

THE QUICKENING IMAGE / Wax-Resist Drawing



Two artists have worked together over several decades to develop a unique process that mixes media, invites invention and blurs the line between drawing and painting.

BY EPHRAIM RUBENSTEIN

RIGHT
Agrigento I

by Ephraim Rubenstein, 2010,
mixed media on paper, 38 x 50.

All artwork this article collection
the artist.

BELOW

Sabertooth Cat Skull No. 3

by David Dodge Lewis, 2007,
mixed media on paper, 26 x 40.



Regions of experimental and multimedia drawing methods are available to adventurous artists, and for many years one such method has stood out to me as being particularly compelling and powerful: wax resist. The basic premise of this technique involves applying wax to a drawing's surface to block subsequent ink washes, the wax acting as a sort of frisket to protect the lighter areas.

The core concept is well-known to various crafts—batik fabric dyeing is a perfect example, and children utilize the principle when dyeing Easter eggs. In painting, the resist process is common among watercolorists, who may use liquid frisket to preserve the white of their paper. John Singer Sargent was known to keep a clear crayon in his pocket to protect light areas of his watercolors.

In drawing, however, the use of resist processes has been much more limited. Henry Moore used wax as a resist in his haunting drawings of figures huddled in the London Underground during World War II, and various artists utilized wax as a resist for subsequent aqueous washes, but none developed the technique in any systematic way. This was left to David Dodge Lewis, an artist from Maine who, familiar with Moore's drawings, began formalizing the process in the early 1980s. He evolved a way of working up a drawing with wax in discreet stages, yielding energetic and powerful results that defy easy categorization. They are at once paintings and drawings, incorporating materials both dry (graphite, wax, charcoal and Conté) and aqueous (ink washes and Char-Kole sticks activated with water).

I first encountered David's work in the late 1980s when I saw a brochure for an exhibition at Hampden-Sydney College, in Virginia, where he was then teaching. Years later I can still remember pulling the brochure out from my box and being stunned by the artworks—I had never seen anything quite like them. I contacted David, who graciously invited me to look at his work and walked me through the wax-resist procedure in his studio.

I didn't know it then, but the technique he showed me would unlock a new side of my work. I had been trained in a controlled, classical manner. Through wax resist I learned to look at the drawing itself as much as my subject, and I



Equestrian, Barcelona I
by Ephraim Rubenstein, 2014,
mixed media on paper, 38 x 50.

reality, with concrete, tangible space, as opposed to the more amorphous space in which David's objects appear. Recently, our efforts have produced the exhibition "The Quickening Image," which will be on view at several locations this year and next.

THE PROCESS

Wax-resist drawing is somewhat challenging—it not only combines wet and dry materials but utilizes several quite different skills. It requires artists to be methodical and spontaneous; to work from observation and to invent in an abstract way; and to plan carefully and react on the spur of the moment. But it is well worth the challenge, and here we'll walk through the process, taking as our example a drawing by David of a Fukushima seashell. This drawing comes from a series David created in response to the nuclear emergency in Japan that followed that country's devastating 2011 earthquake. The drawings hypothesize various mutations in shellfish as a result of the

started utilizing a new vocabulary of marks—drips, splashes and puddles—that had been taboo in my earlier training.

Wax-resist drawing became the basis for a collaboration between us that has now lasted more than two decades, during which time we have refined and expanded the potential of the process. We each bring a different approach and subject matter to the technique—I tend to treat the image more like a classical window out onto



MATERIALS

- large, high-quality white paper, such as printmaking paper or hot-pressed watercolor paper. For the drawing demonstrated here, Lewis used a 40" x 26" sheet of Stonehenge paper.
- Gulf Wax, a paraffin wax used in canning, available in the supermarket. It comes in a rectangular block that you can cut into smaller pieces with a knife.
- black India ink—any waterproof and lightfast brand (for example those from Blick, Pelican, Higgins and Winsor & Newton). Waterproof ink includes shellac, which prevents it from lifting when another wash is put over it.
- Char-Kole, a black-pigmented stick bound with gum Arabic. The presence of gum Arabic is important, because it makes the stick water-soluble.
- house-painting brushes with natural bristles, such as a 2" hog's hair brush.
- assorted sticks of charcoal, Conté, pastel and other dry materials
- electric iron, for removing wax (optional)

**Illustration 1:
Line Drawing**



**Illustration 2:
First Layer of Wax**



radioactive seawater that was dumped into the ocean.

