

Visualising Absence –Geoff Grandfield and Michelle Salamon

Geoff Grandfield and Michelle Salamon reflect on the possibilities of drawing to capture evaporating memories

Geoff Grandfield

My premise is that illustration can make visual form for the non-represented as well as its traditional application of showing the common-sense world of facts and stories. My enquiry is broadly centred on the contradiction of visualising absence but needs specific contextualisation. It is based on lived experience, on how an individual separated at *birth* understands and processes reality; quite relevant to the topic of 'truth'. There are many types of and reasons for infant-mother separation but it's important to stress that my focus is only on birth separation.

I am arguing that by representing, recognising and attributing behaviours associated with traumatic separation, can lead to a positive and enabling recognition of the world. The aim is to use the visual to help understanding, not as direct therapy but

as a step from the confusion of identity so often experienced or denied.

Developmental psychology and neuroscience have in recent years established that the act of permanent separation has an effect on how the infant brain evolves. Subjected to a higher presence of adrenaline and cortisol and lower serotonin, permanent separation constitutes a pre-verbal trauma. Separation is a disruption to the biological 'continuity of life'; due to the loss of the biological senses of taste, smell, touch, sound and sight of the person who brought you into the world and spent 9 months with in-utero. If the separation takes place before the acquisition of words, it is argued that recall is only possible in images. If one's introduction to the world is already marked by an inexplicable rupture of expectation, then it is understandable that learning words adds to the disordered condition of a world that makes little sense. When a separated person seeks meaning, it seems plausible that they are drawn to the perceptual evidence of the visual over the socially constructed meaning of words. It is argued, and my project is focused on supporting this, that a residual 'truth' or wholeness exists in the pre-verbal experience.

The initial phase of the project is a literature review that seeks to gather the existing knowledge relevant to cognition, developmental psychology, attachment, trauma and recovery. This includes reviewing the historic representations and metaphors of absence in visual communication forms. Establishing keywords



IMAGE LEFT
Geoff Grandfield, *Day 1* (2023) Visualising separation experience, part of practice based enquiry

IMAGE RIGHT
Geoff Grandfield, *Ministry of Fear* (2014), cover for Criterion DVD edition. In my PhD research I look at consistent themes across my practice. I illustrated Graham Greene's 1943 novel 15 years before being commissioned to make the DVD cover of Fritz Lang's 1944 film version. The oneiric narrative instability in this story is expressed by *deja-vu* imagery that is familiar to film noir — a style that is common in my practice

and data from this material has developed the basis of visual representation and starting points for workshops with focus groups.

The aim is for the final phase to use resonant behaviours of a 'separated person' as a basis of a graphic narrative to articulate the legacy of the separation event in order to stabilise and validate an understanding of a normative denied identity.

Word and image

I feel the relationship between word and image to be both fascinating and slippery. My research-focus on a pre-verbal event prioritises the image, though associative words for absence can act as keys to access what is being visually sought. Words have a specificity that images rarely achieve. The word 'tomato' can be objectively descriptive whereas an image of a tomato will always contain subjective interpretation, particularly if it shows a green or yellow example. It can sometimes feel like words and numbers represent an external world whilst images are internal. Both are needed in order to communicate.

Drawing and remembering

The gaps between the imagined, the remembered and the lived experience have been central to my practice. 'Where do images come from' has been

a long-term question for me that may not have a conclusive answer. Perhaps it can be answered by asking 'where do images go?' What is the effect of a constructed image on an audience? My research aims to make visual form for what I struggle to find words for. Visual metaphors that produce a resonance with an audience can act as a validation. In adoption circles there is a reoccurring reference to "fog", a visual metaphor for impaired clarity. By recognising this state of being unfocused as a reality for many adoptees, an understanding and processing can begin. For me the research can be likened to entering a large room where unknown objects are covered in white dust sheets. Gradually each inquiry reveals what is hidden under each sheet.

