How to Draw Realistically

By Carlos Aleman

Let's get right to it!

I've had so much positive feedback over the years for my online drawing tutorial that I thought I'd turn it into this short e-book. Using a single drawing as an example, I share all the tips, techniques and advice I can think of. If you study carefully, you'll have quite a bit of knowledge at your disposal for the rest of your life. Assuming you're already good at drawing and striving for photo realism or hyper-photo realism, this is a good place to start. And if you're not so great at drawing and your proportions are usually a little off, you will indeed improve with practice. Or, just use the grid method (More on this in a moment).

Incidentally, the drawing in this tutorial is not quite photo realistic   (I prefer my drawing to look like art and not exactly like photographs).   You can always achieve greater degrees of realism by spending a few extra hours polishing and refining. And don't forget to turn up the contrast when you've photographed your work and want to share it online.

All right, *now* let's get to it. Really!

Warning: May cause severe headaches! Consult a doctor before attempting. Requires moderate to strenuous concentration (Just kidding! —well, I suppose you can get a whopper of a headache if you over do it.)

First, purchase a large sheet of watercolor paper, about 80 lb. weight. Because of what you are about to undertake, the paper will take a beating, so thick watercolor paper will help prevent crinkling and other damage. Turn the paper over and use the back side which should be smoother. If you're drawing a face, the smooth side may have just the right texture to help you simulate skin.

Purchase some cheap mechanical pencils, the kind that you can buy at the grocery store (see below).

As you might be able to tell from the package, I'm using 0.7 mm lead. I will also use a 4H, HB (#2) pencil and a kneaded eraser (also known as putty rubber) for picking up graphite particles. These tools will give you precise control over what you draw.

Photo realism evolved from Pop Art in the 1960's. It was a reaction against the ubiquitous use of photography in media and abstract expressionism in art. I happen to enjoy both realistic and abstract art and don't see a reason to compare. Everything is cool on some level, I suppose. The one thing realism is particularly good at is reaching a broad audience with the clear message: nature is beautiful. In photography, even a tragic image can be breathtakingly beautiful. In photo realistic art, sometimes the same can be achieved, but with an extra human dimension. With this in mind, always strive for a little tension and conflict. You can save all the drama for your momma, but in art, go ahead, pour everything out --and in the end perhaps you'll capture something ineffable or at least your very best.

The Face

The human face is probably the most difficult subject to render accurately. It takes years of practice to develop the skills needed to capture proportions and subtle features that make for a convincing resemblance of a person. If you're not a portrait artist, you can still use these techniques to draw other subject matter. A piece of machinery or tree trunk or still-life of any kind can be a beautiful and impressive work of art. If you are under the impression that you have little artistic talent, you may want to try a simple exercise to shift your consciousness to the right side of your brain. Take a photograph and turn it upside down. Then try to draw it. You may be surprised at how well you draw. However, an artist doesn't necessarily have to be 'right brained.' You also don't need to be left-handed (I'm right handed).

Sidebar, your honor: *The whole left-right brain thing is technically a myth. Neuroscientists assure us that the brain is much more complicated than that.*

Ideally, work from a very detailed, high resolution photograph with good contrast. If you have a graphics editing program, such as Adobe PhotoShop, crank up the levels until all the details are dark enough to see, but try not to lose all the delicate shadows. Use your computer screen and/or mobile device to

zoom in on the details. Being able to see a close-up of a particular facial feature makes it much easier to draw something with photo realistic detail.

Once you have a photo that want to work from, you'll have to transfer the drawing to paper. If you have years of experience in drawing, you'll be able to render proportions accordingly. However, if proportions are not your strong suit, I recommend that you download a drawing grid app to your phone or tablet. You'll be able to divide the photo up into squares and then lightly draw corresponding squares on your sheet of paper. Working on one square at a time, you can better get your proportions to be accurate.

The first stage is the hardest part of the drawing. You are solving a difficult problem: how to create a two dimensional representation of a three dimensional object. This example is particularly difficult since it is a three-quarter view, and will depend on careful observation.

With an HB (#2) pencil, very lightly scribble the forms that create the illusion of volume. Draw, erase, redraw and erase again. The thick watercolor paper will serve you well as you erase many times. The key is permitting yourself to make a multitude of mistakes until you begin to see progress. If you look at an old drawing by a renaissance master, you may notice many stray lines, which reveals the great struggle that sometimes takes place as the drawing is developing.

Remember, this is not a classical drawing you'll be attempting. You'll have to betray all your artistic notions about the creative method. Instead of organically building the composition up as a whole, photo realism requires that you work mechanically. This early stage of the drawing is the closest you'll come to a melodic artful approach. It may even look like a gesture drawing, loose scribbles, until something forms and emerges from the chaos. As you activate the plane with energy, use this time to express movement and emotion.

Once you've made the initial drawing of the face, you've essentially completed the portrait. If you wanted to, you could frame it and invite others to appreciate the weight and linear continuity of the composition. It might not look out of place in a museum of modern art hanging next to a drawing by Alberto Giacometti. So feel free to admire it for a while, appreciating all the interesting lines and what might look like accidental or random marks.

But, this is a photorealism tutorial after all. Let's get to it. Here's a close up of the right eye (image below).

It's been said before that art is a discipline of awareness. The most important activity that we'll be involved in for the rest of the drawing is observation. To put it simply, notice, notice, notice, interesting shapes. The more interesting the shapes seem, the more you may want to exaggerate slightly so others will notice them. It may seem silly, but the greatest joy in drawing can be falling in love with shapes. Shapes are formed by positive and negative space. Tiny details are like hidden treasures that you look for and find, drawing circles around them like word search puzzles. Below, I start off with an exquisite find:

a rectangle and a couple of lines within the iris. Also notice that I've begun using the mechanical pencil for darker lines.

Here are some cross-hatch lines to create the eyebrow (below). I'm shining a bright lamp on the drawing so you can see the direction the lines are going --so there is some glare.

Because this is a graphite drawing, try to work in one area, slowly expanding to others, being careful not smear the graphite with your hand or wrist.


Now listen very carefully, Baby Puppy. You're about to perform a magic trick. Take the 4H pencil, which is a hard lead, and draw some lines with firm pressure. You'll be pushing hard enough to actually dig grooves into the paper. These will serve to create lighter areas that the dark mechanical pencil lead will not be able to penetrate. This effect will be similar to the negative space in fingerprints.

