Symbols in Sketchbooks

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SYMBOLS IN
SKETCHBOOKS
Diana Rice
**ABSTRACT:**

My installation is an expression of the sketchbook in the sense that it is an object bound by time. Specifically, it is the assemblage of time, cognition, and the materiality of the sketchbook. The installation consists of various sized papers interlinked by tied thread. On the papers are drawings and sketches arranged in proximity to other sketches that are the inspiration or iteration of one another. Thus, a web of evolution is created. This project is an exploration of how images are created and evolved, such as symbols, and how the material construction and physical presentation of the installation affects content of the drawings and overall concept of the evolution of the drawing. This essay draws upon Rachel Z. Delue’s writing about the diaries and work of artist Arthur Dove and Emily Dickinson’s Gorgeous Nothings to explore concepts of assemblage, the cognition of the creative mind, and materiality.
SYMBOLS IN SKETCHBOOKS

My installation is made up of 4.5 x 6.5” papers, a standard postcard size. From this standard size I doubled and halved these measurements and to create a variation in scale that would fit together in a custom grid. I started from a postcard size because I wanted the piece to have a relatable and tactile feeling to it. Postcards are made at a standard size because they are easy to hold in the hand and large enough to showcase an image and writing. They are also common enough that one knows the general size of a postcard. This familiarity allows the viewer to make a more personal connection to the piece since they are used to transmit the writers experiences. The installation is a visual diary in this way, a sprawled sketchbook taking a new form.

In total, I custom cut over 140 papers. I chose these papers to be of different colors like cream, white, gray, warm gray, tan, and other natural colors. I wanted the viewer to pay attention to the materiality of the paper, for it to have a presence in the final piece, but not to be too distracting as to compete with the drawings or the piece as a whole. No drawing, big or small, is a focal point more than any other. Of course, there is a natural hierarchy according to scale, value, color, and other factors. For example, a larger sized paper with high contrast and bright color will be more of a focal point than a small, low contrast and subdued colored drawing. However, overall, the goal was to allow the drawings to work together to create many areas of focus rather than the viewer focusing on just one area.

In the beginning of this project, I set out to investigate how a symbol is created, a symbol being a type of “sign” that has no visual relation to what it is signifying. Something like a chemical hazard sign. This quickly became the secondary focus to that of the form. This shift spurred
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the realization that form is the thing that has the greatest impact on the creation of symbols in my own personal practice, meaning the surface I create on and media I create with often drive the creation of the “symbols” more than pure imagination does. This happens in conjunction with the idea of “evolution.” When I sit down to create a drawing, I will look at my previous drawings for inspiration, but I will also look to the qualities of the paper in front of me: dimensions, texture, color, scale, etc. How do I fit this symbol on this paper differently? How does the color and texture change the media I use on it? Does the scale and subject matter interact in a new way? If not, how can I make them interact differently?

Symbols are not pictures; they are meant to be seen in full form. If you cut off a symbol, you may lose some of its meaning. In this sense, symbols take on a sort of pseudo-object quality. In some of my drawings I would start with a real “object”: a package, flower, hand, face, etc. Then sometimes this object would evolve into symbolic images, and then further down the line it might evolve into a symbol that feels like it no longer represents the object it came from but still possesses its visual qualities. This specific way of evolving the symbol retains the sense that the symbol is an object, and ties back into the concept that form dictates imagery.

The specific drawings I created within the piece are not what I am particularly interested in, but rather the kind of conceptual leaps I was able to make based upon this method of compilation. This method was developed because of how I would pin my drawings to my studio wall. I would often think of new ideas by looking at my drawings side by side and create new ones from this comparison. For example, I might start with a very “real” thing, like a flower or plant, and then I would think about the shape of the petals, or the geometry of the petals and create a new drawing based on those elements. Then, based on those drawings, I might refine the drawing down to those basic components even more, creating an even more exaggerated geometry, and in this sense creating a symbol that takes on a new meaning. Maybe it started as a flower but turned into a symbol about taking up space. The drawing progressed like this until I had a big web of sketches that were interconnected to one another. My installation is a re-
finement of this process put in a viewable form for gallery spaces. Because of this refinement, I was able to slow down my comparisons, investigate why I was making these connections, and make more nuanced choices moving forward.

