

Joe Biel

BEYOND THE DEPTH OF FOCUS



Joe Biel lives with his wife in LA's Chinatown in a recently self-renovated home/studio. He attended Drake University, in Des Moines where he received a BFA in Painting followed by a MFA in Painting at the University of Michigan. In 1993 he began to work with photographer Richard Kraft. The two made a large series of mixed media installations involving photo, sculpture, video and performance.

In 2000 he moved to Los Angeles and returned to drawing as his primary medium. He's a master of pencils and his drawings have a certain Kafkaesque feel to it. There is something eerie about them but he doesn't draw scary monsters, and there is no sense of gore or anything else that's blatantly shocking. However, his drawings reveals a subconscious dread, which acts like a reminder that things are not always as nice and harmless as they may seem at first glance.

Besides that he also has an interesting connection to Germany and **poeta laureatus** Durs Grünbein.

Joe, first of all, tell me about your upbringing, your family and your first artistic experiences.

I was born in Boulder but moved when I was really young and grew up in Des Moines, Iowa in the mid-west of the country. This was OK, sort of boring, but my family took me to NY a lot. I remember being five going to the Metropolitan museum of Art and being completely blown away. Even then I somehow had the sense of wanting to make objects which would last after me. I remember trying to fucking copy an altarpiece that day with my little sketchbook, kind of precocious but I think I just wanted to get going with what I wanted to do (which hasn't really changed since that day actually). I still dream about that museum frequently, there's actually a dream version of it that I have visited enough times in my sleep so I kind of know it when I'm awake.

Anyway, my parents are both classical musicians and met at the Juilliard School for music, they were very active and played recitals every year. I started studying drawing when I was seven with an amazing artist who my mom actually was in High School with in NY (High school of Music and Art) but incredibly she only met years later in Des Moines, weird.

Anyway, I got a real sense of old world discipline and I think my interest in art of the past and what's going on now is one result. I mean they are both part of me. I recently had a funny realization listening to a Radiohead song, that it had this really classical sequence of chords underneath and it struck me that somehow I wanted my work to have that same blending of parts; not new so much as rich. But with a contemporary edge in terms of subject and that's what I love about that band—no sentimental love songs from them—they deal with what life's like now in really broad but idiosyncratic terms.

My parents were really supportive and one thing I think which they were intent upon was to make sure I realized that there was a much bigger, more competitive world out there outside my little city. They didn't let me get a big ego, even though I was ahead of a lot of kids in terms of my seriousness about art etc. And my teacher was the same, he showed in NY and had work in museums and he was a hard-ass about work ethic.

I mean he didn't treat me like a kid. So I had some drawing and painting skills by the time I got to college. And I had the idea of a work ethic kind of hard wired in me. And I feel like

it serves me well now, particularly since I make these really large super detailed drawings which take months sometimes.

My Dad was actually born in Breslau, in the 30's so there's an interesting connection to German culture. I've always felt close to it in some way. I remember the first time I visited Berlin in 1995, it felt in some ways more like home than a lot of places I lived in the states.

So I think I was really lucky in my upbringing and the support and guidance I got from my family.

Is there anything besides music, that triggers a certain emotion that you can hardly explain where it comes from?

Yes, there are other things besides music: open spaces, like burnt out industrial spaces, or vacant lots which are waiting to be built on. There's this weird double feeling of being home and totally isolated when I see them or wander in them. Like I sense what has gone on there or what might go on in the future.... again Berlin has a lot of these and maybe one of the reasons I felt at home there. Also some parts of LA (not all of course)—but there is a funny connection in my mind between the two.

And to get very specific about another thing that does it: the light from windows in paintings by Vermeer. I don't know what it is about that but it really triggers a cascade of feelings I can't describe, but they are very strong...

Also the smell of coffee... it always feels familiar to me, gives any place a strange feeling of history....

