

Christine Pilkinton Fine Art

PHONE 615-860-2368

EMAIL CHRISTY@PORTRAITCREATIONS.COM

WEB WWW.PORTRAITCREATIONS.COM

*To send light into the darkness of men's hearts
- such is the duty of the artist. Schumann*

Drawing Session Eight : Training Yourself to use Negative Space

Spaces between the forms, or the negative shapes, play just as great a role as the positives and they enable you to check the accuracy of your drawing. The positives make the negatives and negatives make the positives. ([Stan Smith](#))

There must be an open space in the paintings – an entry space for the viewer, or even for me. Just white space where you can get into it. ([Norbert Bisky](#))

Sign-painters have the automatic advantage of painting the positive while being aware of the negative. That space between the letters has to be of a consistent visual weight. ([Tony van Hasselt](#))

The space between the dish and the pitcher, that I paint also. ([Georges Braque](#))

I like empty spaces that are no longer occupied, although you can tell that people were once there. ([Dick Cole](#))

Doughnut holes are made of the same thing as the hole in your toilet seat, but nobody ever publicizes that. ([Megan Coughlin](#))

Without negative space how would we appreciate the positive in our art and in our lives? ([Dyan Law](#))

A hole is nothing at all, but you can break your neck in it. ([Austin O'Malley](#))

The gaps between the forms worry me. I can *never* get these spaces right... ([Paula Rego](#))

Space is the breath of art. ([Frank Lloyd Wright](#))

Negative space

August 5, 2005

Dear Artist,

These days no self-respecting workshop instructor goes half an hour without mentioning negative space. So prevalent has this stylistic concept become that it's currently central to practically all types of pictorial composition. In my own work, the "backwards" of negative space is as vital as breathing. Here are a few tips if you too would like to see it happen:

Negative space strengthens compositions by solidifying form and building design. It also helps work to look "painterly." In order to make magic with negative forms you need to "set up" your positive forms. In the early stages of a composition these positive forms--in realistic work they are often foreground objects--can be juggled and juxtaposed with an eye to the potential shapes and "holes" that form around them. This requires what I call "one-two thinking"--the ability to think ahead to further moves that might happen later in the game. Watching some painters, particularly beginning painters, it's this one-two thinking that is most frequently lacking. Simply stated, one-two thinking permits creators to make plans where lights or darks might later be spotted through foliage, furniture, figuration, or some other veil. If you're not sure about this, try doing some regular "one-one thinking"--and see how relatively uninteresting the stuff starts to look. "One-one" is okay for sign painters, but not for fine painters.

Think of negative space as a sort of musical counterpoint. It's an embellishment to a main theme, played in pianoforte, pianissimo, or somewhere between. Counterpoint adds a secondary motif that rings the clear bells of beauty, mystique and quality. Here begins the magic of abstraction. It's this abstraction, subtle or strong, that makes your work live as a thing-in-itself and become something unique and different from what it represents. Taken to extreme, I call it "contrapuntal overemphasis," terminology that when thrown around the studio, makes visitors groan. I have to tell you that high action around negative space is the moxie that brings noses right up to the work. Even though it's "negative," it's good stuff.

As all this may seem a bit theoretical, I've asked Andrew, now fully down from the mountains, to illustrate some of these ideas in close-up. They're below.

Best regards,

Robert.

PS: "Spaces between the forms, or the negative shapes, play just as great a role as the positives. The positives make the negatives and negatives make the positives." ([Stan Smith](#)) "A painter is a choreographer of space." ([Barnett Newman](#)) "Fill a space in a beautiful way." ([Georgia O'Keeffe](#))

Esoterica: The rendering of negative space can be confusing. As [Charles Reid](#) says, "A positive object in relation to one background area can become a negative shape when another object cuts in front of it." A simple exercise is to devise and execute a composition where you concentrate on painting the areas around objects rather than the objects themselves. Just keep saying this mantra: "Objects are held by the backgrounds that are cut into them."

Negative space in action



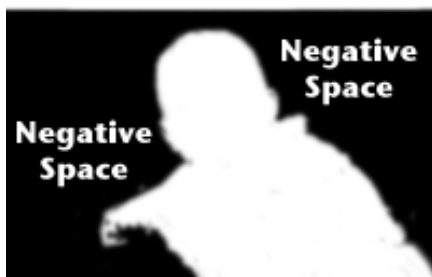
In the early stages--as in this one of Tsimshian funerary poles--foreground elements are moved around so as to provide the possibility of interesting shapes and holes where the totems press against the sky.

