

VISUALIZING TIME

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HOW DO YOU SEE THE PASSAGE OF TIME?

In the mid 1990s I started to ask friends, students, and acquaintances to answer this question with a sketch and the resulting drawings were later collected in the database Visualizing Time, an ongoing online research project by Icastic (www.icastic.com).

The very first idea is a private event and it occurred in a Bulgarian bank, while changing some currency. This event brought up the rendering of digits in space, the question being: How do you "see" the sequence of numbers 1 to 10? Through the transaction my husband would regularly and amazingly indicate a right turn after number 10. For me number 10 was sitting comfortably on a cableway rising left to right instead. Surprising enough, some other people we asked would see 1 to 10 like stars in the sky, without any sequential order. Or rising from the ground to eye-level. A whole new set of horizons was unfolding.

The shift to envisioning time seemed only natural. Surprisingly, from the very beginning, the great majority of the people I asked drew something immediately and without giving it much thought. It was as if they had always had a crystal clear shape of time in mind although, in most cases, they confirmed that they had never thought about it once.

Soon it was evident that what was going to show up was a wide variety of drawings. Instead of an expected collection of lines and circles, individual perception of time proved to range from minimalist abstractions to complex symbolic forms.

The Visualizing Time database is organized according to age group (per decades) or by six categories: abstract, cartoon, metaphoric, nature, sequence, symbolic. Also, the fifteen most frequent words in the captions are listed. For instance, in October 2010 they were:

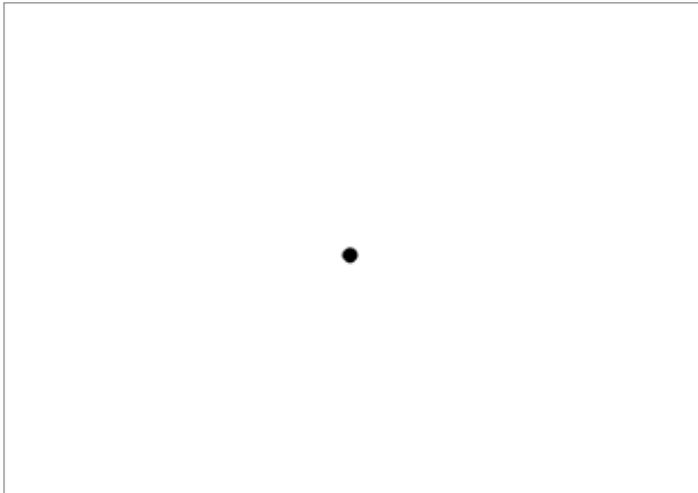
Time	Into
Life	Think
Like	Years
From	Different
Will	More
Always	Passage
Past	Clock
Days	

The abstract section is by far the most articulated, and it is probably what tells us more about the immediate and almost physical perception of time for many people. Perhaps it also shows us a glimpse of the intricate synopsis producing a picture of such an elusive subject.

Let's now take a look at a few examples, following a progression akin to Kandinsky's "Point Line Plane," moving from dot to line to circle to surface, all the way up to a very complex level of metaphor and beyond. All drawings are extremely fascinating, and it was not easy to compile a shortlist of samples.

