

Everyone Can Draw!

Keep a sketchbook and embrace your art

by Susan Shie

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Detail of artwork by Susan Shie



Artist Susan Shie with host Susan Brubaker Knapp

I've been obsessed with drawing all of my life—from the time I could hold a pencil—but for a large part of my life, my drawing has been part of my painting or quilting. And now it's become the most important part of my work again, full-circle to my little toddler self, though I never quit drawing.

And now my teaching, which began as teaching basic drawing classes to undergrads, has become the only thing I want to teach. But this time it's not at all about teaching basic classical drawing techniques but about exploring and honoring our personal and unique natural style of freehand drawing. (After my first year of teaching undergrad drawing, I dumped the School of Art's classic textbook in favor of *THE NATURAL WAY TO DRAW* by Kimon Nkolaidis; but now, even that is way too structured for my taste. Now I don't recommend any book. I just want people to open up the door they closed [when they started to go to school and learned about using erasers to fix mistakes] and draw from their hearts again!)

This all has to do with me realizing long ago that I love the openness of children's art (and outsider art) the most of anything. *That* art is made *before* we get the bad news that there is a right way and a wrong way to draw, to create. Our educated art has *lots of rules*, but those rules produce art that falls flat in the presence of the art made in innocence. Making educated art doesn't make us feel good like making naïve art does! More and more, since that realization, I've been on a crusade to deprogram artists, to get them to relax and just let the art come out as unjudged as possible.

But that's not easy because all the well-meaning art classes we've had—or the standards we've absorbed from those who've taken those classes—have us convinced that we need to strive to make our work better, more realistic, struggling against imperfection. But I think that the trick is that we really need to savor and celebrate the imperfection of our freehand artmaking.

It's the "flaws," the deviation from camera-perfect realism, that make human-made art so special. We all agree on that when it's children's work or naïve art that we're looking at. But then we forget that stuff when we make art ourselves, as adults.

Back to the Garden

So how can we get back to the garden, the place where we as little children drew in delight and wonder and didn't question the worthiness of our art making? I've been working on this quandary and have realized that it's one thing to understand the theories but quite another to *feel* and *believe* and *become* innocent again. We are such creatures of propriety, we adults. We can understand the ideas of getting back to innocence and then we angst when we make art. I know. I still do it sometimes myself.

I want to only teach drawing now, for several reasons. You don't have to teach people how to use drawing tools, even if they've never used them before. They can experiment with what

they want to draw with and figure out how to use the tools by simply drawing. I give them a very open supply list, recommending a few tools, but only insisting that they buy a big 11" x 14" hardbound sketchbook to make double-page drawings in for the class. (I love sketchbooks, because they keep our work in order—stored well—and we can carry them around easily. I've been using big hardbound sketchbooks since 1980.) They can use any tools that make good marks that we can see well when we view the pictures through photos taken of them and uploaded to the class. So when you're in an intuitive drawing class you are free to simply focus on expressing your ideas through your art!

Lucky Drawing Classes

Let me tell you about my online Lucky Drawing classes. I began in January 2015 and I've kept it pretty much the same way ever since. I have a 4-week class, preceded by a 1½ day soft opening, in which we meet and greet each other. We all set up our own albums for our drawings, taking a new selfie photo that becomes our album cover. That's how I try to simulate being in a real classroom, seeing each other as we look right then! I give one assignment that tells you something special about making the drawing, and that's the selfie drawing, which is also the only assignment I repeat over time. (That's why I give each class's selfie assignment a special twist, like drawing it upside down or including your astrology animal in the selfie.) That's the first Special Event drawing, of 4, and there are 4 weekly assignments, too, which are much less specific than the SE assignments. I love to think up each assignment the night before I give it! They are *all* different, so if you take the class over a long period of time, it's not repetitive.

We draw freehand, with no tracing, collage, or digital assistance. We draw from life, from memory or imagination, from photos of our own or others. (But if we use others' photos, we change the composition to be our own.) And the most important thing is that we make our drawings express our own ideas, not those lifted from others.

The class is in a private Facebook group, so no one besides us can access it. My students are all women, and I warn them that we are pretty liberal, so conservatives will probably be unhappy in the group. My subjects for the assignments are broad enough that we can each find a unique way to approach the topic. And since it's a safe space, we can really express ourselves openly.

