

6: EXPRESSIVE ARTS

It was in expressive arts, and we were playing a game. I had to close my eyes and wait for something. But then everybody hid, around the room. So I didn't know what was happening, 'cause the teacher played a trick on me.

It's not really that big a moment, but I just thought it'd be good in a picture. So like the whole room surrounding me, and I'm right in the middle.

The words of the text accompanying the drawing were spoken by a Year 7 school student. I was on a residency for Whitechapel Gallery at Raine's Foundation School in London, in 2007. I had been commissioned to create a work of art that responded in some way to the school environment. My practice draws on memory, re-enactment, and narrative — often through depicting solitary figures in interior spaces. For *School Interiors*, I asked students from two classes I had been working with — Year 7 and Year 10 — to tell me a memorable incident that had taken place in the school, and to take me to the location.

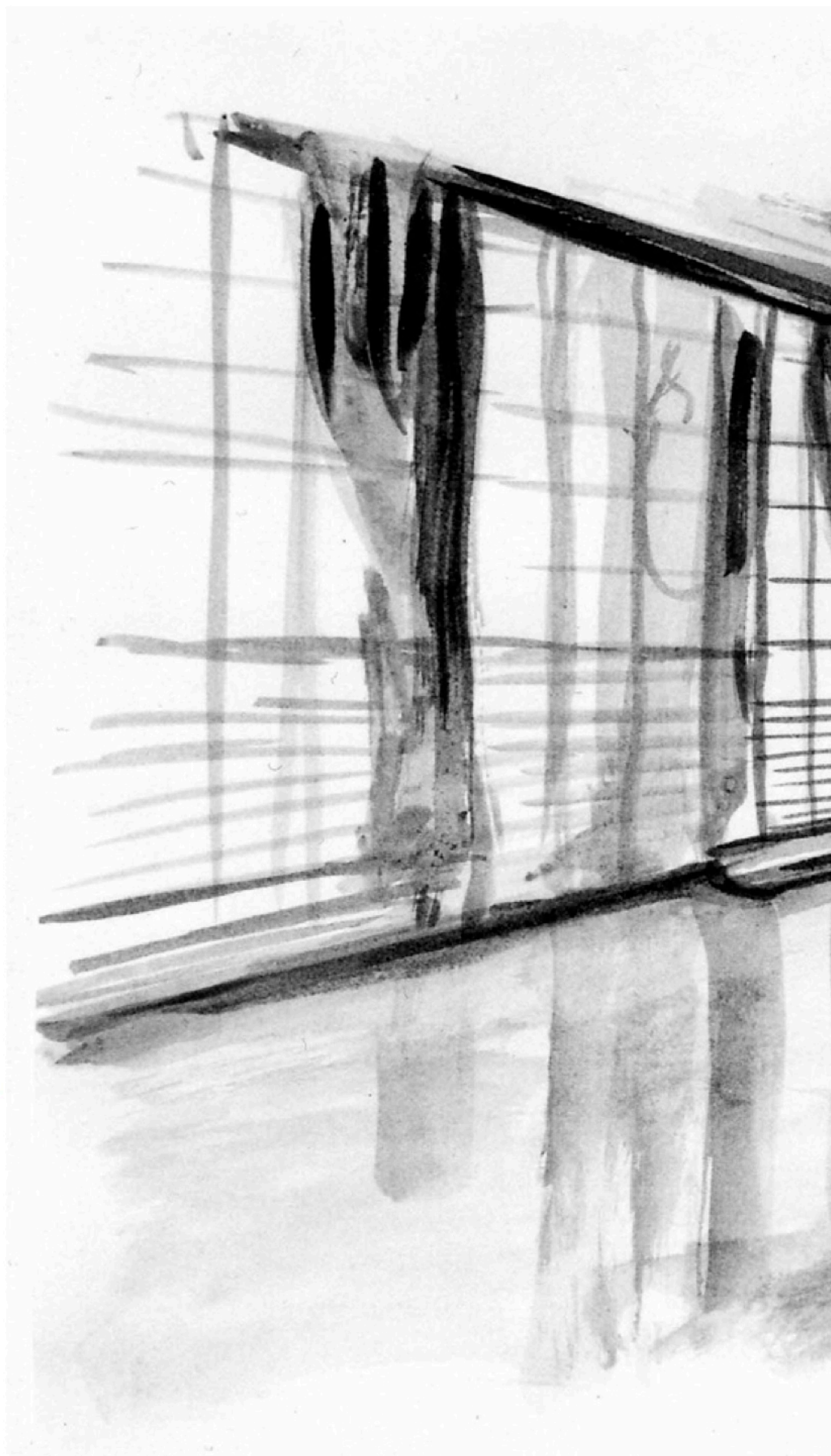
I took fourteen students individually out of the classroom, photographed them remembering the incident, and recorded their words without rehearsal on a Dictaphone. There was an intimacy created: the spaces they took me to were deserted, where normally there would be the clamour of break, or lessons. It was a rare opportunity to be alone with a student in a school, and for them to share a personal memory with me. This drawing for 'Expressive Arts' (one of a series of fourteen Indian ink drawings) was created from the photographs I took, and the atmosphere of the story the student told.