Now for the graphite technique you'll be using most in this drawing. With a slightly worn mechanical pencil lead (just scribble on something for a moment), use the dullest part of the point to shade with tiny ovals. The ovals should be built up gradually, so that the shading goes from light to dark like a photograph developing in a dark room over time. Go slow, be patient. Use the grain of the paper to aid you in creating the illusion of skin texture. You have to decide when you've reached a shade that makes the best use of the paper texture and the graphite technique.
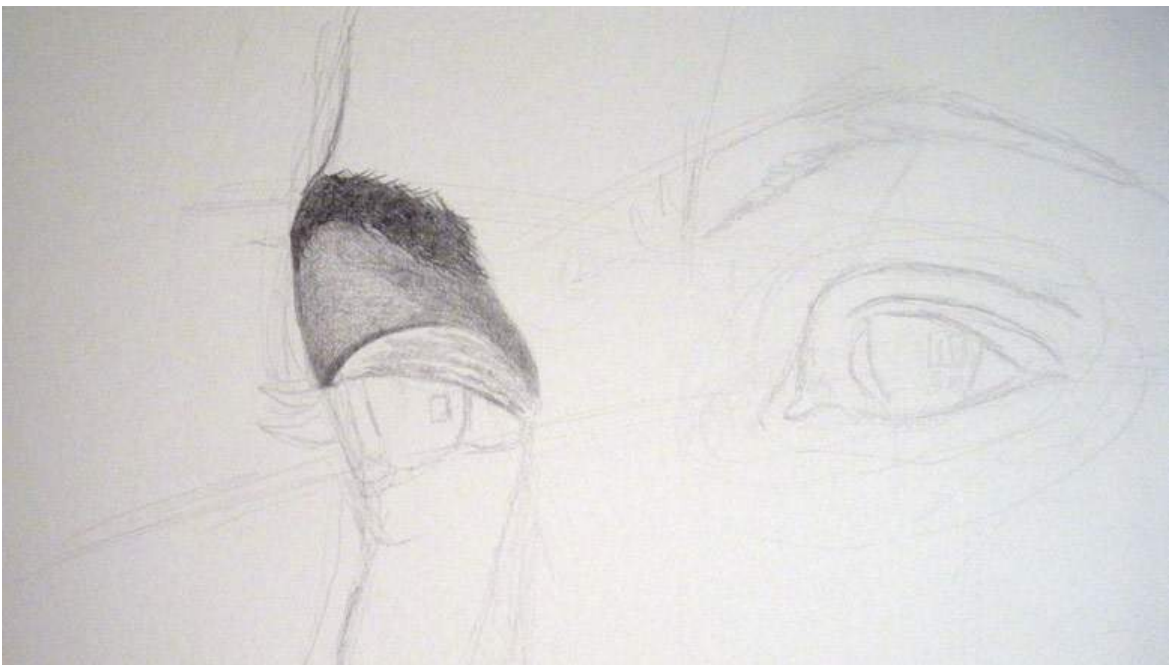
As you shade over the eyelid, you'll notice the grooves that you've created with the 4H will now begin to stand out (see below). These are the beginnings of wrinkles that you'll soften and add more detail to later. The skin around the eyelid is extremely soft and thin. With a youthful looking person, the eyelid wrinkles don't usually make the person look old. Most people are accustomed to seeing wrinkly eyelids, and won't question your rendering of wrinkles.

Back to shape finding. I zoomed in on the eye and noticed more interesting shapes. These are reflections of lights and objects. They will help me to shade the eye, like drawing within the lines of a coloring book. And who said you had to grow up?

Next, we add eyelashes by creating careful strokes with the mechanical pencil. You will want to apply firm pressure, so be careful not to slip, since a kneaded eraser will not remove impressions in the paper.


Using the mechanical pencil for darks and the HB for light, shade the rest of the eye (below).

Prepare the lower lid by digging down firmly with the HB pencil. This will create the same effect as the darker lead not entering the grooves in the paper. The lower lid is not as wrinkly as the upper lid.
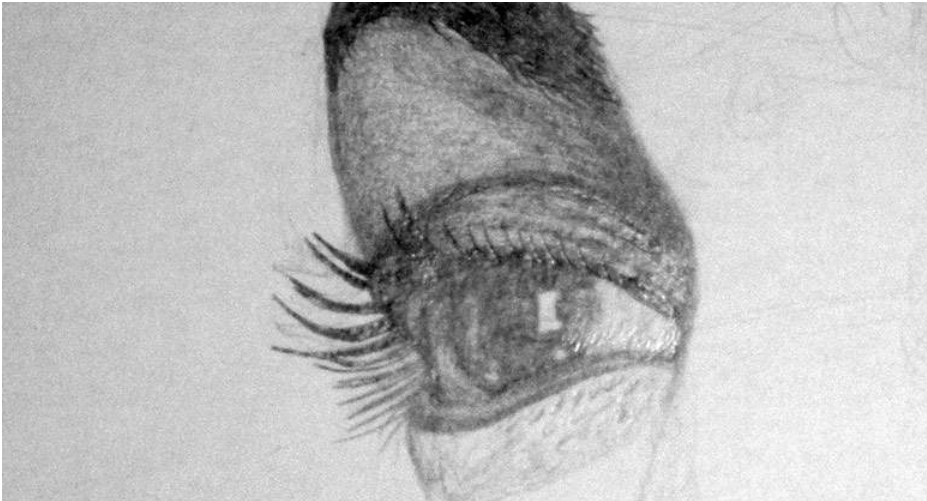
Shade the lower lid with the mechanical pencil (draw over the grooves created with the HB). Continue to darken the eyes.
Being careful not to smudge the drawing, shade the forehead with the same tiny ovals.
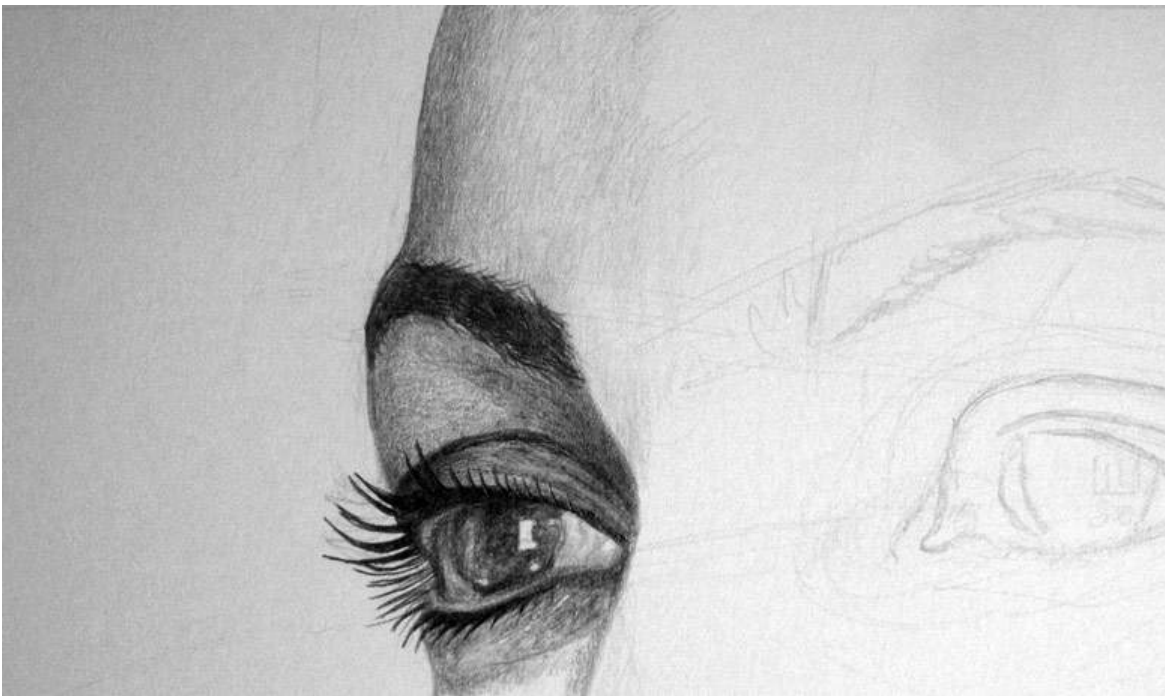
Gradually build up the side of the face with shading (see below). Be patient and sensitive.