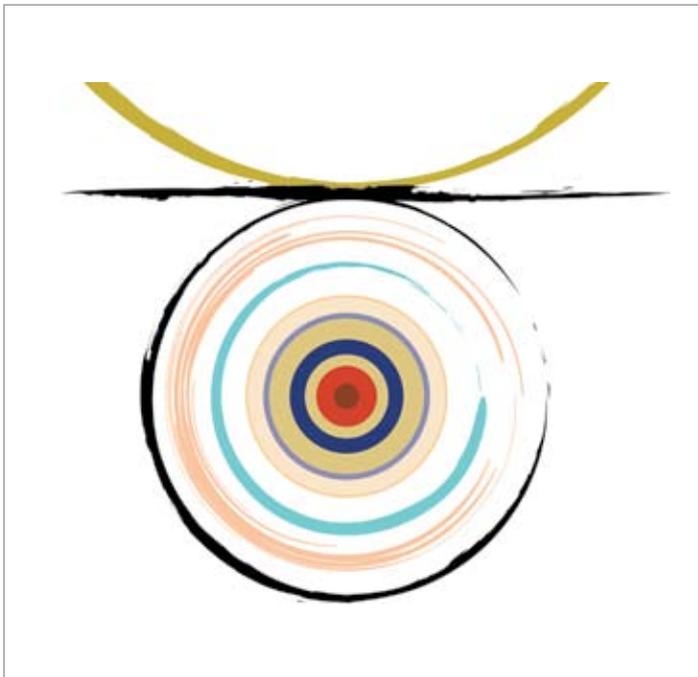
DOT

Figure 1 shows the ultimate time unit: a dot. And this is where our journey starts, trying to find a narrative logic through the forest of this visual complexity.



1 - 0165
 Section Abstract
 Age 30
 Gender Female
 Country of Origin Italy
 Country of Residence Italy
 Education Undergraduate
 Profession Student
 Caption -

Figure 2 gives the dot a closer look, giving it a still nucleus but also layers that move more and more the closer they get to the surface.



2 - 0154
 Section Abstract
 Age 43
 Gender Female
 Country of Origin Italy
 Country of Residence Italy
 Education Art History / Graduate
 Profession Designer

Caption: I feel like an onion. The outer skins move with time, and it is a social time that allows me to get in touch with others. But the more I go to the center of myself, the more time is slow and, in the very center, time is still. Only recently I realized that it is in the still center of an onion that the new plant buds.



Figure 3 shows more dots interacting in space, and the energy brought by this movement. It reminds one of the 1914 painting by Italian Futurist Giacomo Balla, "Mercury Passing in Front of the Sun."

3 - 0099
 Section Abstract
 Age 28
 Gender Male
 Country of Origin USA
 Country of Residence USA
 Education Art / Undergraduate
 Profession Student

Caption: Dots can stand still, but also move around.

Figure 4 instead delivers an astonishing and much more regular boustrophedon of dots, each one representing a generation through the history of humankind.

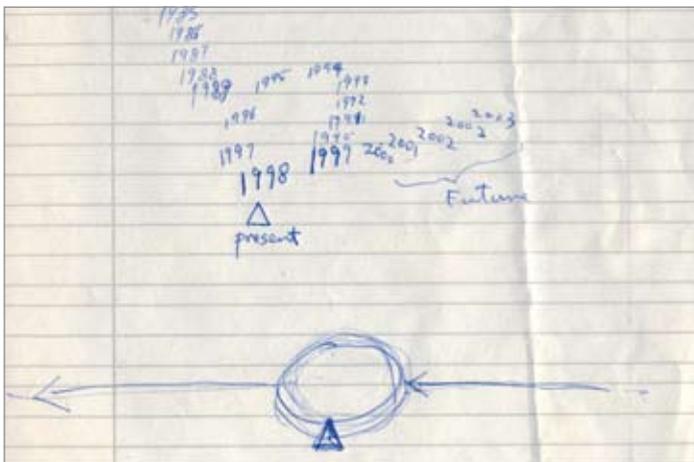
4 - 0060
 Section Abstract
 Age 21
 Gender Female
 Country of Origin USA
 Country of Residence USA
 Education Illustration / Undergraduate
 Profession Student

Caption: I feel I belong to a generation in a row.



Figure 5 can hardly be categorized as dots, still the whirlwind of the present moment creates a focus on the present (And it just had to be here, being the very first drawing in this collection!).

5 - 0001
 Section Abstract
 Age 25
 Gender Male
 Country of Origin Hong Kong
 Country of Residence USA
 Education Architecture / Undergraduate
 Profession Student
 Caption -

