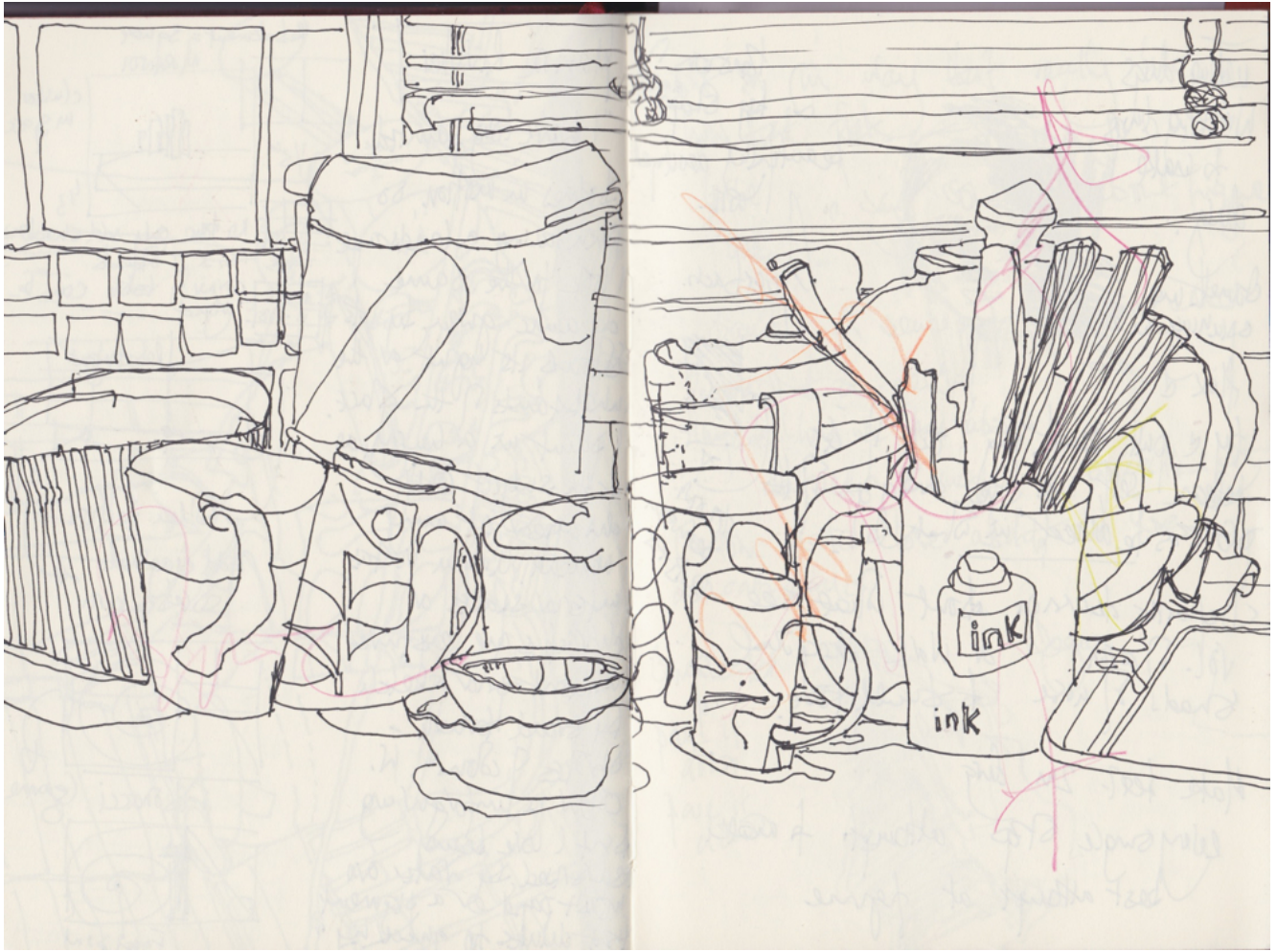
Contour drawing before doing the washing up
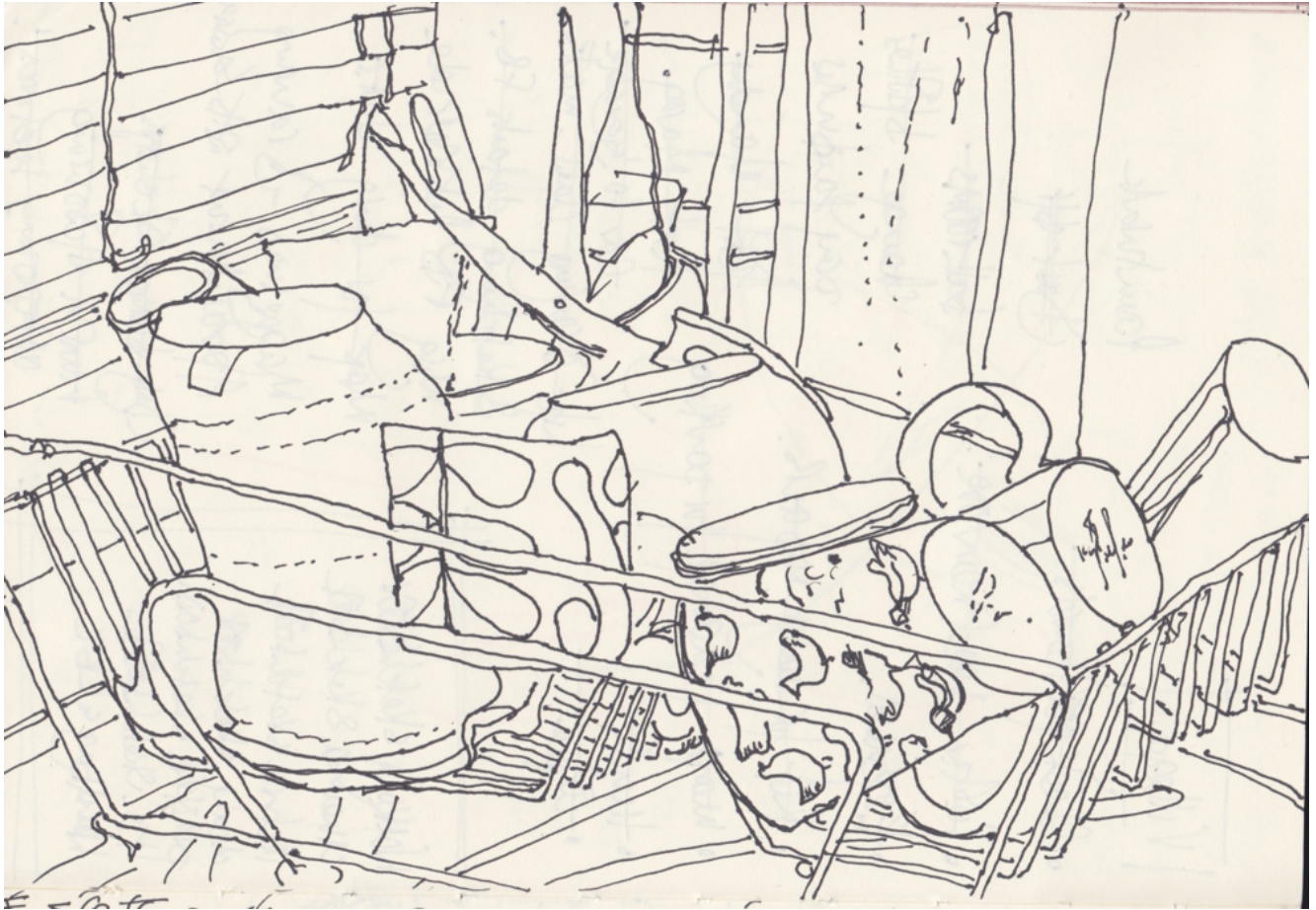
Contour drawing after doing the washing up

Blind contour of a harbour scene

Contour drawing at a lecture

I made drawings that were considered and took time: e.g. drawing the washing up and also quick, speculative drawings: drawing someone watching tv, scenes from the tv or someone reading the paper. I found the balance of line and white space on the page very pleasing, especially with the [blind contour drawings.](#)

I began to concentrate on drawing moving objects and images as I found a freedom in the mark making that I wanted to push further to see what it could add to my drawing vocabulary. With these drawings, I only had as long as the subject kept their position, sometimes I only managed a couple of lines, then the view would change and I stopped the drawing. I found these open-ended sort of drawings fascinating and quite liberating. I accepted as part of the process that the drawing would last as long as it lasted.

