



artist daily  
*presents*

# HUMAN FIGURE DRAWING TUTORIAL

13

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Gesture Drawing  
Techniques

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# Drawing Movement

CAPTURING THE ACTION LINE, GESTURE, AND ENERGY OF THE FIGURE by **Bob Bahr**

When Patricia A. Hannaway sees some of the more dynamic paintings by Tintoretto, she sees the work of an animator. “You’d swear a Tintoretto painting moved when you weren’t looking directly at it,” she exclaims. “The figures are in transition from one movement to the next; they are bursting with energy! I am drawn to that energy.”

Hannaway is biased in a way—she is best known for her work in the field of animation. The California-based artist was the senior character animator for the character of Gollum in *The Lord of the Rings: The Two Towers*, and she also worked on the animated films *Shrek* and *Antz*. She cut her teeth in the animation department at Walt Disney Feature Animation, where she worked on *Mulan*. Her fine-art endeavors have earned her recognition as well; she is represented by Kathleen Avery Fine Art, in Palo Alto, California. But when Hannaway sees some of the academic drawings

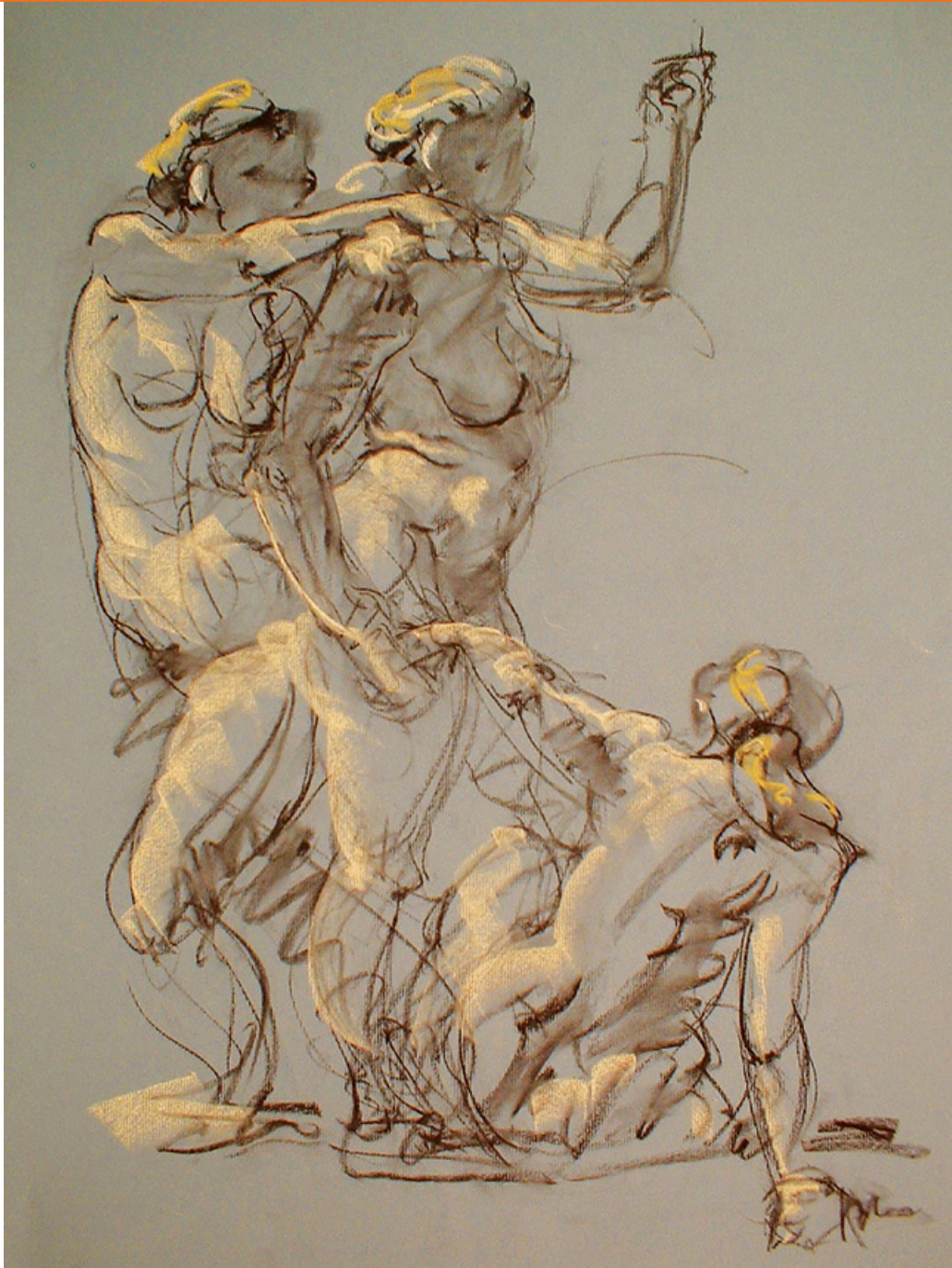
Ogden  
2007, pastel  
on toned paper,  
21 x 12.