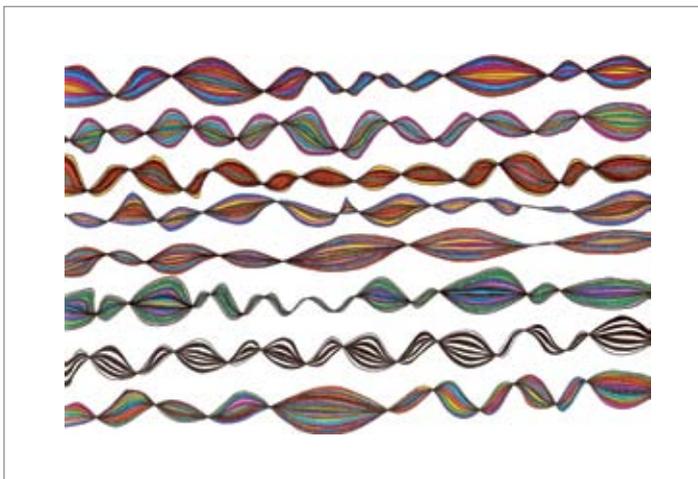




LINE

Once things get moving, the variety is increasing. The three-year-old author of Figure 6 had no doubts when given a pen and explained the task: maybe (and quite obviously) one of the "freshest" entries, it was handed to me with a large proud smile.

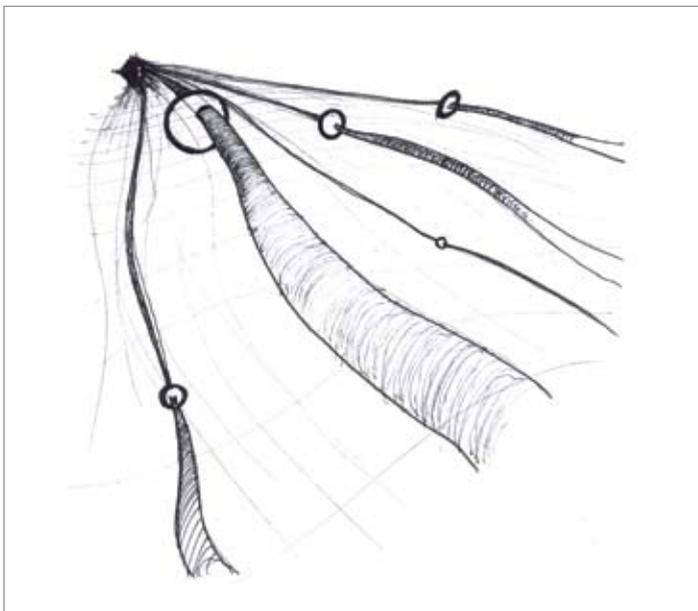
6 - 0006
 Section Abstract
 Age 3
 Gender Female
 Country of Origin Italy
 Country of Residence Italy
 Education Kindergarten
 Profession Student
 Caption -



Lines can thicken (Figure 7), but as it happens, with alternating widths. The parallel motif recalls the topos of parallel universes ranging from Borges's *The Garden of Forking Paths* (1941) to the movie *Sliding Doors* (1998).

7 - 0255
 Section Abstract
 Age 20
 Gender Female
 Country of Origin Germany
 Country of Residence Netherlands
 Education Educational design, management & media' / undergraduate
 Profession Student

Caption: Time goes...



In Figure 8 lines are similarly thicker and thinner, but seen in perspective. The knots along them are the several perceptions.

8 - 0123
 Section Abstract
 Age 20
 Gender Male
 Country of Origin USA
 Country of Residence USA
 Education Architecture
 Profession Student

Caption: Time across space is motion of many perceptions all from the same point.

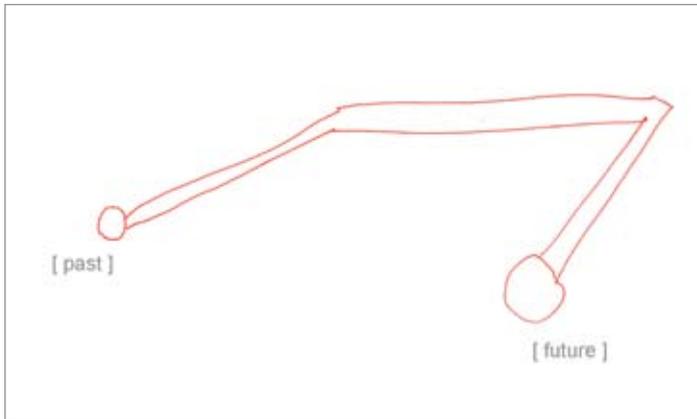
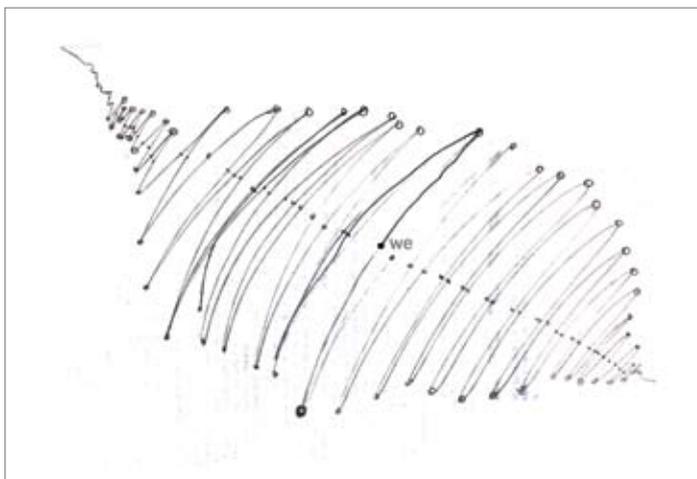