Over the left eye, shade the forehead, combining the 4H (light pressure) with the mechanical pencil oval technique.
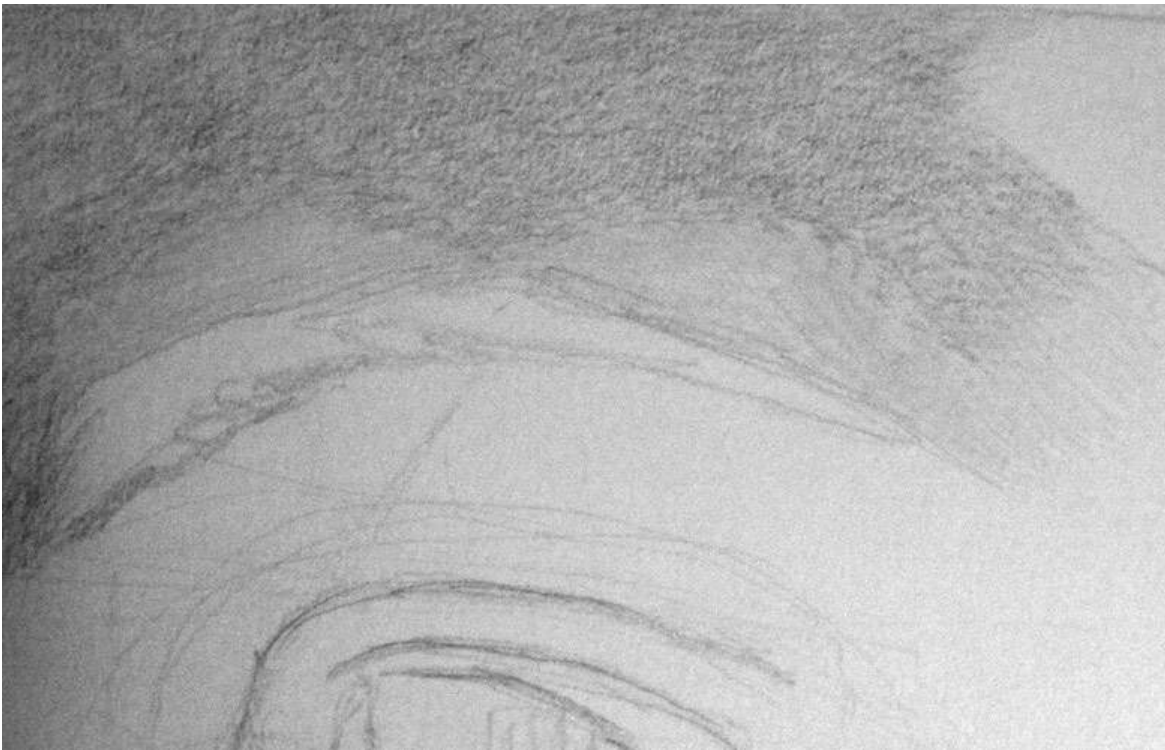
Since the model is wearing a hat, it will creates shadows on the forehead. Take your time and make gradual transitions from dark to light with your shading. Since I'm right handed, I'll be drawing generally from upper-left to lower-right. If you're left handed, you'll do the opposite.

The lamp I'm using will be on my left so that my hand doesn't create a shadow over the area I'm trying to draw. In this photograph the light source is different only for the sake of the camera.

Although the shading in the forehead is finished (below), I will go back later and even out the spotty areas with the kneaded eraser, redrawing some parts if I erase too much. I've shaded enough to draw the left eyebrow with firm pressure (with the mechanical pencil). Do not draw the hairs over white paper. Make sure you've shaded underneath first. Take your time and draw each hair with great care (hey that rhymes!).