Wax resist is most comfortably used on a large scale; my own drawings have been as large as 60" x 40", and David's typically measure 40" x 26". The drawings are worked up in discreet stages, so some planning at the outset of the process is crucial. For instance, you need to know from the beginning where your lights are going to be, because these are the areas you are going to protect with wax, and it's very difficult to reintroduce them at a later stage.

David began *Drawing Title TTKK* by making a strict linear contour drawing of the shell in graphite. This would act as a map telling him where the lights and darks would be and hence where wax would need to be applied. (See Illustration 1.) When starting your own pieces, remember that this contour drawing needs to be emphatic enough to stay visible after multiple washes of ink and charcoal.

David identified the areas where he wanted to preserve the white of the paper and drew over them with a piece of wax, using it as a sort of invisible crayon. (See Illustration 2.) If you ever have trouble remembering where you put the wax, hold the paper at an angle to the light—the waxed areas will have a noticeable sheen.

Next, David wet his paper with clear water so that the ink wash would be consistent, and then brushed the paper with a light-gray ink wash. (See Illustration 3.) The areas covered with wax remained white. It's helpful during this stage to lay the drawing flat so that the washes don't drip down. Another virtue of working on a horizontal surface for the wet stages is that depending on where you want drips or splashes, you can walk all around the drawing, attacking it from different sides.

After waiting for the paper to dry, David applied a second layer of wax, this time protecting the areas of the

**Illustration 3:
First Wash**



**Illustration 4:
Second Wash**





**Illustration 5:
Charcoal Stick**



**Illustration 6:
Charcoal Wash**



The Finished Drawing: Fukushima Shells
by David Dodge Lewis, cap tktktktktktk.

drawing he wished to remain light gray. (See Illustration 4.) He then wet the paper and introduced another ink wash, this one slightly darker than the previous wash. This process of stopping out and putting down ink washes can be repeated as many times as you wish. Most of our drawings have two or three stages of waxing, but some

have as many as six or as few as one. Up until this point, David had been working in the lighter range of the drawing, starting with the white of the paper and slowly getting darker with each wash. Once these light areas were established, he began to address the darks. He located the darkest darks and covered them with Char-Kole. (See

Illustration 5.) These dark areas would soon be activated with water, so it was not necessary for him to be fastidious with the application.

It was now time for the stage that generates the drips, splashes and textures that animate the image. Using a wet brush, David activated and manipulated the Char-Kole, diluting

it in some areas and leaving it as an intense black in others. (See Illustration 6.) The wet parts of the process were now complete.

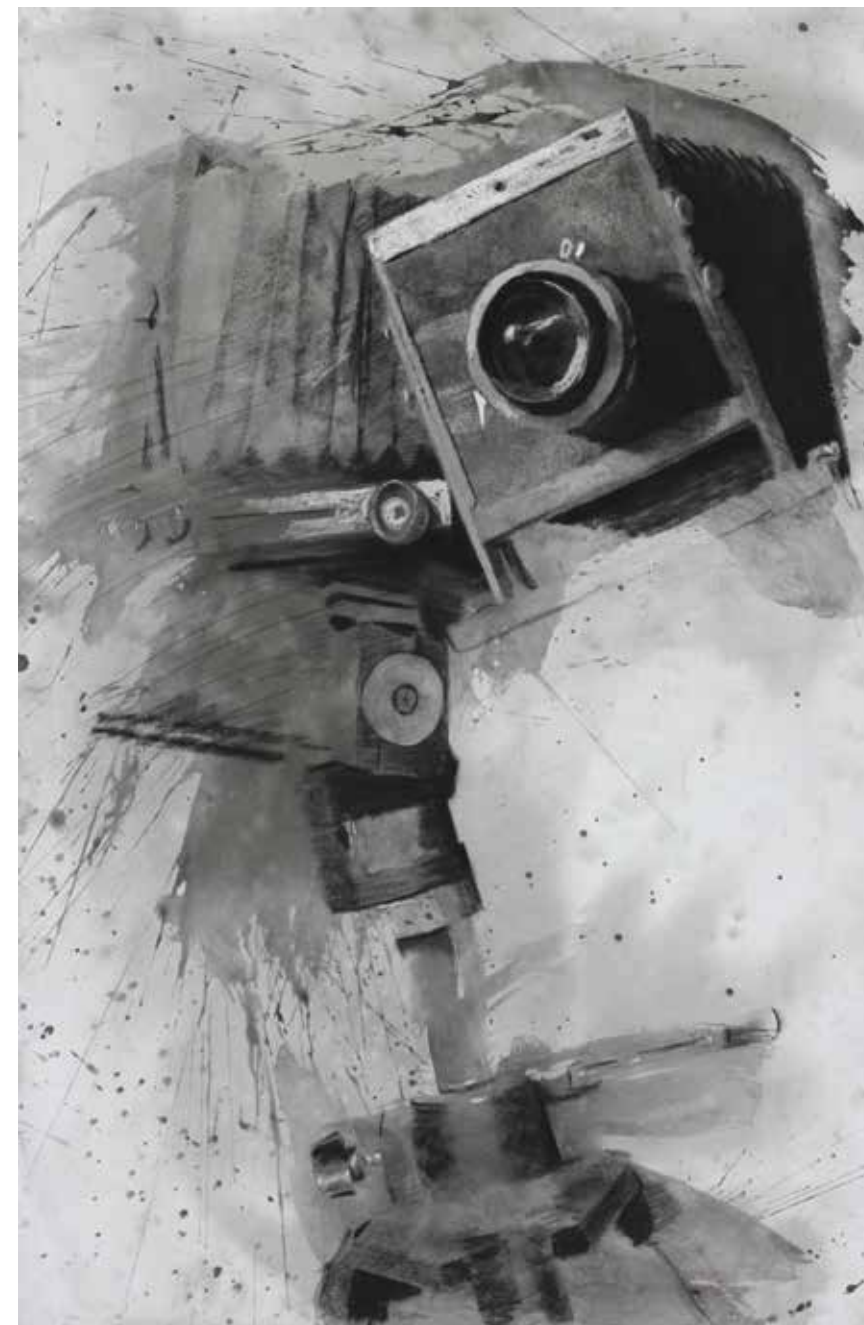
In the last stage, David refined the drawing using dry materials. You can choose several media to apply at this stage, including charcoal, Conté and hard or soft pastel. After a drawing is finished, you can either remove the wax or leave it in place. I leave it as part of the drawing—it is inert, it poses no archival problems, and I like the change in texture that it offers. David usually prefers to remove the wax, which he does by placing a piece of newsprint atop the drawing and ironing the waxed areas with low heat.