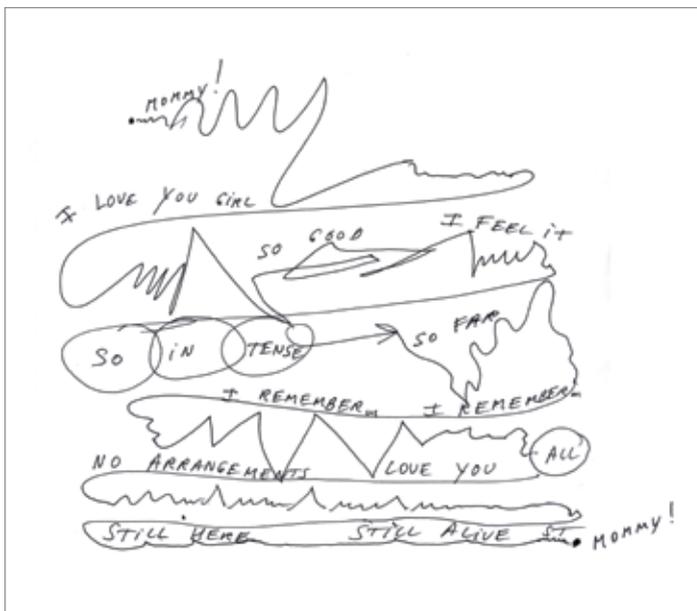
Figure 9: time depicted as a pipeline going from left to right on a path creating two angles. Very interesting information about the author is that this child has undergone colon surgery twice. Like a body memory, time takes the same shape of this organ. The same child when asked after one year, is already geared to a more dynamic vision of our position in the electric flow of things (Figure 10)

9 - 0053
 Section Abstract
 Age 9
 Gender Male
 Country of Origin Italy
 Country of Residence Italy
 Education Primary School
 Profession Student
 Caption -



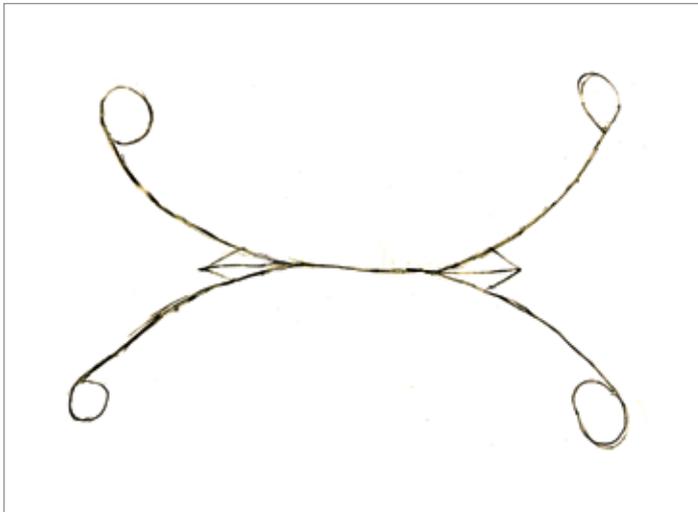
10 - 0231
 Section Abstract
 Age 10
 Gender Male
 Country of Origin Italy
 Country of Residence Italy
 Education Primary School
 Profession Student
 Caption -

A humorous example closes our selection of lines (Figure 11), merging waves, peaks, ups and downs, boustrophedon path from birth to death, going back to the very beginning with the final cry of Mommy!



