

DRAWINGS

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by Dike Blair

Like most everybody, my early art-making involved drawing with crayons. Then, like many who later become artists, my ability to render recognizable things allowed me to be considered an “artist” by my peers, a role that interested me. I remember doing drawings of Oscar Robertson (NBA star) and the Green Lantern (superhero). My first watercolor-and-pencil drawing was of a mug of beer sitting on a bar with a wooden beer keg in the background. Eleven-year-old me thought it a highly sophisticated subject, and I realize my subjects haven’t evolved much since then. Twelve-year-old me made money at summer camp drawing knockoffs of Ed “Big Daddy” Roth’s monsters driving hot rods, like Mother’s Worry, on my campmates’ T-shirts. Thirteen-year-old me moved on to drawing naked women on campmates’ pillowcases. My knowledge of naked women was very limited so I sourced my figures from the swimsuit page of *Betty and Veronica* (an Archie Comics book), and hazarded guesses about the placement of nipples on breasts. Later I would make expressionistic sketches from black-and-white photographs with sources like Cartier-Bresson portraits or hippie bands from their album covers. I drew through my college years, then, roughly coinciding with becoming a professional artist, I stopped drawing except for plans to visualize sculptural constructions and the occasional sketch when vacationing.

I’ve never been happy about not drawing. Every couple of years for the last three decades or so, I’ve gone to the art supply store, bought drawing pads or paper, charcoal, carbon pencils, graphite, erasers, and shading stumps, laid all of this on the table before me, and then drawn a blank. I’d do a few half-hearted squiggles, and then everything would go on a shelf. A little over a year ago, I was arranging to do a studio visit with an artist and he asked if I did drawings, because he’d be happy to trade drawings. I really wanted one of this artist’s pieces, so went out and bought paper, etc., and immediately did a rough, relatively quick drawing of an ashtray, an image I’d rendered in both gouache and oil paint.

It felt as if something had been recovered or released. I allowed myself to be sloppy and fast. I mixed mediums with little thought: charcoal, water, gouache, oil, and white chalk. I realized that in paying no attention to precision, something I care about with gouache and oil, I found a different new/old pleasure in making. I’d significantly lessened my invested labor, including searching for subject matter. Rather than figuring new subject matter for the drawings, I simply used images already used, or ones I’d been considering for paintings. While this approach to subject matter should have been obvious to me all along, it hadn’t been. I found that drawing images I was very familiar with from already having painted them made the drawing more effortless and free. More recently and more traditionally, I’ve been drawing subjects in advance of painting them. I get to familiarize myself with the subtleties of an image, especially in learning the value scales in black and white before employing color. I guess this is why artists have been using precisely this approach for centuries. Duh.