

LOS ANGELES TIMES

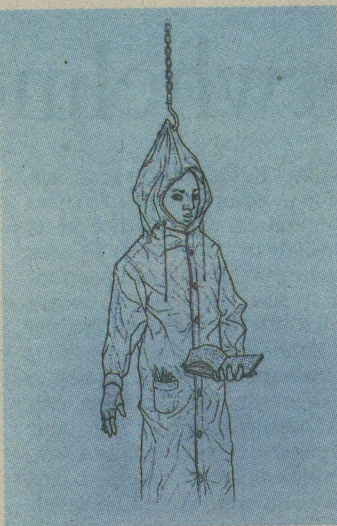
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Packing a heavy metaphoric punch

Joe Biel's curious little drawings in the back room at the Acuna-Hansen Gallery persist in the memory long after they've passed from sight. Laid down in crisp, decisive lines on light blue paper, they describe conditions dense with ambiguity and incongruity.

In one, a young man in a long, hooded rain jacket hangs from something like a meat hook. He holds a small notebook in one hand. His pocket is crammed with pencils. However odd and unsettling his predicament, he gazes out at us with level sobriety.

In another image, a man seen from behind is removing his shirt, revealing a strong, handsome torso. In the center of his back is a target, looking faintly tattooed. Vulnerability recurs in the drawings in a strange variety



Acuna-Hansen Gallery

UNSETTLING: A young man hangs by his hood from a hook in a drawing by Joe Biel.

of forms, most having to do with some sort of physical compromise or violation.

Christian references abound as well. One drawing shows a

man in dress shirt and bow tie standing in chest-deep water — a baptism, perhaps. But he wears a jokey duck mask, and his hands, raised out of the water, reveal stigmata. Redemption whispers through the work, but so do loss and a dark, disquieting humor.

Biel, who teaches at Cal State Fullerton, heightens the metaphoric punch of his drawings by setting them in undefined or neutral spaces — a bare room, a body of water. The scenes read more as propositions than illustrations.

In confident lines, they yet tell of a sort of existential tenuousness. That their protagonist is often a reader or keeper of a notebook reinforces a vision of life as a continual cycle of experiencing, witnessing, imagining and recording. Biel's drawings mirror the potency of that process.

Acuna-Hansen Gallery, 427 Bernard St., Los Angeles, (323) 441-1624, through March 27. Closed Sundays through Tuesdays.