

Drawing People in Motion

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Pencil > Pen > Brush Pen > Color



What is the fastest, most reliable method of sketching people on the street? Given that they don't hold still for you, and might get up and leave at any time? I use a four step method that helps me get things down as quickly as possible, and gives me the best chance to (accurately) finish later, if I lose my subject part way through.

- 1 The Gesture aka "The Ball of String":** An instantaneous "single" line capturing volume, posture, costume hints, and narrative. A gesture should be so fast, you can capture any subject, no matter how active. The gesture is only a guide - don't worry about facial features or details, just get the proportions - the volume the figure occupies - and the 'acting' - the essential bits of the story.
- 2 Line Drawing:** Draw in pen right on top of the pencil gesture. Your subject is probably walking away about now, unless you've chosen someone who can't escape. (Workers are good, street performers, people playing sports). Don't copy the gesture - improve on it. Add smaller detail, let the line work be rhythmic and free.
- 3 Spotting Blacks:** Use darks to attract the eye and to 'ground' objects with tiny cast shadows. They indicate volume, weight, and contact with a surface. Darks should cluster around the area of interest and fade out to the edges. The eye goes to the areas of darkest dark. Once you have a solid drawing, you can go back and erase some of the pencil for a cleaner looking drawing.

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Color at last!: The drawing comes alive when you add color. It's best to get it all in one sitting - but if your subject is long gone, you can add color washes at home or while relaxing in the café. Rely on your memory combined with the structural drawing, and just have fun with the color.



Storytelling License:

These are from an afternoon sketching at a graffiti festival. I added this design when I got home, based on my section of the collaborative mural.

Yes - that's not entirely drawing from observation - but this is the kind of story element that I feel is worth going back for. Maybe it would be an architectural backdrop from the location, or just clouds in the sky. If you need it - add it. Just be true to the story you found and it's still reportage.



I just use regular ballpoint pens for the line work.



Work in Progress:

Keep moving around the area getting the best angles. When you see a great pose, pencil it down. If they move, sometimes you can move too and restore the view. Also: think about the page layout. Add smaller figures or portraits to vary the scale of elements. Give the page a strong direction - a path to lead the eye.



Sketch people when they're doing something interesting:

It's always better when there's a story to tell. You can add props, the tools they are using, or distinctive gestures, and have a whole story in moments. You don't even need a background - no time for it anyway :)

I like 0.7mm mechanical pencils - they're a little bolder, and the lead doesn't break as often.

This lady wandered off - but another guy with the same hipster hat showed up. You can often finish a person by combining a second passerby.

This is the new 'tourist with camera' pose.

This guy holds his brush like a prison smoker. Gangster style.

Tracing is freedom:

The second time you draw the figures, you can be expressive with the line. Let it flow, let it break, leave gaps. Emphasize curves and angles. You can be fearless, because you have your pencil gesture for the guide. Get the things like the tread under the shoes - belt loops, sandal straps, clothing logos - stuff you can't be bogged down drawing in the gesture.

At first your gestures won't have enough information. Don't worry - it will come with practice. Just try to get the posture, and the 'acting'. What are hands doing, where is the person looking, shape of hair mass, do they have a coat collar or bag? The tilt of head says a lot. Look for character traits that say who this person is.

I use a Pentel GFKP brush pen for the dark accents. It has a fiberglass brush tip that's superior to any others I've tried. Almost as good as a real brush.

Like her neon green thong peeking out - I'm sorry, I had to draw it in. It speaks to character :)

See how much her hair improved after the spot blacks?

A paint cup blew over, bounced off this guy's head, then plopped right on his phone. There was cursing and blaming other artists. Good thing I had the gesture done.

Ideally, you have a sketchbook with paper that can handle some washes. Stillman and Birn make the best I've found, or Moleskine has a nice watercolor book, and their basic sketchbook is fine too - if you don't mind the beige paper color.