Again, we will be digging hard into the paper with a 4H pencil (see below).
This will create larger pores and wrinkles to be revealed by the dark soft lead of
the mechanical pencil going over the 4H marks.
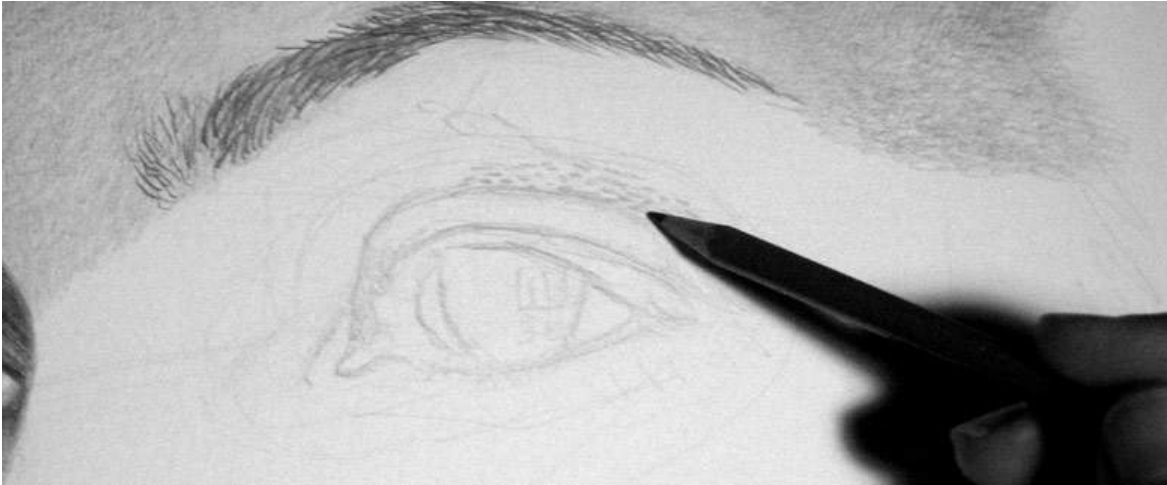
This part of the face is reflecting light, so you'll be trying to simulate a
complex effect, a highlight on porous skin with tiny wrinkles. Use the grain of
the paper, the pencil graphite and the kneaded eraser (all working together) to
render this until you're satisfied with the result.
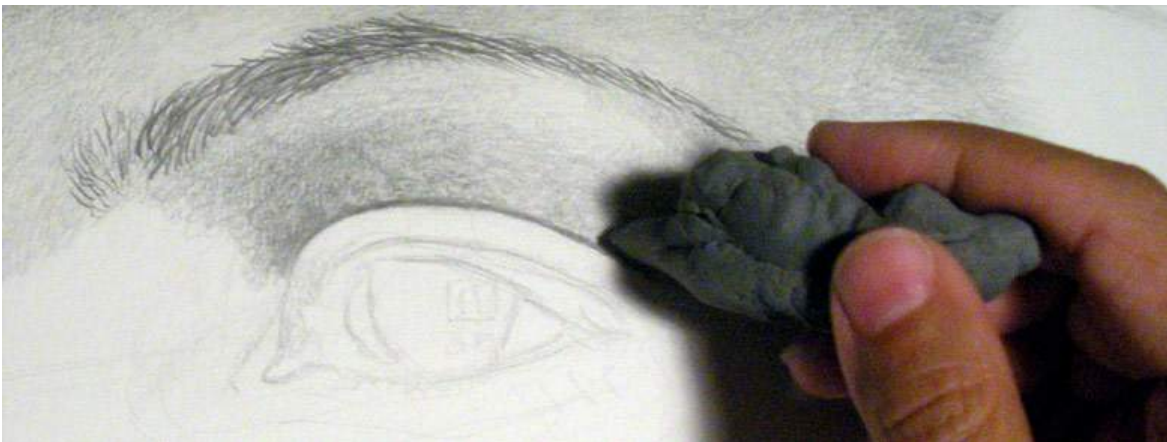
You may even want to draw thin lines around the pores with the 4H pencil to
create more contrast and detail.
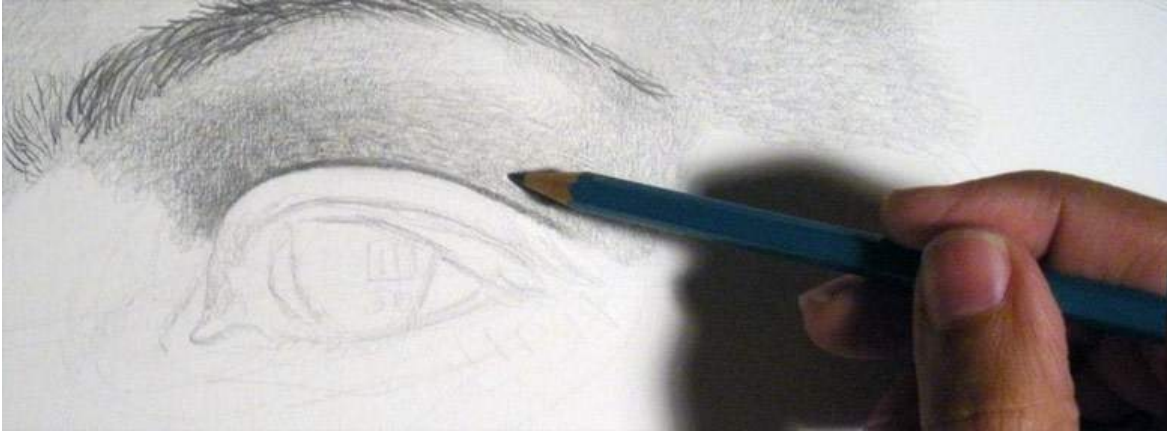
Dig hard with the 4H pencil to prepare the shading of the eyelid.

By the way, this is where you can get completely carried away and create details that no one will ever notice. However, I have a theory that the subconscious mind notices almost everything, so maybe all your work will be appreciated at some level, or at least by aliens monitoring people's brains or the multidimensional beings watching you right now!
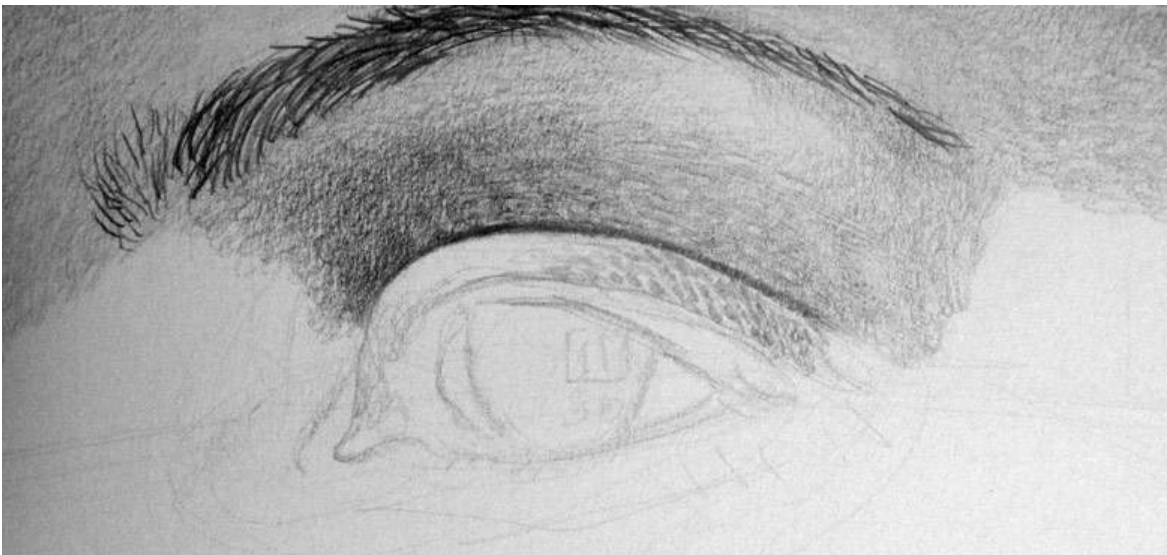

Shade the eyelid and draw the eyelashes with the mechanical pencil and begin shading the iris and pupil. Notice the complexity of shapes within the eye. Do not assume that anything is symmetrical. Observe nature. Study the symphony of patterns (See below).