Image:
Matthew Krishanu
Expressive Arts
2007
Indian ink on paper

EXPRESSIVE ARTS

Written by Matthew Krishanu

CURRICULUM LINKS: KS3+
Art and Design





The photographs document the school environment in detail, and show the precise identities of the students. The drawings are a transformation — they represent the students in the act of remembering; the scenes lose their substance and colour (evoking old black and white photographs), blurring like memories.

Indian ink is fluid — it brushes across the paper in light washes, but also has the potential to be deep black. It can be both solid and ethereal. In 'Expressive Arts' the darkest form is the boy — the scene around him is in shades of grey and white, except for the darkest shadows in the curtains and ceiling, and the boy's reflection on the polished gymnasium floor, which are in black.

To create the greatest contrast between the rich blacks of Indian ink and the bright white of the ground, I chose a smooth (hot pressed), relatively lightweight (135 gsm) bleached cartridge paper. This weight of paper can't take much fluid before it starts to ruckle, or even tear. I kept the brushstrokes light in application.

Indian ink is indelible — unlike watercolour or gouache which one can 'lift' off once it dries (the paint dissolves and runs in water). I chose not to use bodycolour (white gouache) to make corrections, so the drawing had to be right first time. When working from photographs I find this pressure useful — it keeps the works fresh, rather than over-laboured. The final drawing was my third attempt — in the first two a brush mark had gone astray, and I needed to begin again.

I worked on A3 paper. Unlike when I work on canvas, I was able to forget the edges of the page. The actual drawing takes up less than half the space of the A3 sheet — it floats on the paper, its edges blurring into the white of the page. The impression is similar to the television and film convention of 'memory' or 'dream' sequences where the four corners of the screen dissolve to a blurred oval, as if we were seeing through the lens of the person remembering.

The image is not photographically accurate — my hand and eye have changed the perspective of the scene. The sloping wall from the top left of the page is at a heightened angle, exaggerating the space in the room, and giving a slight sense of vertigo to the drawing.

The unreality of the room is emphasized by the boy's placement. He seems to hover in space, perhaps a couple feet off the ground. There's something toy-like about him. In relation to the plane of the

floor, the boy seems to float. This gives the impression that he is standing on water, partly evoked by the liquid application of the ink (which is simply dark water). The sense of his remove or detachment from the scene reminds me of certain dreams where my surroundings appear like an apparition, just beyond my touch.

The room is fluid, the boy more solid, and the whole image is filled with light. Light floods through the windows, creating dark shadows in the curtains and on the bars of the gym apparatus, and light bounces off the floor. While there is a diagonal shadow cast on the wall behind the boy, what we see on the floor is a reflection (of the boy and the apparatus), not a shadow. The reflection of the boy is as dark as his black suit.

He stands stiffly, perhaps ill at ease, and looks exposed in the vast-seeming hall. We get a sense of his character from his pose — he is young, not tall, with short cropped hair, and has a serious demeanour. He is a boy in formal uniform, in an institutional setting, yet he is remembering a personal scene. The drawing is about representing something of his interior world, rather than the outward appearance of the school environment and a student in school uniform.

I placed the boy's head about half way up from the bottom of the floor to the top of the ceiling. The expanse of floor adds interest to the composition: the drawing becomes about space — the plane of the floor around him, and the light and air surrounding him. However, the floor isn't an inviting surface to walk across — he seems frozen still.

Inessential details are lost: the lines painted on the gym floor, the fire exit sign, the strip-lights above (I wanted the scene to be lit only by day light, entering from the top left — an Old Master convention). We know what gym apparatus looks like, so we know there are ropes, hinges, bars — we fill these in ourselves. The mattress-like folded structure on wheels behind the boy provides a compositional device, anchoring the figure in the room from the right-hand side.

The roof slopes upwards from the room's far corner, then straightens to a horizontal at the top right of the picture (where it meets a grid-like window pane). At first this detail of the architecture might not be noticed, instead giving the sense of an unreal perspective, as if the corner were further from the boy than it actually is. The roof looks like old wood beams — neither quite parallel nor straight. The school gym becomes one of memory and imagination, rather than the new-build of my photographs.

