

# Unsighted tactile drawings





# Unsighted tactile drawings of prehistoric archaeological objects

By Claude Heath



It is not often that you hear an archaeologist say words to the effect: We are not like other organisations; you can touch our prehistoric objects. Would you like to visit our dig in Romania and draw some of them by touch?

Douglass Bailey, the archaeologist in question, had just seen my talk at the conference at the Courtauld Institute in London, when I had spoken about making a blindfold drawing in 1997 of a plaster copy of the four-inch high Venus of Willendorf. The drawing of the Venus had been a detailed tour of the contours of the sculpture, sequentially drawn while turning through 180 degrees, as if she was swinging around from left to right. It had seemed to reanimate the figurine. While I have been making work in a variety of other ways since then, we agreed that it was worth revisiting the blindfold drawing technique, as an opportunity for a new approach to these artefacts. The best way to work was going to be to draw what I felt, with no prior knowledge of these objects.



The first object that I was presented with was hidden in a cardboard box, it weighed heavily in the hand, a chunk of rock with a sharp edge, bound to a wooden shaft by a frayed but tight cord. I guessed that it was a flint axe-head with a modern handle. Steve Mills and his resident team of archaeologists working at the Muzeul Județean Teleorman in Alexandria, Romania, were under instruction not to tell me anything about the objects that had been chosen for me to draw. In the heat of the first day, we set up a desk area that was screened off by hanging cloths, so that I could work with my arms out of my sight, and not see the objects or the drawings. I preferred to work without a blindfold, with my hands inside the tented working area.



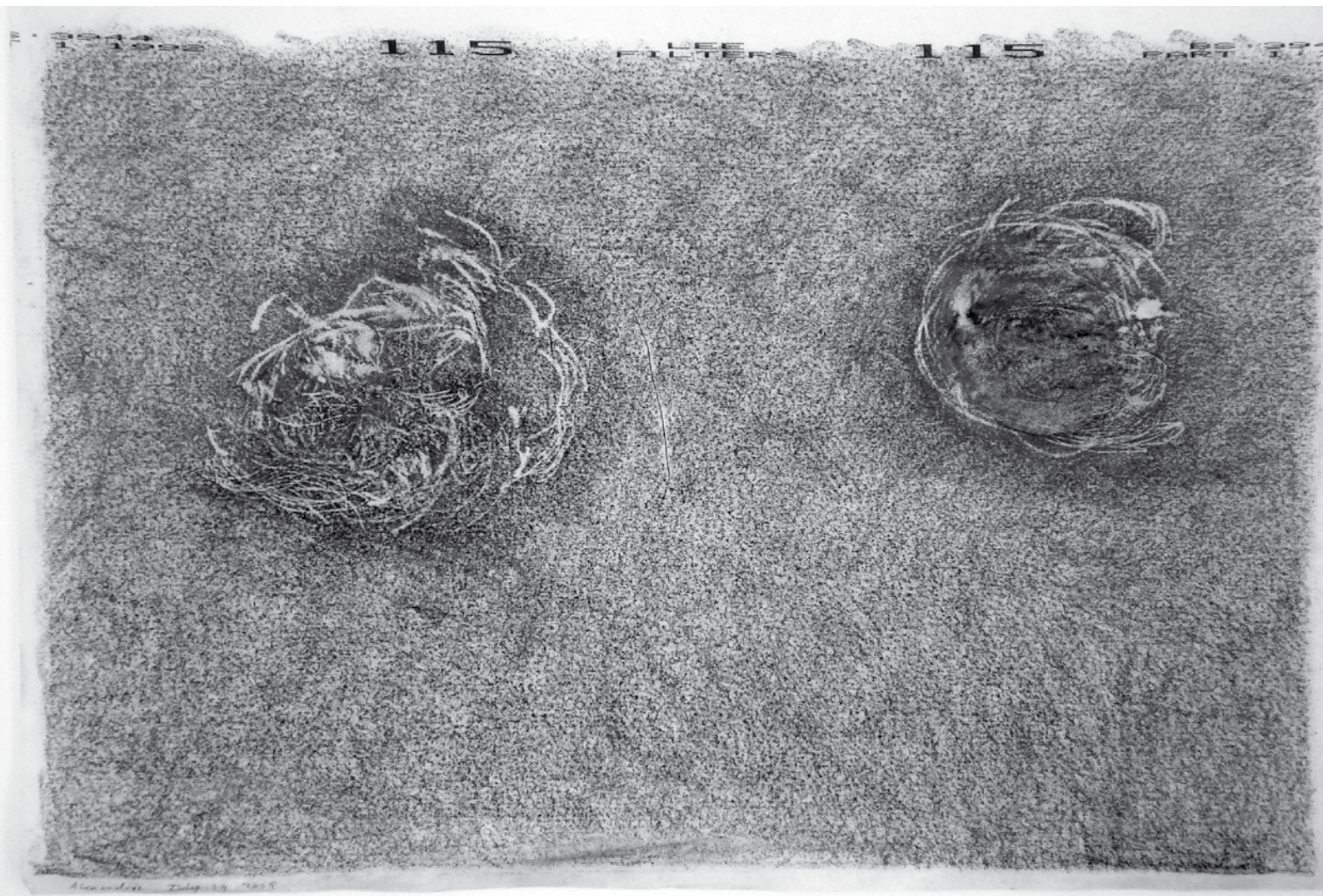
Drawing a flint axe-head begged an obvious question: what tool do you use to draw a tool? Or could I use the instrument itself to draw? I used the flint cutting edge to incise and tear the paper, while carefully avoiding putting the object at risk of damage by using soft layers underneath the paper. Rocking the gently curving edge repeatedly across the sheet, in a slow grinding action using the handle end as the fulcrum, left a trail of indentations and tears that reshaped the paper into strange furrows. The lacerations reveal the smallest details about the individual chipped planes that constitute the cutting edge.





