

From street to court and back again: drawing what the public sees

Isobel Williams

In many cases, quick and dirty justice would do better justice than the full majesty of a traditional common law trial. – Lord Neuberger, President of the Supreme Court, in a speech, *Justice in an Age of Austerity*, 2013

I hope to show you that there's room in court for quick and dirty drawing as well.

I draw from the viewpoint of the uninitiated stranger, straying into someone else's mystery.



It all starts in life class. One day I'm asked if I want to be artist in residence under the Westway, a road through London. This will be a temporary unpaid gig. Sounds perfect. I start my blog, *Drawing from an uncomfortable position* (www.isobelwilliams.blogspot.com).



My chief muse on the street is Egbert, a Rastafarian born in Saint Lucia.



This is his friend Kili, short for Kilimanjaro 'because it's white on top'.

The Notting Hill Carnival passes under the Westway each year. These young people are getting ready for it.



There is a strong police presence at the carnival. This is Constable Shields, a riot policeman.



After the carnival...



...I'm wondering where to draw next. Then something happens.



Protesters from Occupy, the pro-equality movement, camp outside St Paul's Cathedral in the City of London. I drop in on this street tragi-comedy while it lasts. This is Tom, who changes his name to Marcus, after Marcus Aurelius.



Jimmy (seen here in the supply tent) is very charming and plays the piano. Two years later a play partly based on Jimmy's experiences, *Protest Song* by Tim Price, is performed at the National Theatre.

Here is Matt, an Iraq veteran, in the tech tent.





This is a study of layers of oblivion. I don't know I'm being photographed by a Chinese student. The lovers give me permission to draw them, then withdraw into their world. The cathedral has just reopened its doors to the public after closing them for a week in a notorious error of judgement, one of the factors leading to the resignation of the Dean of St Paul's.

Behind the tents of the protesters – less popular with the public than in the first heady days of the occupation – are buildings owned by the Corporation of the City of London, which is preparing a lawsuit to evict the protesters (*Corporation of the City of London v Tammy Samede and persons unknown*).

A court action deprives me of my pet place to draw so I start thinking about drawing in a court. What about the highest court? I write to the UK Supreme Court, which kindly gives me permission to draw discreetly from the public benches as long as I don't take up more than one seat.

This is my first drawing in the Supreme Court; it is also this barrister's first day there.



The courtrooms are democratically flat: no one is raised above anyone else. This means I have sightline problems. I solve them by making people transparent.



Court 3 is where the Judicial Committee of the Privy Council normally sits. This is the court of final appeal for UK overseas territories, Crown dependencies and some Commonwealth countries. A flag indicates the jurisdiction of each hearing. Here it is the Isle of Man.



A particularly resonant Supreme Court case is *R (on the application of Nicklinson and another) v Ministry of Justice*, about the right to assisted suicide. Tony Nicklinson brought the case after suffering a massive stroke, but died before the hearing. The case is heard by nine justices, reflecting its importance.



The judgment, delivered some months later, is over in minutes. Journalists gather outside.





Tony Nicklinson's widow, Jane, gives several interviews, then sits quietly on a stone bench with her daughter Lauren. The judgment didn't go her way.



Oblivious to this tableau and its history of emotion, a triumphant bride pauses for a photo, her brand new husband just out of my view. *Till death us do part.* But it doesn't.

It's lonely when you're on your feet. This QC has no one to help him now he's in front of five justices. His junior sits beside him; above is a carved stone angel.



Court 2 is lofty with white walls and velvet hangings. The space emphasises the clarity of colour and thought; it reminds me of Peter Brook's white box production of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* for the Royal Shakespeare Company in 1970.



I travel. These are the doors of the Cour de cassation in Paris, closed to me...



...but I was allowed to draw in the Cour d'appel where, as an Englishwoman, I was shocked to see the judge's bare forearm.



Sometimes my subjects know they are being drawn; sometimes they don't. But you never know when you're being googled. A stranger's internet search plunges me into a hectic project – drawing a cabaret-themed art exhibition called *The Violet Crab* at the David Roberts Art Foundation in London.



The organisers are looking for someone to log the exhibition's progress from set-up to dismantling. So they google 'court artist'. I'm not one of those, just someone in a court, but I'm happy to spend time spying in the gallery.



James flexes under Cindy Sherman's *Untitled*, #341, in *The Violet Crab*, exhibition created by artist Than Hussein Clark



When I'm drawing in court, I can't use potentially messy gear like this (bamboo, reed, rope, quills, ink, coffee stirrers, white man's dreadlock).



But at *The Violet Crab* I use the media I want. This drawing of pole performer Ayumi LaNoire is made by dipping sheep's wool in ink.