There are no strict deadlines for finishing the assignments, so the class often spills over into the 12-day break between classes. And students can do the assignments as I describe them, or bend the topic into something else, or just not do an assignment.

We post our drawings, some of us also posting in-progress pix in our albums, too. Whoever finishes an assignment first creates the group album for that assignment, so that their drawing is the cover art for that album.

Another drawing thing we do is voluntary Library Time (LT) drawings, a thing I created years ago in my in-person classes. In person, we start each class day with a 10-minute drawing time in quiet, like in a library. Hence the name, Library Time. My original LT idea is to let whatever comes into your head be what you draw, often with children's markers, to help you feel playful and open. Recently, we as a group have added a Planned LT drawing exercise, to the Unplanned one, so that you can know

what you're going to draw, before you set that 10-minute timer. I prefer the Unplanned version, because I think it really helps us connect with our inner thinking, which I think is so centering for us, and so very healing. Often I keep working on an LT drawing after the 10 minutes are up, only pausing to photograph it in its pure, Library Time stage. I recommend doing Library Time early in the morning, to start your day.

At the end of each Lucky Drawing (LD) class, I make a drawn class diploma, which the students can download and write their names on. We began with Lucky Drawing 101 and now we're in LD 127, the 27th class, as I have roughly eight classes per year. Some students come once and are done. But many of my students return off and on, or stay with me continuously, like when we take piano or yoga lessons. We have become quite a tribe of feisty women, with an average class having 17–22 students in it.

Appreciate your art

I encourage my students to draw in the style they naturally create as they work. I hope that each student can appreciate the art that comes out of her and honor that as her current natural style. This way, we can all put our energy into thinking about what we want to express in our work, what ideas to communicate, rather than having to struggle to make our work in someone else's way.

I never tell the students how to work. I don't give them step-by-step instructions or correct their work. **Never!** I don't say "You could do this," or "Try that next time!" Nope. I listen to what they have to say about their work. I may ask them questions about what made them think of doing this or that, but it's all so I can really understand where they're coming from. And since the classes are big

discussion groups, we **all** learn a lot from each other.

I make videos exclusively for my online classes, so we can be closer to feeling like we're in a room together, as when I teach in person, I demonstrate a lot. And I draw the same assignment I give them, during the same time frame that they are working on it. My movies and demos let the students witness me thinking about what I'm going to do next, and figuring things out as I go, rather than preplanning a drawing, even if it's very complex. And I usually post my own drawings to the class in a number of stages, and encourage my students to do the same. We all learn from each other, and we all ask questions, tell each other what their drawing means to us or does to us, in positive feedback. We tend to give ourselves plenty of negative feedback!

New students in my online class are surprised to learn that many others in the group, whose drawings seem so expert, started my classes with no adult drawing experience, and were afraid to post their works at first, too. Adults are pretty fragile!

Oh, to have the open mind of a 5-year-old child again! I don't know if that can be fully taught but I try. At least my students know it is my ideal. It's fine to want to draw realistically, but without judging it so harshly. But my favorite feeling is that of soaring with my hand almost moving before I can even think about what's coming out of me. I love to just watch the art happen!! That's when we get into the groove with the 4- and 5-year-olds; innocent but able to control a drawing tool and unaware of any reasons why their art making might not be good enough.

Think about it: No animals can really draw creatively, but we can. No computer can do it. It is a truly special thing about humans, that we are each so unique.


Sit Down with a Pen

Sit down with a pen and see what you can draw in 10 minutes of just letting it out. Draw what pops into your mind and don't judge it. Watch the images pour out of you, and don't block the flow with any fears of it not being good enough. Just draw! Watch it happening. You were designed to draw, to paint, to sing, to make music. All of us were. Creative

geniuses are just those who stayed open and kept going, developing their passion for their expression.

So find what you are passionate about and give it a lot of your time and dedication. Drawing is a really good place to start. Stand back and enjoy what your mind and hand can bring out of you. Oh, such a glorious feast of genius! Tell your critical, civilized inner voice to go away. Beg your joyful, wild, and woolly inner voice to come out and play.

Play! Not by the rules—play by your love and passion. You will be so glad to find out that, as long as you can stop and chase away your worrying, stewing, proper self, your brilliant soul will be there, where it's always been, ready to make some art that makes you feel good, heals you and makes you love life.

Yes, it's that simple. We can all draw wonderfully. Just do it! 

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