The door at the back is a counterpoint to the boy. It was made of dark wood, but I bleached it out, so that it would not distract attention from the figure. In our vision, things in the distance appear lighter, less focused. The light grey rectangle is just enough to suggest the door's presence, without unbalancing the picture.

The outside is blank. We know there is a view beyond the windows — perhaps trees, bushes, buildings, sky — but the drawing only shows the white of the light, not the scene beyond.

The boy's black uniform is punctuated by five slits of white: at the bottom of his buttoned jacket, on his cuffs and collar, the light reflecting off his shoe, and a thin band of light at the sole of his shoe, before his reflection on the floor begins. Each of these patches of white are where I left the paper exposed. If they had been inked over, the small standing figure would have lost its form — it would have flattened to a silhouette.

In his words, the boy states that he was 'right in the middle' of the gym. When I took the photos, that's where he stood, but when it came to composing the drawing, I placed him to the right, for an asymmetric composition. His words give a sense of the space around him, including the space where the viewer is — we are in the gym with him. In the game of hide and seek that the teacher had tricked him into playing, we could be one of the children hiding around the boy, waiting for him to open his eyes. However, the impression is one of emptiness — the people really have gone. He is alone, and that's how he remembered the scene.

The drawing floats on the paper as the boy does in the room. The white light in the drawing extends into the white light of the page. If the white in the image had been made with paint (for example gouache), it would be differentiated from the white paper. The white of a page is beautiful, unlike the machine-bleached white of a pre-primed canvas. With canvas, painters talk of the need to 'kill the white' — to put down a layer of paint all over the surface before one can proceed. On paper, the surface needs to 'breathe'. The white would be suffocated if too much ink were applied.

Norman Bryson, in *Vision and Painting*, writes of the difference between 'deictic' (from the Greek *deikonei*, to show) and 'erasive' media. Here the ink is deictic — it shows the hand of the painter; as in Chinese calligraphy, there is a performative element. The reflections are clearly whole brush strokes, and one can read the width of the brush used from the thin lines of the bars. If the artist's hand falters, the record is apparent. An erasive medium — like oil paint — allows the painter to cover his or her tracks, successive layers concealing the layers beneath.

If I had chosen to make an oil painting from the photographs, it would be a different piece — it would memorialize the room itself, representing the solid space and colours of a tactile environment, rather than the black and white blurring of a room remembered. On canvas, the edges are more determined: the convention is to fill the picture all the way to its edges. If an oil painting were left blank at the sides, it might look unfinished or contrived. In a drawing far more than a painting, we accept the partial.

THE IMPRESSION IS ONE OF EMPTINESS — THE PEOPLE REALLY HAVE GONE. HE IS ALONE, AND THAT'S HOW HE REMEMBERED THE SCENE



The black ink of the text relates visually to the ink of the drawing. The boy's words are printed in Courier font (to imitate a typewriter) on the same cartridge paper as the drawing. If I were to do the piece again, I would typewrite the text. The physical marks of the typewritten word would have been a good complement to the stroke / caress of brushed ink. With ink-jet printing — unless the printer is damaged — there is no variation in the value of the black ink: all the letters are precise, repeated, and of the same blackness. A typewriter is closer to the hand, each letter an extension of the finger that punches the key. The qualities of blackness and of impact vary, according to how hard the key is punched, and to the individual characteristics of the machine — each letter will be fractionally different.

The drawings and accompanying texts were first exhibited at Whitechapel Gallery without frames, lightly attached to a white wall. For Raine's Foundation the drawings were placed in picture mounts and frames — a necessary protective for hanging them in the school. There was a rawness to the loose presentation of the drawings and texts placed directly on the wall, which I preferred to the framed and mounted display. It allowed viewers to draw close to the image, without the glass intervening.

Although I have a lot to say about the drawing now, many of the complex decisions were made intuitively. At the time I was simply focused on completing it quickly, and in one sitting (I find it much easier to achieve a unity of tone and composition in one go, rather than over a series of sessions). For me, speed of execution is important to allow the medium to speak for itself — for the ink to run and spill and build in layers — rather than trying slowly and methodically to control it. It also allows chance to enter. How an individual brush stroke will look, or at what scale a subject is represented — these are elements I do not preconceive, and yet all contribute to the atmosphere and individuality of the piece. From start to finish, the process of drawing is about discovering what my mind's eye sees in a given scene — I am only vaguely aware of what I want to achieve when I begin drawing a picture. What excites me about creating art works is that the success of a given piece can't be pre-formulated: for the results to have any lasting resonance requires a degree of spontaneity.