LOOKING BACK AND SHARING KNOWLEDGE

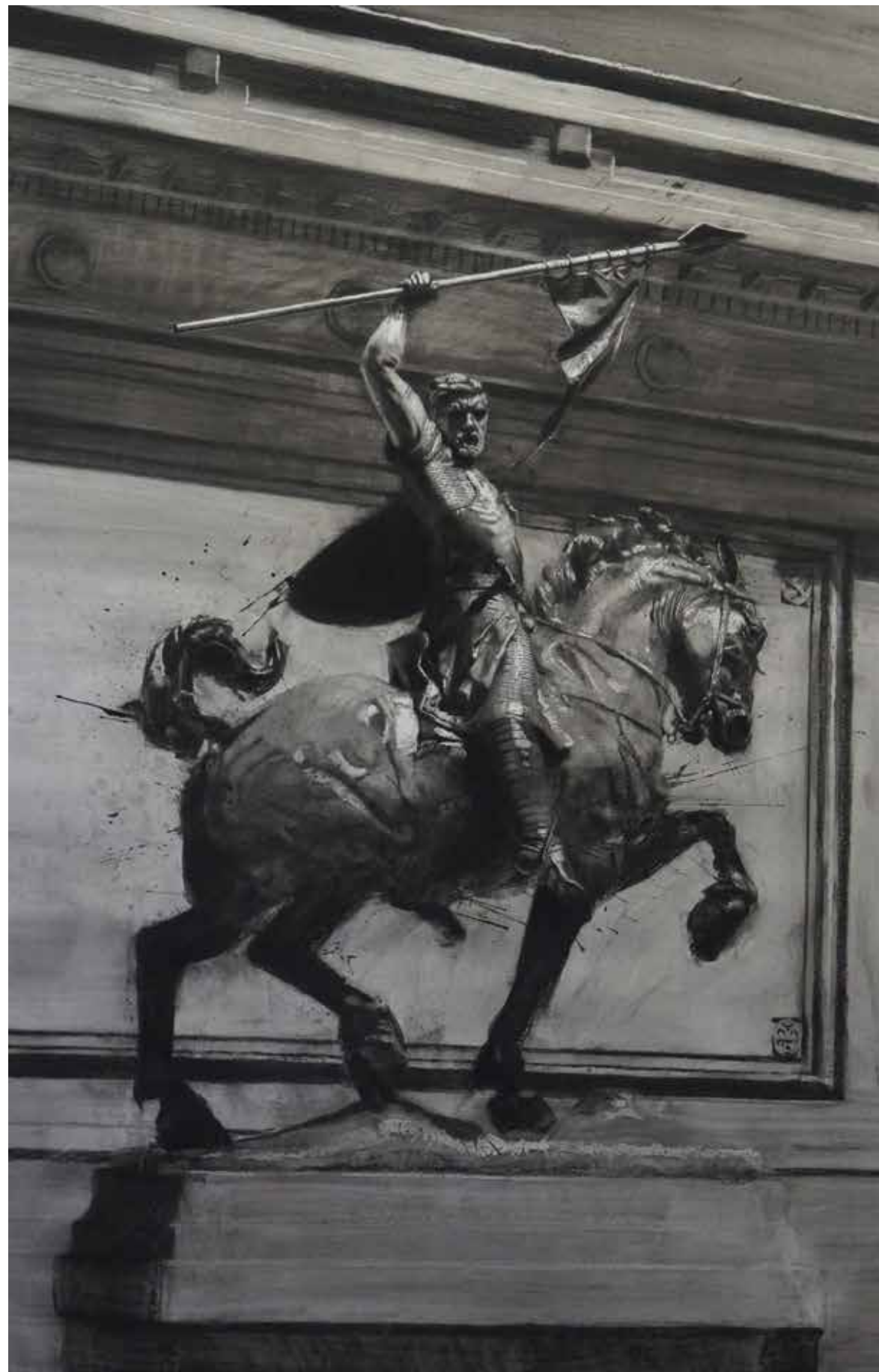
After working together on this process for more than 20 years, David and I felt we had not only built up a considerable body of work but had reached a clearing from which we could survey what we had accomplished. Our exhibition “The Quickening Image” is evidence of what we saw from that vantage point. We chose the word “quicken” to highlight wax resist’s unique ability to animate and energize an image. The goals of the exhibition are both to present the drawings themselves and to tell several stories.

