

ISSUES AND IDEAS

- The essence of art is expression—transforming ideas, experience, and thoughts into an art form.
- Fine art is artwork created for its own sake. Applied art is artwork created for an outside, often commercial, purpose.
- Through artistic expression, we can communicate thoughts and feelings to others.
- Part of the learning process in art involves openness to the ideas and insights others have about our work and practice in forming ideas about the work of other artists.

THE GROUP CRITIQUE

Forming an Opinion

One of the most important opportunities for the exchange of ideas in drawing class is the group critique. The term “critique” might suggest an emphasis on negative criticism, but the point is to identify positive qualities and possibilities in a drawing as much as aspects that need improvement. Group critiques can take many forms, from short, informal discussion of classroom work in progress (Figure 1.5) to extended reviews of finished projects conducted in an exhibition-like setting. Their common feature is that *everyone* is expected to look hard at the work presented and



Figure 1.5 Critique in progress

verbalize their feelings and thoughts about it. This is distinct from a review in which the instructor does all the talking. Certainly, your teacher can be expected to take the lead in proposing specific lines of discussion for the critique or in making sure the talk stays on track. The most important necessity for this particular exercise however, is for you, the student, to be involved as completely as possible.

A common misconception is that the chief point of a critique is to pass judgment on the work presented. There could be some value or fairness in acknowledging that someone put in a great deal of effort on an assignment or accomplished something very skillfully. The real point, however, is to dig deeper, to gain an understanding of *why* a drawing is powerful or moving in some way, or to suggest stronger emphasis of a given quality.

Instead of simply saying, “I like (or don’t like) this drawing,” try to ask yourself why. The critique process should be one of analyzing your ideas, thoughts, and feelings, clarifying and giving depth to your response.

One of the wonderful things about drawing as an art form is the way in which many different interpretations of a given piece can coexist as appropriate responses to the work. Personal associations of shape, varying response to mark or texture, diverse connections with outside cultural precedents or individual experience can all affect the way a work is perceived by a viewer. It is impossible for any artist to understand all these factors at once while focusing on his or her own conceptual and expressive goals. Still, if you accept that art is at least partially about communication, you must

broaden your understanding about the varied experiences that others will bring to a work of art that you create. Critique is an excellent time to hear about the effect that your work is having on other people.

The first thing you may notice before the critique even begins is that your drawing looks different on the wall in front of the class than it did in your workspace. The classroom studio is most likely larger and brighter, and your drawing will probably seem much smaller and could lose the intensity of contrast it seemed to have when you were working on it. You can anticipate or counteract this effect while you work by looking at your drawing-in-progress under different light: in the hallway or even outside.

The most important change in your sense of the drawing in the classroom, however, will probably be due to the sudden comparison with the work of other students in the class and the awareness that other people are looking at your creation. This is a fascinating, if daunting, effect and could allow you to see your work in a new way even before the talking begins. Make a few notes on your first reaction, both weaknesses and strengths. It will be interesting to compare these notes with the comments of others as the critique progresses and to have these quick insights at your disposal when you get back to your own studio.

Responding to the Work of Others

As the critique begins, it is just as important to concentrate on understanding and expressing your reaction to the works of others as it is to hear their response to your work. This goes beyond simple fairness or giving everyone in the class his or her time in the "spotlight." Being vocal in critiques in a thoughtful way is actually something that you are doing *for your own good*; one of the best ways to develop a firmer understanding of drawing as an art form is to analyze other people's work.

It is difficult for anyone to be objective about his or her own drawings. Often you have spent so much time wrestling with one aspect of a given work that the overall effect has drifted from your

thoughts. Perhaps you have personal knowledge of some aspect of the subject matter that is affecting the way you think about the piece, but it is not apparent to others.

In any case, it is much easier to *objectively* respond to someone else's drawing and so come to understand how certain structures or marks could be perceived if you were to use them in your own work. Critiquing the work of others is a way to assemble a vocabulary of visual possibilities for your own use and to practice visual analysis so that you can more effectively make decisions while you are at work.

Practicing Directed Looking

The first step in a critical analysis of a drawing is, of course, to look. Sometimes the artist mentions some things about the conditions of creation of the piece such as aspects of the subject matter or the reasoning behind the choice of media or format. Other times during a critique, the class will simply confront the work on the wall, letting the drawing "speak" for itself. In any case, when the time comes to actually respond to the work, you should practice **directed looking**. This simply means concentrating on absorbing the visual impact of the piece. Everyone in the class will have a slightly different approach or angle of entry into the work, and this difference is entirely positive. Varying points of view are in fact the point of the critique, and no one should be nervous about seeing the piece "wrongly." There is not really a wrong way to see.