11 - 0239
 Section Abstract
 Age 66
 Gender Male
 Country of Origin Lebanon
 Country of Residence France
 Education -
 Profession Writer

Caption: Mommy! I love you girl - so good - I feel it - so intense - so far - I remember - I remember - love you all - no arrangements - still here - still alive st... - Mommy!



CIRCLE

Needless to say, the line bends very often into the shape of the circle. In Figure 12, a friend saw the Feynman diagram (quantum physics).

12 - 0024

Section	Abstract
Age	9
Gender	Female
Country of Origin	Italy
Country of Residence	Italy
Education	Primary School
Profession	Student

Caption: Time is interesting because we never know what happens

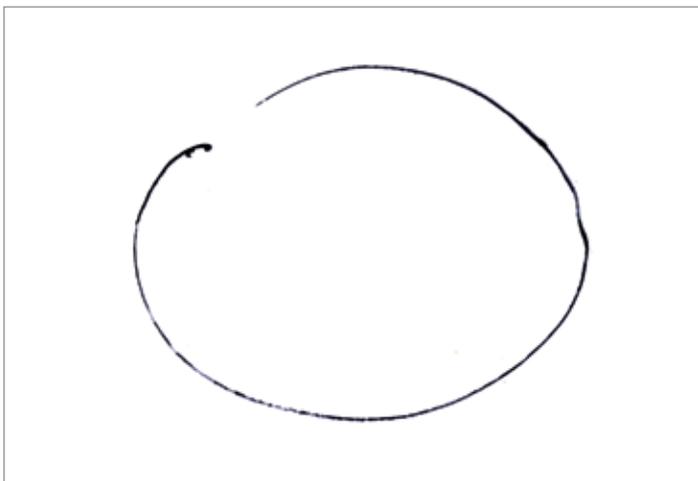


13 - 0217

Section	Abstract
Age	20
Gender	Female
Country of Origin	USA
Country of Residence	USA
Education	Undergraduate
Profession	Student

Caption: Time is circular. As a human, I will only experience a small section of it. I enlarged my experience of time on the diagram so that it would be visible, but ideally it would be infinitesimal compared to the giant circle. My personal experience of time is circular too, it rotates around certain pivotal points and then comes back around to where it started.

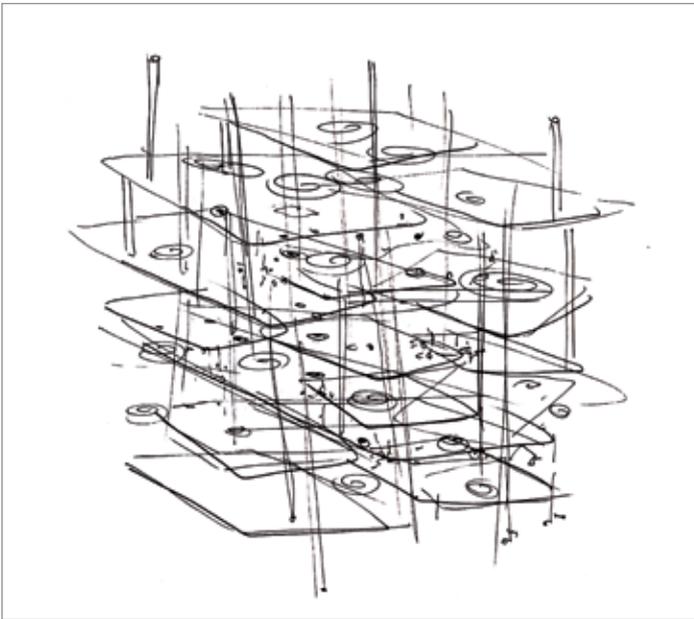
More often time is a circle, either closed (Figure 13) or unfolding in a spiral. Single moments can be more or less visible (Figure 14).



14 - 0149

Section	Abstract
Age	49
Gender	Female
Country of Origin	Italy
Country of Residence	Italy
Education	Undergraduate
Profession	Yoga Teacher

Caption: In the tradition of yoga, the smallest unity of time is called ksana (one instant), the rhythm of our mind's perception of the interior and exterior world, like the photograms of a film running so fast that we do not perceive them as separate.



