

Essay

## Drawings as contemplations past and present

**Kelly Chorpening**

Camberwell College of Arts

Key words: drawing, observation, medical artist, anatomy, pathology

These two drawings were made during visits to the Gordon Museum of Pathology, located on Guy's campus near London Bridge. For years, I have organised an extracurricular module, 'anatomy for artists', for Camberwell College of Arts Fine Art students, run by Eleanor Crook, the artist in residence at the Gordon.

She introduces students to the history of medical ethics and teaches human anatomy through drawing from the collection, and in the nearby King's Dissecting Room. For these students, the module sits in contrast to their otherwise open-ended, self-directed art education. Instead, they discover that gaining an understanding of human anatomy requires objectivity, informed observation and practised, technical accuracy.

At the same time, and I would say of equal importance, the experience provides a profoundly personal confrontation with disease and death. In these sessions, I am more a fellow participant than an educator; there to draw and connect with others through the shared intensity of the situation. When I view work made in these sessions, I not only recall the subject, but the sounds, the smells and the conversations as we, together, tried to make sense of it all. My favourite drawings from the Dissecting Room cannot be shared publicly for ethical reasons. Instead, I am sharing drawings made from the Gordon Museum's collection of wax models created by Joseph Towne (1808-1879).

The specimens are in excellent condition; a 3D catalogue of hundreds of various skin pathologies he recorded as Guy's wax modeller for over a 53-year period. Towne created most of the models from living subjects, many with extremely painful and disfiguring conditions. As an artist, I try and imagine him having to scrutinise individuals at close range, people who certainly would have suffered, not just from physical discomfort, but from Towne's unflinching attention to their appearance.

Whereas for me, with the distance of time, sat studying the wax likeness, I can take some amusement from the macabre way specimens are displayed as fragments: heads, arms and feet in jars. And yet my aim for these drawings is to treat these subjects with sensitivity. In late afternoon, I capture the way light falls across form to reveal the ravages of disease. In this moment, I feel connected to Towne, to the individuals he sculpted, and to the students I am sharing this experience with; a moment that is incredibly grounding, both as an artist, and as a human being.



