

Emilie L. Gossiaux: Drawing Beyond Sight

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For the October 2022 issue of Art in America focused on [disability culture](#), Emilie L. Gossiaux created a special pull-out print of her drawing titled Peanut Butter Licking. Below, Gossiaux discusses the drawing and other work of hers, as told to Emily Watlington.

Most of my drawings are of my guide dog, London. *Peanut Butter Licking* (2022) shows her on the floor, licking peanut butter out of her red cone-shaped toy. There's a table hovering above her, and I'm sitting in a chair next to it, licking peanut butter off a spoon. I was thinking about how sometimes, in human/dog relationships, you just become so entangled—your personalities sort of meld. You might copy each other, or you see yourself reflected in your animal. *Me Wrapping My Arms Around Your Furry Neck, in a Lush Landscape, You Dip Your Nose Down to Smell My Face* (2022) shows me lying on my back in a lush green landscape with bushes and flowers. London is standing above me, and her nose is dipped down to smell my face, which is obscured; I'm reaching up to wrap my arms around her neck.

London is kind of the star who has taken over my imagination. I like to capture her personality on the page. Also, I feel that, with my drawings, I'm giving her a kind of agency, and in daily life, she gives me agency too.

I draw using ballpoint pen and Crayola crayons. I like to use crayons because they're very waxy, and I can feel where I've colored. Similarly,

with ballpoint pen, I'm able to feel the line as I'm drawing. A lot of the time, I rely on a kind of muscle memory in addition to the tactile materials.

I keep all my crayons in tiny envelopes with Braille labels on them, and I associate most of the colors with a memory. Wisteria is the bike I had growing up; I love that color. Brick Red and Fuzzy Wuzzy combine to make my mom's Estée Lauder lipstick. Tropical Rainforest is my dad's old Jaguar.

When I'm envisioning a scene, I usually draw it twice. When I do my first drawing, I often think, I can do this better, or something feels off. Then I do a second drawing, but most of the time, I wind up liking the first drawing more! Usually, I'll show both. I like to flush out this vision I have in my mind a couple times while it still has its energy. It's kind of like playing your favorite song over and over again.

After becoming blind, I made my first drawings with a high-tech tool: BrainPort. That was around 2011 or 2012. (I didn't start drawing with ballpoint pen until I went to Yale [for my MFA] in 2017.) BrainPort is this adaptable seeing device: you wear sunglasses that have a camera at the bridge of the nose, as well as a device that sends electrodes to shock your brain through your tongue. It allows you to see in low resolution, black-and-white pixels. The images I saw were really grainy, and I couldn't see details, but I could see high-contrast black and white. So I was drawing with a thick black marker on plain white paper. That got me back into the feeling of using a pen in my hand and seeing marks. It helped me build up my muscle memory. But it ended up being really exhausting, so I decided to stop using my vision when I draw.