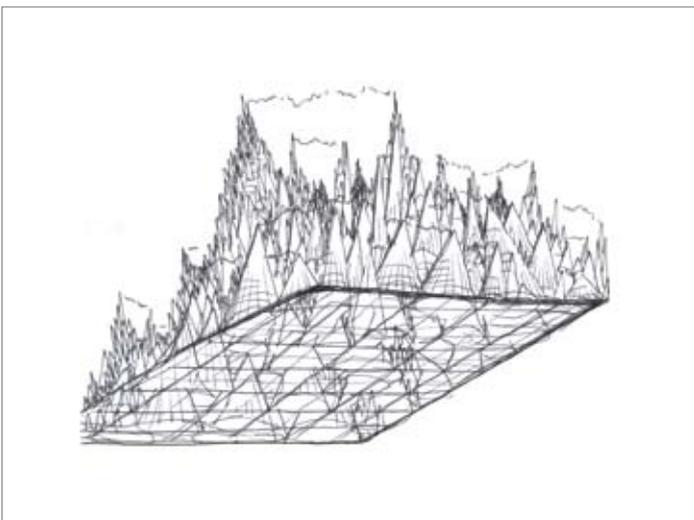
SURFACE

Once we get into the third dimension, time designs fascinating landscapes.

15 - 0087

Section	Abstract
Age	22
Gender	Female
Country of Origin	USA
Country of Residence	USA
Education	BA
Profession	Student

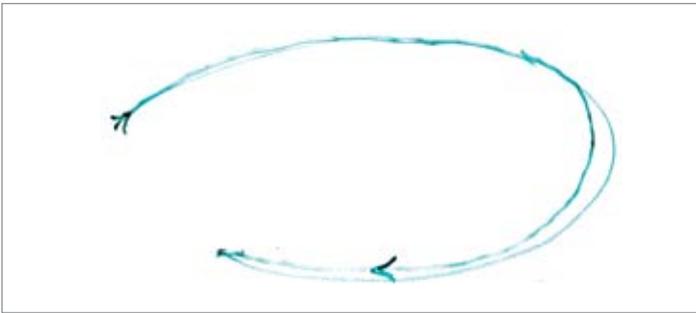
Caption: "But I began then to think of time as having a shape, something you could see, like a series of liquid transparencies, one laid on top of the other. You don't look back along time, but down through it, like water. Sometimes this comes to the surface, sometimes that, sometimes nothing. Nothing goes away." (Margaret Atwood, Cat's Eye)



16 - 0108

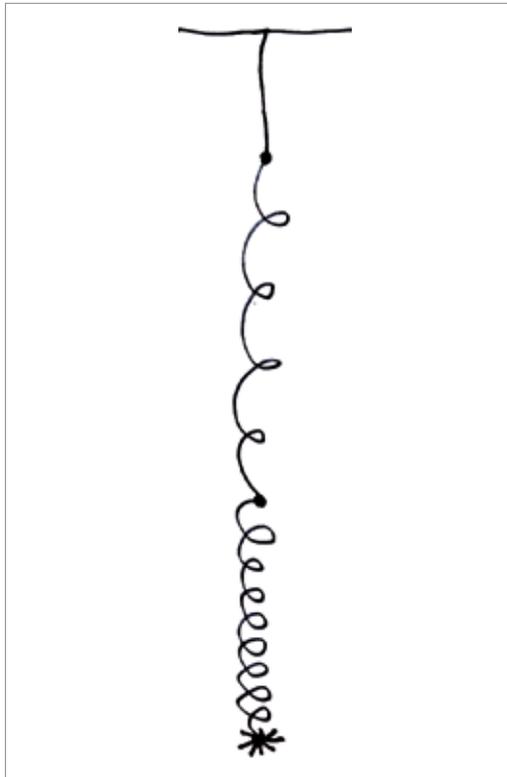
Section	Abstract
Age	21
Gender	Male
Country of Origin	USA
Country of Residence	USA
Education	Graphic design and illustration / undergraduate
Profession	Student

Caption: I see time not as a linear sequence of events but as the manifestation of a moment from an infinite field of probability. Each spike represents a probable unit, and when combined with other units the spikes build themselves into a sort of spine which exists simultaneously with other parallel spines to create the universe that we perceive



TIME SPAN

Age, profession, cultural factors determine the chosen time-span: the present moment, a day, a week (this applies mostly to mid-life), a lifetime or even the entire history of humankind (Figure 4) are represented as time-frame. Let's compare the following two pictures from two women in their seventies. The first drawing (Figure 17) is a common representation for this age group: time is coming to the individual end.