Medium and process

Another emergence since beginning the PhD is a re-evaluation of my chosen medium. During my time as an art student chalk pastel offered expressive immediacy and vivid contrast. It was great for dramatic blocks of tone and scale. I developed techniques to control the edges and define them with sharp lines. I learnt there were many things impossible to achieve in such a messy, fugitive medium and worked out ways to avoid including them in my imagery. I tried using the inherent pastel capabilities of blending and blurring to correspond with ambiguity, the constant threat of smoke or fog. As I developed figurative shape silhouettes, I was also representing what

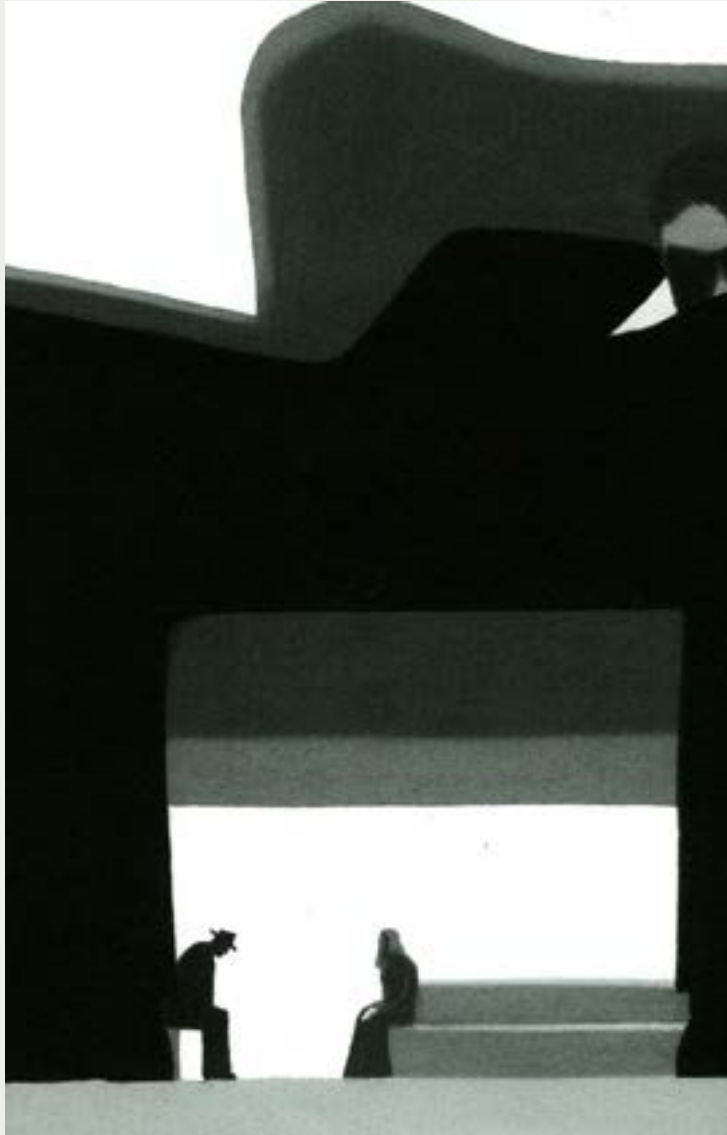


IMAGE LEFT
Geoff Grandfield,
*Raymond Chandler
illustration* (1997), for
Folio Society edition.
My PhD work looks at
alternative reading of
my practice images.
In this example we see
echoes of adoption,
absent relationships
between male and
female, shadowed by
a dead 'father' figure

IMAGE RIGHT
Geoff Grandfield,
Shopper Target
(2007), newspaper
editorial illustration for
The Times. My PhD
research looks at
alternative readings of
my previous practice,
for example here I
note the relationship
between an adult male
and a 'mother' figure

I didn't know or could not visualise. Rather than develop a detailed portrait I wanted to use volume and composition.

Reviewing how materials, intentions and feelings all combine to constitute the style of an outcome is significant to the question of embodiment. I recognised in the cinematic language of Film Noir a familiarity. Though working in a static image, my interest in visual instability, high contrast, ambiguity and black voids developed through watching the visual work of primarily emigres to post WW2 Hollywood. There was for me an evocative approximation between the celluloid shadow world of cinematographer John Alton and covering a sheet of paper with carbon black chalk.

Overall I consider my illustration practice has given me an expression of self that has helped form my self identity and the confidence to find ways to articulate the unknown or un-represented. The notion of truth will always be close to the specific values of an individual. By finding individual meaning and ways of communicating to an audience through creative practice, the larger social understanding and acceptance of difference may be possible.

Michelle Salamon

The hypothesis for my research is that the motor activity of drawing on paper, with no prerequisite of any kind of artistic skill, can increase the ability of an eyewitness to recall details of an offender fixed in his or her memory following a criminal incident. The research examines drawing as an activity or physical act, asking whether it can have purpose beyond the creation of an artefact, beyond the fields of art and design. The intention for this project is to better understand relationships between drawing and memory and ask if the physical act of drawing can be used as a tool to improve recall in eyewitness testimonies. The project explores how a tool commonly associated with art and design practice can address problems in the criminal justice system. Research carried out by the Innocence Project (Scheck Barry C. and Neufeld Peter J., 2022) has shown that 60% of wrongful convictions have been based (at least in part) on mistaken frontal identification by eyewitnesses or victims of the crime.