Again, I used the 4H pencil to press grooves into the paper before shading with the mechanical pencil. Then I shaded with the darker lead (mechanical pencil) and added eyelashes. The whites of the eyes are not white, but in a slight shadow (4H pencil).

Avoid pure white so you can always add highlights later with a kneaded eraser, or at least leave small areas for highlights.
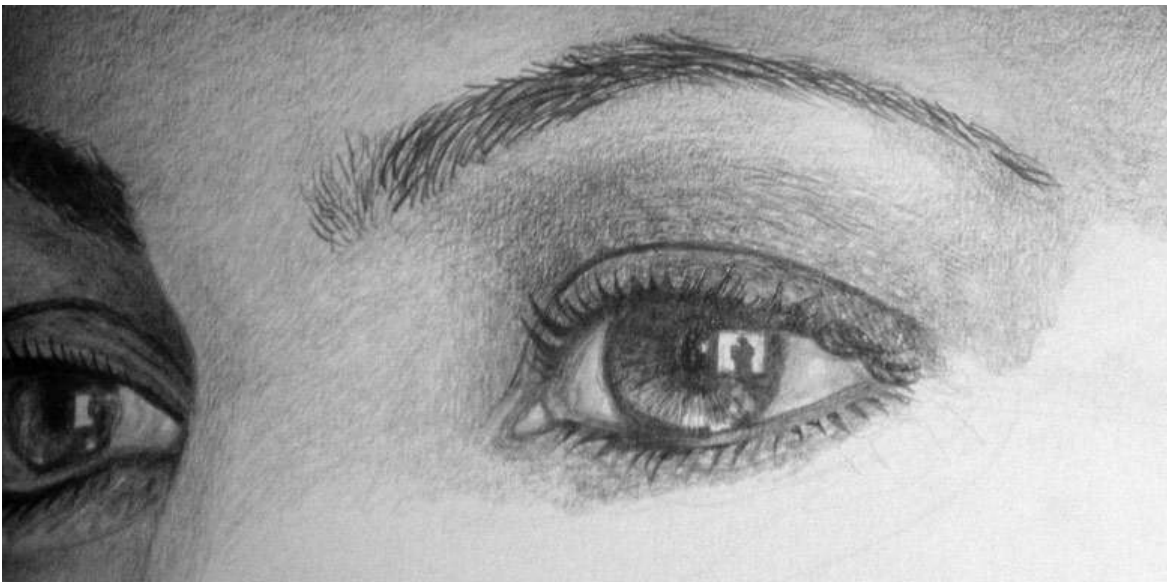
Begin shading the nose with soft graphite ovals. Notice the shadow of the nose on the right side of the face (her right). Please excuse the glare of the lamp over the left eye.

Apply hard pressure with the 4H pencil to create long highlighted hairs. Although the subject has dark hair, the highlights will look natural and not like gray hairs. The key is to create the impressions in the paper first and then later go over them with the darker, softer lead of the mechanical pencil. This effect works really well with blondes who have fly-away hairs visible in front of dark backgrounds (See below).

To create hair, draw long lines with firm pressure with the mechanical pencil. Notice the highlight hairs appearing.

Continue to use the oval technique for the skin, and the dark lines for the hair. Carefully shade the ear, sensitive to the subtle shapes visible in the skin. Think about the cartilage, fat and skin that causes the skin to contour and catch light.

Although the paper is glaring because of the light, you can get an idea of how the hair is drawn using both the HB pencil and the mechanical pencil. Notice the highlight on the nose and the general direction the drawing is still taking, upper-left to lower-right. Again, this will help to keep your wrist and hand from smudging the drawing.

Below is a detail of the hair showing the effect of soft lead over the impressions left by an HB pencil. Continue to darken.

I've create a highlight on the cheek with very light shading, transitioning out into darker shading with the mechanical pencil.
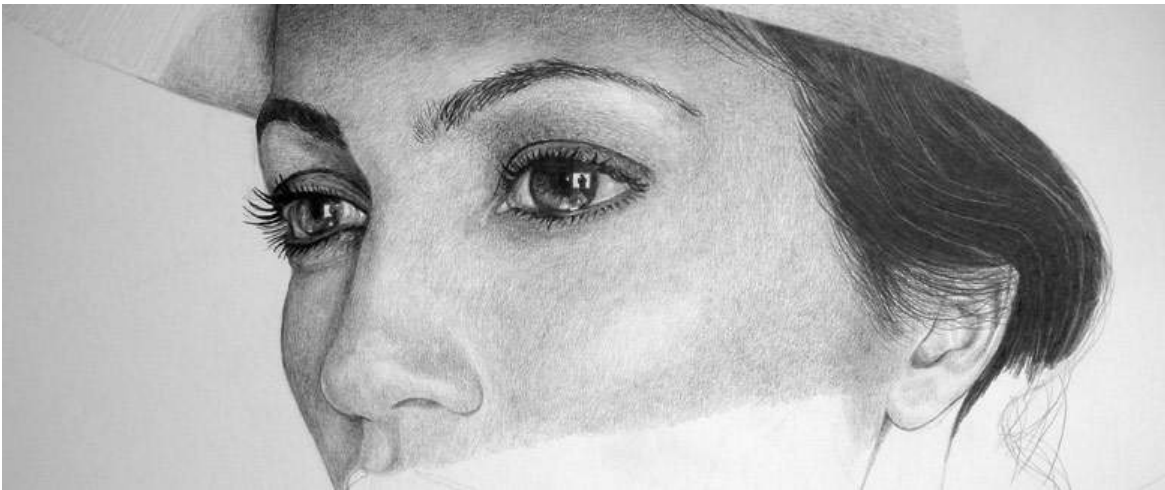

