

What makes a great drawing? It's a gut feeling. But the ones that keep the eye looking and looking very often have things 'wrong' with them. For example, in Vincent Van Gogh's pen and ink studies of the landscape, his marks in many places 'misbehave': they have the wrong scale, or weight, or density, or direction. And it's precisely the things that are amiss about Van Gogh's drawings that give them their vitality.

Sculptor Ron Haselden has for some years asked groups of people to draw for him. He's worked with children, because they will draw so freely and unselfconsciously. Then prisoners, who at first found it strange, but "had nothing to lose" and so drew with abandon. More recently, he's asked older people – who, to begin with, held back, insisting that they couldn't draw. But, as Ron Haselden reflects: "people surprised themselves when they did make the effort, saying 'did I do that?'"

Ron Haselden later pores over the pile of drawings that has been given to him, looking for a quality – often, an exciting and remarkable kind of 'wrongness' – that brings it to life. The most compelling of these he will transform into large-scale light sculptures.

At Fabrica, we see Ron Haselden's renditions in light of drawings made by older people in Brighton and elsewhere. Here are his thoughts on some of these drawings and the people who created them:

The *Big Man*, a self-portrait, is a beautiful drawing, quite melancholic. He appears to have an overview of where he is, maybe resulting from reaching an 'elderly' age. The *Rabbit Lady* behind, expressing clear signs of surprise or even shock, seems to burst through making the man portrait appear perhaps more vulnerable about his status. Meanwhile, the small *Swimming Man* glides by, the small *Lady with the Dog* seems to be one of those quiet people one often sees in city streets, while the *Big Dog* in the foreground walks casually in from stage right.

The *Large Tulip* in the centre right of things is on an upward trajectory which slightly reminds me of the *Jack in the Beanstalk* story. Quietly behind is an aged-looking *Reading Man* who appears to be reading or writing, I'm not quite sure which, but certainly it's absorbing his whole attention. Right behind all these works is the giant *Stick Man*, with a walking stick, and appearing quite anonymous, no apparent identity and just

an empty symbol of an older person.

It's clear that, over time, the drawings become ever more compelling to him, turning into something like 'imaginary friends' that populate his own inner dialogues. Having recently entered his seventies, Ron Haselden has a particular feel for the inflections of old age: the crumpled and sagging outlines, the voiding of identity, the intense bond with pets, the capacity for total absorption in a task. On the other hand, some drawings have a *noumenal* (that is to say, unknowable) quality, inspiring simple curiosity or, in one case, a deep sense of wonder:

I never managed to discuss *Shield* with the drawer but, in its simplicity of shape and line, it has continued to intrigue me and made me wonder, as many of the drawings do, what prompted the person to draw this?

Finally, *The Tree*. I remember talking to this quiet lady who insisted that she had never drawn in her life. It was after much persuasion that she started drawing and made this quiet work, which can be interpreted in many ways. It is a bundle of blazing warm white light. Or at least this is what I hope and think and have come to know about it.

Something of the life of these drawings will be inadvertent, since the older hand when it draws is prone to interesting kinds of mishaps. A line might begin as a portrait study, wobble and become more of a diagram, and then carry on in the manner of a cartoon (see *Big Dog* for example). But happily, as art historian Erika Naginski points out, drawing as a medium specifically accommodates this: 'there is no fixed and absolute identity – aesthetic, semiotic, or otherwise – that we can attribute to the trace' ('Drawing at the Crossroads', *Representations* no. 92, 2000). On the other hand, it remains unusual to encounter several varieties of drawing in one and the same work.

The mishaps and mix-ups might be due in part to arthritis, or the length of time since the person last drew. But awkwardness in the hand (if not actual pain and loss of movement) is found in the general population too, due to our growing use of keyboards. Is your own handwriting deteriorating? Is it arthritis, or new technologies, or both? Will you try for a drawing to see what you get?

Finally, what has Ron Haselden done in rendering these drawings

into light sculptures that are so uncommonly large that you can walk through them? Sculptures that reach into the apex of the roof of this church and nearly touch its sidewalls? Strangely, the drawings have also been intersected: is this to cross-pollinate what they offer up to us?

It's perhaps as if new storylines for the 'imaginary friends' have been let loose; new dramas can now take place within our imaginations, as visitors to this exhibition. In Luminary, Ron Haselden stage-manages an astonishingly vivid sense of elderly human presence.

Angela Kingston
Independent curator and writer