Adding Watercolor Washes

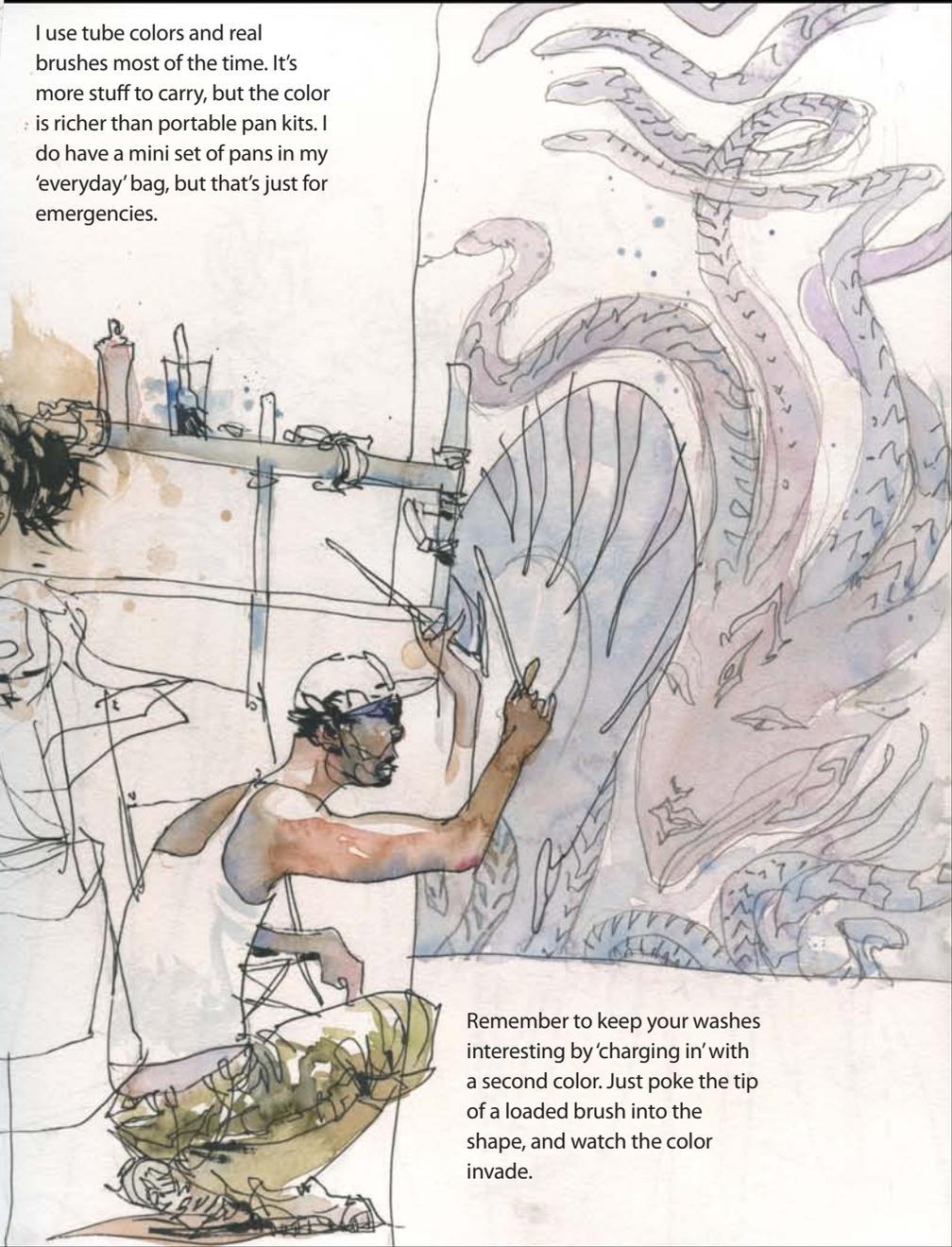
I use tube colors and real brushes most of the time. It's more stuff to carry, but the color is richer than portable pan kits. I do have a mini set of pans in my 'everyday' bag, but that's just for emergencies.



To get a dot of pigment to bloom, the paper should be damp (not soaked), and the 'touch' needs to be a rich mix - not too watery. Stronger pigment invades weaker. (The green thong again).

You can use clear water to 'pull' pigment out of a wet stroke into dry areas - useful to soften in one edge direction.

Remember to keep your washes interesting by 'charging in' with a second color. Just poke the tip of a loaded brush into the shape, and watch the color invade.





If you use lots of water, the color dries lighter. To get a 'solid' stroke, mix it more creamy in consistency.



Pigment pools and makes dark edges around wet-on-dry strokes. It's a nice quality - you can use it to emphasize form - it worked out on this fellow's tricep.

Flesh Tones:
I'm using little areas of viridian, yellow ocher, cadmium red and burnt sienna - touched with cerulean blue for some excitement.



Color is the fun part: Don't try too hard to be accurate. Feel free to bleed outside the drawing or leave little white shapes. Let some edges melt - when wet touches wet, strokes creep into each other. If you have a strong drawing, you can get away with anything at the color stage.

Hope you enjoyed **Drawing People in Motion**



Maybe you'll be interested in a little video of these sketches coming to life?

[Watch the Video Clip](#)

I've been wanting to make a free PDF download for a while. Just to gauge the interest level in the sketching community.

This one is for my class at the 2013 Urban Sketchers symposium. I figured I might as well share it with everyone who can't make it to Barcelona.

Please don't make commercial use of these notes or sketches - but feel free to share the file with friends, use it in your own classrooms, or even post it on your sketch blogs - as long as you don't mind pointing people back to my own site:

CitizenSketcher.com

If you found this helpful, or have any questions, or just want to say 'hey' - feel free to mail me at: [marc.taro \(at\) gmail.com](mailto:marc.taro@gmail.com)

If you're interested in some more advanced examples of spontaneous sketching from life, here's an article about my sketching project at the Centaur Theatre in Montreal.

[The Innocence Lost Production Diary](#)

Thanks!
~Marc