First, it tells the story of a new and difficult drawing process. Wax-resist drawing is physically demanding, both because of its scale and because one frequently executes the dry parts on a vertical surface and the wet parts on a horizontal surface, moving back and forth between the two. It is conceptually demanding as well, in that it must be worked up in discreet, carefully planned stages.

The drawings derive power from



Camera No. 2
by David Dodge Lewis,
1995, mixed media on
paper, 40 x 26.



El Cid I
by Ephraim
Rubenstein,
2014, mixed
media on
paper, 58 x 45.

how they juxtapose contradictory tendencies—the drawn and the painted, the careful and the spontaneous. They also give center stage to a number of historically marginalized tendencies. They are drawings but made on a scale more typical of painting. They are epic works but done in black-and-white rather than color and on paper rather than canvas. And for drawings that are so animated, their subjects are often inanimate objects.

Second, the exhibition focuses on David's and my mutual interest in the concept of working in series, an artistic tradition that dates back at least to Monet's famous sequences of haystacks, water lilies and the Rouen Cathedral. A series of artworks functions like a theme and variation in music, gaining power from the way some elements change while others stay the same from iteration to iteration. A composer might keep the melody but change the harmony or the rhythm. In wax-resist drawing, an artist can leave more or less ink on the paper, lighten it with water or generally adjust the composition.

Finally, "The Quickening Image" tells the story of a collaboration and friendship. When artists were members of guilds and worked more collectively, there was a continual transference of information, both technical and aesthetic. Eventually artists became much more isolated and it became rarer for them to learn so intensely from one another. In order to do so successfully, there has to be a high level of trust and respect, and I am continually amazed at how open and generous David has been with his time and knowledge.

I, in turn, have taught the process to any students who have been interested. The possibilities of the technique are vast, and I hope artists try it for themselves and discover what it has to offer. ❖

My Father's Stroke II, No. 1
by David Dodge Lewis, 1988–1990,
mixed media on paper, 40 x 26.



ABOUT THE EXHIBITION

"THE QUICKENING IMAGE" WAS ORGANIZED BY THE WASHINGTON COUNTY MUSEUM OF FINE ARTS, IN HAGERSTOWN, MARYLAND, WHERE IT DEBUTED THIS PAST SPRING. IT IS NOW ON VIEW AT THE LONGWOOD CENTER FOR THE VISUAL ARTS, IN FARMVILLE, VIRGINIA, THROUGH NOVEMBER 22. IN 2016 IT WILL TRAVEL TO EAST CAROLINA UNIVERSITY, IN GREENVILLE, NORTH CAROLINA, AND TO THE EVANSVILLE MUSEUM, IN INDIANA. FOR DETAILS, VISIT WWW.THEQUICKENINGIMAGE.COM.