Do you already know what you going to draw or is it there a progression during the process? E.g., "Pistol", is it like—okay, I'm gonna draw a girl on a chair who puts a gun in skulls mouth.

Sometimes I see it in my head as a complete image—when this happens I will make a sketch and then actually set up a model and try and pose the model to recreate the sketch as best I can. Of course, things will change, but sometimes it is executed very close to my original vision.

Sometimes I will use a found or appropriated image. Generally I feel the need to change the image and/or the context of the image. Again this isn't conscious, but usually the original

suggests other readings and ideas—so I'll change details and/or environment.

Sometimes the situation is sort of in between the two. The example you ask about: the girl with the pistol and skull, was a sort of improvisation. I was doing a photo shoot with the model, whose mom had brought a bunch of different clothes and objects to use as props, and I just sort of let her pick things up and see what happened—and if I saw something interesting I would stop her and shoot a few pics. I think in this case she had the skull and gun and I thought to try a bunch of things, and the gun in the skull's mouth was really edgy and disturbing, but I didn't think of it ahead of time. So its kind of a performative image.

But the execution is very linear and non improvisational. So the whole thing is a seemingly contradictory blend of intuition and rational process.

This is also true with the really big complex drawings. The creation of the images takes several months of sketching and moving things around in terms of creating the world and placing all the elements in space. I actually make a full scale collage on the wall; actual scale. Things change dramatically form day to day. Often I write about the work; there's a sort of literary thinking.

But again execution is more straightforward, not that things don't change but they change less than in the earlier phase. If I'm unhappy with something I may abandon the whole piece and restart from the beginning rather than change the piece halfway—this is because I want a clean working surface without a certain history.

Concerning your work flow, do you draw one picture at a time or do you work on several simultaneously?

In terms of my work flow, I tend to have many things going at once, but often when I am working on a big project, it tends to take over for a period of time. Right now I'm about to start on a really big drawing of 1000 TV sets, piled up like towers, each one with a different screen image rendered in watercolour. Very, very labour intensive and I've been preparing to start the actual drawing (this has taken since January). During the time I've also made a lot of small drawings and paintings, but once I start the actual large TV piece, I will focus on it exclusively for awhile to gain momentum...

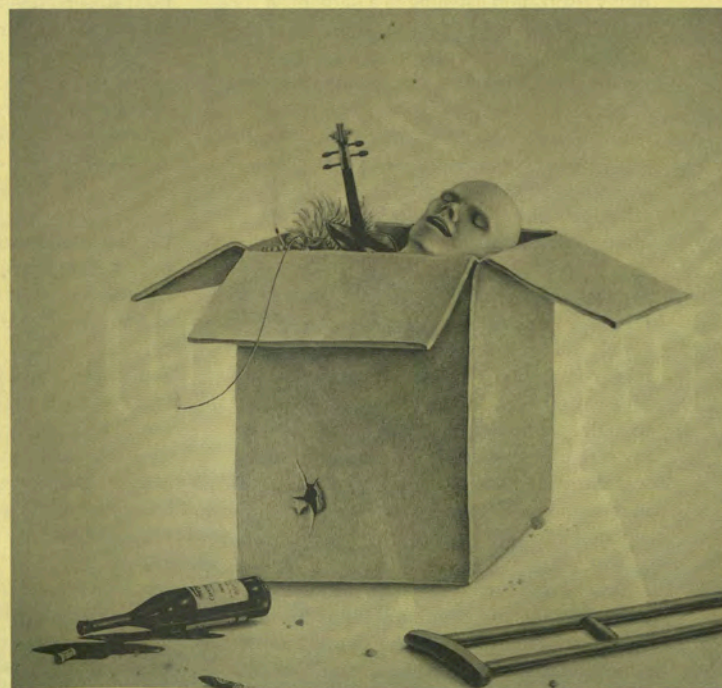
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Frontier (2008)
Graphite and Colored Pencil on Paper
59 x 119 in