Instead, the goal is for you to open yourself to your own feelings and reactions as you look at the work. You may have to force yourself a bit. Perhaps you find the work initially uninteresting. This, in itself, is an important aspect of your reaction because one of the principal functions of artwork is to interest a potential viewer. Still, addressing a work in critique is different than looking at art in the outside world; you are all there to help one another. You should give the work a while to sink in. Try to gauge what the artist's intentions were. If the artist gives an introduction to the piece, factor those remarks against what you see going on in the work.

The most difficult part of directed looking is understanding your own reactions. The best way is to start simply: What do you see in the drawing, or more particularly, what do you notice? Visual emphasis is one of the most important aspects of drawing and art in general. Because multiple qualities often coexist within a work of art, emphasizing a certain aspect of the drawing is usually important in clarifying the point of the image. In the end, the most noticeable quality of the artwork should have a strong relationship to the point of the piece.

Ultimately you should compare the stated intentions of the artist with your first impressions to gauge the effectiveness of the work. The process of directed looking could be divided into three steps. You can go through these steps when you first sit down in front of the work, before discussion begins.

1. Immediate impact: How does the work strike you visually? What seem to be the artist's priorities based on the choices of mark, medium, subject, and composition?
2. Evidence of stated purpose: Based on your knowledge of the assignment, or the stated priorities of the artist, can you begin to follow a line of thought or find a sense of purpose in the piece?
3. Analysis of particulars: If you have found a clear expressive direction in the work, how do the various choices made by the artist support or detract from this direction.

Some visual qualities that could dominate your first reaction include these:

Shape character or arrangement
 Movement of your eye through the composition
 Graphic pattern
 Depth or spatial illusion
 Illusion of solid form and surface
 Light situation or atmosphere
 Color or tonal usage
 Texture of the surface, use of materials
 Compositional balance or imbalance
 Overall mood: quiet or aggressive
 Point of view

In addition, you might have an immediate reaction to the subject matter or imagery. Aspects of your reaction might include the following:

Associations of personal memory or familiarity
 Associations of culture: references or echoes from art history or popular culture
 Reactions to the meaning of gestures or facial expressions
 Psychological implications of point of view or compositional placement
 Narrative implied by figures, spaces, or abstract relationships of form
 Free associations or unexplainable reactions
 Connection with previous work by the artist or someone else in the class
 A sense of the artist's process, spontaneous or planned

We will explore all these factors for drawing in greater depth in later chapters of this book.

ISSUES AND IDEAS

- Critique is a discussion in which participants compare their reactions to the artwork presented in order to clarify its meaning or expressive impact.
- Forming a thoughtful opinion about the work of others can give you excellent insight into issues in your own work.
- Directed looking means analyzing your reactions to a drawing in relation to the artist's intentions and specific qualities that are present in the work.

Verbalizing

Once the class has “taken in” the work for a while, someone, often the instructor, starts the discussion. Perhaps the instructor would like the critique to center on a particular theme or issue in relation to the drawing at hand. You can compare your first reactions to the work with this theme or with the remarks made by others as they come up. At this point, you should begin to practice verbalizing your thoughts.

Verbal thought is a particular characteristic of human beings. Certainly everyone also has nonverbal thoughts, but the particular advantage of verbal thought is that it is a bit more definite, recordable, and communicable. You could find that trying to clearly verbalize the thoughts you have about a drawing helps you to understand the actual nature of your initial, visually based reactions. This should be a multistep process. First, try to think of some terms that might help you characterize an aspect of your reaction to the work (see the following section Using Specialized Vocabulary) and weave them into sentence form. Repeat the sentence to yourself silently and “listen” to it; try to assess the effectiveness with which it conveys your feelings. It is usually most productive to frame your ideas in a positive manner. Even if your reaction to the drawing has to do with a certain weakness, try to address it in terms of a potential quality that could be improved.

When you are ready, raise your hand and speak. The first few times you do this can be embarrassing, but it will get easier. Remember that no one is so convinced of the rightness of his or her own opinions to feel completely sure that yours are wrong.

It is important to track the reactions to your comment from the other participants. If you are contradicted, try to understand the point the other person is making and compare it with your own thinking. If other members of the class pick up your idea and elaborate on it or confirm it, this can add to your confidence in analyzing future works. The point is to build a web of communication between the drawing on the wall, your comments, and the comments of others that will ultimately solidify your own ability to understand the way in which works of art can function.

