

GEMMA ANDERSON

in conversation with Jack Southern, London, March 2011.

GA For me, drawing facilitates thinking. The drawing process is so crucial to me, and gradually I have noticed that the activities in life which I prioritise and repeat outside of drawing allow a similar kind of thought process to take place, for example spending time walking is really important to me.

Through walking I consciously create time to think, observe and explore. But, I also see walking as a linear journey or path through a thought process, similar to that of making a drawing. I think the other parallel is motion. I find it easier to think when I am in some kind of motion. Drawing is a form of motion, which for me is particularly conducive to contemplation.

DRAWING IS SUCH AN IMPORTANT PART OF MY LIFE THAT I HAVE TO REALLY MINIMISE MY LIFESTYLE, IN ORDER TO CREATE THE TIME TO DRAW.

JS So a conscious concentration on observation, and processing thoughts those observations generate, is key to making your drawings, but also, to how you live your life?

GA Yes, drawing and observing are mutually dependent and happen simultaneously when I have a pencil or etching tool in my hand. But unlike drawing, observation can be practised anytime and anywhere. The continued and consistent observation of the world around me is when a lot of the ideas for the work take place, which feeds directly into my drawing practice.

The process of making drawings then allows me to distil the experiences, related thoughts and observations, into the simplicity of a line. I can then use the language of that line to convey the visual relationships and resemblances I see and recognise as interesting and meaningful.

JS So you put visual aspects of the world together by drawing them in relation to each other?

GA Yes, I work in a kind of collage practice where I often draw things together because of their shared anatomies. I borrow and transplant visual signifiers, symbols, shapes and forms, from the people, specimens and objects I draw. Like an operation; where drawing is the technology, parts are removed, added, exchanged, merging forms that are analogous.

JS Considering your practice is based in London, and much of your work is centred around the subject matter of the natural world, it is almost as if the conditions you set up for both your life, and work, provide an antidote to your immediate surroundings?

GA Yes I think that is right, and I am becoming more aware of that the longer I am in London. I find that in contemporary culture, it is hard to do anything slowly, and I feel that drawing is a continuous effort to maintain a slow and conscious way of life.



TOP *Life Drawing*, 2003. Falmouth book of 105 *Life Drawings*, rotiring pen and ink, 25x 33 cm. Courtesy of the artist.

BOTTOM *Alice*, 2007. Copper etching, a la poupee, 80 x 100 cm. Courtesy of the artist.

OPPOSITE *Elsy*, 2008. Copper etching, a la poupee, hand coloured with Japanese inks, 60 x 80 cm. Courtesy of the artist.



JS It is almost as if the way you live your life deliberately places value on observational practices or methods we might associate with the pre-industrial world? You seem to explore the contemporary world with empirical principles that allow you to discover and look at things with wonder, insight and reverie?

GA Yes, well, I suppose it is to do with the particular things I place value on in life. And I guess the things you rightly point out are aspects of the world which could be associated with practices in periods of history I am particularly interested in, like in early scientific exploration.

JS It is really interesting to think about intrinsic human traits, principles and ways of life that seem to transcend time and place. In relation to your comments on navigating contemporary culture, it is fascinating to think you can feel connected to a specific period of history through feeling an affinity with practices you learn about. And of course making drawings is part of that; it sort of makes the connections tangible, visual and present in your life?

GA Yes, I think so too, in the sense that I draw as a method of recording my observations and discoveries, and drawing of course was the only way to record discoveries made on early voyages.

Before the creation of modern science, natural philosophers like Aristotle and Pliny observed the world holistically, often basing their classifications on anatomical resemblances. I do not really know why, but I really relate to their approach, it feels instinctive and a natural way to approach learning about the world, through comparisons. I naturally abstract what I see into shapes, a bit like a child or an alien, discovering everything for the first time. I try to see each specimen or object I draw, without its labels, but as an abstract form full of the hieroglyphics of nature.

JS It is interesting you reference observation in relation to learning. When we work with students we place an importance on acknowledging and understanding the 'currency' of looking and observing the world around you. So in the light of what you have been talking about, have you always recognized and valued observation as a tool for direct learning?

GA Yes, and I think it is how I learn best in the sense that I have always valued learning through experience, and drawing from observation is a way of experiencing, learning and evidencing at the same time. Throughout art school I always maintained a really rigorous life drawing practice. I loved the intense observation. Even when my work started to change, I always drew from life alongside any other work I might have been making.