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## HUMAN FIGURE DRAWING TUTORIAL



being created by contemporary realist artists, she is dismayed. “Filling in the external contour, termed an ‘envelope,’ is not the way many of the Old Masters drew at all,” she asserts. “The envelope stiffens the drawing—that is why a lot of academic drawings can be staid and still. They are just models on a stand. They don’t breathe or move.

*The Three Graces*  
2006, charcoal  
and chalk on toned  
paper, 26 x 21.

She majored in art history at Smith College, in Northampton, Massachusetts, and earned an M.F.A. from the New York Academy of Art. But a second M.F.A.,

But life is in continuous movement.”

The artist’s schooling was rooted in the traditional. She

this one in computer animation, earned at the School of Visual Arts, in New York City, pointed toward her present career, and when Hannaway went to work for Disney, she felt like she was crossing some kind of line into commercial illustration. Hannaway now feels the move was quite the opposite. “I can render anything, I can make

## HUMAN FIGURE DRAWING TUTORIAL

anything look like a photograph, but I found that to be a dead end," she says. "I have been surprised to find a feeling of connection with the Old Masters through animation." She began noticing the prominent action line in drawings by Michelangelo and Rubens. She saw how Kollwitz and Degas built their drawings on the larger gesture of the figure. She noted the swinging hammers, rearing horses, and vigorous wrestling depicted in Leonardo's

**BELOW LEFT**  
Attitude  
2006, pastel on  
toned paper,  
21 x 12. All artwork  
this article collection  
the artist.

**BELOW RIGHT**  
Male Figure  
Study  
2007, pastel on  
toned paper,  
18 x 11.

notebooks and the fleeting moments captured in the work of Velázquez. And she marveled at the dynamism in Tiepolo's subjects. "His figures twist and turn and are greatly exaggerated, but somehow

they still work in his paintings," says Hannaway. "You will probably never see anyone turning or torquing as much as some of his figures—if you tried it, you would probably break your back. But who cares?"

The point isn't the exaggeration. It's how the action line, the gesture, is used to advance the larger compositional idea. "Sometimes I distort the forms of the body to accent the action line," she says. "Whatever makes the drawing work and read properly on paper, that's what I try to achieve. I don't copy what I see; I push the pose, using the model as a reference." Hannaway stresses that an artist can always tone it down if the action line is too extreme. "But always go to the extreme, then pull it back," she advises. "It's very difficult to make a deadened pose more dynamic. I make the action line more extreme than it is in real life so that when I render on top

of it, there's some movement left over."

Figures that are engaged in dramatic movements are not the only ones with an action line. **Any body that has weight has an action line.** In a standing figure, the action line describes how the weight is handled by the body: which leg is bearing most if it, which hip is canted, which shoulder responds by slightly dipping, how the spine is curving—even how the head is held by the neck. "On a standing pose, the force of the action is the weight going down into the floor," says Hannaway. **Determining where the weight, compression, or extension is in a pose gives direction to such a drawing and determines the center of interest.**

The artist has some simple advice for draftsmen who want to learn how to quickly and accurately put down the action line: **Go to the zoo and draw monkeys. They will force you to simply**





HUMAN FIGURE DRAWING TUTORIAL



**ABOVE LEFT**  
Strike!  
2005, charcoal  
on cream paper,  
24 x 18.

**ABOVE CENTER**  
Victory!  
2007, charcoal  
on cream paper,  
24 x 18.

**ABOVE RIGHT**  
Study for  
*Tempest*  
2006, charcoal  
and chalk on  
toned paper,  
24 x 18.

capture the way they move—they won't stand still enough for careful rendering.