The drawings were about recording the time I focussed my looking on the object and discovering what marks would appear on the paper; they were not about making a 'complete' or 'proper' drawing. I was also

interested in the fact that if I was forced to draw quickly (to capture what I could within an unknown time scale) this created a more exciting and intuitive response. As I settled into regular drawing, I began to use a more gestural line, making marks that recorded my eyes moving around and over the object and that reflected the urgency of the looking process.
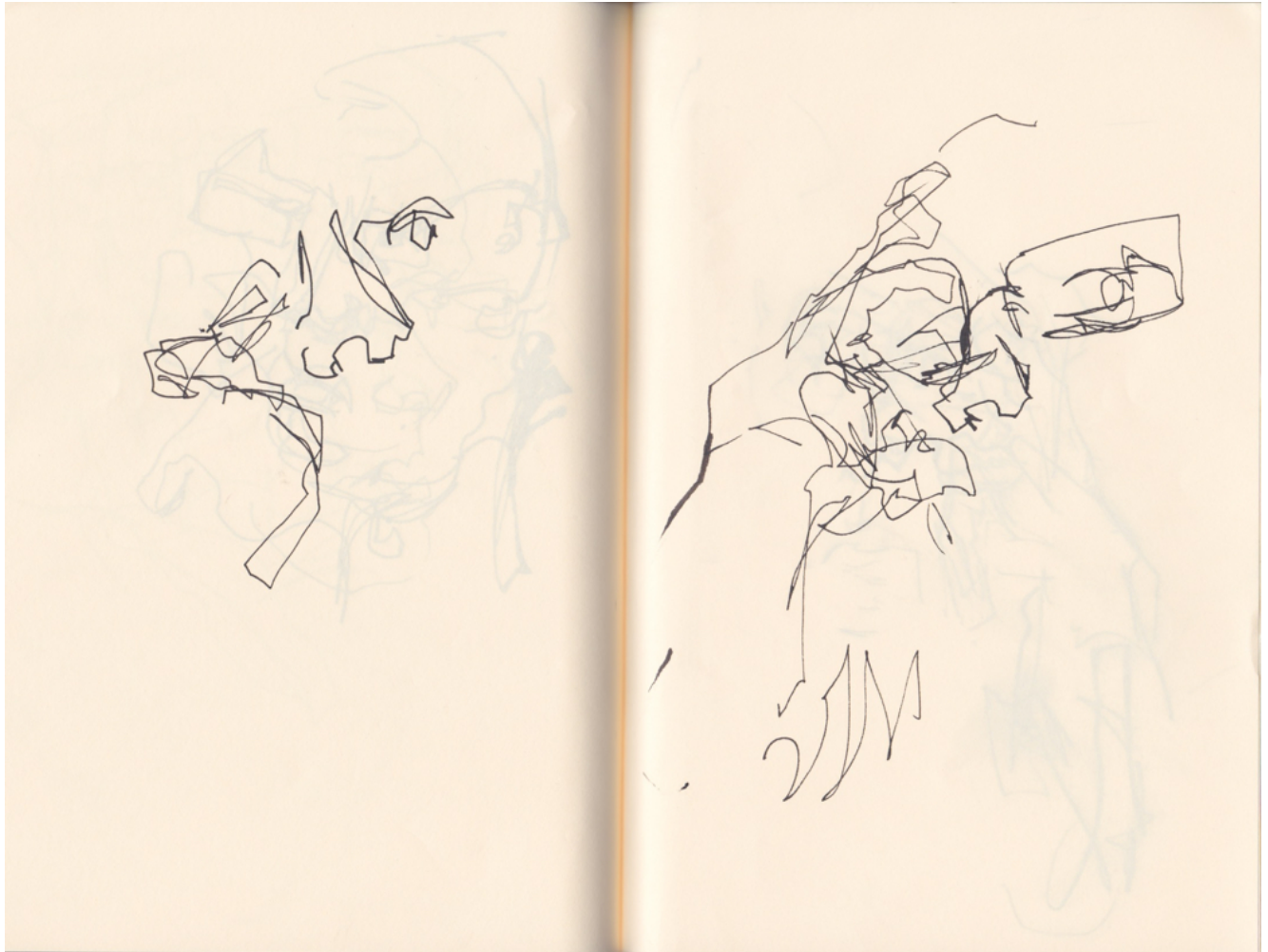
Gestural studies, working mostly blind with quick peeks at the page

Gestural contour drawing from the tv

Little dog.

Drawing a little dog ahead of me on the path. I kept walking as I made these drawings.

Drawing another dog out for a walk

Developing Gestural Marks

I felt more prepared now for the life sessions that I had signed up for and these began with a half hour lecture looking at the exhibition prior to drawing the model. To warm up for the life class, I set myself the challenge of drawing in each lecture beforehand. The first week, I decided to draw as much as I could of each picture whilst the lecturer was talking about it (about 30 seconds to a minute) using a mixture of blind drawing, contour drawing and gestural mark making.   No time for anything other than visual notes and no time to worry about or edit what was appearing on the page. (It was surprising though, how when I looked at the drawings afterwards I could recall the pictures even with such rapidly made marks).
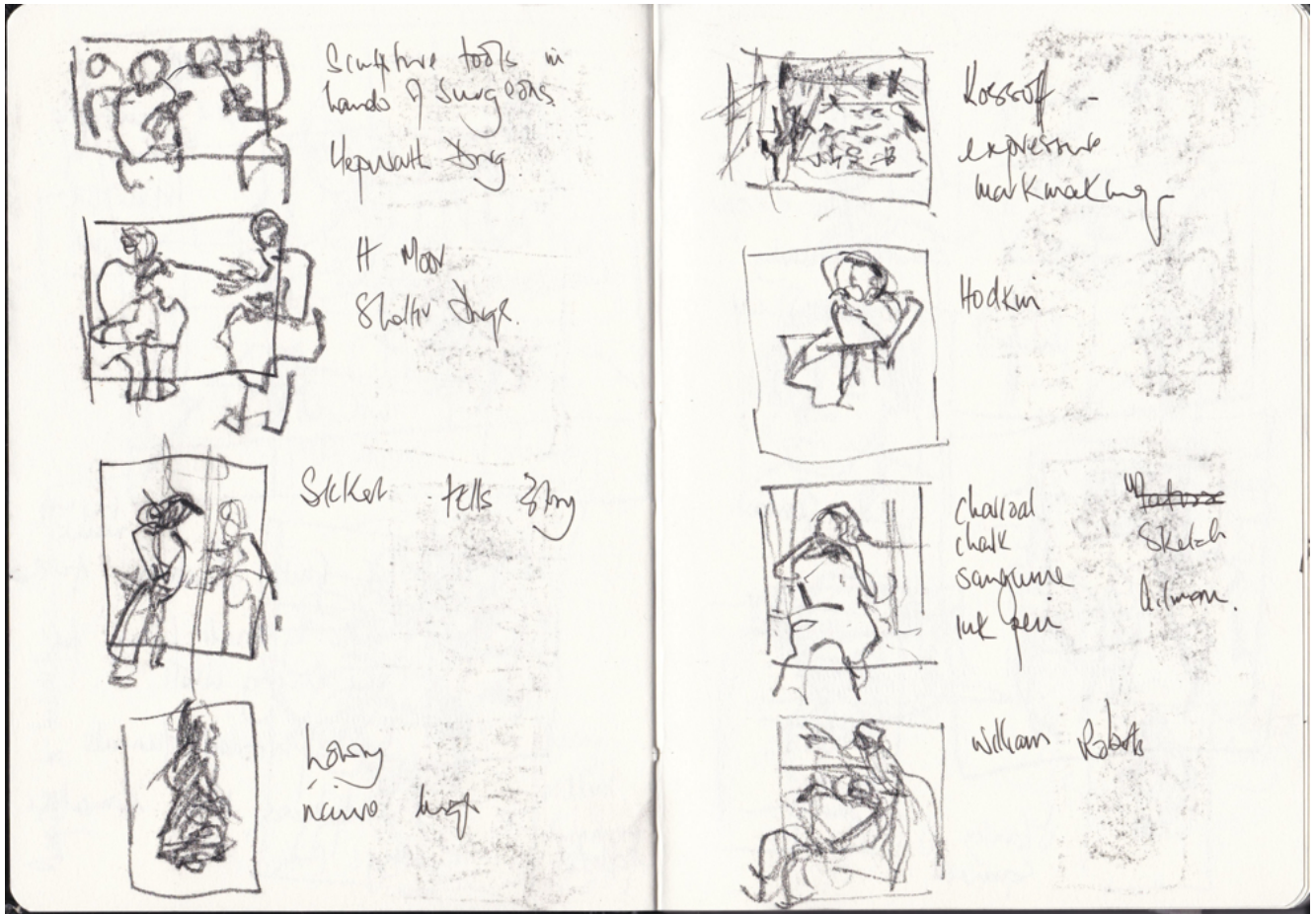
Drawing from an exhibition, first week.
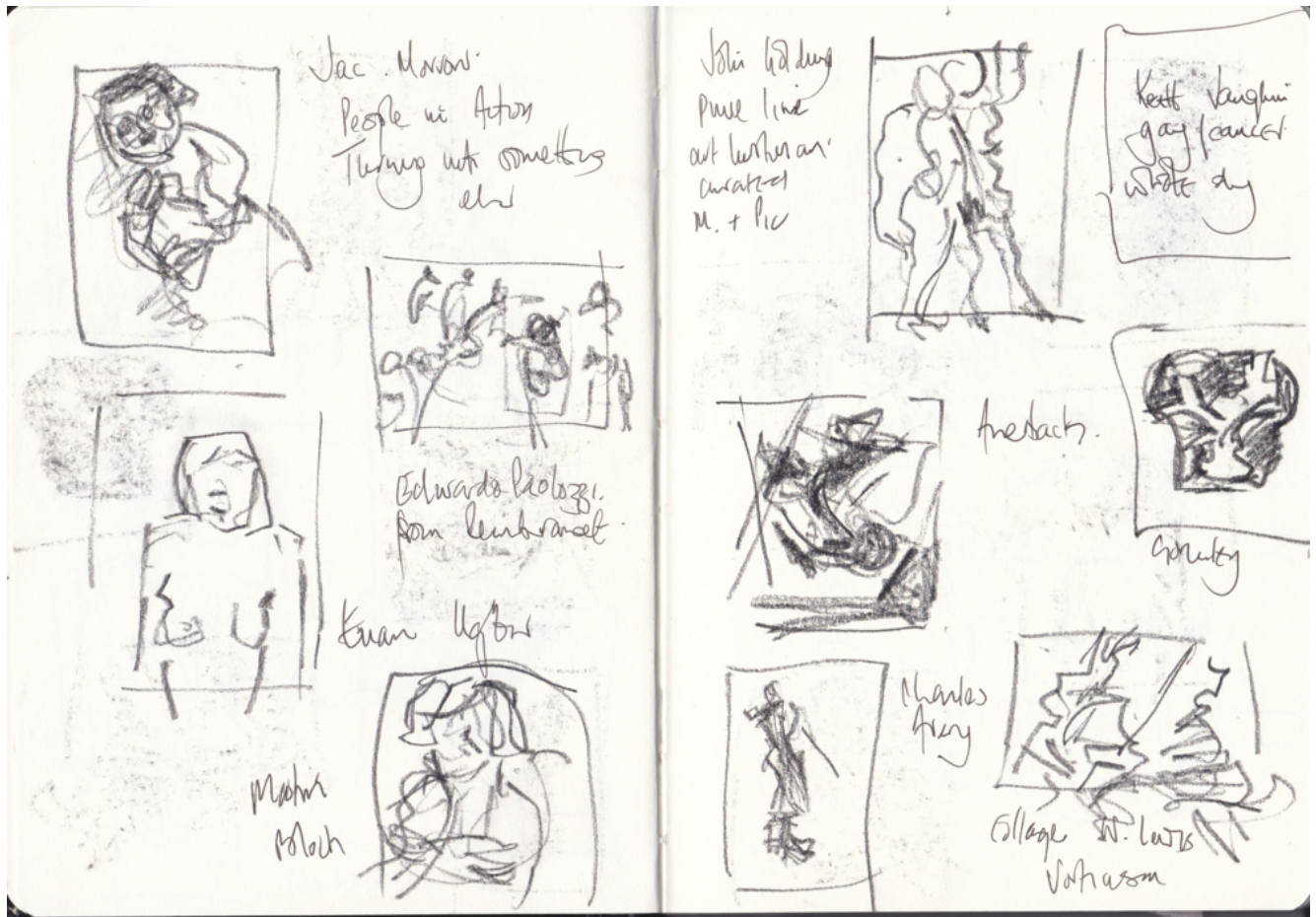
Drawing from the exhibition: first week

