

Capturing the Unseen: The Art of Swimming and Drawing

Author: **Christian Keszthelyi**

Dr Trevor Borg doesn't just swim in the sea – he draws in it. The Maltese artist, water polo player, and frequent swimmer has transformed his relationship with water into a unique artistic practice, using his movements to create ephemeral underwater marks. His art explores the intersection of land and sea, past and present, permanence and impermanence – an artistic practice as fluid as the waters that inspire it.

Disclaimer: The author is biased towards water. He has played water polo for over two decades, moved to Malta to be near the sea, and plays on the same water polo team as the interviewee of this article.



Dr Trevor Borg grew up by the sea and lived on the coast for years. Later, he moved to inland Malta, and though no place on the tiny island is far from the shore, he still felt the distance. It affected him more than he expected. Returning to dwell by the sea helped him reconnect with his past – and inner muse. He swims daily, and as a casual water polo player, has a profound connection with the sea. 'The water is therapeutic, offering calm, openness, and space. Island life can feel confining, but the sea provides a sense of freedom,' Borg says.

His work has been place-oriented for the past 10 to 15 years, shaped by specific locations. Using anthropologist Tim Ingold's diction, Borg describes his art as being about 'dwelling'. It is not just living in or spending time somewhere, but deeply engaging with a place. His work is rooted in place, and his surroundings naturally influence his art.

FLUID SHIFTS

Walking also plays a crucial role in his creative process, allowing Borg to absorb a place's characteristics, think more clearly, and connect with his surroundings. So, it is unsurprising that his artistic vision gets sparked by walking. The muscles in the calves – often called the second heart or the venous pump – play a crucial role in circulation. When humans walk or pace, these muscles contract, helping push blood back up to the heart. People often pace when they are thinking, anxious, or restless, and this movement can help maintain blood flow, provide a mild energy boost, and even stimulate brain activity.

Now that Borg is back by the sea, he often replaces walking with swimming. 'Instead of moving across land, my movement is guided by the water. I wanted to explore this shift, so I experimented with translating my walking methodologies to the sea. I attached a submersible action camera

to my limbs and began recording my underwater movements,' Borg says.

He quickly noticed an ephemeral trace left behind with every movement – disturbances in the water that are much less visible on land. Recording underwater opened up a hidden world of textures, currents, and details that would usually remain unseen. His swimming has evolved into exploring movement, memory, and the unseen aspects of land and sea.

In fact, Borg describes water as both a medium and a canvas. But what does that mean? 'Water functions much like the surface of paper. It allows for mark-making, but in a fluid, impermanent way. When you move your arms or legs underwater, you create air bubbles that form temporary traces. Being lighter than water, these bubbles immediately start rising, creating a fleeting mark that even generates sound. In a way, this process is akin to drawing in water,' Borg says. ➤



1



2

1. **Drawing underwater: A trail of air bubbles captured by an action camera**
2. **Two charcoal drawings based on digital images captured underwater**

Images courtesy of Dr Trevor Borg

At first, his approach was unconscious – just an observation of the traces left behind. However, by experimenting with controlled movements over time, he began to see how specific patterns or marks could be generated. This evolved into an intentional practice of underwater drawing.

'What's fascinating is that, in this setting, the body becomes part of the drawing. In traditional drawing on paper, you create a mark from a distance, but in water, you are both the creator and an integral part of the work. It's almost like a performance – a deeply immersive and multidimensional form of drawing,' Borg says.

CHARCOAL TRANSLATIONS

The process itself is layered: first, there is the experience of movement in the water; then, capturing it digitally; reviewing and selecting meaningful frames; and finally, translating that into drawing. Charcoal serves as a bridge between these stages, maintaining a sense of immediacy and physicality – much like the movement of the sea itself.

Why charcoal? 'Charcoal is an incredibly immediate and primitive medium; it connects to something raw, organic, and essential in mark-making. Historically, it was created from desiccated willow twigs, originally left to dry naturally, but now processed in kilns to speed up production. This gives it a natural, almost elemental quality, similar to clay. It is soft, responsive, and does not require much pressure to leave

a mark – making it ideal for capturing fluid, gestural movements, such as the trails of bubbles underwater,' Borg says.

His choice of charcoal was initially experimental, but it proved ideal for capturing water's ephemeral qualities. Your columnist could not help but notice how charcoal may be the perfect conduit for translating water onto paper. Life on Earth began in the sea, and all life is carbon-based – so with charcoal being a form of carbon, this was almost a poetic choice. It is a material that carries the cyclical essence of creation and return, mirroring how the ocean is both a beginning and an end.

Another intriguing aspect of water is that it always takes the shape of its container – unless it hovers in an anti-gravity environment where it naturally forms a sphere. This occurs because surface tension pulls the molecules into the smallest possible surface area – a sphere or a bubble. Water's ability to adapt and assume any shape is remarkable. This adaptability gives water a paradoxical nature: it is formless, yet it can fit into any form; it is fluid, yet it can exert immense force.

Beyond the visual joy of underwater scenery recorded on paper by charcoal, sound is another crucial element of submerged environments – one that charcoal alone cannot convey. Bubbles create a distinct auditory experience that Borg ponders to incorporate into future installations. With today's technology – such as ASMR microphones, which are used to capture gentle sounds that elicit

a tingling sensation in listeners – it would be possible to record and play back the actual sounds of the underwater drawing process. This could enhance the immersive experience, allowing viewers to see and hear the artwork being created.

CREATIVE CONTRAST

As quick AI-generated content reshapes our world (and keeps academics thinking, see page 60), drawing remains a slow, manual process. Does this contrast enhance the value of hand-drawn work in an era saturated with AI visuals?

'One of the key distinctions is that AI-generated images often prioritise the outcome – the final product – whereas drawing is about the process. Prompting an AI tool gives you a quasi-instantaneous result, but you do not fully witness the steps it took to get there. You only see the output, not the experience,' Borg says.

Creating, on the other hand, is thinking. It is evaluating, refining and engaging deeply with the subject. It is about the journey, and not the destination.

'For example, when I create my underwater drawings, I have to physically immerse myself in the sea, experience the movement of water around me, and observe the bubbles and patterns they create. That phenomenological experience – feeling the water, sensing the resistance, understanding the refractions of light – is something unique,' Borg concludes. **T**