



Female Nude in Charcoal

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Charcoal is typically a medium to be loved or loathed. In an instant it can create those rich blacks that any graphite artist will envy, having squandered hours to achieve the same result. However, there comes a price, and that price is dust. Charcoal (particularly vine charcoal) will do its utmost to distribute itself wherever it can: on fingers, under nails, unwanted smears across your page, usually everywhere except the very place you wanted it.

A Sandpaper Ideal for grinding down charcoal, or sharpening it to a point.

B Vine Charcoal Assorted sizes. (note: vine charcoal is made from the willow tree).

C Vine Charcoal This came from the garden of John Ruskin, and was formed in larger sticks, though essentially it is the same as B.

D Chamois Bought from a car shop and can be used to blend.

E Colour Shaper A rubber tipped tool designed for blending and shaping pastel/charcoal and paint (available in artshops and on the Internet).

F Charcoal/Pastel Pencils Charcoal can be bought in pencil form. It saves fingers from becoming blackened, and can be easier to control. The white pastel pencil can be used for highlights.

G Compressed Charcoal Not as messy as the vine charcoal sticks, but is harder to erase.

H Putty Eraser A crucial piece of equipment that removes charcoal without leaving a mess.

I Container An old tic-tac sweets container to hold the charcoal dust. Use whatever you like, but preferably something with a lid.



J Brushes Two cheap brushes that can be used to push the dust around on the paper.

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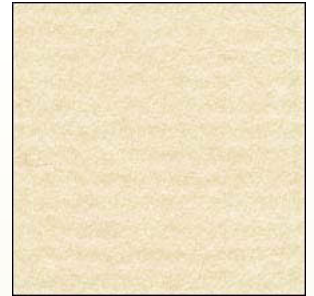
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Left: Fixative - Brushing dry charcoal dust around with a brush makes it difficult to apply a dark tone in one take; spraying fixative allows me to build up two or maybe three layers to get the darker tones.

The larger can was the cheapest I could find, and as a consequence I have to spray three times as much to get any use from it. My recommendation would be to invest in something half-decent. The Windsor and Newton fixative may be smaller, but it is much more effective and ultimately lasts longer.



Right: Paper - You can use any paper from pastel paper (Canson is particular good from my previous pastel painting efforts), watercolour paper to bristol board. For the purposes of this article I have bought a pad of Charcoal Paper made by Daler-Rowney. It is 'laid' paper, giving it a texture that helps hold the charcoal, and is slightly tinted.

Making Dust

This is the messy (and fun) part! With your vine charcoal in hand, sand it down over a piece of folded paper (I've used an old envelope). If you do not have any spare sandpaper, you should still be able to create dust by rubbing your charcoal on a piece of paper. Take caution not to breathe in the dust. You will probably need to obliterate two sticks, and once done carefully pour the dust into a container for safekeeping.



Making a Point

Vine charcoal does not have the pinpoint accuracy of a sharpened pencil, but if you rub it down you can form a sharp edge for more detailed work. Do not expect the sharp edge to last long.

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Outlines



The initial outline does not have to be inspiring in-itself, and can be reworked throughout the drawing, however some level of accuracy is required if you wish to keep areas of your page clean for later highlights. If your lines go astray a piece of putty should soon put it to rights as vine charcoal is very malleable - you might even get away with rubbing out areas with a clean finger.

Seeing negative shapes helps a great deal when marking out the human figure, for example, the triangle between the sloping back and left arm, or the shape between the left thigh and right breast. I started the drawing with the arm and back so that I could size the head to fit.

Applying the Charcoal Dust

I used an old soft brush for this. One that is too coarse (such as hog's hair) will scrape the dust particles, which may find a use in another drawing, but not for this one.

This step is fairly messy, but I am unconcerned about particles finding their way into my outline: dust particles are easily removed providing they have not been pushed in too hard with the brush.

Even before I put brush to paper, particles were falling off onto the page.



Applying the Dust (cont...)