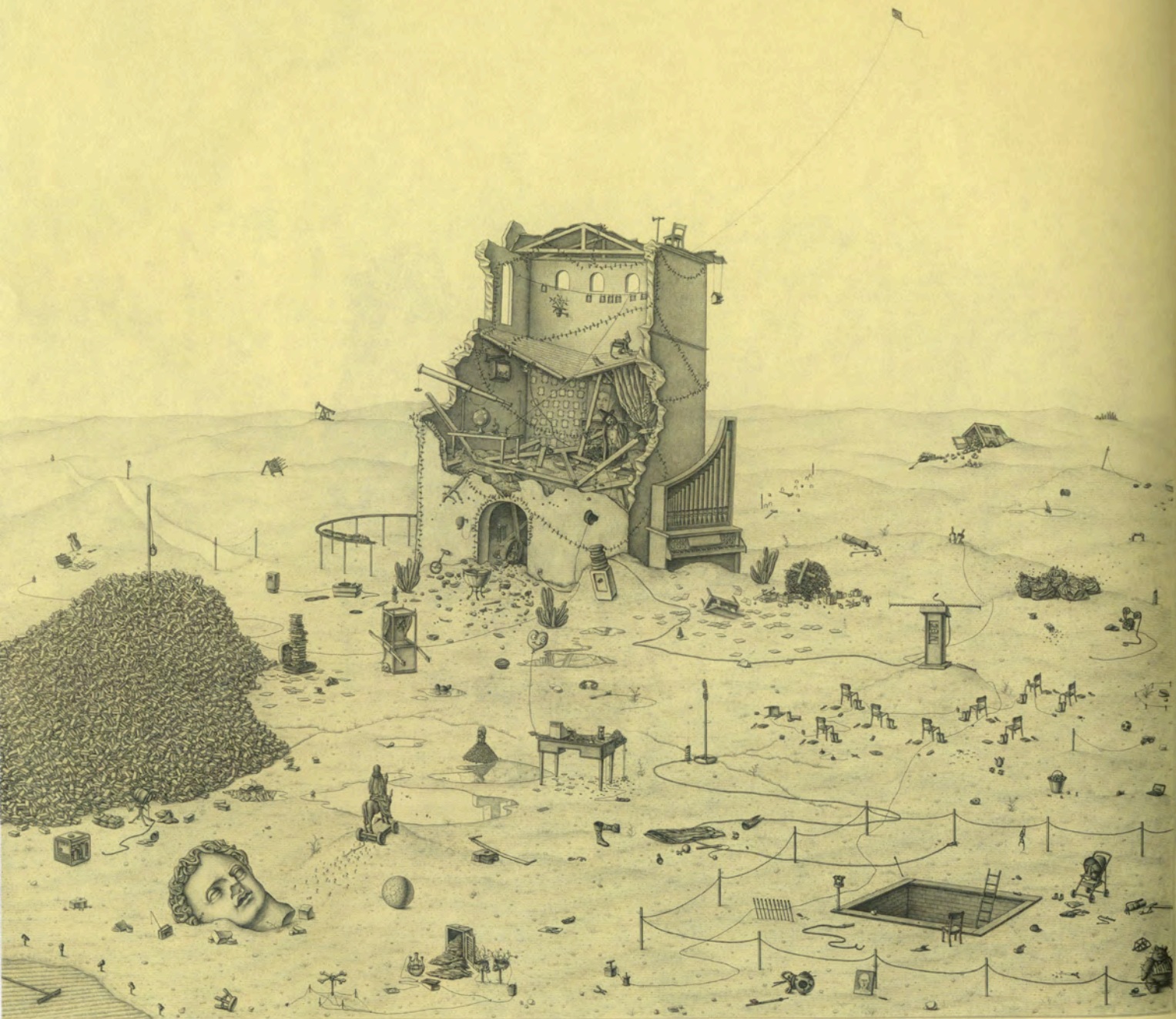
Pistol (2006)
Watercolor, Colored Pencil and Graphite on Paper
64 x 53 in.