17 - 0056

Section	Abstract
Age	73
Gender	Female
Country of Origin	Italy
Country of Residence	Italy
Education	Undergraduate
Profession	Retired

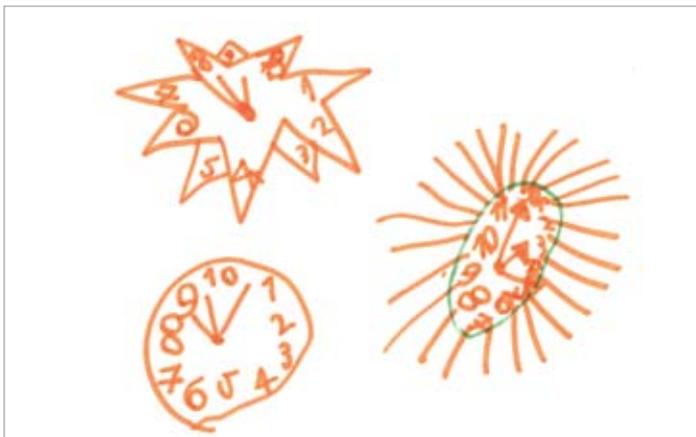
Caption: The circle is almost complete.

Figure 18 shows instead a reassuring daily routine, in a time of life when all days tend to be similar.

18 - 0054

Section	Abstract
Age	70
Gender	Female
Country of Origin	Italy
Country of Residence	Italy
Education	Art School graduate
Profession	Retired Designer

Caption: Energy decreases during the day.



SYMBOLS AND METAPHORS

The symbolic approach seems less immediate and physically expressive than the abstract, and this independently from the age group. Figure 19 shows the most common - by far - symbol of time: nature. Many times as stars, a tree through the four seasons, the blooming to the rotting of a flower. In this picture stars, moon, sun, combined in the effective synthesis of a five-year-old with the symbol of the clock. The same clock acquires a much more sophisticated look in the surrealist rendering of the stretching, forking, melting hand of Figure 20.

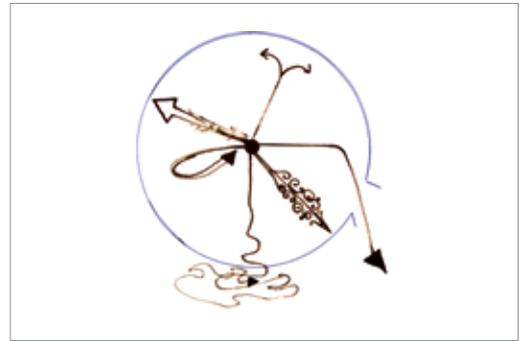
19 - 0043

Section	Abstract	Education	Kindergarten
Age	5	Profession	-
Gender	Female	Caption	-
Country of Origin	Italy		
Country of Residence	Austria		

20 – 0209
 Section Abstract
 Age 69
 Gender Female
 Country of Origin Italy
 Country of Residence Italy
 Education Junior High School
 Profession Retired Secretary

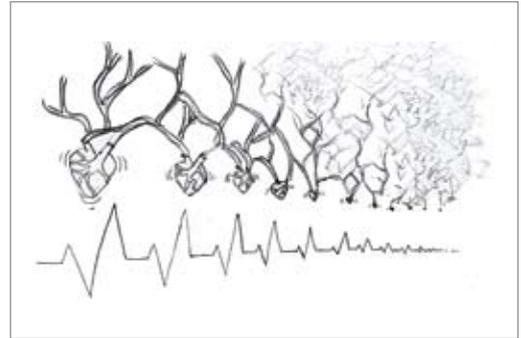
Caption: Time conceals all answers in itself.