I chose to make my project an installation, meaning it is in the gallery space rather than displayed on a wall. The audience is encouraged to walk around the piece to view both the front and back. I did this because I wanted areas of rest (the blankness of the backsides of the drawings) and for the paper and construction to become the subject matter rather than the drawing. There are groupings of drawings that relate to one another in some way, whether it is visually inspired by, an iteration of, or a conceptual leap from one idea to another. When I found that there were no more drawings for a grouping, I would attach the next group of drawings to the first grouping so that the papers were facing opposite directions on the front and back of the piece. This is what allows for the areas of rest and creates organic boarders around groupings of drawings and moments.

In the areas of rest the methods of construction are highlighted because the connection points are one of the few elements to look at. I wanted the construction of the piece to be a part of the piece rather than an unfortunate necessity of the craftsmanship that needed to be hidden. The papers are attached together with a natural cotton thread and tied off visibly on the front sides of the drawings. The choice to tie the thread on the front sides of the piece means that there is a dialogue with the content of the drawings, so, because of this choice the attachments take on content: construction, craftsmanship, monotony, repetition, assemblage. If the visible tie happened on the backsides of the drawings, they might feel like an unfortunate necessity and that the drawings are the main and only interest of the work. I would reiterate that the blank space’s purpose in highlighting the construction only benefits from this because it creates a more nuanced contrast between blank and drawn spaces.

As well as emphasizing the contrast between blank and drawn spaces, the tying of the thread on the drawn sides of the papers also draws the viewers’ attention to the laborious aspect of the installation. There is
no intent to hide the construction, so the labor behind the construction is going to become a part of the installation. This relates back to the idea of the installation being an object bound by time. Depending on its placement, each paper is tied anywhere from 2 to 8 times, but most being 6-8 times. There are hundreds of ties. Tying a knot is a very familiar action, an action that nearly everyone understands, so, the construction is relatable, and thus, so is the labor and time spent compiling it.

I would often find myself breaking conventions when following this thought process for a while. For example, drawing right on the edge of the paper and emphasizing these contentious meeting points. I was taught to avoid this, but I was drawn to do it repeatedly, and it even became a main interest in my paintings on canvas. I think this interest arises from a couple of reasons. One is that in creating an installation where drawings are attached to one another to create one huge work, the idea of “edge” is blurred. Another is that I am drawn to making the drawing feel more like an object or emphasizing its materiality via the drawing. The example of drawing up to the edge of the paper emphasizes the paper as an object because the drawing is adhering to one of the qualities that make the paper an object- the fact that it has an edge or an ending. The form (an installation of papers) dictated the kind of drawings I made within the piece.

This piece does not exist in one final form. It exists more as an idea that can be replicated, re-explored, and continued. My intention is to continue this piece by adding drawings along the bottom edge. This means that the piece has a beginning edge and ending edge. The top edge is straight, communicating that there is no growth this way. The bottom edge undulates with each added drawing, there will never be a straight edge here until there is intention of “finishing” the piece. This direction of growth also suggests gravity, supporting the idea that this installation is very much about how it is an object. The installation is a living object and a living idea. There is no assurance that it will be the same upon each installation, it grows and changes as the artists’ ideas grow and change. It is a history of an artist’s mind, similar to how a diary is the history of a person’s mind.
Diaries are deeply personal and are reflective of the thoughts of their author. Diaries’ purposes range from daily life records to a medium for self-exploration, and a record of the past. “What might strike the reader discontinuous or haphazard style of accounting suggests that from Dove’s point of view connections existed among these things…”¹ Rachel Z. Delue writes this of Arthur Dove’s diaries and the associations deriving from the way he compiled his entries. Delue posits that the diversity of content and seemingly indiscriminate ordering of Dove’s diary was intentional. While they are documentarian in nature, they were still crafted from an artistic perspective. Diary keeping is like assemblage, especially the way in which Dove compiled his diary. This compilation “involved interweaving people, terrains, ideas, sensations, data, and things.” The material that Dove scavenged was from his own mind, his memories of these things.

In the case of Emily Dickinson, her craft is poetry, but it is more than words. Dickinson was a visual creator as well. Emily Dickinson: Gorgeous Nothings² is a compilation of Dickinson’s handwritten poetry on used envelopes and scraps. There is a specific material quality to these works that is lost when converted to standard text. There is emotion in the way she writes- the slant, the quickness, the punctuation, size of writing, direction of writing. Dickinson also chose to write on damaged, stained, scrap, patterned, and irregular papers. There is beauty in understanding the rules that Dickinson imposed on herself when composing each envelope. For example, the geometry of the direction of writing. The writing may be parallel to the edge of the paper, or maybe diagonal or perpendicular. Or, similarly, how she chooses to conform to or deny writing along lines of a pattern, stain, stamps, or other words. These were not simply the papers she had on hand, but also integral to the composing of the poem.