The same lecture was given at the start of each of the five sessions for any new participants to the workshops. I attended them all, and by the third week, I was more familiar with the content of the exhibition and chose to spend time drawing particular exhibits but still keeping the time short - a minute or so for each of drawing, max. It was contour/gesture drawing at speed. As I drew, I also began to note down words and phrases from the lecture.
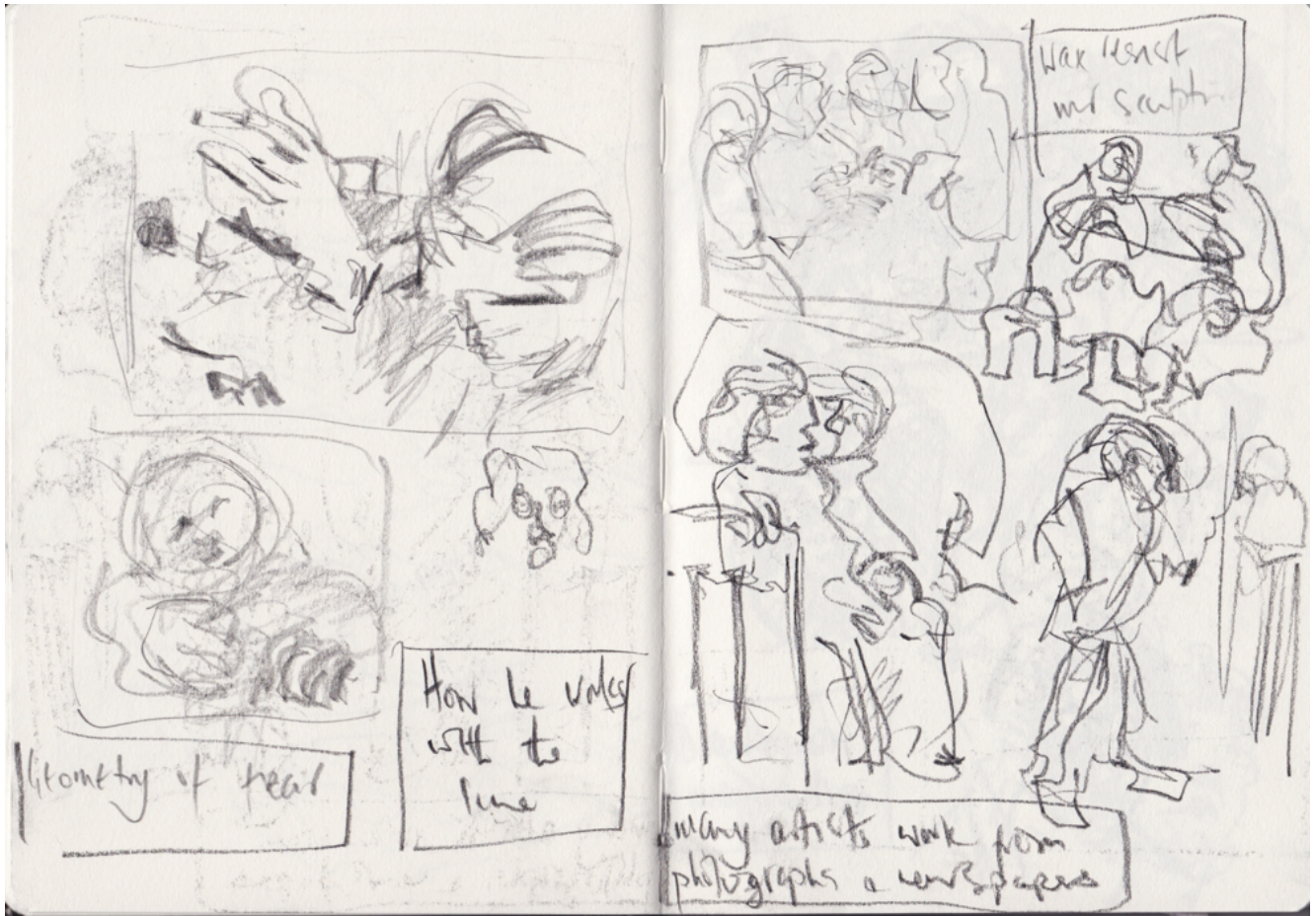
Drawing from the exhibition lecture - second week

Drawing from the exhibition lecture - second week

In the second week, I suddenly 'noticed' the lecturer. She had been there all the time, of course, but I hadn't 'seen' her just skimmed a look at her then concentrated on the exhibits. Now, she came within my drawing vision and was added to my sketchbook page. Once I began to include the lecturer and audience, small narratives began to appear on the page. I drew the audience with a speedy contour line for as long as they stayed in position - sometimes this was only seconds.

things becoming
something
else

Jacqueline
Morreau

The lecturer and the exhibit became the combined subject, so I
drew them as 'one object' rather than drawing them separately

First drawing of the day: warming up whilst waiting for the lecture to begin

a little walk   the story with him is sad

they found him with
a pen in his hand
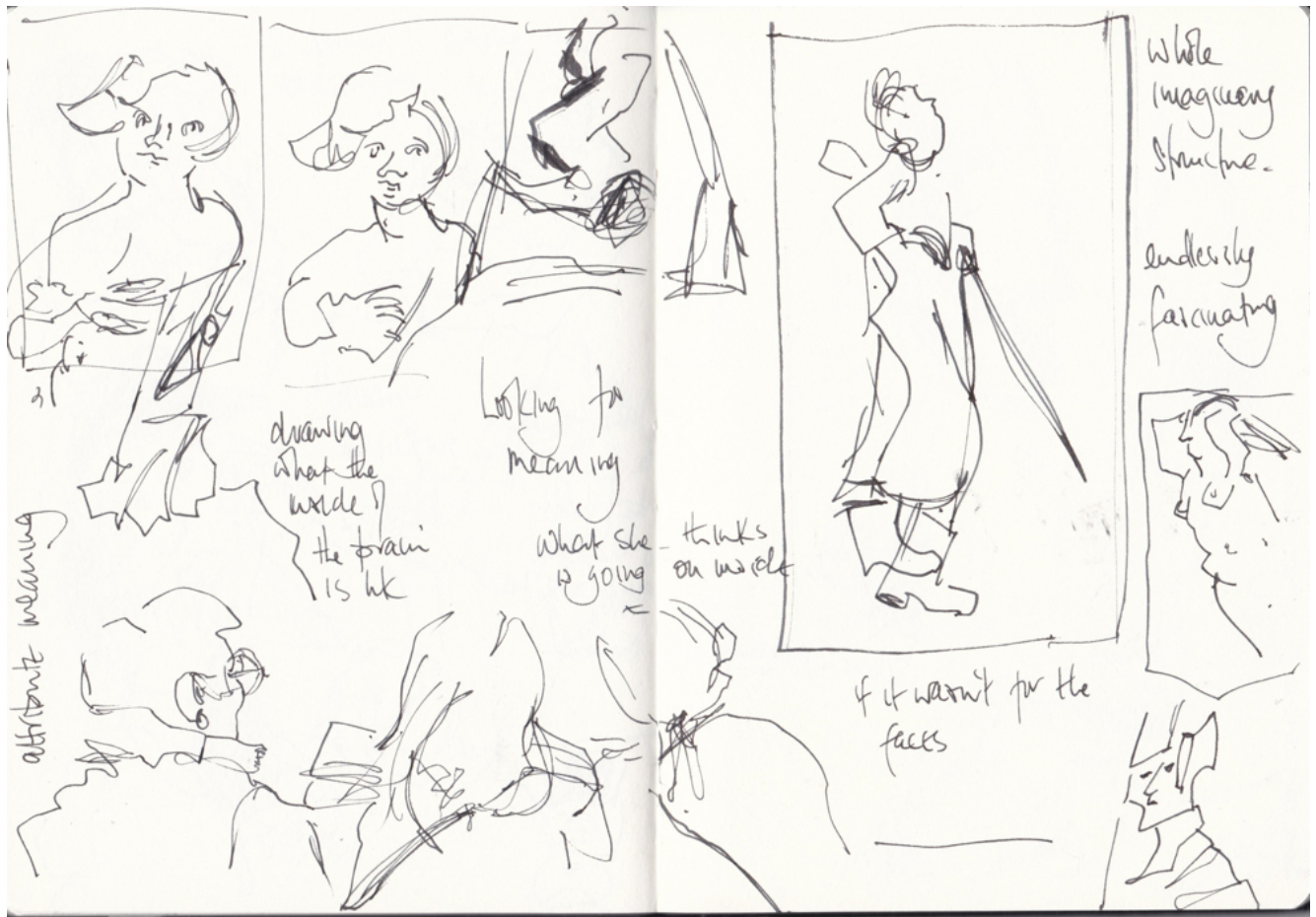fading

scratch scratch scratch

the funny thing is
he always represents himself

most of us feel intuitively the way round

Expression energy tension, energy

quite an enigma a lot of tension.

skill of looking & drawing

unassuming

seated fig soft timid feel

determination time patience.

Quirky unusual drawing doesn't quite fit together

Fourth Week - this page has a coloured background as I was trying out paint samples for decorating and used my sketchbook to wipe the excess paint off my brush.

drawing
what the
world /
the brain
is lk

attribute meaning

Looking for
meaning

what she thinks
is going on inside

whole
imaginary
structure.

endlessly
fascinating

if it wasn't for the
faces

the person here
just a head of
a woman

Final drawing of the week, colour added afterwards

During the life drawing workshop weeks I also attended a lecture on the history of drawing and using the same idea, I drew from the powerpoint presentation with seconds to capture something from the slide before it changed. What I found exciting and what kept me exploring was that, because my aim was to get marks on the page as a record of my experience, I couldn't edit or try for a 'nice' drawing and I was surprising myself with the variety of marks and lines that I made. It was almost like I got my 'censoring self' out of the way whilst I was drawing and I stopped worrying about what it looked like or what anyone would think. It felt like I was exploring a personal language and the drawing marks reminded me very much of [Asemic writing](#).

Drawing from a PowerPoint lecture

Drawing in the Dark

All this drawing had developed a drawing trust in myself,
trust that my hand could make a mark that could interpret what
my eyes were seeing. I took my sketchbook with me to the
local theatre but then when the lights went down, I had a new
challenge - I couldn't see what I was drawing at all or where
I was drawing on the page. I started on the left hand side of
my sketchbook and moved across it, drawing the performers as
long as they stood in that one position. I didn't look down at
the page at all whilst I was drawing - I couldn't see it
anyway - just kept feeling my way across my sketchbook page
and only turned over when I ran out of page. In the interval,
it was exciting to see what sort of drawings had resulted and
what sort of marks I had been making to record the
performance. I had a band of blank space along the bottom of
the page, so I made blind contours of the audience during the
interval, to create a context/narrative. The performers
changed character with their distinctive hats - I added the
colours later.

Blind Contour drawings - drawing in the dark

The Cinema Sketchbooks

A keen film fan, I took my sketchbook with me to the cinema and began to draw in the dark from the films. The previous drawing practice meant I could now make marks confidently at speed and I also began to add in phrases from the film dialogue and draw the silhouetted shapes of the audience. I drew with coloured pencils, choosing a selection of colours beforehand and then changing them randomly throughout the film. In the dark, I had no idea what colour I was using at any one time and I've ended up with some interesting colour combinations on the page.

If you plan to give this a try at the theatre or cinema, there are a few things to consider:

- people have paid to see the performance so be considerate and as unobtrusive as possible - I try and sit at the end of an aisle or with a friend/empty seat