Extending the Thread of Discussion

You should feel comfortable with the idea of expressing almost any opinion or feeling during the critique. Your class discussions can have a particular character based on the teacher’s approach, but it could also be interesting for you to raise issues or ideas you are learning in other courses: history, literature; three-dimensional design, science, or math. However, because the critique usually has a time limit and some dominant theme in relation to the assignment or topic of the day, you should remember that everyone else is following a particular line of thought in relation to the work on the wall. Your comments should extend that line of thinking or adjust it rather than coming from a completely irrelevant angle. If you feel strongly that the discussion is ignoring something important about the piece, then by all means say so.

Do not worry or be intimidated by students with more experience in drawing or verbalization than you have; learn from them. You can advance your own knowledge and abilities most quickly by absorbing and analyzing the ideas and approaches of your peers.

Using Specialized Vocabulary

The most important qualities your remarks in critique can have are clarity and sincerity. If you are honest about what you are seeing in the work and organize your words simply, they will be of greater help to the student who did the drawing.

Often, however, aspects of your reaction to a given piece will be difficult to explain in everyday language. Art criticism has a specialized vocabulary that has developed and changed over the years to facilitate discussion and understanding. Knowledge of these phrases and the concepts behind them can expand your understanding of the components of art and make your comments more comprehensible to others.

Of course, it is important to truly grasp the meaning of a phrase before you use it rather than just repeating something you have heard. Do not hesitate to question a word used by another stu-

dent or your instructor. A definition understood in common by all members of the class will help the effectiveness of the critique.

This book includes a glossary consisting of words, phrases, and concepts that are particularly relevant to different components of drawing. Bold words in each chapter are listed in this glossary. As you read, study these terms in relation to the illustrations in the text, the concept presented, and the exercises and assignments. Art vocabulary has varying levels of complexity, including words borrowed from other languages. It is not really important to use words for their own sake, but for the simplicity and clarity of reference they provide. It is best to rely on words you feel comfortable with rather than adopting a particular jargon to attain an air of sophistication. Remember that the guiding principle should be honesty and clear expression of your feelings and observations.

A brief list of general terms with some synonymous variations follows. You can also make your own list in your sketchbook from new words you encounter in discussions or in readings.

Abstract: Removed from incidental reality. Abstract thought involves general concepts; abstract form is simplified or distilled from real-world objects; abstraction can also be based on specific principles such as geometry.

Aesthetic: Having to do with appreciation of beauty or other sensual visual qualities.

Arbitrary: Based on free choice, unconnected with any restrictions; capricious.

Composition: The arrangement of shapes and lines on the page (two-dimensional composition) or, in drawing, of implied three-dimensional forms in space (in drawing, implied three-dimensional composition); also a drawing or image as in "a narrative composition."

Conceptual: Having to do with a governing idea or philosophy.

Drawing: The art form primarily concerned with marks on paper; also the organization of mark, edge, and form as they might occur in painting or other art forms, as in "this painting has drawing problems."

Dynamism: Energy; a sense of directed compositional movement; emotional or creative excitement (adjective: dynamic).

Element: A unit of form, such as a mark, shape, line; a basic aspect of approach, as in a narrative element.

Focus: Emphasis; the quality of being organized around a goal or sense of purpose; also a quality of sharpness of definition (or blurriness in "soft" focus).

Form: An element, graphic or with implied physicality, as in "solid form"; the quality inherent in a form, as in "the sense of form."

Formal: Having to do with the character or relationships of form as a chief priority, as in "this composition has a formal clarity."

Formalism: A school of aesthetic theory placing the highest priority on relationships of basic form.

Format: The dimensions of the picture plane or another overall aspect of an artwork; the means of presentation or basic medium of an artwork.

Gesture: A mark made with energy and direction; the quality of movement or direction in a whole composition or in a figure; also an artistic statement, usually bold, forceful, or especially public.

Graphic: Pertaining to flat shape, line, and two-dimensional composition; also means vivid or hyperclear.

Loose: Open, unresolved; can be positive (free, dynamic) or negative (sloppy, unclear).

Medium: The specific materials of an artwork or art form such as graphite, ink, or charcoal.

Objective reaction: Emotionally distanced reaction; matter-of-fact or reasoned analysis.

Open up: To stretch out, aerate, or free up; back away from resolution; move toward implication rather than definition; extend outward as in "the looseness of mark opens up the composition on the left."

Picture plane: The flat or two-dimensional surface of a drawing; the conceptual two-dimensional field; the imaginary "glass"

through which we perceive space in an illusionistic drawing.

Realism: A quality or expressive priority pertaining to the everyday world; in drawing, often used to refer to illusionistic qualities of solid form, textural surface, space, and light.