The powerful beat of a young heart with time gives way to a new strength made of intricate emotional connections (Figure 21).



21 – 0109
 Section Abstract
 Age 21
 Gender Female
 Country of Origin USA
 Country of Residence USA
 Education Undergraduate Student

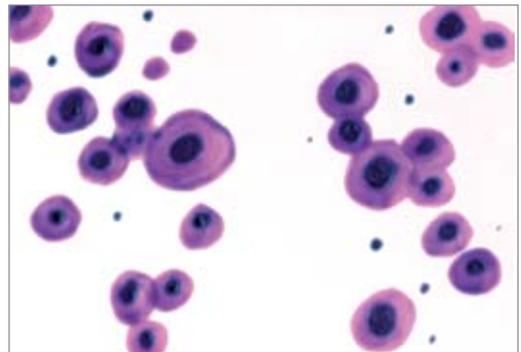
Caption: Subjective vs objective perception, organic vs scientific, simple/present/youth vs complex/future/adulthood, receding into distance but also shrinking. The weaker the heart, the richer it becomes with connections.



Floating in space in a freeze are the cells of Figure 22.

22 – 0259
 Section Abstract
 Age 21
 Gender Female
 Country of Origin UK
 Country of Residence UK
 Education Art

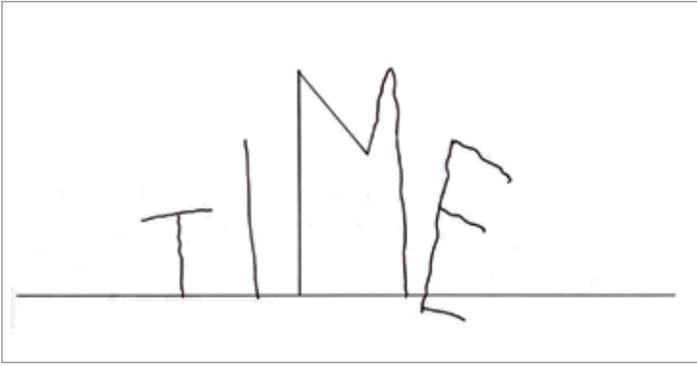
Caption: My cancer cells.



Time as something exquisite that needs a certain pace to be fully enjoyed is symbolized by the ice-cream cone in Figure 23.

23 – 0321
 Section Abstract
 Age 42
 Gender Female
 Country of Origin Bosnia
 Country of Residence Austria
 Education Economics and Marketing / Master
 Profession Chief networking officer

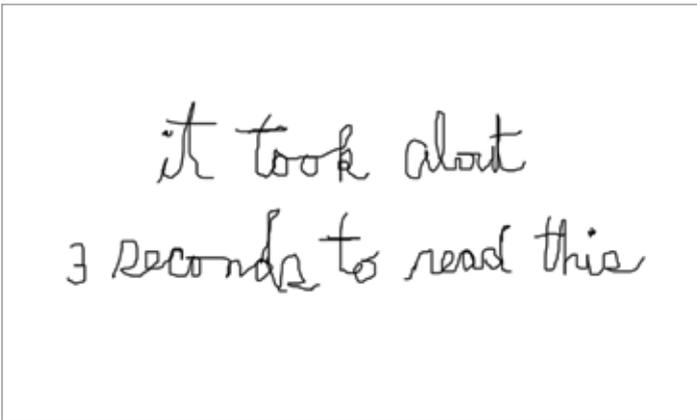
Caption: Time is like ice cream. Either you enjoy it while your speed of eating the ice perfectly matches its melting speed; or you are desperate while you are constantly trying to catch the sweet drops getting lost on the floor.



The last two examples go beyond the icon and challenge our vision with a conceptual punch related to the picture itself (Figure 24 and 25).

24 - 0193
Section Abstract
Age 72
Gender Male
Country of Origin USA
Country of Residence USA
Education Graduate
Profession Accountant

Caption: Timeline.



25 - 0196
Section Abstract
Age 40
Gender Male
Country of Origin USA
Country of Residence USA
Education BFA, MFA
Profession Artist / Professor
Caption -

The research is ongoing and we are collecting data. The database is growing through the website and also the contribution of every person that kindly agrees to be challenged on the subject.