between me and other members of the audience
- try and angle your sketchbook so that the light from the film doesn't make the white paper gleam
- don't draw during quiet scenes if you can hear the scratch of the pen or pencil
- use a small sketchbook and a pen or a few pencils that you can hold in your hand, (but try not to drop them, especially during the quiet scenes!)
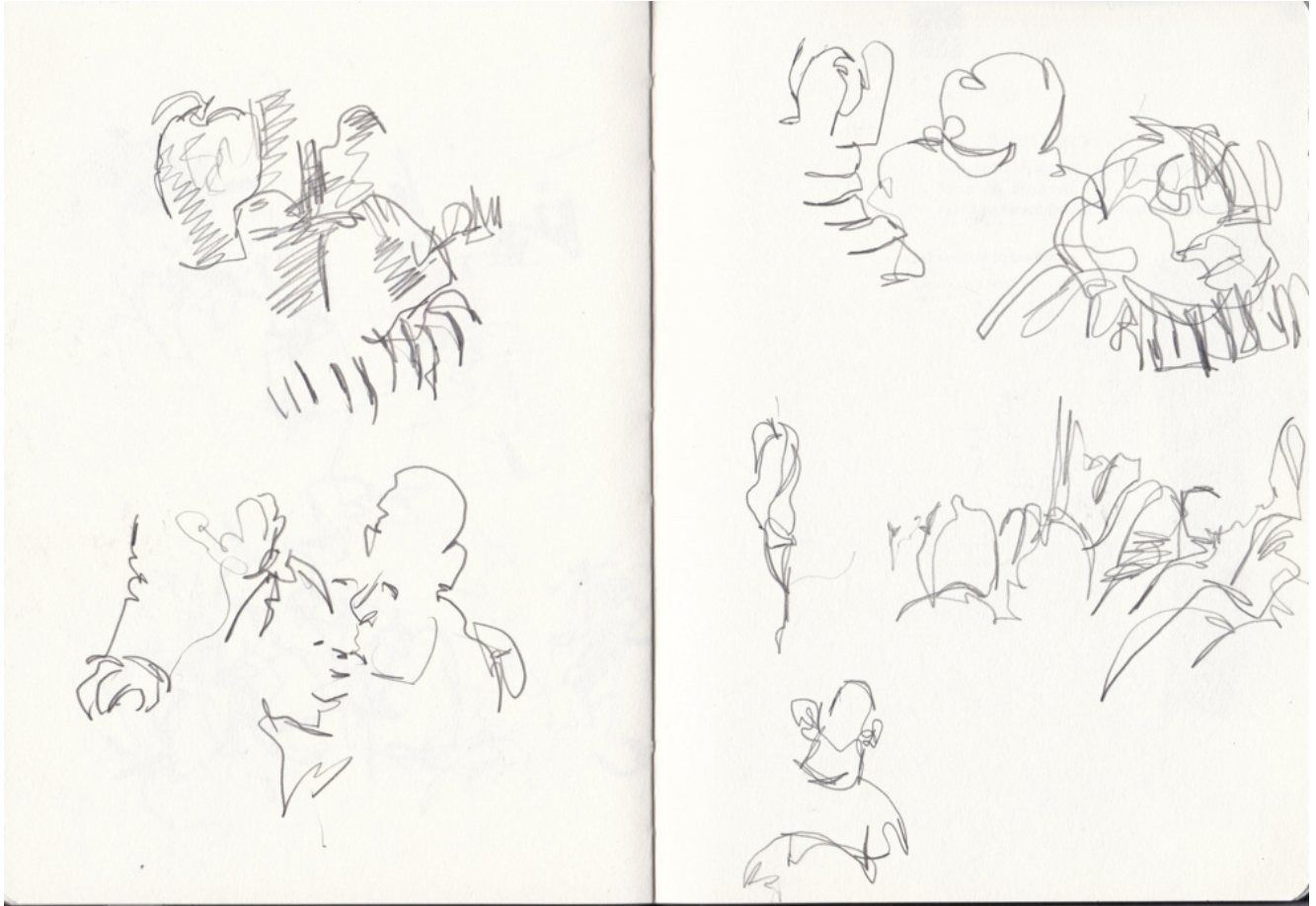
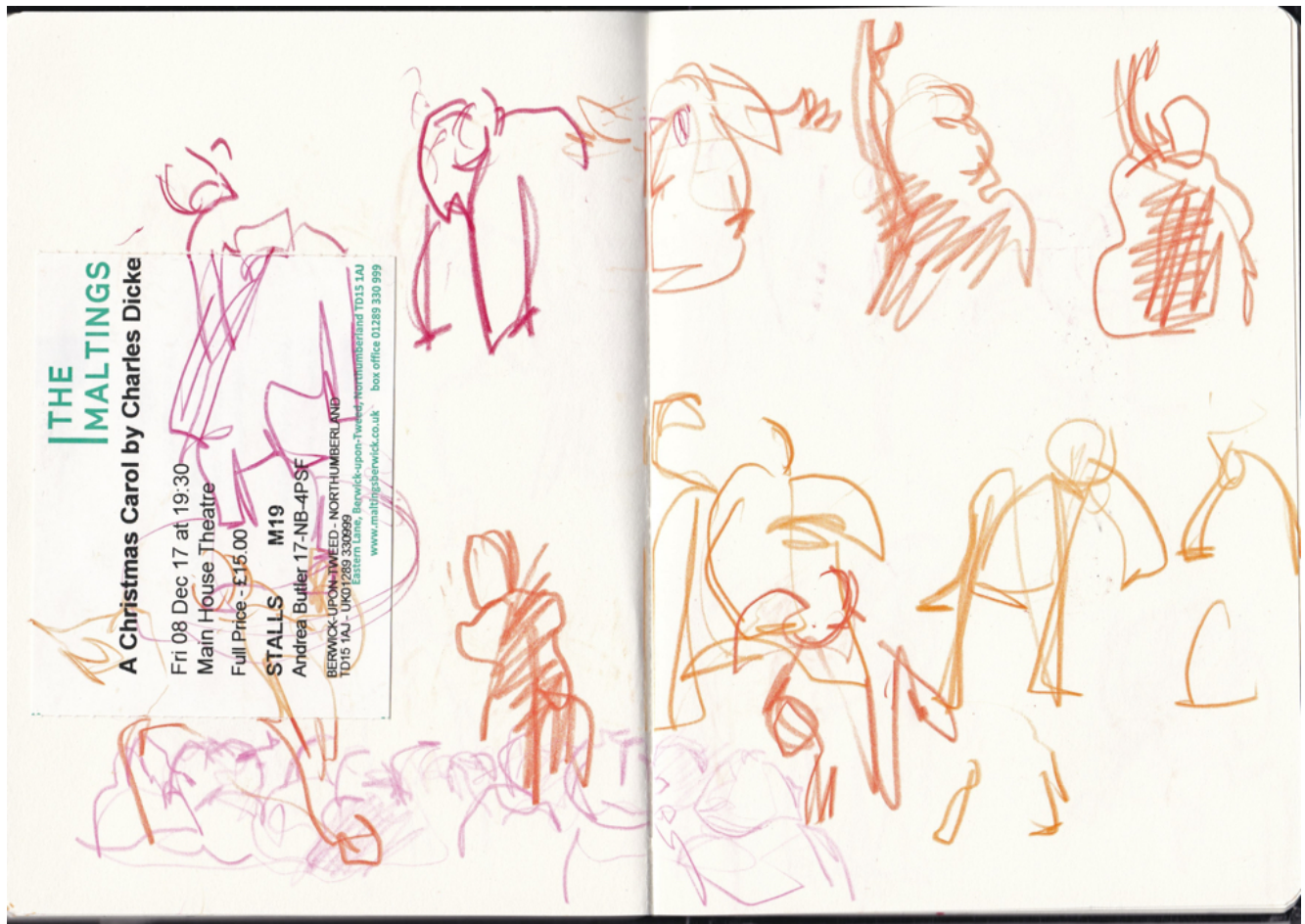Drawing from film in the dark - 'Blade Runner 2049'.
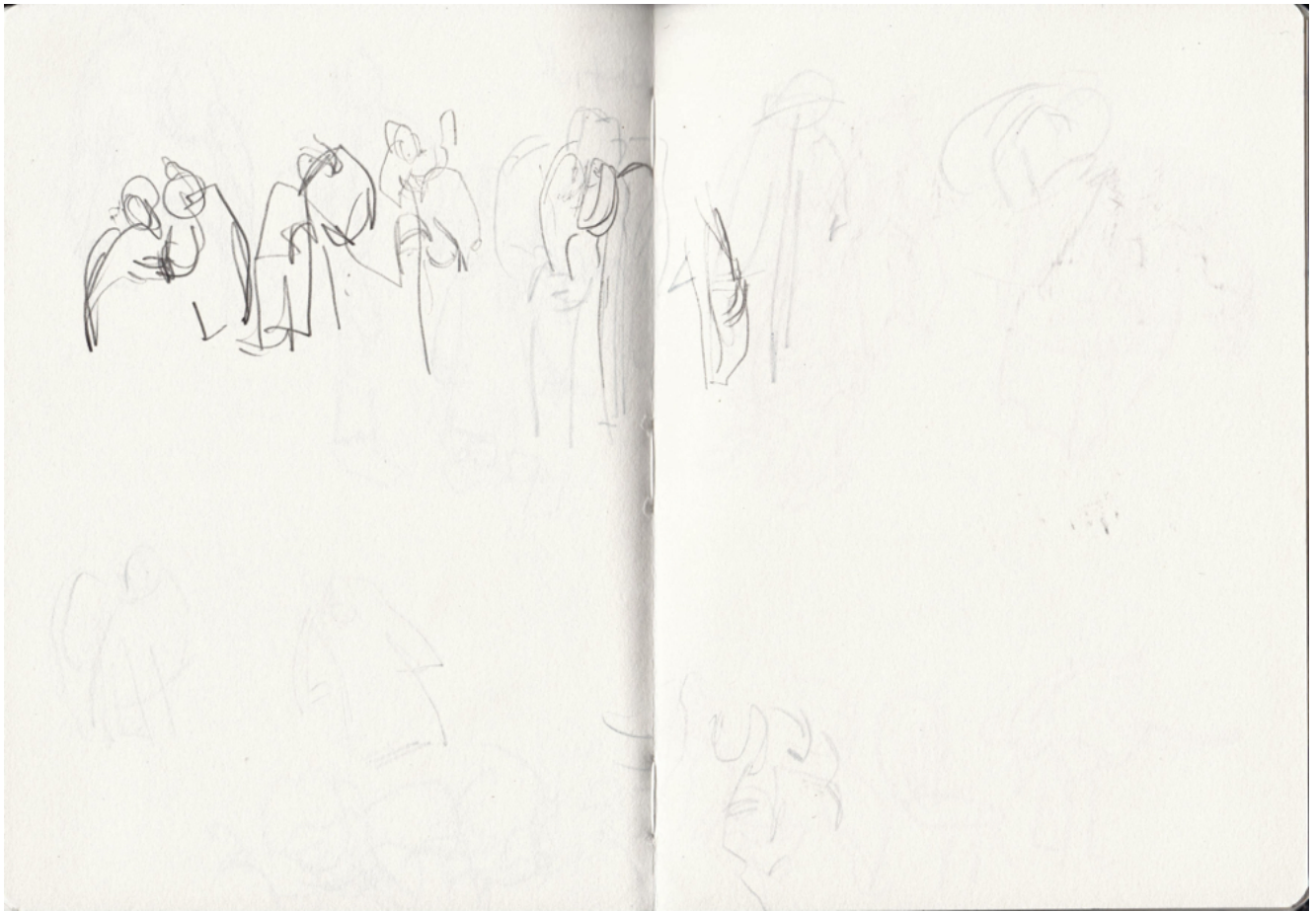
Drawing in the dark - theatre performance