In order to gather a reliable data set in support of the hypothesis a cross disciplinary pilot study event took place in September 2023 as a collaboration between CSM (Michelle Salamon) and King's College London (legal academic Dr Hannah Quirk and associated lawyer and magistrate Dr Noga Shmueli Meyer). A total of 73 student volunteers participated across both institutions. Data was gathered from these "mock witnesses" to investigate whether the physical

IMAGES TOP
Drawings made by student participants from the Pilot Study event held at KCL September 2023



IMAGES MIDDLE
Drawings made by student participants from the Pilot Study event held at CSM September 2023



IMAGE BOTTOM
The photo lineup image used to identify the suspect during the CSM/KCL Pilot Study Event



act of drawing can be used to improve memory recall for facial recognition in first person witnessed events.

The pilot project took place during Welcome Week, when students were attending Welcome orientation talks. During one of these talks they unsuspectingly acted as “witnesses” to a staged incident where someone (the “suspect”) enters the room and passes a note to the speaker, causing a minor disruption to the flow of the session. Following the talk, students were asked to identify the note giver from a photo lineup. The students, in their role as “eyewitnesses”, were split into two groups.

Group 1 – Drawing Group

People in this group were first asked to try and recall the suspect they saw, and then to sketch the suspect using pencil on paper. The quality of the drawing was irrelevant as its purpose in this experiment is to assist the memory recall. They were then asked to identify the suspect from a photo line-up comprising eight photographs, each of a similar-looking individual, including the “suspect”.

Group 2 – Control Group

This group merely participated in a review of the photo line-up. They were asked to identify the suspect from the same line-up without drawing.

Forms were analysed to find trends that begin to tell a story. Analysis of the drawings created by the drawing participants provided insights into the sample groups, for example, the CSM Drawing Group students, who may be said to be more familiar with the act of drawing as part of their practice, had a 5.12% better rate of positive identification suggesting drawing is an effective trigger for recall. The KCL groups consisting of Law Undergraduates were given the same instructions as CSM but had an equal rate of positive and negative identifications. A number of them embellished their drawings with handwritten notes. This might be viewed as indicative of a forensic mindset or suggest they were driven to find a means to further communicate information. The Pilot Study is set to continue in order to add to the data set.

Drawing and remembering

In his talk at Kingston School of Art on 4 October 2023 Geoff Grandfield referred to his drawing media as “ectoplasm”, in other words as “a place that things emerge from”. This can be understood as trust in chance. The physical act of drawing is indeed important, especially when aligned with a belief that an image will emerge from the materials through the craft and effort of making.

I share with Geoff an interest in using drawing to reanimate or get to the truth of something that happened in the past. In my project, remembering

IMAGE
A lineup image
created from a series
of drawings made from
memory based on
important characters
recalled from my own
childhood experience



and drawing are intrinsically linked. Our research wants to prove how creating a connection between hand, eye and brain, can serve as a trigger for recall. Existing evidence from research by psychologists at University of Waterloo supports the theory that drawing can improve memory. Their research describes drawing as a “robust encoding manipulation that can, and does, improve memory performance dramatically.” (Wammes, J. D., Meade and Fernandes, 2016). Initial evidence collected from our first pilot study suggests that the physical interaction of pencil on the surface of paper can indeed help to engage the recalled memory of a witness following an incident or event.

In this work communication with a wider audience is not particularly relevant since the main recipient of its message is the maker. The physical process of making the drawing, the touch of the pencil on the surface of paper, can be viewed as a mechanism to connect the eye, hand and brain. In this case the act of drawing itself is more valuable than the drawings produced. Drawings themselves are not necessarily foregrounded as artefacts or outcomes but can function as an active part of a process, for example to trigger or activate memory recall.

Through my own practice I have noted how the act of drawing and memory recall work together in the process of making an image. My personal project *Memory Drawings*, partly laid the foundation for the research Pilot Study. In this project I challenged

myself to recall the faces of the congregation of my childhood synagogue. I found that through a process of drawing and redrawing, the physical touch of the pencil on a surface acted as a trigger for recall and helped me to find what Geoff described as “ectoplasm”, fragments of recalled faces that pieced together over time emerged from the contact of the media with the surface of the paper to become portraits.

GG, MS