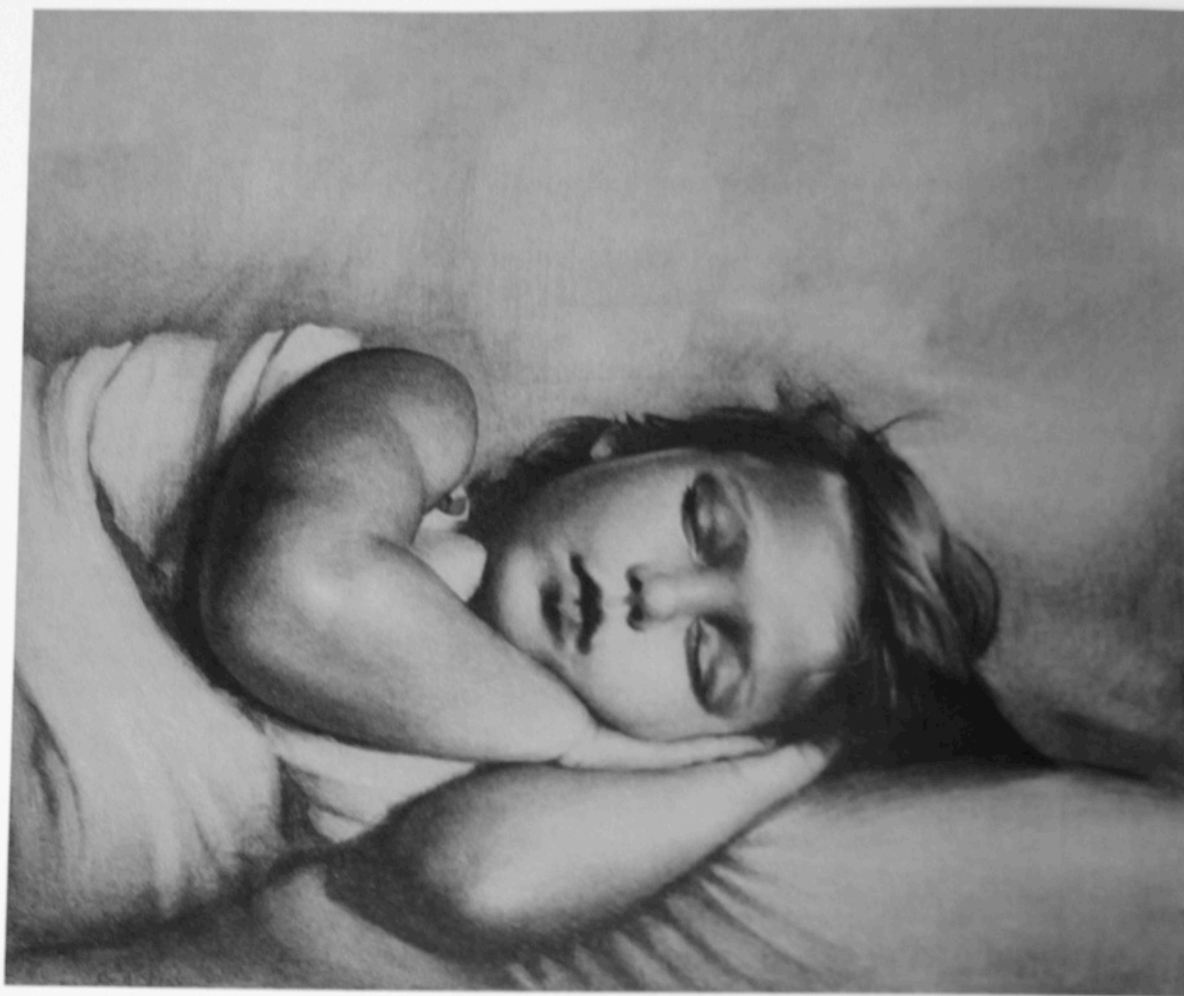


"One-two" thinking provides the set up here to go in and loosely describe the trees and the foreground meadow. Mountain scenery provides constant opportunities for foreground-background interaction.



These whaling schooners sit "over-shot" and ready to have their silhouettes "cut in" with negative areas around the masts, etc. Variety and counter-light in the background adds the potential for abstraction.





RON CHEEK, *Isabella*, 2006, charcoal and white chalk on toned paper, 15 x 19 inches (38.1 x 48.3 cm)

The artist captures the weight and innocent sleep of childhood with his studied use of line. The small, triangular negative shapes around the arms could help the artist locate the position and degree of curve found in the shape.