Drawing in the dark with water-soluble ink: 'Macbeth'.
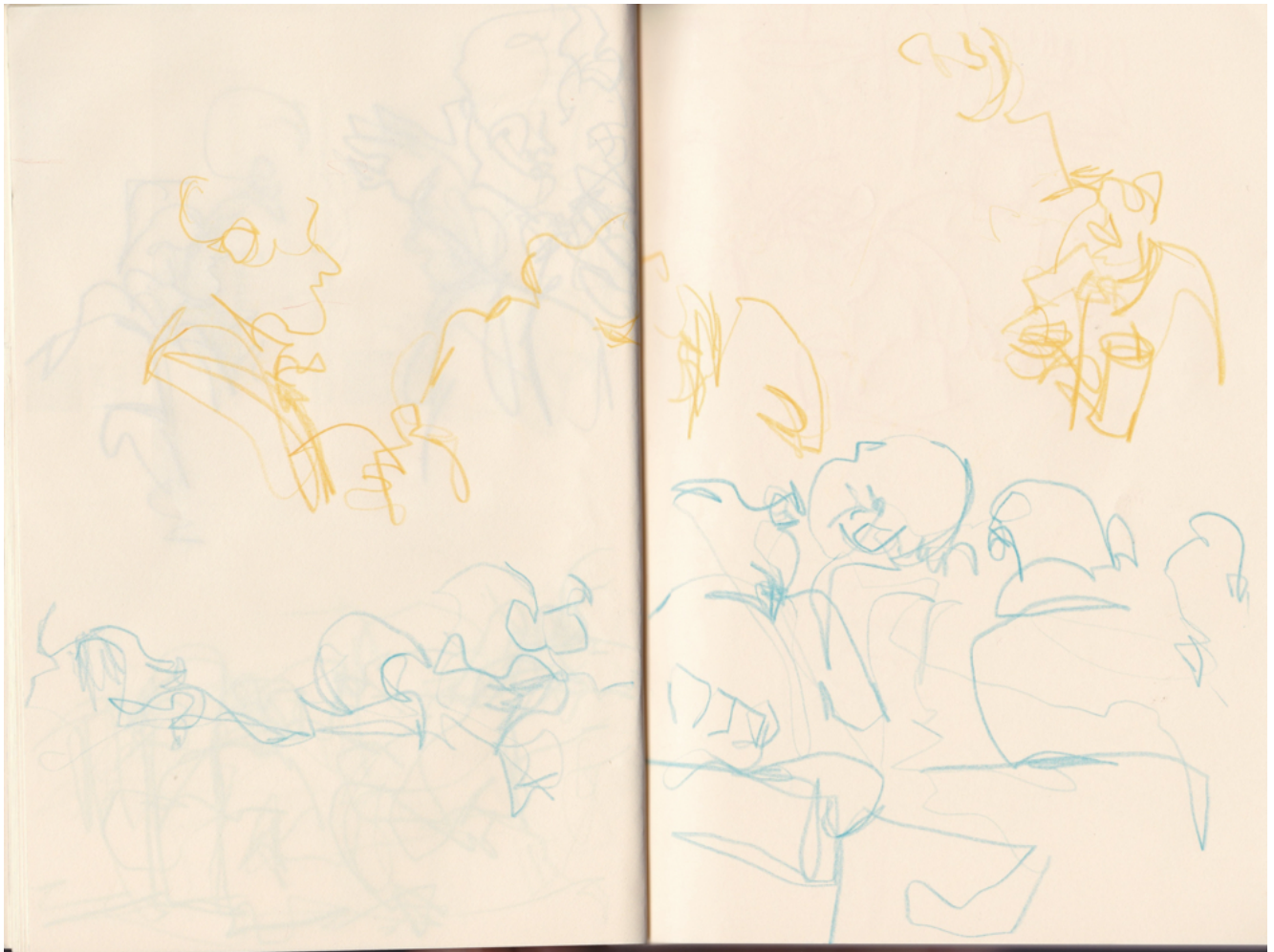Experimenting with tone and colour afterwards

Drawing in the dark with water-soluble ink: 'Macbeth'. Sometimes it felt right to make just one drawing and turn the sketchbook page. Tone added afterwards
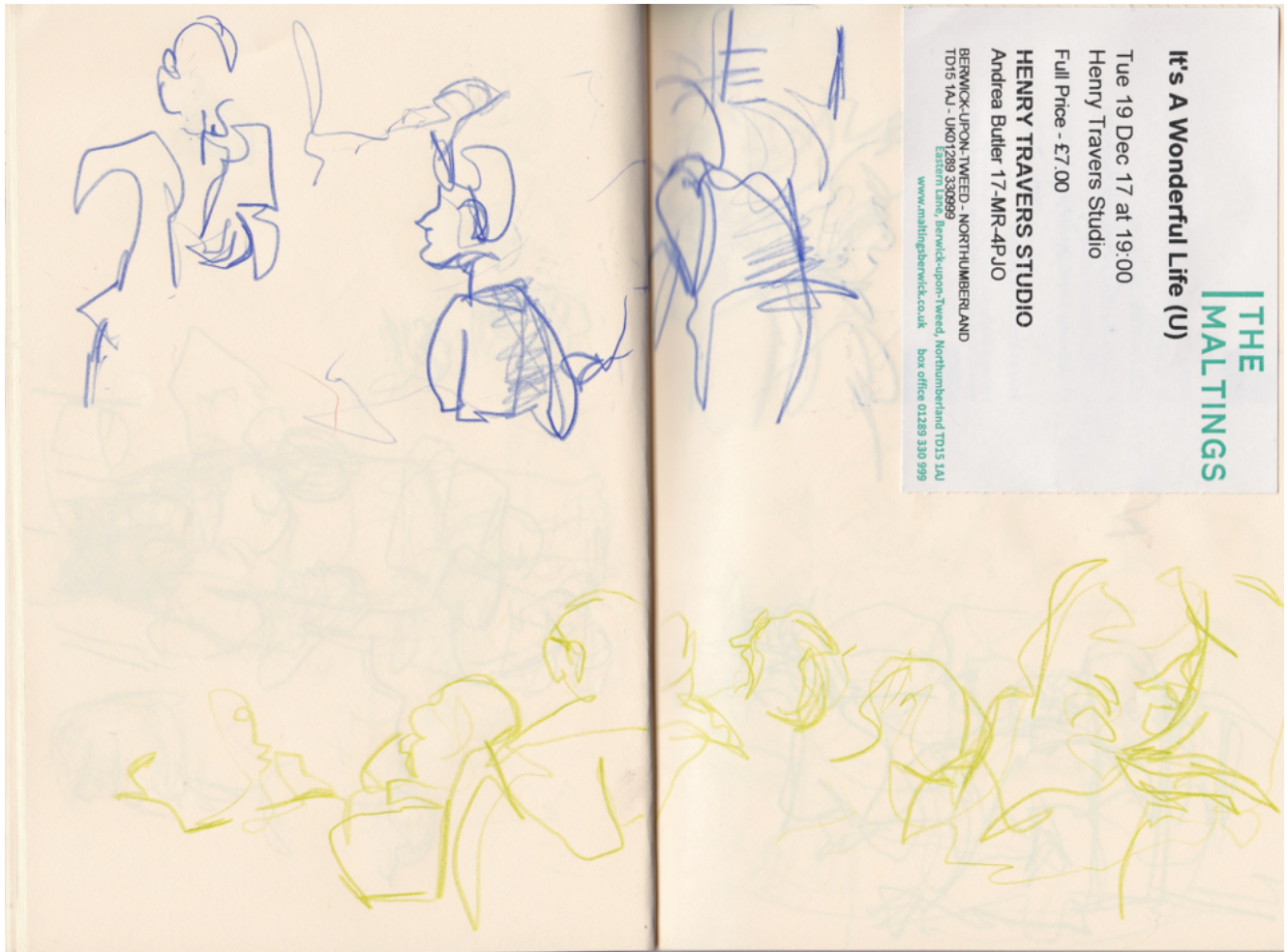
Adding colour: drawing in the dark

