

HIGH CONTRAST

by Geri Greenman

The traditional black line on white paper can be stunning with its sharp contrast. The white and black serve to create a dichotomy, playing off one another in startling ways. Those dark marks on paper are also comfortable, recognizable and acceptable. To add a little “twist” on the usual, my drawing students were asked to interject the “unusual” by making at least part of their drawing the nontraditional white line on black.

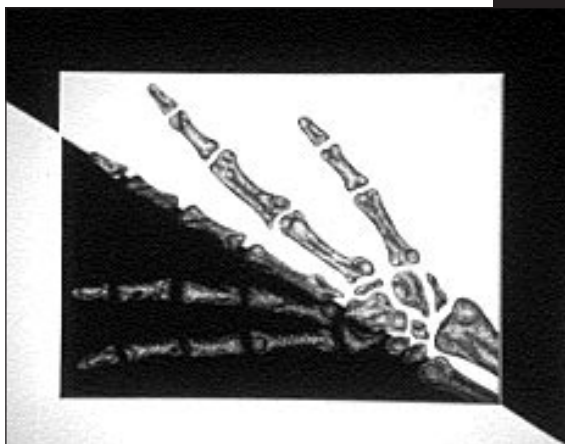
The black surface in this case was scratchboard, a chalk-based board with black sprayed on top to cover its surface. By scratching into the surface, you uncover the white chalk base to give you that unique reversal of line.

The board I use is pre-inked and student quality. Drawbacks are that it's very shiny and, of course, its unforgiving nature. British “scraper board” has a matte surface; it's a heavier quality but approximately 10 times the cost of what I use.

In the past I've had students spray the scratchboard surface with aluminum or white spray paint to give a third layer for interest, so that if you gently scratch the first layer you uncover the black, and then the white chalk base.

Scratchboard work is fascinating and very appealing, partly because it is the opposite of what we're used to seeing, but also because it seems so dense and rich; therefore, the line appears more delicate, bold or just different. Using the same techniques with black ink on white paper and scratching into scratchboard may well receive different reactions—with many leaning toward the scratchboard techniques.

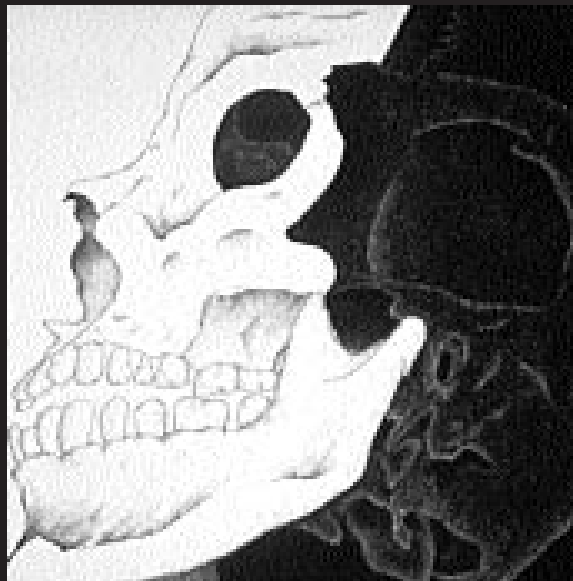
Methods of shading—like dot density, line proximity and cross-hatching—can be used with equal success on both surfaces. In our case, we used an ultra fine-tip permanent marker on white hot-press illustration board (to avoid ink bleeding), and an X-Acto® knife to get fine lines on the



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scratchboard (supervise closely). Because I am concerned about safety, I have my students turn the blades up to the ceiling, using only the very tips. As well, nibs made especially for scratchboard can be used, though the line they give is not as sensitive.

For this assignment, I asked my students to combine the two media using similar techniques, but to be cautious with the way they would incorporate the scratchboard. Since it's so “heavy” and bold in appearance, we discussed the care that should be used in deciding where to place it on our compositions. On the example I created for the class (a practice I have used since my early teaching days), I used the scratchboard on the right side of my artwork. I felt that since it had such a bold appearance and we read from left to right, I was concerned that if placed on the left it might stop the viewer's eye. Although a few of my students were able to do that with pleasing results—it didn't work on my composition.

We had been drawing from a skeleton for a couple of weeks

see **CONTRAST** on page 50

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

Students will...

- learn techniques in both ink and scratchboard, giving the visual effect of texture.
- learn to compose creatively with the “problem” of two visual weights.
- experiment with dot density (stippling), line proximity and cross-hatching.
- use an additive approach with black ink on white, and a subtractive technique for white on black.
- consider the importance of visual rhythm and weight with the high contrast of the black and white surfaces.

MATERIALS

- Sketching paper
- Pencils
- Tracing paper
- Light-colored pastels
- Subject (in this case, skeleton/bones)
- Hot-press illustration board
- Ultra fine-tip permanent markers
- Scratchboard
- Scratchboard tools and X-Acto® knives

CONTRAST and the students
continued from page 25 felt comfortable
with it. We dis-

ussed the beautiful sculptural quality of bones and the pleasing shapes and inherent design quality to be found in the skeletal structure. Now we were ready to zoom in on a portion and create a black-and-white, high-contrast composition from our sketches and, of course, the skeleton, which was nearby.

Once the sketches were perfected in terms of placement and proportion, I had the students enlarge them to the size they wanted. Then they rubbed graphite on the back of their drawing to be transferred lightly to the illustration board.

For the scratchboard portion, they traced the part they preferred to be white onto tracing paper. They used light-colored pastels to chalk the underside of the tracing paper and then placed it faceup and gently drew over their lines to transfer to the black surface.

My class all seemed to start with that comfortable black line on the white illustration board using a particular shading technique or combination. Before they started working on the scratchboard, I gave them practice sheets and had them try several different techniques and textures—you can't add what you've taken away, so caution and preparation is necessary.

Another drawback to scratchboard is that if the students press too hard when transferring their sketches, they can create a groove in the surface that when crosshatched, may chip out a chunk that can ruin an area. Caution with handling is also advisable because bending or creasing the scratchboard will crack the chalk base, leaving a white crevice that is irreparable.

I combined these two techniques because it was a way of joining two different looks and visual statements. I was pleased with my students' work—bold and rich with strong line usage, giving a very graphic impression.

A few students reversed their line handling on the scratchboard by scratching out the shadows rather than the highlights, giving an X-ray quality that greatly changed the results. These are unique interpretations of bones, and the high contrast makes them powerful images that please viewers and the artists alike. ■

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