Relationship: The interconnection of elements within a picture or on the picture plane.

Resolve: To define, finish, balance, or clarify as in "the composition is resolved by this adjustment of relationships"; focused, as in "highly resolved detail" (noun: resolution).

Stasis: Lack of movement, deadness, heaviness (adjective: static).

Subjective reaction: Intuitive or emotional response based on personal knowledge or associations.

Tension: Dynamic opposition or balance between unlike or separate elements; a principle of dynamic composition.

Tight: Highly resolved: can be positive (clear) or negative (static).

Trompe l'oeil: French for "fool the eye," refers to a complete realistic illusion.

Unity (of an artwork): Expressive coherence or clarity; wholeness; a unified artwork "works well as a whole"; Gestalt (a German word referring to a whole greater than the sum of its parts).

Weight: Significance or emphasis as in "a composition weighted to the left"; also the quality or implication of heaviness in form or of thickness in line as in "line weight."

ISSUES AND IDEAS

- Verbalizing your thoughts, in your own mind or aloud to others, can clarify your immediate reactions to the work in a critique.
- A good critique often features a thread of discussion or line of thought about the work on the wall, but diverse comments are also important. Honesty and sincerity are of greatest importance.
- A working knowledge of terms specific to the discussion of art can greatly aid your ability to communicate your feelings to others in critique.

Responding to Criticism of Your Work

Although the larger part of a critique will most likely consist of discussing the work of other people, you will certainly be most concerned when your turn comes around. It is natural to be wary of criticism directed at your work. If you have truly devoted yourself to the task of creative expression, the resulting drawing will have more than a little bit of yourself in it. A public discussion of its deficiencies or even of its merits can be embarrassing or even annoying. Remember that it is the drawing that is being discussed, not you. Try to create a lit-

tle distance between yourself and the work, difficult though it may be.

Looking at your own work in a critique is a vital step in moving it toward full realization as art. The best spirit in which to accept criticism is as a practical acknowledgement of the link between appreciation of an artwork by others and its full existence as a communicative work.

Talking and Listening

Oddly enough, the least important time to talk during critique could be when your own drawing is

the subject of discussion. You might be asked to give a brief overview of your goals or process, but it is best to keep your remarks fairly brief; the class should be responding as directly as possible to the experience of looking at the work. If you feel, after a few minutes, that something is missing from the group's understanding of your intentions, it could be appropriate to explain what you were trying to do, especially if you did not introduce the piece in the beginning. Do not make excuses or be overly defensive. You want the rest of the students to concentrate on what they are seeing on the paper rather than on what you are saying.

The way to make the best use of this process is often just to listen. After all, you have already put a great deal into the discussion—the drawing itself. Pay attention to all comments; sometimes the most interesting or relevant remarks come from quiet members of the class. In some ways, it is best for you to fade into the background a bit. Do not cut people off with an immediate, unconsidered, or defensive response. It is in your best interest to encourage everyone to be open and honest in his or her remarks. You should not interpret anything as a personal judgment, but as a potentially useful insight. Defensiveness is counterproductive and suggests immaturity.

Try not to make any disclaimers, such as “I was bored doing this drawing.” A comment like this—however much it might seem to lessen your responsibility for anything wrong with the work—will make the rest of the class feel foolish

for taking the work seriously and immediately derail the discussion. The drawing could be more effective than you think it is, and you can gain new insight from the unexpected appreciation of the class. Remember that there will be aspects of drawing that will be new to you throughout your time in the class. You could very well find new, completely legitimate ways to look at your own drawings and entirely new criteria for defining a successful image. The best outcome of a critique of your work is to help you step beyond what you already know and are comfortable with. This is how you will truly learn and grow.

Taking Notes

Taking notes throughout a critique is an excellent idea and not only when your own work is the subject of discussion. It is easy to forget what was said in a critique, and jotting down a few brief keywords can help you recall an important point later. If you note the speaker of each comment, you can even continue the discussion with them after class. Similarly, the names of relevant artists, art movements, or other cultural references could come up in the critique, particularly in the instructor's remarks. It can be enormously helpful to do follow-up research later in the library, or online, to connect with professional work that could ease your access to qualities you are seeking in your work, or ideas that will expand or deepen your understanding.

ISSUES AND IDEAS

- You should not take discussion of your drawing in a critique as personal criticism.
- When your drawing is under discussion, your goal should be to gain new insights about it.
- Limit your own comments to those that could help the class understand what you were trying to achieve. Do not make excuses or negative assessments of your own efforts.
- Keep track of the comments offered by others, and review them later while reassessing your work.