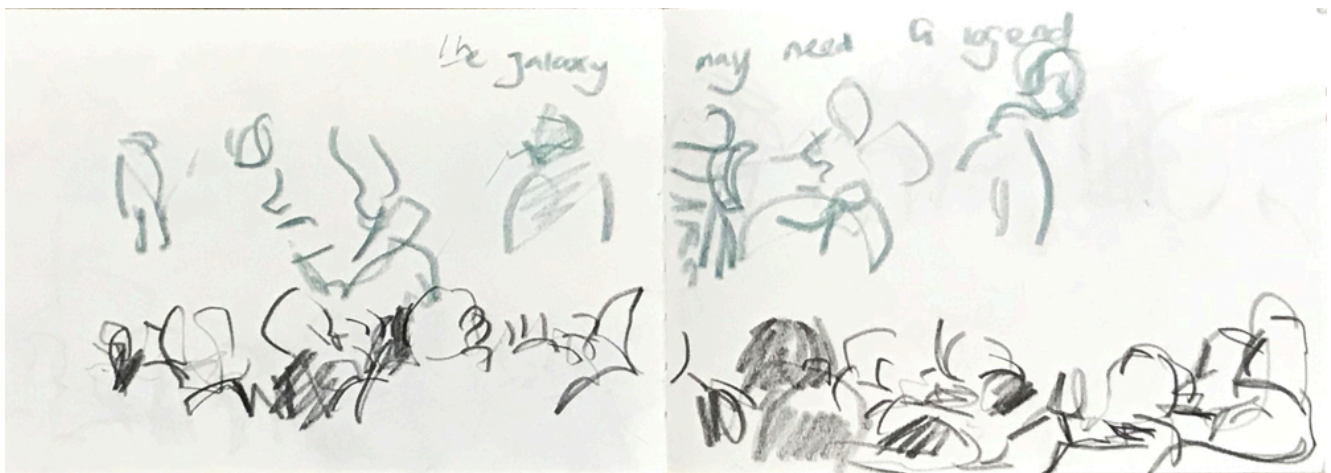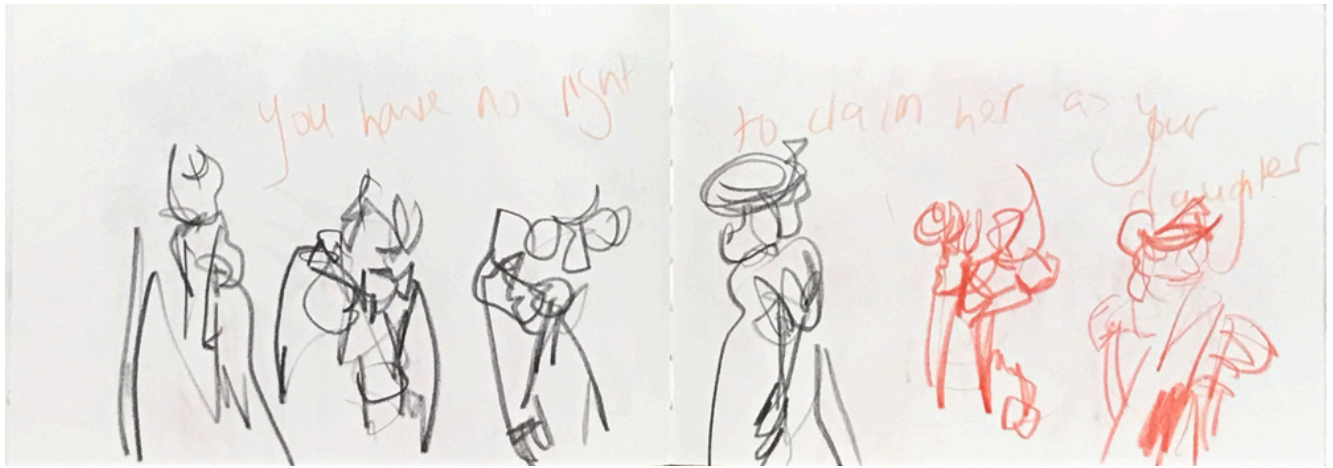III live in the past present and the future

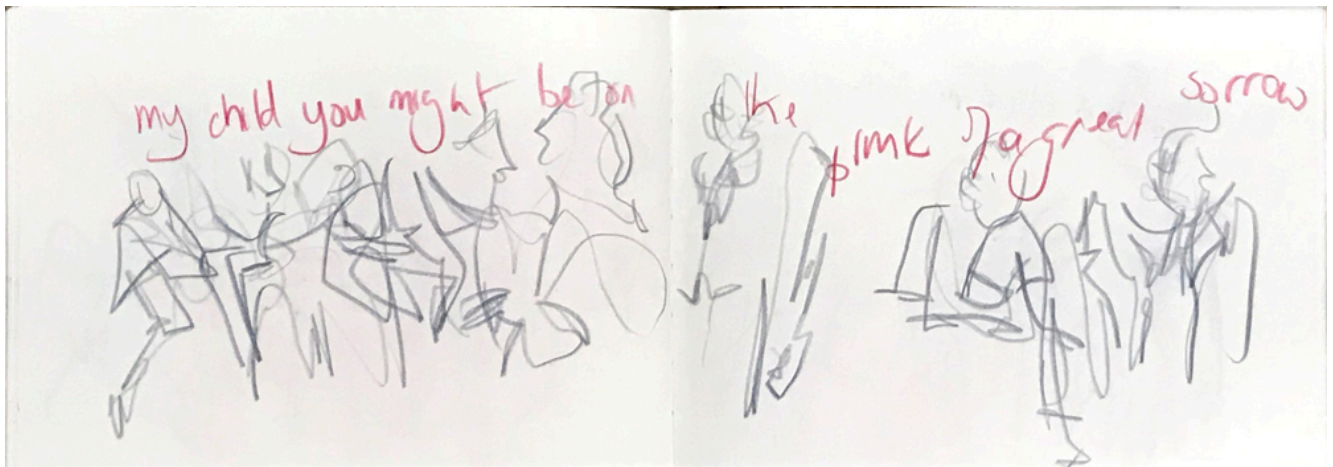Drawing audience and actors on the screen in the dark

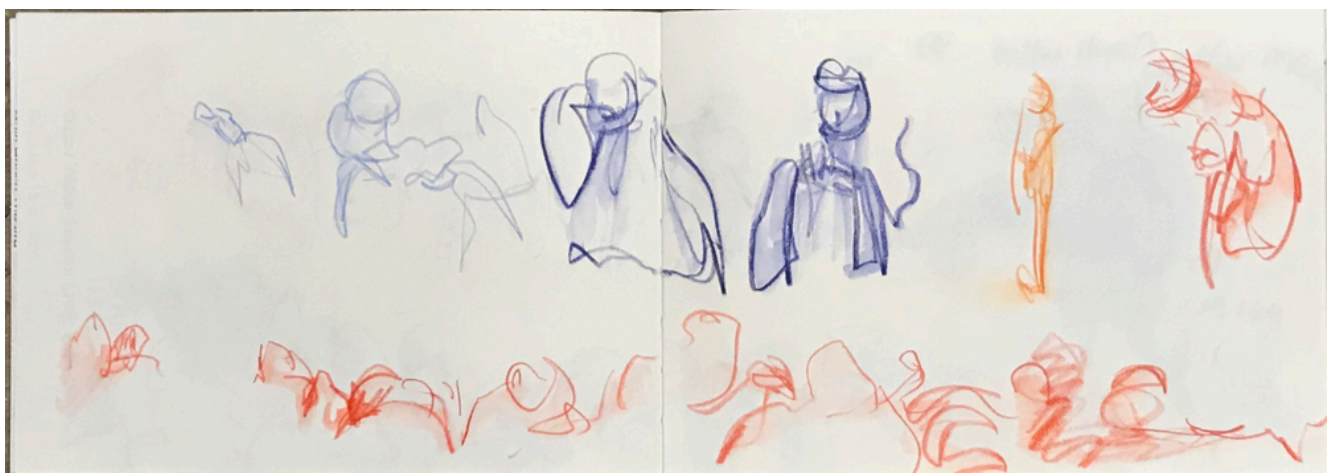Drawing actors on screen and the audience in the dark

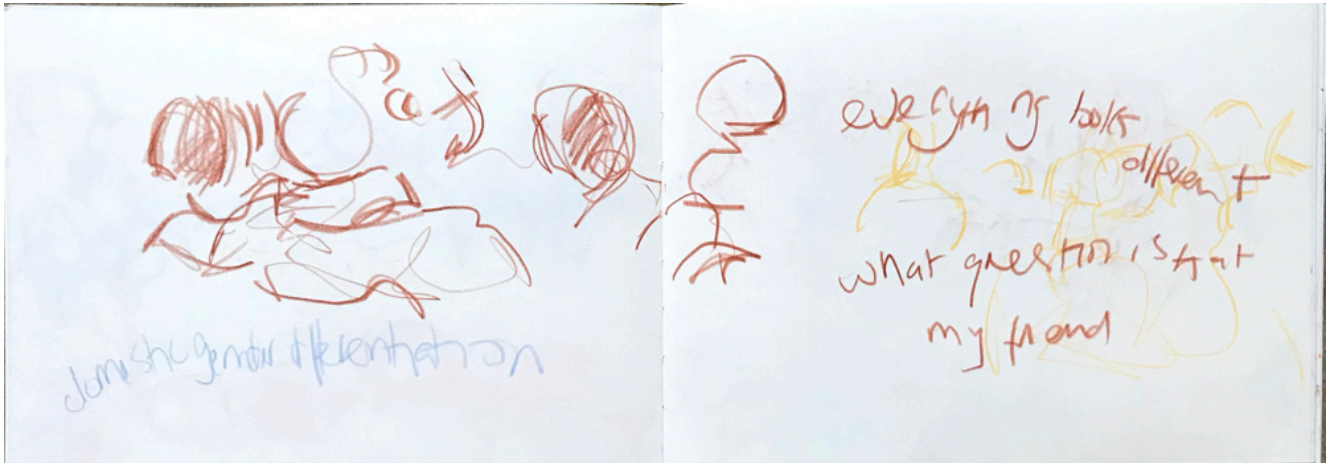'Star Wars: The Last Jedi'