Here's a close-up of the mouth. I've turned up the contrast so you can better see the lines and shading. Notice there are no straight lines in nature. All contours are melodic. Try to imagine these shapes as islands on the horizon. Squint your eyes and see an archipelago in the pacific (See below).
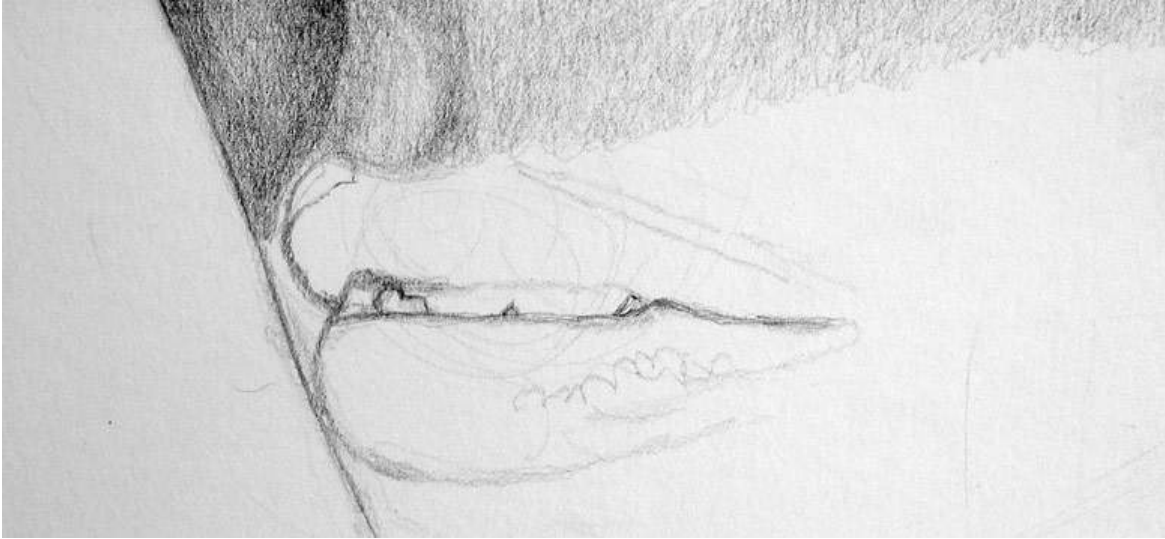
With the 4H pencil, push hard against the paper to create wrinkles.
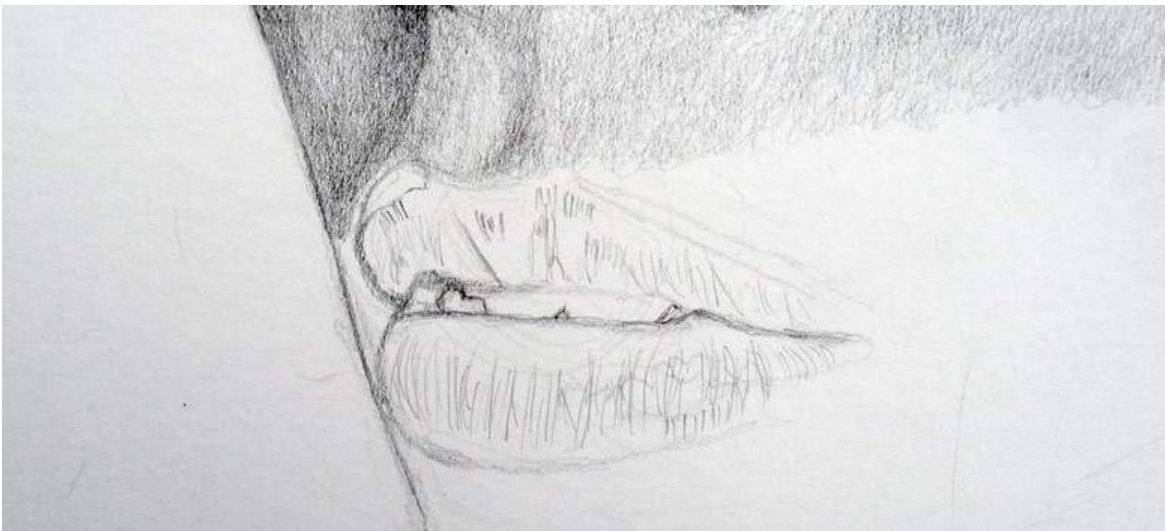
Now shade with the soft lead of the mechanical pencil. Continue to discover interesting shapes and patterns. Notice