"You can't capture their contours," says the artist. "But you can capture the action line and, consequently, the essence of the monkey. Watch the weight transfer, the typical actions, how it sits. Learn the character of the animal.

See how it hangs and swoops, how the tension works in its body. You can't worry about the fly in its ear or other details." Hannaway stresses the action line to the point that she's willing to sacrifice anatomical correctness, and she cites Goya as a convincing example

of this concept, in particular the highly effective drawings of his *The Disasters of War* series. "Nobody cares that the anatomy of an arm or shoulder may not be right in one of them," explains the artist. "The way the arm is drawn serves the powerful idea behind the design of the drawing." It may feel hard to ignore technique in most cases, but Hannaway serves a different master. She is in relentless pursuit of "the idea," and that idea is expressed more in the action lines of figures in her pieces than in their surface information. Her art is about things happening, events occurring or about to occur. She likens it to filmmaking—except a painter is limited to just one frame. This artist values the kinesthetic over the merely accurate.

In fact, the essence of Hannaway's approach is encapsulated in a motto

her mentor, Jim Smyth, put forth: "Draw what the model is doing, not what it looks like." She explains that this way of thinking promotes a dialogue between the artist and the model, which enables the artist to capture the larger relationships and "feel" the pose in her own body as she draws. "My thought process as I'm drawing is, The model is sort of doing this, and kind of doing that—I become engaged with what the model is doing and mentally take the pose myself, feeling the movement in my own body. This is transferred to the page via an energized line; the drawing proceeds from an inward feeling outward. In contrast, when the focus is on what the model looks like, this dialogue shuts down. Suddenly the drawing becomes all about the surface details and sketching an external contour. It progresses

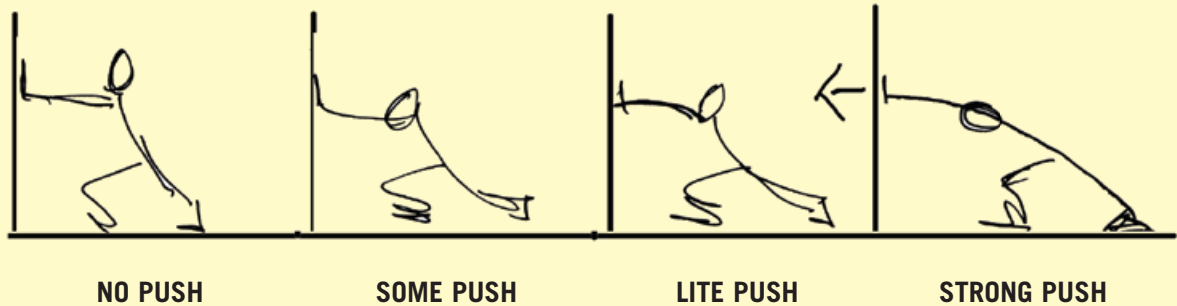
## HUMAN FIGURE DRAWING TUTORIAL



Tenderness  
2007, pastel  
on toned paper,  
21 x 13.



## HUMAN FIGURE DRAWING TUTORIAL



## START WITH THE ACTION LINE

Hannaway strongly believes that the best way to start a drawing is by first laying down the action line—a line that shows the shape, force, and direction of the figure’s movement. “The action line is not the external contour,” she says. “You must make a conceptual leap and consider what the action is.” Draw the shape of the movement, not the thing, says the artist. She advocates keeping your pen or pencil on the surface while sketching and draw from your shoulder, not your hand. Lifting the point off the paper breaks your train of thought and causes you to lose your place, and Hannaway says it all needs to go down on the page in one flow. “Once you get better at depicting the action line, you will find that it serves as a sort of hanger, and all the details just hang off it,” she explains. “The perspective will be in it, everything. It’s amazing.”

For this article, the artist drew the action line for three stages



S Curve  
2007, charcoal  
and chalk on  
toned paper,  
26 x 21.

Knowing how much detail is enough—knowing when to stop. “Animation drawing—and to my mind, great fine-art drawings in general—favor only capturing what is essential to a character or form as opposed to rendering the surface qualities of a form,” the artist explains. **“A good drawing works from the inside out, from the general to the specific.”** She summed it up by simply saying that more detail does not result in greater truth or accuracy. “The intellectual discernment of what to emphasize is the great delight of doing an engaging and animated drawing,” Hannaway explains. “A drawing stressing movement is more truthful than a photograph that freezes a figure in an instant of time. Great artists aim to capture the essence of the model, and that is what animators go for.”