JS When you say it changed; do you mean your main focus moved away from observation?

GA Well, for a period, during my foundation course at Belfast and first year of my BA at Falmouth I worked solely from life. At some point I became a bit frustrated with it. I could not work

out how the drawings could express ideas I was interested in, and I was conscious that the imaginative side of drawing was not really expressed in what I was doing. Whereas, now, years down the line, everything I draw is a truthful observation but the compositions are invented, so I hope the work somehow balances the factual and the fictive.

I AM INTERESTED IN MAKING WORK THAT IS SOMEWHERE BETWEEN AN EMPIRICAL PRACTICE OF RECORDING, AND BUILDING A SUBJECTIVE PERSONAL ARCHIVE.

JS So when and how did the work begin to change to incorporate both of these aspects of drawing?

GA Well, I had a bit of a break through in my second year at Falmouth. Primarily because I became so fascinated with the natural environment in Cornwall. I would spend so much time walking outside and consciously observing plants that I started to see resemblances between plant and human anatomy. I began to amalgamate these two worlds through drawing.

In the life room I would elaborate on my drawing with plant forms from memory. At that time I was drawing the human figure on a sketchbook, and the lack of true scale meant it seemed to make sense to make up the plant forms. That shift in content also coincided with a really important development in the materials I used to make drawings. I went from drawing in pencil, to a really fine drawing pen, then to a rotoring pen, until someone suggested I should try etching because of the fine quality of the line and the anatomical nature of my work.

JS Most of the drawings you make are now etched. Why, on first using etching, did the way you worked, or subject matter you dealt with, translate particularly well to the medium?

GA Well etching and engraving are widely associated with drawings of anatomy and the natural sciences, which I have always been into. But I also just immediately liked the alchemy of the etching process; using, fire, metal, acid and water. I really love copper as a material. Drawing on the smoked ground of a copper plate is a process of removing the ground, so it is more of a sculptural process. Like carving, a process of subtraction, as opposed to that of drawing with pencil on paper, which is more of a process of addition.

Drawing an object on copper, feels like processing one object into another object and once etched, the drawing becomes a physical mould, like a blueprint of the object, which is a lovely thing in itself.

JS So you began working with the medium by drawing directly onto the copper plate? Did you ever make drawings that became etchings?

GA No, when I started working with etching I immediately treated copper like a piece of paper. I have never made a drawing in preparation for a drawing. It does not really make sense, because it is very risky but I like the energy of the first

drawing and observation of the subject. Even when I was working on life size portraits, on the largest copper sheets I could get, I would still draw directly from life onto copper.

JS And in the light of what you have already said about the subject matter of the work at that time, I guess it seemed entirely appropriate to capture the energy of a living, growing organism with the energy of an immediate mark on copper?

GA Yes, but it is really interesting you should make that point, because while living in Cornwall everything I drew was plucked from the living environment around me, but moving to London forced a big change in the subject matter of the work. Although the content still involved making transcriptions and translations from the natural world, the move to London led to the change of drawing inanimate or dead objects.

JS Is that because you had to seek out subjects from archives and museum collections?

DRAWING FROM SPECIMENS IN MUSEUMS FEELS LIKE A MACABRE EXPLORATION OF THE UNDERWORLD; THE WORLD OF THE DEAD. A WORLD OF ARCHIVES FORMED FOR RESEARCH AND STUDY OF THE DEAD, IN ORDER TO UNDERSTAND AND DEVELOP THE WORLD OF THE LIVING.

GA Yes, at first I drew from the Hunterian museum (Royal College of Surgeons), but found the distance of drawing specimens behind glass too detrimental to the observation. I asked for permission to draw specimens from the research collections at the Natural History Museum, in order to be able to observe at close range, developing a more intimate, and personal relationship with the objects. It was important to me to explore collections first hand, in my own time, making my own discoveries.

APPOINTMENTS ENTIRELY DEPEND ON THE FLEXIBILITY AND GENEROSITY OF THE INDIVIDUAL. SOMETIMES I HAVE TO CONTACT A NUMBER OF PEOPLE, BEFORE GETTING ANY REPLY, BUT IT IS IMPORTANT TO PERSIST. DRAWING FROM A FORMAL PUBLIC ARCHIVE IS A COOPERATIVE PROCESS WHICH REQUIRES PATIENCE AND RESPECT.