that part of the lower lip looks a little like an E.K.G. rhythm strip. Also notice the little nicks around the edge of the lips and how there are dramatic differences between the lights and shadows. The teeth are not white, but in the shadow of the lower lip (See below).
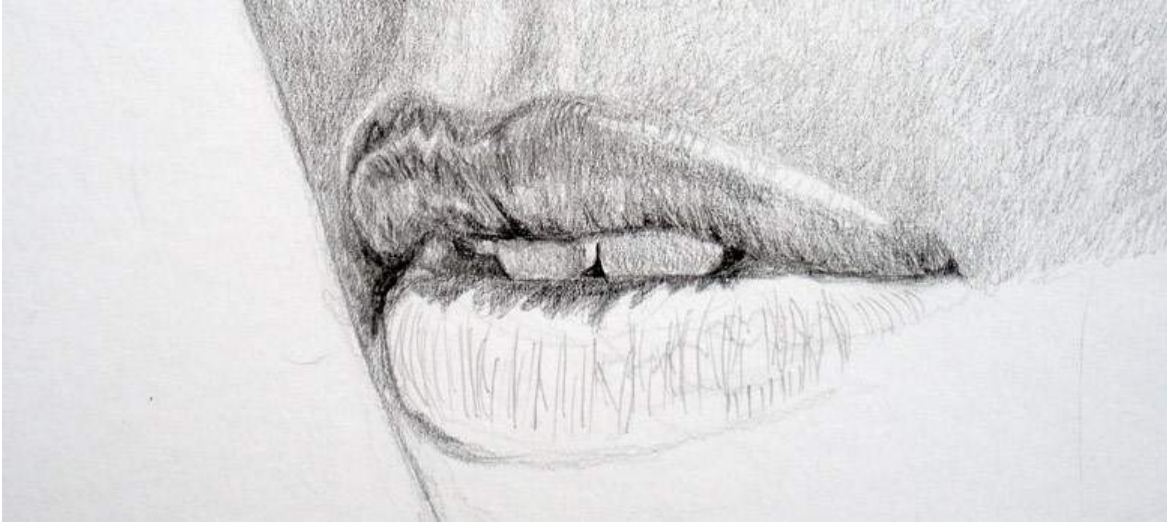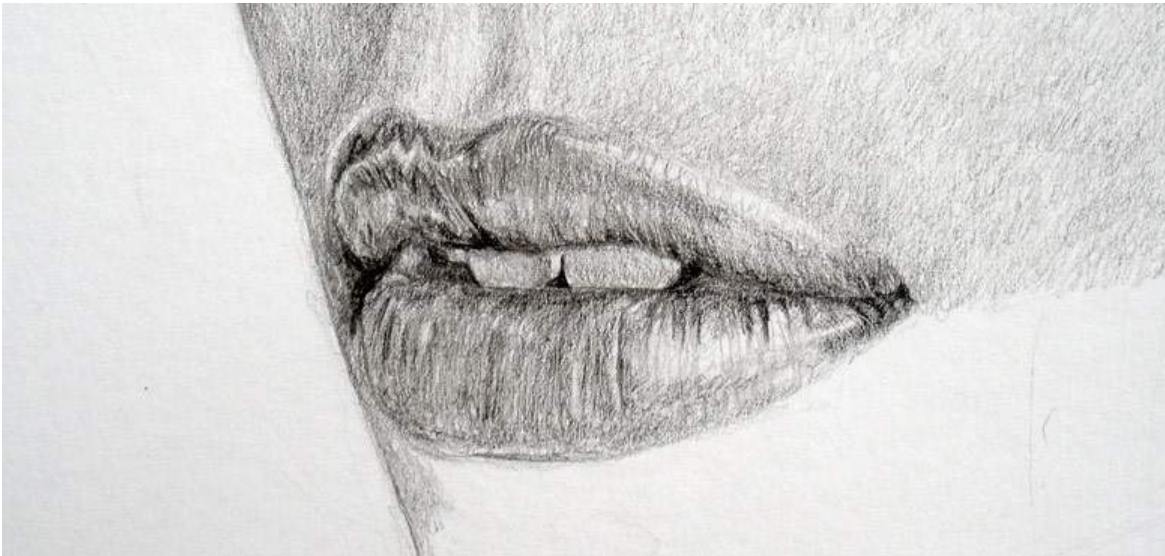
Here's an even closer view of the detail (below).
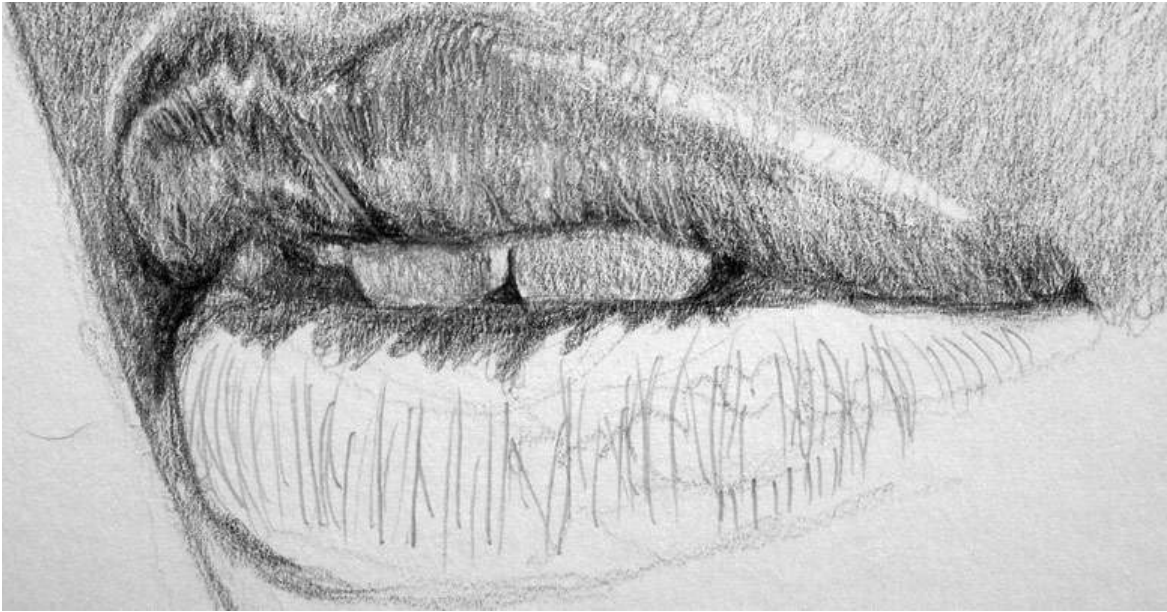
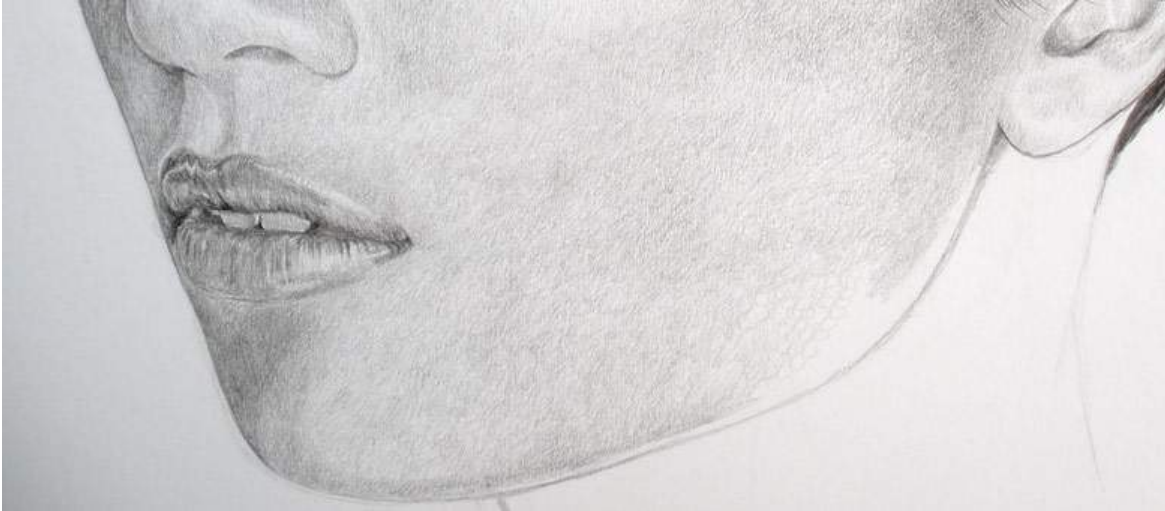Add in some dark wrinkle lines with the mechanical pencil (below).