Likewise, in my installation the material quality and construction are integral to the creation of the imagery. So, the imagery in the instal-

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lation cannot be disconnected from its form. The form was developed after my process of sketching, but in this development, I created a new way of evolving my drawings. For example, in some drawings I began to compose in a scalable grid, despite the grid concept arising from a purely structural standpoint. Although I intended the form of the installation to display only my studio process, it evolved into a way of thinking about the content of the drawings as well.

Transparency was another unexpected outcome resulting from form. The gallery lighting altered the relationship between blank and drawn spaces by making the drawing visible on its opposite side. This mostly happened in high-contrast drawings and drawings where marker bled through the paper. This complicated the relationship of the front and back side and made relationships between neighboring drawings more complex. Instead of these neighboring drawings dialoguing because I placed them next to each other for their visual or conceptual similarities, they were dialoguing by chance placement.

One such drawing was made with marker and became visible on the opposite side next to floral inspired drawings with delicate, fluid linework. The marker drawing was also delicate with fluid linework but made in a different way. Although I created these drawings separately with different inspirations, they contained similar principal ideas. This was a lucky pairing and not all other pairings resulted in such clear similarities (although I’m sure there are interesting connections and comparisons) but thinking about taking this unplanned occurrence into future development could mean that front and back groupings don’t have to be separate but can be continuous. Attention to this type of relationship could strengthen the overall cohesion and conceptual idea of evolution of the drawing.

There is an element of cognition in the way that I was able to arrive at a similar visual conclusion despite starting from different inspirations, like the marker drawing. Or, on the back of the piece there are many circular and oval shapes. Some shapes started from spiral imagery, or the clock, and others started from the image of a rock. These two groupings started to look very similar because I started to format the oval shapes in
similar ways, meaning I would place them snuggly into the picture plane of
the paper. This type of composition began happening in both groupings of
oval shapes despite their different origins. These kind of convergences and
divergences are some of the most interesting occurrences in the work.

There is no way to fully and accurately map the cognition patterns
behind creation because of the complexity that arises from divergences,
convergences, and interconnection of multiple ideas at a time. Sometimes
it’s not as simple as one thing inspired by another, sometimes there is a
complex web of inspiration. In a way, flattening this web and conform-
ing it to a grid is a unique expression of the evolution, while not totally
accurate, it is a unique interpretation of it. This conforming in itself may
inspire its own patterns and new ideas for drawings. For example, in the
past I may not have strictly juxtaposed sketches next to each other in a
grid. The comparisons that come from this element alone can be a unique
outcome from this form.

In the gallery alongside the installation, I displayed some paintings
that were inspired by my drawings but were also the inspiration to some
of the drawings in my piece. Inspiration flows both ways. But I think the
development of my installation brings to light a more interesting way to
inspire future paintings. Instead of being inspired by a particular drawing
for a particular painting, inspiration could be gathered from how certain
images were compiled next to one another, how they fit in to one another,
the way they are physically connected, or the unexpected occurrences like
the transparencies in lighting or dimensionality from overlapping pages.

Another aspect to consider for future development is the way in
which the piece is hung in the space. For my first installation of the piece,
I chose to hang it with clear plastic line with the intention that the line
would disappear and the piece would appear to be floating. I wanted all the
attention to be on the piece and not it’s method of installation. However,
the clear line became visible in the gallery lighting, and it became a part
of the piece. Going forward, I should consider that however I install the
piece, it will become a part of it. I might consider using the same natural
cotton twine to continue the dialogue of construction to the space that the
piece exists in. Or I might implement a rod that the papers hang off that might encourage the idea that the piece has gravity, a starting point, or continues downward.

This installation allowed me to explore new ways of making. The assemblage of the installation challenged me in the way I view materiality and craft and their impact on content. Materiality emerged as a driving force in this project: paper, thread, mark-making, light and shadow. Each of these aspects had some effect on the way the drawings were perceived. This project also altered my thought patterns surrounding creation, in the sense that the flow of inspiration can be a cycle or a back and forth rather than just forward progression. This paper captures the installation in one moment of its creation, but it will continue to grow and change. The next installment will have evolved in material, assemblage, and expression of cognition. It is a sketchbook in a new form, and the images that it depicts are symbols that will grow and change according to this form. Maybe in the future it will becomes like a map, or even more like a quilt with an intentional pattern and symbols representing a more unified message. Contrastingly, it might dissolve into a more sporadic state with symbols becoming less and less related. All of these things are possible with the discoveries made during this first installment.
Bibliography:

