

Joseph Biel at Mark Woolley

Joseph Biel's exquisite new figurative drawings, in graphite or pastel, are irrational and convincing. In his statement for this exhibition,

Biel described the hapless protagonists in the series as "the passive everyman, the neophyte in over his head, the big dumb guy." These figures, all male, often resemble the artist himself, with large eyes, handsome features, shaved head; they suggest aspects of his psyche, dark fears or murderous desires. One figure, wearing jeans and a hooded sweatshirt, stands atop a mountain of bones, casually tossing another onto the pile. He counters his insouciance with a culpable gesture, yanking the hood down to hide his face. In another pastel, a man in a bloody bib clenches a bone in bared teeth; armless in

this bust-length image, however, perspiring, he may have been force-fed his dubious meal. Aggressive impulses are exposed but disavowed: someone else made him do it.

In the masochistic *Two Heads*, the deadpan faces appear side by side; glancing sidelong at the viewer, they are identical—save for the dozens of pencils that impale the head on the right. Sebastian-like, Biel's victim suffers for art. Throughout the series, the artist's role is ambivalently considered, both blessing and curse, like the stigmata displayed, in one drawing, by a geezer half immersed in a pool (baptized, that is, in the waters of the unconscious). Significantly, the dunce cap crowning a poor chump inscribing repetitive marks on the wall in one image formally echoes the star-spangled magician's hat in another. The artist alternates between self-punishment and the exercise of power. In *Daggers*, twin figures seen from the rear clutch bloody knives behind their backs, gleeful partners in crime. Elsewhere, though, Biel's artist-everyman is impotent, peering forlornly over a brick wall, his arms dangling in front of it, his pencil and notebook lying on the ground. His limp sleeves are much too long, he can't pick up his tools, and Biel conveys the paralyzing frustration of artistic block.

The most beautiful piece on view distilled all this ambivalence in a single self-portrait image. Here, the delicately colored head, pink and pale green, exhales billows of moist white cloth. Confronting the viewer with his mysterious condition, Biel's protagonist elicits sympathy and won-

der. Though the title, *Malade*, means "sick," we recall how breath is traditionally associated with vivifying power, as when God breathes life into Adam in Genesis. Biel seems genuinely haunted by his own creative talent: is it a bizarre affliction or miraculous gift? —Sue Taylor

Joseph Biel: *Malade*, 2003, graphite and pastel on paper, 40 by 32 inches; at Mark Woolley.