Shading the lower lip (below).

Shade the rest of the face. Observe the light reflecting off jawline (below).
(Note: this photo is slightly distorted)

Here's an extreme close-up (below) so you can better see the graphite oval technique. It's up to you how much of the illusion of realism you want to achieve. Something that may appear to be finished can always use another day of work to achieve greater detail and smoothness. I'm kind of a fan of loose rendering, so I don't usually spend the extra time trying to reach 'perfection.' I ask myself, 'Do I like it?' And if I'm satisfied, that's all that counts. If you're ever not sure about a drawing you're working on, look at it in the mirror. You'll instantly have great omniscient powers of perception!
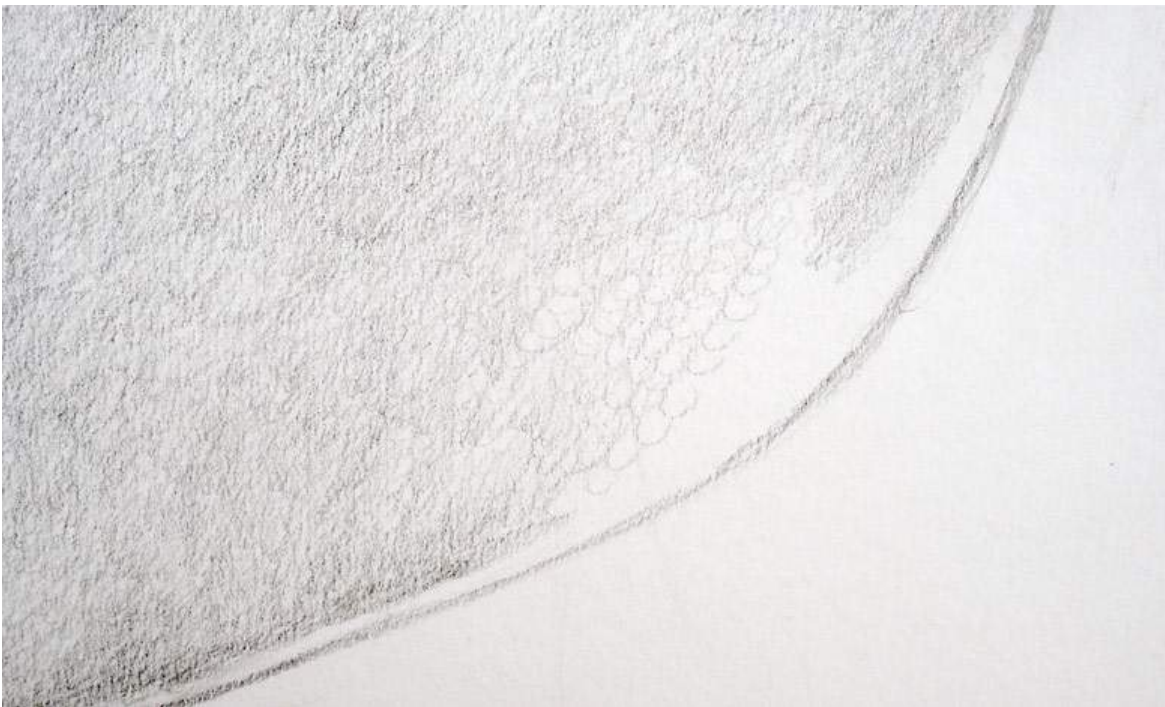
The hair is almost finished.
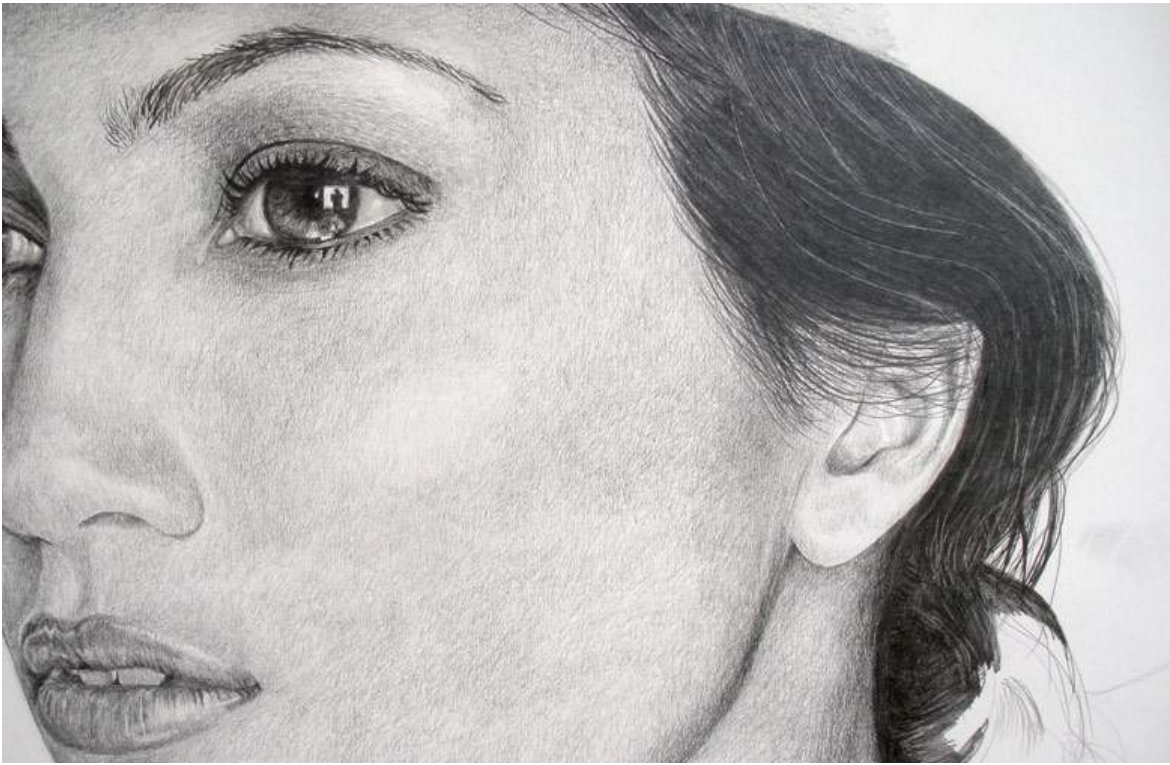
Closer view of the hair (below).

After spending quite some time darkening the hair and patting down the face with a kneaded eraser, the skin still looks a little spotty (below). At this point one has to decide if they want to move beyond photo realism into hyperrealism. My personal taste is that the drawing should still look like a drawing. I leave a hint of the shoulder with a single line, and shade the hat with simple diagonal lines. As for the blotchy skin, I can smooth away for days in the chasing after flawlessness, but I think that the human quality is worth the unevenness.

How long did it take to draw this face? If I add up the hours, perhaps one full day. I hope you had fun.

If you liked this tutorial, please consider reading one of my full length books such as:

Imagining: Beyond Purpose & Creativity
The how-to book on life for creative people. A practical guide for overcoming creative block, self-doubt, plus encouragement and strategies to live by.

And

Death after Kyoto (A novel)

Also, please visit my website and view my paintings.

Be well,

Brother Karloz