Mural (Detail)
Acrylic and latex, Install view of wall drawing, NYC



Apollonian (2007)
Watercolor, Colored Pencil and Graphite on Paper
38 x 50 in.



Compound (2007)
Watercolor, Colored Pencil and Graphite on Paper
80 x 82 in.

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When I'm working on a series of smaller things, I often start 20 at once and let them work out in groups. So I guess I use different methods for different types of projects. I should probably add that I don't tend to have a conscious policy for any of this, but simply react to what allows me to just keep going on any given piece or project.

There is a lot of energy in your drawings. I have to think of isolation, loneliness and melancholy which are all powerful in a way.

I think there is a lot of what you speak of in my work: isolation, loneliness and melancholy. Funny thing is I don't feel so much that way personally—that is to say I maybe feel it more generally as a human condition, and maybe specifically as a contemporary condition—isolation that is. I feel maybe that I am close to William Kentridge in emotional tone. So I guess my answer is that I don't set out to express those things only, but somehow they always come to surface. Perhaps I am in denial. I often think artists aren't truthful with themselves for a variety of reasons. I often think of Francis Bacon talking about how he never thought about the figures in his paintings as being isolated or distressed because he was too busy thinking about the formal qualities of the painting—hard to believe on one hand but I kind of know what he means on the other. Or Giacometti not seeing the existential qualities of his figures; he said that to him they were simply more “real” looking. So it goes.

I also hope that humour gives the work another aspect to keep it from only going one direction. But my take on the world is a bit dark: my favourite books are *The Castle* by Kafka and *The Brothers Karamazov* by Dostoevsky. My favourite director is Andrei Trosky so that gives you an idea. But I think the energy in my drawings is also a life force so there is some hope maybe. Of course there is cynicism as well. What did Kafka say? “There is hope, but not for us.” The thing is I see humour in that quote along with all the other stuff.

You're currently working in a private place. Can you explain how this “commissioned” work is different from your usual work? Since the person has to live in the environment, I guess you had to figure out together with him/her what to do that it stays comfortable. Was this difficult for you?

The commissioned work is different in the sense that much of the content is actually formed collaboratively with the collector... particularly since the general aim of the piece is to take specifics from his life and make them more symbolic. So I end up using some images that I wouldn't necessarily consider on my own. Also I think the emotional tone of the piece is a bit more playful... or at least less dark than some of my other work. And I think this has to do directly with the fact that its part of a living space. In terms of process, certainly I have made choices to make the practical execution workable in terms of not disturbing the collectors long term. One way is working in instalments of one week at a time. This makes it

so that the overall time of working is longer... but this is also interesting as it gives time for the ideas to evolve, and things have changed from original ideas by the time they are actually executed. Also the actual technical process is actually very clean and is easy to do while people are living in the space.

You mentioned Vermeer and there seems to be a connection to Breugel and Bosch. Are there any contemporary artist that inspire you?

Yes, though I look at a lot of older work, there are certainly contemporary artists I find equalling interesting: Beuys' a huge influence. The thing about Beuys is that he is so amazing on every level. And the contradictions in him in his work only make him richer and deeper in meaning. In the end I think one senses his total investment in art in his life, and that seems rare to me in an increasingly corporate sense of the art world. Philip Guston, William Kentridge, and Robert Gober in terms of other people working with the figure. I'd also mention Ron Mueck and Paul Noble. And Lawrence Wiener in terms of creating a poetic world.

What about Durs Grünbein?

I discovered his work quite by chance two years ago and it blew me away. I ended up contacting him and last year and ended up making some drawings for the new English version of his book *Descartes' Devils*. I think my approach to the world has some kinship with Grünbein.

One of the mysteries of art is the amount of emotions that it's able to trigger and you never know when it's going to get you.

I think you are right on about art - you never know.

words. Erik Hüsken
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