'Lady Windermere's Fan'

'Lady Windermere's Fan'

'Lady Windermere's Fan'. I added the tone afterwards, as the pencils I'd been using were water-soluble
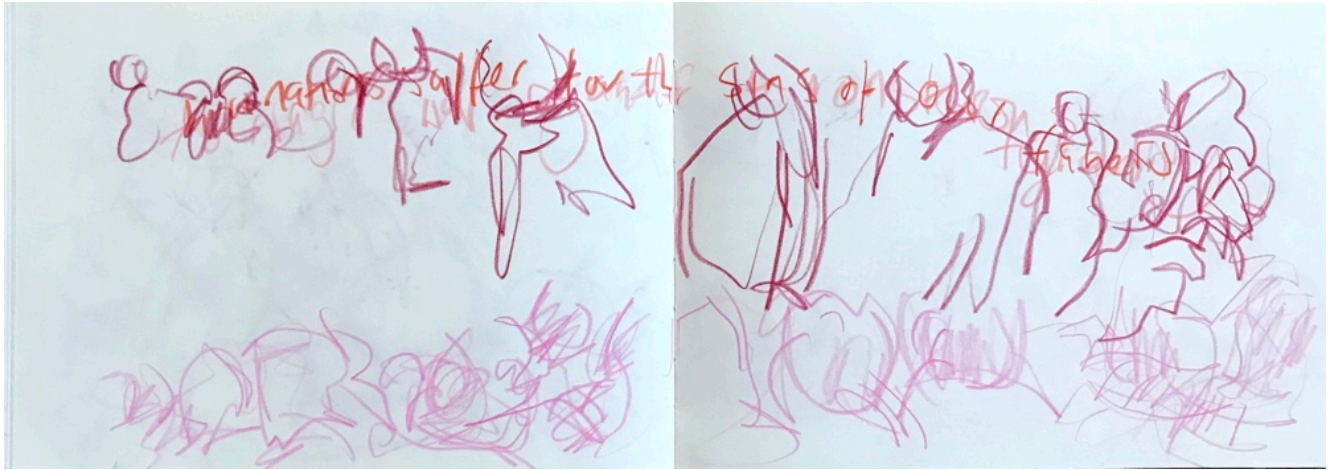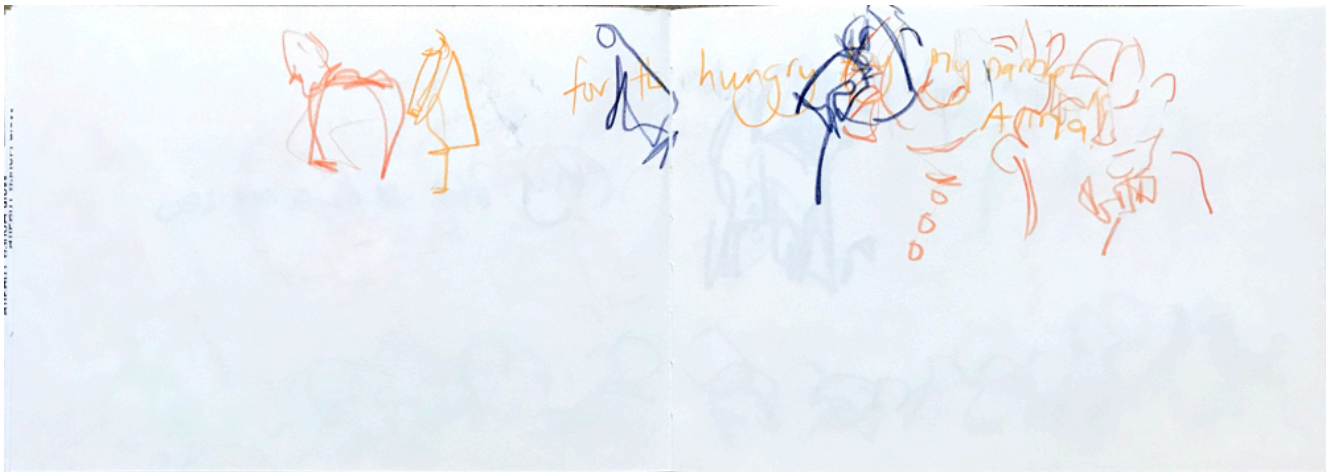
'Lady Windermere's Fan'

'The Party'

Sometimes, the marks become very layered: 'Darkest Hour'

'Darkest Hour'

'Phantom Thread'

'Molly's Game'

'Molly's Game'

Reflecting on the Process

Drawing in the dark means having no idea what's happening on the sketchbook page but it's quite exhilarating taking the risk and I enjoy the anticipation of finding out what I've been thinking, about what I've been seeing. The drawings look like a collection of hieroglyphics and probably don't mean much to anyone else but I love the energy and random colour combinations and the feeling that I'm looking at something that is talking to me on an subconscious level. The text too is unlike my everyday handwriting and seems in character with the drawing marks.

The process has revealed to me a more 'true' drawing language that I can access if I stop worrying about the drawing or trying to edit whilst I draw. And whilst quite a few pages look a bit chaotic, I have been surprised by how balanced some of the pages have been in terms of composition: line/marks against negative space. Many of the marks I have recorded have a freedom and character that I trying to incorporate into my other drawings, a visual language that prioritises seeing and enjoyment in the dialogue between my eye/hand, the object and the drawing.'

Sketchbook drawing of a stormy day

This is a sample of a resource created by UK Charity AccessArt. We have over 1500 resources to help develop and inspire your creative thinking, practice and teaching.

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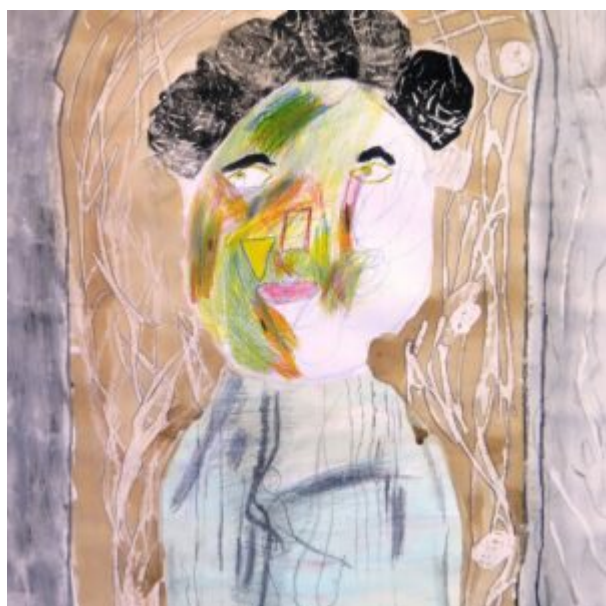
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Taking on the Inktober Challenge

Artist Morag Thompson Merriman taking on the Inktober Challenge and generously shares her process with AccessArt.

Three Approaches to Drawing

Melissa Pierce Murray proposes three approaches to challenge habitual ways of drawing by expanding the repertoire of marks and approaches.

Modelling the Head in Clay Part 2 — Preparations

This post looks at two preparations for making a clay head: drawing to help us learn to see the form in the round, and taking measurements from life.
This is the second post in a series of resources showing how teenagers modelled a clay head over the course of a term.

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How to Make Beautiful, Liquid Drawings Inspired by Degas

This resource looks at drawings by the French artist, Edgar Degas (1834-1917), and how to enable the production of beautiful, 'inky drawings' in the classroom. This resource was created in collaboration with AccessArt and the Fitzwilliam Museum, Cambridge.

Making Monotypes Inspired by Degas

This resource shares how Edgar Degas made his 'inky drawings,' or monotypes, and how the process of mono-printing can be further explored in the classroom — In collaboration with the Fitzwilliam Museum, Cambridge

Sensing Form: Using Feel to Manipulate Clay with Linda Green

Magnets and Forces

Secondary school students are likely to study properties of magnets in their science classes, but in this workshop, artist Melissa Pierce Murray, encourages teenagers to explore playful and aesthetic responses to magnets, rather than analytic and quantifiable ones. Using artistic and scientific approaches together aid in developing curiosity and imagination.

Explore and Draw

Watercolour Portrait

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Continuous Line Drawing Exercise

Many thanks to AccessArt Young Artist Alex Tunstall for composing the music for the video in the Continuous Line Drawing Resource.

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