By working the background first, the darkest tones are established and provide a tonal reference to more accurately apply the highlights and middle-ranged tones for the body and face.

The dust particles create miniature plumes of 'smoke' that are fascinating to observe, but try not to breathe it in. Better to work in a ventilated room and keep your head at a distance.

I dip the brush into the powder as necessary, but try not to leave an excessive amount of dust on the page. I know that if the dark is not as dark as I would like, I can always spray a little fixative and repeat this stage at a later time.

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Cleaning the Subsequent Mess

Using my smaller brush I go over the lines of my drawing to soften the edges and remove a little of their blackness.

The brush I am using is a cheap Cotman size 111 watercolour brush. After two drawings it looks slightly sorry for itself, so my advice is please do not use your best kolinsky sable brushes!

Applying Tones

This is the stage where I stop and look at what I have so far with a little despondence. Many artistic endeavours can look quite feeble in their early stages. With a little perseverance I am confident it will take shape.

I adopt a different approach to each of my drawings/paintings. In this instance I want to finish the head before proceeding. No fixative has been sprayed and so it is imperative I keep my hand off the paper.



Details

Using a piece of sharpened vine charcoal I start working on the details. At this size things can be a little fiddly, but when mistakes happen the putty can be moulded into small thin points to put things right.

I have darkened the area around the head in an attempt to better define the face. At a later stage I plan to darken the entire background.

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Hair

The colour shaper I'm using has a fine chiseled tip and I use this to put in a few finer suggestions of hair. I find the tool a little unpredictable in that sometimes it removes charcoal and sometimes it places charcoal. Pressure is a factor in this.

Toning the Body

I'm moderately happy with the head at this stage, though plan to return to it later. I use a little fixative on the face and background, and then darken the background with another layer of charcoal dust.

For the tones on the back and body I dip the small brush into the dust, give it a small tap to remove any excessive loose particles and then brush it onto the paper using a putty where necessary.



Highlights

I used the pastel pencil to add a few highlights where needed, but try to go sparingly. White pastel reflects light dependent on the angle of your light source so it is recommended to view your work from several different angles to try and ensure you are not over doing the highlights.

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Foreground

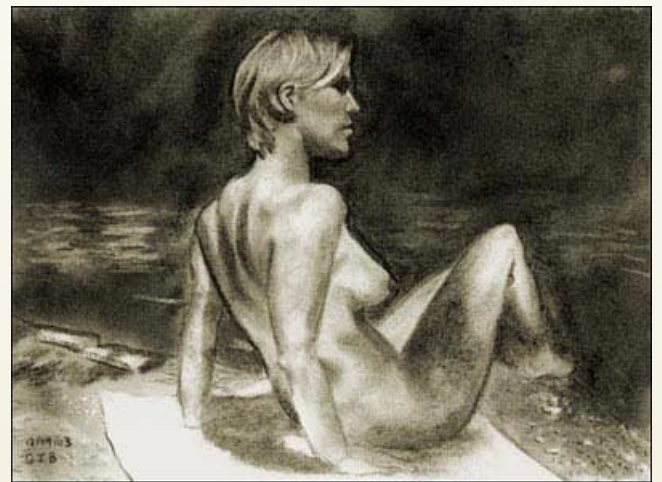
A shadow below the figure helps give it a position within the drawing, and I start to make a few suggestions of things in the foreground, again careful not to touch the drawing with my fingers as even with fixative, charcoal can be a volatile medium.

Toning the Body

I work the leg in a similar way to the body, then touch up and blend a few more areas before giving it a good spray of fixative so I can scan the image without the charcoal falling away.

There are lines, features and shading that I know could be improved upon, but I'm content to call it a day. Hopefully if nothing else, it helps demonstrate that charcoal needn't be an artist's enemy.

Incidentally, I was not particularly impressed with Daler-Rowney's charcoal paper. Even without relayering, the paper had taken as much charcoal as it could take (see right thigh) and slowly started beading!



FINISH



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