Finding Negative Shapes

The term *negative shape* refers to the space surrounding an object. We tend to be subject centered, seeing the object we are drawing (a pitcher, perhaps) in isolation from its environment (the space in which the pitcher sits). I am a big offender in this area, and I have had to consciously train myself to work on the whole picture.

Negative space, the areas around your subject, can help you double-check the accuracy of your angles.

If you add negative space to your artistic vocabulary, you will find that your work improves. It gives you a different lens in

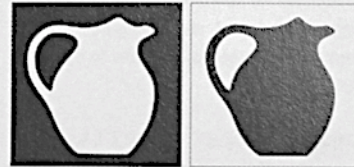
which to see your subject. Furthermore, the small spaces between objects, such as the space between fingers or the air between leaves on a branch, can help us double-check the accuracy in our work. Negative shapes afford us another method of comparison to ensure that our drawings accurately reflect life.

Some artists, such as Norman Lundin, make negative shapes the major focus of their life's work. Lundin once said, "Just as one cannot have something 'long' without having something 'short' for comparison, one cannot have an 'object' without a 'void.' It is the void that interests me."

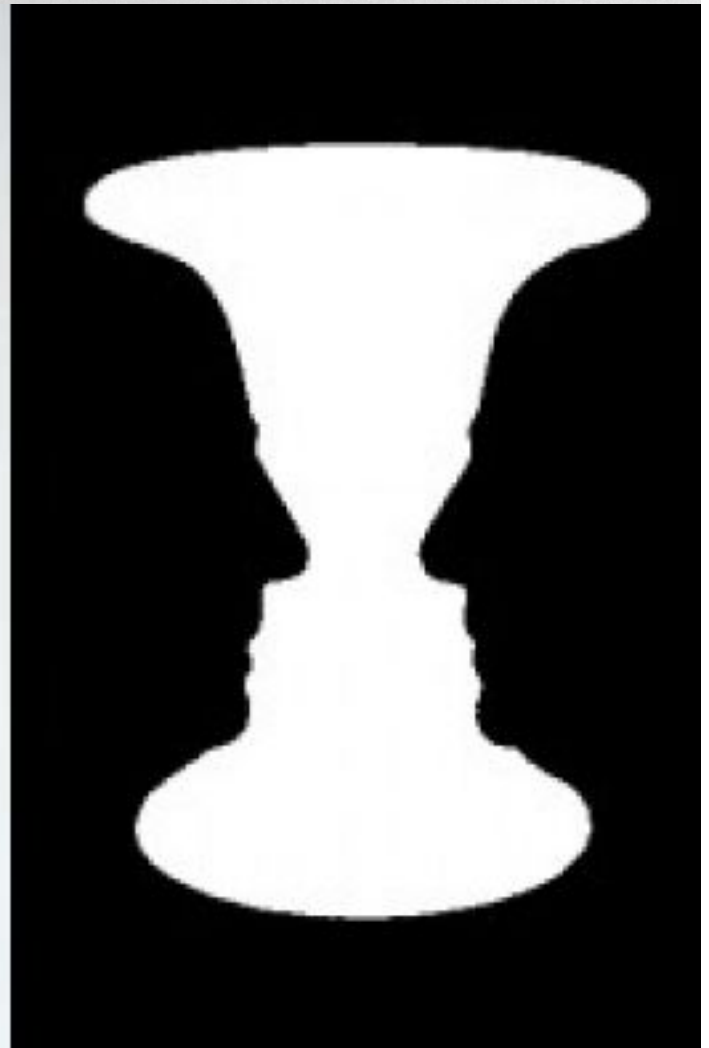
Be warned, however, that negative space is fragile. Unless the artist is very skillful, the space between or around a subject can, in fact, overwhelm it. For example, while the space around the head is an important element of a figure drawing, the head itself is not shaped by the air around it. Rather, it is shaped by the structure of the skull. Just getting the contour lines right will never re-create the power and form given to us by the skull. Train yourself to notice negative shapes, but be sure to use them wisely.

NORMAN LUNDIN, *Blackboard and Lightswitch*, 1974, charcoal on paper, 28 x 44 inches (71.1 x 111.8 cm), collection of the Museum of Modern Art (New York, NY)

Lundin has made a career of drawing things that go unnoticed by most people, such as sunlight hitting a wall. He gives each part of the drawing its own shape even when his subject is only air and light.



Consider the black shape of the pitcher on the right to fix the positive shape in your mind. Next, compare it with the black shapes around the pitcher on the left to see the negative space.



Drawing the negative spaces between these two figures.