She fondly recalls how Disney arranged for a giant lizard to visit their offices when the animators needed to study the animal’s movement to cre-

to ‘filling in’ a contour instead of ‘feeling out’ the larger relationships and weight. Nothing kills a drawing faster than that thought process! I only render what enhances the gesture.” Pointedly, Hannaway mentions that the word *animate* comes from the Latin *animatus*—“to give life to.”

If striking the delicate balance between a strong action line and an inappropriately exaggerated one is a difficult task, Hannaway’s aversion to tightly rendered drawings brings up an even more difficult one:

HUMAN FIGURE DRAWING TUTORIAL



NO TUG, LITE



STRONG PULL BACK



LITE CARRY



STRONG PULL FORWARD

of a baseball pitcher throwing a ball. In the sketch on the far left, the pitcher is winding up to throw, and Hannaway started at the pitcher's right foot, where she felt the action begins, and drew the action line up through the leg, through the back, and into the coiled arm. "The energy is coming up from the feet and the tension coils up in that wound arm," she asserts. The next two sketches show action lines indicating the force leaving the body through the throwing hand. The gesture is exaggerated, but Hannaway would rein it in later as she developed the drawing.

The sketch at right illustrates

how action lines show not only direction but also force. Note how a line bowing upward along the figure's back suggests a relatively small force, while the line of the back bowing outward implies a strong push.

"By starting with the action line and staying in that frame of mind, you stay in search mode," says Hannaway. "If you are focused on contour, you will find that you're thinking about the need to make one part or another look a certain way—you will find yourself relating the pieces instead of relating the idea. The idea is the action, and this is what needs to be communicated."

ABOVE  
Glass  
2006, pastel on toned paper, 21 x 11.

TOP  
Mist  
2007, pastel on toned paper, 19 x 11.

ate a character, and how the artists would spend a day drawing a live falcon in preparation for a particular scene with that bird in it. "Drawing is like breathing at Disney," says Hannaway. "The people there don't even think about it, it's so natural and they are so good at it. **So instead of drawing what you see, you draw to understand**

**something.**" It's not that drawing isn't important; Hannaway still draws from life at least 10 hours a week, and her idea of a good day is sketching the customers in a café for hours. **But the drawing is not about displaying or justifying a technique or creating a photographic likeness. It is to build up a bank of mental images; to observe and learn**



## HUMAN FIGURE DRAWING TUTORIAL



### ABOUT THE ARTIST

Patricia A. Hannaway earned an M.F.A. in computer animation for the School of Visual Arts, and an M.F.A. in figure painting and drawing from the New York Academy of Art, both in New York City. She was the senior animator of Gollum for the film trilogy *The Lord of the Rings*, and trained and worked for Walt Disney Feature Animation for many years. Film credits include: *Mulan*, *Antz*, *Shrek*, *The Two Towers*, *Star Wars*, and recent films in development at Aardman Animations in the U.K. The artist taught drawing at Stanford University, in Palo Alto, California, is a member of the California Art Club, the Salmagundi Art Club in NYC, recipient of the Andy Warhol Foundation Scholarship, and member of the Cabbagetown Art Center. Hannaway is represented by Kathleen Avery Fine Arts, in San Francisco. For more information visit [www.pathannaway.com](http://www.pathannaway.com).

**At the Park** about her environment, physics, and humanity; and to internalize the most important elements of poses and forms so she can make them serve her purposes. “Design in a composition is always the priority—I will sacrifice everything for the design,” says the artist. “Then, based on the design, I pull out things

I want to emphasize. It is selection, and it has very little to do with painting what I see. The design is determined by the idea, and the idea is what I wish to convey.”

Recently, that has meant large-scale thematic figurative paintings. Hannaway executes many charcoal and gouache studies in preparation for a painting, then she paints small oil studies to

work out the lighting for the piece and to clarify composition. Current events and contemporary human behavior constitute the subject matter. “I think it is important for artists to be the conscience of their times,” she says. “It’s good to learn about the materials and skills from past centuries, but art should be of our world. I’m searching for meaning in the human condition.” ■



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