JS Working from collections has become such an embedded part of your practice. In that development, has your approach become increasingly restricted in some ways? The connotations of the history, and priorities of the classification of whatever you might be drawing must have changed how you think about the subjects?

DRAWING HAS BECOME A WAY TO LEARN ABOUT ALMOST ANYTHING I WANT TO LEARN ABOUT, BECAUSE THROUGH DRAWING, I HAVE GAINED ACCESS TO COLLECTIONS AND PEOPLE THAT OTHERWISE I WOULD NOT HAVE COME INTO CONTACT WITH.



TOP Basaltic Lava, Pyroclastic Rocks and Sulphur Butterfly, copper etching, 35 x 30 cm, hand coloured with colour pencil and Japanese paints, Galapagos Islands, 2010. Courtesy of the artist.

BOTTOM Fumaroles and Hornitos of Volcan Chica, Ninachumbi, copper etching, hand coloured with colour pencil and Japanese paints, 2010, 30 x 35 cm. Courtesy of the artist.



GA The intention is always the same thing, whether drawing in a field or drawing in a museum; to discover all the shapes and forms that exist in the world, which is ambitious, I know! But the more forms I draw, the more relationships I see and in turn, the more ideas I have about ways in which to draw one thing transforming or appearing as something else.

OVER YEARS OF PRACTISED OBSERVATION, I HAVE BEEN CREATING A BANK OF FORMS, STORED IN MY MEMORY. DRAWING IS A MNEMONIC DEVICE, AND THE MORE I DRAW, THE MORE FORMS AND IDEAS ENTER MY COLLECTIVE MEMORY.

But you are right in the sense that on a walk, it is only me, as an artist, placing an importance and deciding something is worth documenting. Whereas, the objects in museum collections, all have a place of scientific importance in the classified world of natural history. I am an artist approaching a science archive, and classifying what I find according to my own principles, which often displaces the object and creates a playful disorder.

IN THE CONTINUING COMPARATIVE STUDY OF FORMS, I AM QUIETLY SUBVERTING THE CONVENTIONS OF MODERN CLASSIFICATION.

JS I think that it is so interesting that you, as an individual, go into institutions and collections, which have been formed by a number of scientists and academics. You are using the same collections and apparatus, but you are following a creative endeavor, forming a unique knowledge of what you work with. You are united with the scientists in your collective drive to 'know' and understand these collections.

GA Yes, you are right, and I really value the interactions with individual scientists and curators I work with, I think we are curious about each other's work. I often find that there is a genuine exchange of knowledge. A kind of symbiotic learning that goes on.

Last year, I made a drawing of the moon observed through a telescope, with the help of astronomy staff at University of London Observatory. The observatory technician opened the dome and I climbed a ladder to the telescope, covered one eye with an eye patch, put my copper plate at arms length and began to make marks; I had no idea how long I had before the clouds came back. The longer I observed through the telescope, the more my eyes adjusted, and the more I could see of the moons forms.