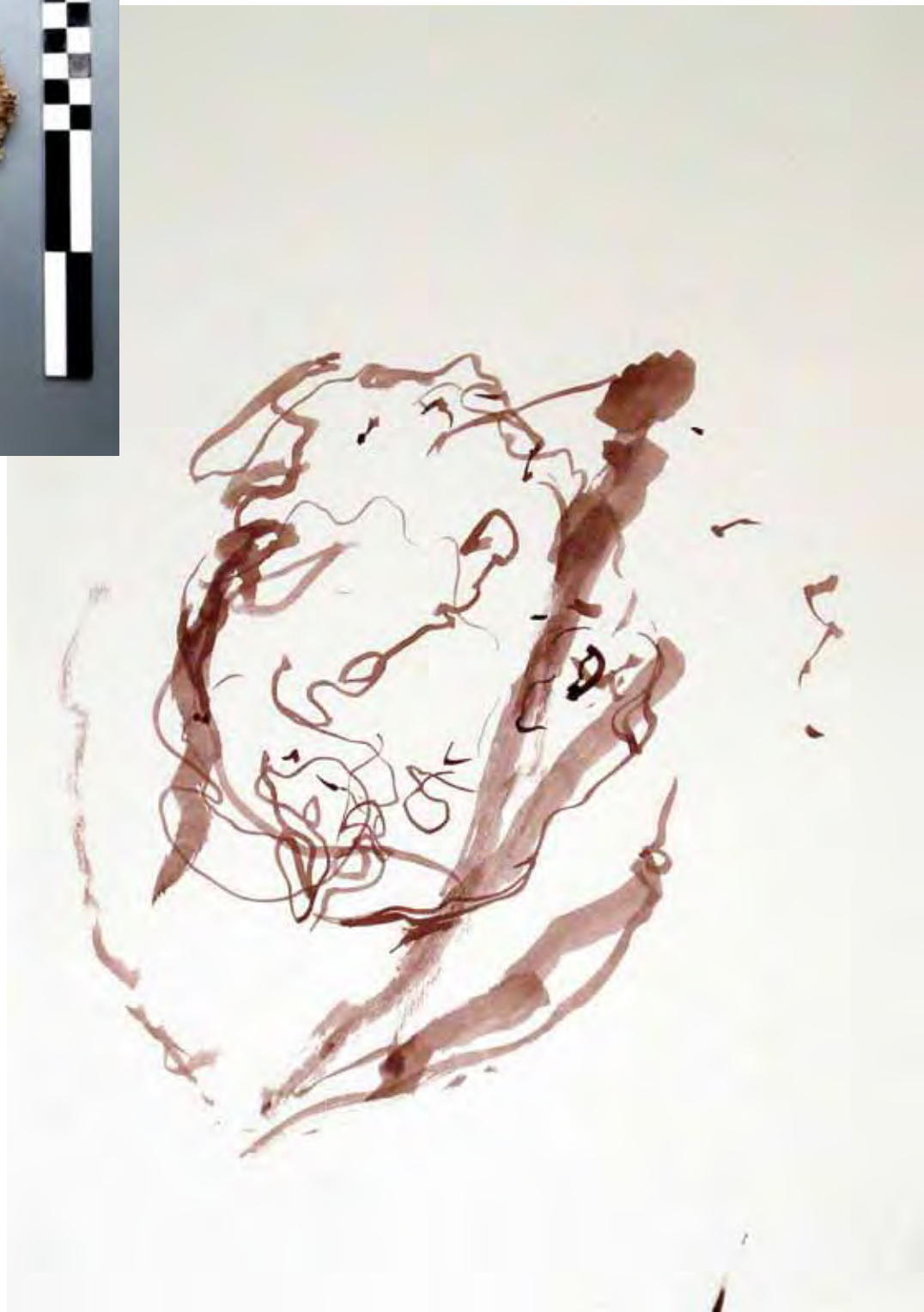
Other drawings of this and other objects used scalpel blades to cut the paper, or smaller flints that were dragged and scraped into the paper surface. Pressing and embossing was another approach, until it began to resemble by touch the shape of an object. Ink drawings were made looking for the inflections on surfaces of objects - when drawing unsighted these surfaces seem to be inscribed with tantalising but inconclusive clues as to the meaning of these things.











The objects chosen for me to draw were a mix of prehistoric things as well as thematically related modern ones that could not have survived such a length of time, such as a three-legged wooden stool – a traditional design and still used in the region. There were also flint tools along with their cast off parts. Also dry clay forms, one of which was rough and friable like a dry cake, complete with hand print in the centre. Another was moulded smooth, as if made by compressing clay between the palms, then punctured with holes, with the imprints of fingers present.











The final object was a slightly larger-than-life sculpture bust on a base, which necessitated working while wearing a blindfold, because its scale was too large for the screened-off area. Coming to terms with it by touch was in itself a task, with strong impressions conveyed to me via my hands and fingertips. It had a massive beaked nose and chin, a thick cloaked surface over the shoulders, like wings dropping by the side of a large bird of prey. The hands clasping a scroll, like talons onto the broken branch of a tree. All of this convinced me that the maker of this portrait had intended it as a satiric image. Finally I discovered the name 'Nicolae Ceaușescu' spelt out in relief-lettering along the base. This was an object that I did finally see before leaving Romania, and it did not appear to be barbed or ironic in the way that I had imagined.





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