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## In the Studio: Joe Biel embraces the 'Veil'

The artist is a little uneasy with his panoramic drawing of 1,124 tiny TVs and their on-screen images. It's a friction between symbolic and literal, a collection of cultural touch points.

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By Leah Ollman, Special to the Los Angeles Times  
April 8, 2012

Joe Biel seems quite at ease on a recent Saturday morning, sitting for a conversation in his Chinatown live-work studio, sipping iced coffee. He faces a panoramic drawing of 1,124 tiny televisions aligned in towering stacks, each set with a meticulously rendered and often recognizable image on-screen. Biel, 45, has been working on the piece for two years and expects it will take him an additional year to complete. As eloquent and enthusiastic as he is about the work's sources and his process, "Veil," he admits, also makes him uncomfortable.

"It's almost hard to look at," he says. "The space is so not unified. I've spent some of my career trying to escape my training and some of it trying to embrace it. This is the first piece that I'm aware of where there's a real dual goal. This feels like the biggest watershed change in my work in years."

The drawing stretches 12 feet across the studio's back wall. Working from right to left (resulting in fewer smudges, since he's left-handed), Biel has detailed about a third of the television sets, in pencil, and painted their bluish-gray screen images in watercolor and gouache.

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The eye pinballs from a glimpse of Elvis to a snippet from a Velázquez portrait, from Stalin's stern visage to Dorothy's ruby slippers, from a trio of hooded Ku Klux Klan thugs to a sex scene, a car crash, the planting of the American flag at Iwo Jima. The images — tight, legible extractions from our collective cultural memory bank — range from the size of a thumbnail to a postage stamp.

It's the friction between symbolic and literal, the frontal, gridlike mosaic of appliances and each screen's spatially convincing view that makes Biel uneasy — but it's a productive discomfort that comes from venturing into new

territory. In the piece, he says, "there's a real postmodern schizophrenia in terms of visual strategies, but it's somewhat intentional, because there's a strange power to the real/unreal combination that it creates."

A related sort of "poetic dislocation," as he puts it, has long run through Biel's psychologically ambiguous, technically precise drawings. He often makes the space in his tableaux indeterminate, and the actions depicted vaguely unsettling (a young girl with rabbit ears and a whip in her hand peeks out of a cardboard box) or darkly absurd (a Kafkaesque young man holds a portable radio to his ear with one hand; in the other hand, a candle burns at both ends), but he always defines the characters and their props with crisp clarity. Allegory, myth and metaphor meet exquisite illustrative veracity. Lightness converges with gravity, humor with vulnerability.

The training that has such a vexed grip on Biel started when he was 7, growing up in Des Moines. A colleague of his father (a music professor), saw one of Biel's drawings at a faculty party and took him on as an independent student, somewhat like an apprentice. The professor, Jules Kirschenbaum, was dedicated to old-master methods, and the psychic complexity of his own work likely also made a lasting impression on Biel. Biel studied with him almost continuously up through his undergraduate years at Drake University in Des Moines.

He is aware now, he says, of how unusual his background is, what "a different kind of animal" it created. When he left Iowa for the University of Michigan, his "whole world got flipped upside down."

"I discovered Joseph Beuys," he adds. "I got an MFA in painting, and I didn't make any paintings for my thesis show."

After graduating, he moved to Portland, Ore., and began making collaborative work in video, performance and installation art with Richard Kraft (now also based in L.A.).

After a decade of exploring multiple media, Biel returned to drawing — in a sense, righting himself after being upended. "It's like one of those snow globes you shake up and eventually the flakes come right back down to where they were. Clearly, I'm somebody who wants to make images."

In 2000, Biel and his wife, artist Hilary Hopkins, moved to L.A., where he had several solo shows as well as at galleries in New York, Seattle, London and Berlin. (His work can be seen through April 19 in "Obscured Lines: Contemporary Drawing in Los Angeles" at L.A. Valley College.) For eight years, he has taught at Cal State Fullerton.

And since early 2010, he's been diligently bringing "Veil" to fruition. Inspiration to make something similarly dense came while reading "Finnegans Wake." "I had the idea for the piece in a flash — this wall of televisions," he recalls. "That happened very quickly, which is often how pieces start for me. What took a long time was to work out the specific perspective, or lack of perspective."

Biel spent eight or nine months researching and gathering a pool of around 5,000 images. He began developing categories of images, as if writing "an encyclopedic poem or list, like a Walt Whitman list-poem on steroids," he says with a laugh.

He broadened his sources, from television only to photographs, works from the history of art and film and from the news, inserting the banal and generic as counterweights to the iconic and personally significant. He deliberately mixed the recognizable and the obscure, wanting to give viewers some traction, but not too much. The panoply should pose a bit of a challenge, Biel hopes, agreeing with the late writer David Foster Wallace that "it's the job of literature, of art, to get the

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viewer to want to do the work."

As an accretion of optical and cultural touch points, "Veil" resonates with both Wallace Berman's Verifax collages and Christian Marclay's recent 24-hour-long tour-de-force, "The Clock." Autobiography, social critique and nostalgia converge in all of them. Ironically, Biel no longer owns a television, but he modeled the quaint clunkers in his drawing on the black-and-white set he had in his room as a kid. The physical obsolescence of the monitors makes a nice contradiction to the enduring quality of the images, just as the immediacy of those screen shots contrasts with the slow, manual process of Biel's rendering.

His methods are strikingly labor-intensive, but "Veil" isn't about the effort.

"I'm not a storyteller, and there's really not a narrative, except in as much as the world is one big set of them. This is my weird attempt at encapsulating my time. The idea is of craft being wedded to meaning. To me, they're always together."

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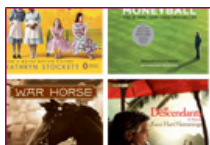
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