



Black Magic

Charcoal is the medium of choice for Rick Shaefer, whose powerful drawings reflect his fascination with, and mastery of, the “integrity of the line.”

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BY ROBERT KIENER



Bent over a waist-high, eight-foot-square table in his airy, light-filled studio, Fairfield-based artist Rick Shaefer seems lost in thought as he feverishly draws with charcoal on a massive sheet of white vellum. He works quickly but precisely, scratching out crisp black lines.

Pausing and standing back to inspect his progress, he explains why he prefers to create works in charcoal rather than paint, pencil, or some other medium. “It’s so primitive,” he says. “Our Paleolithic ancestors were scratching with burnt wood on the walls of caves, and I like to think—at the risk of sounding too romantic—that using charcoal somehow links me to what artists have been doing for thousands of years. I also like the tonality, the rich, crisp blacks on white that I get with charcoal.”

A former editorial and fashion photographer, he left photography in 1994 and began painting and experimenting with mixed media during what he terms his “everything goes” period. Five years ago he decided to concentrate on drawing.

LEFT: *Oak After Storm* (2016), charcoal on vellum mounted on paper, 45”H × 57”W. ABOVE: *Indian Rhino* triptych (2012), charcoal on vellum, 96”H × 148”W.



studied how he laid down each line and marveled at his fussy and finished lines as well as his moments of spontaneity. I suppose I was trying to find out where the genius is."

Shaefer's work has been widely exhibited in both group and solo exhibitions, and

is included in private and corporate collections such as Microsoft, American Express, and Prudential.

For the last five years or so he has

"I'd always loved the power and preciseness of line and enjoyed making etchings, so I decided to try to create drawings that looked like huge etchings," he says. To prepare himself, he spent months peering through a magnifying glass at drawings by Rembrandt and others, as well as woodcuts by Dürer.

"Rembrandt's drawings fascinated me," says Shaefer. "I



focused largely on nature, depicting everything from animals to trees to cloudscapes. He creates large, often life-size drawings because the format gives him the freedom to be more gestural or, as he explains "more calligraphic." "If I'm in the flow, it's as if I am writing my way across the surface, like I am capturing thought in a hurried frenzy of note taking." Also, he says, "I like life-size drawings because there's something about the weight and size of the subjects I depict that demands contemplation."

His most recent project, *Refugee Trilogy*, inspired by the ongoing European refugee crisis, echoes Baroque and Romantic paintings of the seventeenth and nineteenth centuries by artists such as Rubens and Géricault. Other works

spring from events closer to home. For example, on a walk after a heavy winter storm, he was saddened to see a massive black oak that he had long admired toppled to the ground in a neighbor's field. "Although it had fallen, it still had a majesty to it," he says. "It looked like a beached whale, complete with a giant eye peering up at me."

He photographed it—it was so huge he needed five shots—and made a five-panel, nineteen-foot-long charcoal drawing, *Van Breems Oak*, of the fallen beast.

Regular midafternoon visits by a mad crescendo of squawking crows outside his studio inspired Shaefer to draw an ongoing series of charcoal portraits of the noisy visitors. Because his large-scale drawings can take several months to complete, he describes his crow draw-

BELOW: *Dodo* (2016), charcoal on vellum, 45"H x 45"W. FACING PAGE, TOP TO BOTTOM: *Van Breems Oak* (2012), charcoal on vellum, five panels of varying sizes, 60"H x 234"W overall; *Spanish Bull* (2014), charcoal on vellum mounted on aluminum, 42"H x 60"W; detail from *Crows on Wire* (2013), charcoal on vellum mounted on nine board panels, 18"H x 148"W overall; the artist in his studio working on his *Border Crossing* triptych from the *Refugee Trilogy* (2016), charcoal on vellum mounted on board, 96"H x 165"W.



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ings as "light relief." As he explains, "The crows are an interlude to break up the sometimes arduous process of drawing large animals and life-size trees. They are also just fun to draw because they have so much attitude."

From a distance, Shaefer's drawings may look like the work of a photorealist, but the closer a viewer gets to the work, the more evident is his mastery of line and his spontaneity. There is a richness that invites viewers to move in closer then back away only to return.

Shaefer has an interest in helping to spread awareness about endangered species, and he has drawn everything from snow leopards to the long-extinct Dodo bird to the Indian rhinoceros. His massive *Indian Rhino*, inspired in part by Dürer's famous sixteenth-century woodcut, covers three panels. Does the triptych hold special meaning for Shaefer? "Well, it is a classical form," he explains.

Then, with a wry smile, adds, "And I wouldn't be able to get an eight-by-twelve-foot drawing out my studio door!" •

EDITOR'S NOTE: Rich Shaefer is represented by the Sears Peyton Gallery in New York City and Los Angeles, searspeyton.com. To see more of his work, visit rickshaefer.com