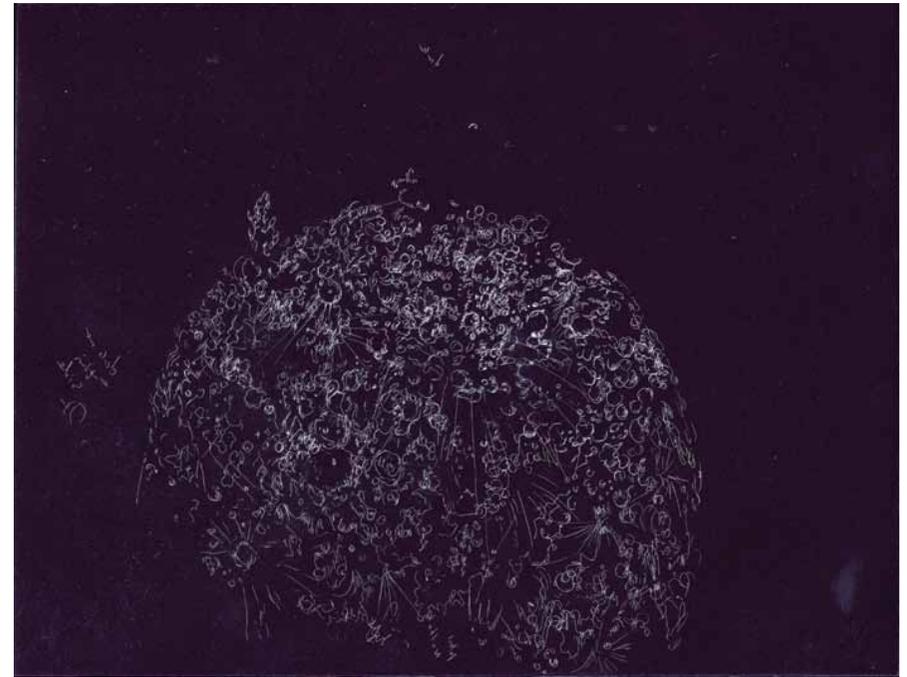
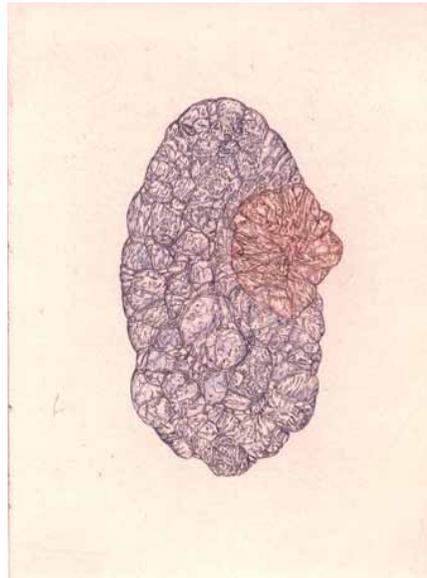
JS You talk a lot about the acquisition of knowledge. But as we have discussed, you focus on knowledge which relates to science, history and the natural world. I am interested in how this is reflected in the way you limit what you draw to subjects which are raw materials of nature; people, plants, animals, minerals, etc.. You do not really draw man made objects?

GA I hope my drawings intrigue people, making them curious, and encouraging them to re-assess their relationship with the phenomena of the world around them. So I suppose that is

always going to be reflected in the subjects I choose to draw. The natural world offers an endless variety of shapes in its materials whereas the range of shapes in the man made world are more limited. But I also think I draw natural forms because I am fascinated by the origins of things, and the raw materials of the world. If I was to draw a man made object for example, I would naturally think about its origins. How it existed before it came to be in the state in which I found it, which would inevitably lead me back to the natural materials involved in the objects construction or manufacture. I am interested in finding the shapes and forms of the materials within man made objects which may begin to give the work a complex process as many of these shapes can only be visualized using scientific technologies.

My drawings document the interest I have in finding shared shapes between forms, for example, ramifying plants and lungs, or coral and mineral forms of aragonite. I find these relationships very poetic as they exist as curiosities outside the conventions of classification, related but segregated through formal classification into different kingdoms. Shapes tell us things, and I am becoming more and more fascinated by the abstraction and relation of shapes in Euclidean space, and how this can be combined with observational drawing.

I LIKE THINKING ABOUT DRAWING AS A MEANS OF COLLECTING AND POSSESSING THE WORLD WITHOUT ACTUALLY HAVING TO COLLECT OR POSSESS ANY "THING" AT ALL.



PREVIOUS PAGES *Aragonite under moon*, copper etching, drawn from the collections of the Natural History Museum, 2011, 60 x 45 cm. Courtesy of the artist.

OPPOSITE *Haematite*, after "Haemoglobin of the Brain" by R Hooper, copper etching, drawn from the geology collection at University College London, 2010, 12 x 18 cm. Courtesy of the artist.

TOP *Moon*, after "The Moon, viewed in oblique sunlight" by William Herschel, drawn through the 8 inch fry refractor at University of London Observatory, copper etching, hand coloured Japanese inks and colouring pencil, 30 x 35 cm, 2010. Courtesy of the artist.

BOTTOM *Mycology*, after "The grotto at Antiparos" (Unknown), drawn from the mycology collection at Kew Gardens, etching on copper, hand coloured Japanese inks and colouring pencil, 2010. Courtesy of the artist.