Ayumi LaNoire performing at the Grand Opening of *The Violet Crab* at DRAF, 2015. Photo: Dan Weill. <http://davidrobertsartfoundation.com/projects/dz-hosts-the-violet-crab-nights-of-cabaret-at-draf/>

Ayumi also takes part in performances of Japanese rope bondage (shibari).

These people are practising shibari. They make me think of *The Burghers of Calais* by Rodin.



Here is Ayumi at *The Violet Crab* again. You can see me sitting on the stage: my task is to draw the cabaret and the audience.



Performance by Ayumi LaNoire and Nina Russ as part of *DZ Hosts The Violet Crab – Nights of Cabaret at DRAF*, 2015 (documentation video still: courtesy DRAF and ThisIsTomorrow)



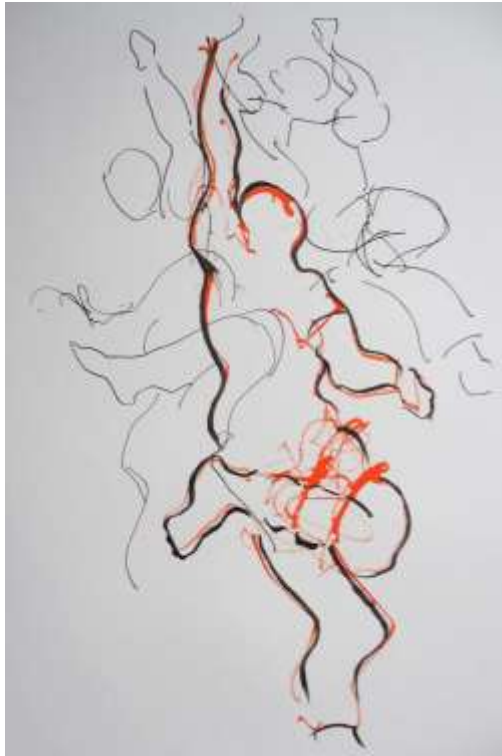
I start to draw a girl who is laughing at one of the cabaret acts where laughter is not the intended effect. She sees me drawing her and stops laughing. I feel bad. I've spoilt her enjoyment. But I am not judging.

A transparent plastic curtain divided the on-stage area and the dressing room, meaning not only that backstage preparations were a visible part of the night's performance, but that the actors could watch the audience. Isobel Williams silently sketched members of the crowd (an experience I was surprised to find, once her pinched gaze turned to me, totally unsettling), while a vast, beautiful Enrico David canvas (Untitled, 2013) hung above the stage, depicting a screwed-up face, staring out at us like a sentinel. Watch or be watched – watch and be watched. If life is a cabaret, old chum, you're part of the spectacle too.

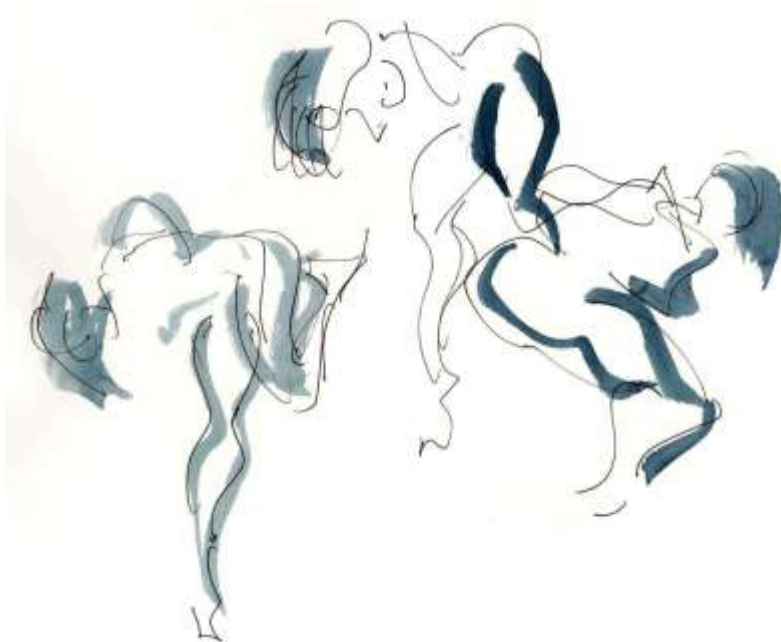
– **Matthew McLean, Frieze Magazine, May 2015**



Dancer in front of Enrico David's *Untitled*, 2013



And I float in suspension between the subject of the drawing and you.



*My shibari blog is www.boulevardisme.blogspot.co.uk
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