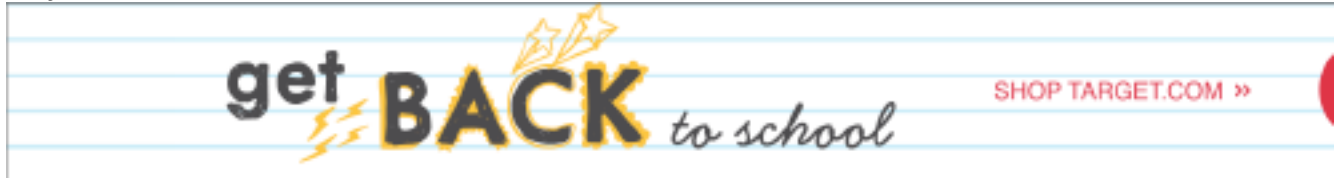


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Ethan Murrow

Artist

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Big Wall, Slow Pace. The New Work of Joe Biel.

From a distance Joe Biel's drawings and paintings appear sparse and quiet. Then you walk a little closer and his meticulously crafted and precisely considered work exerts itself. That sweet girl with the balloon standing in the sand? She's holding a whip.

"Pax Romana" Watercolor, Colored Pencil and Graphite on Paper 50 x 38 in. 2006

Biel's work sneaks up on you, causing you teeter on the edge of your first assumptions and wonder what the hell you must have been thinking. This inherent darkness in the work is balanced by an understanding of balance. As Biel says in the statement on his website he is interested in the,

"fusion of differing qualities: stoicism and vulnerability, absurd comedy and overwrought tragedy, the banal and the bizarre."

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

Biel's drawings are so exquisitely rendered that the content can sometimes be overlooked as viewers pontificate about the deftness of his hand. But as Biel said in a phone call the other day, his mother, a musician, told him once,

"If you're turning pages at the concert, the best you can hope for is not to be

noticed."

Again, like the allegories and oddities within the narratives of Biel's work, there is an intentional element of surprise. He wants you to recognize the craft, but only after you are lost in the narrative. This is a difficult gambit.

"Load" Watercolor and Latex, Drawing on wall, Otis College of Art and Design 2008

"If you make things good enough people don't think they are done by hand. They think its computer generated."

In this way Biel's work stands defiantly against other contemporary projects that can sometimes feel superficial because of the rapid speed with which they are achieved. He says,

"Nowadays I feel like doing something slow is unusual."

Detail of "Load" wall drawing at Otis College of Art and Design

Patient and thoughtful execution define what is happening in Biel's latest project. On a 12' high x 39' wide wall in a loft in Soho, a painting is growing. Biel and the New York collector he is working with have painstakingly planned and discussed the project, which is, "An allegorical portrait of the owner."

Acrylic and latex, Install view of wall drawing in progress, New York City

The artist completes prep drawings, the two discuss them and then Biel flies to New York for a few weeks to work on the piece. Like much of his work, the process itself is laborious but simple. Paint and brush, sheaves of small drawings, this guy travels light.

Example of preparatory drawing for wall drawing project

It takes the right kind of partnership for a project like this to work. Biel spoke enthusiastically about the uncanny agreement between the two on choices for the piece. This is a multi-year endeavor and the artist has worked hard to divide the painting into stages so that the owner is not left with an artist's studio in his dining room. At present Biel is about halfway through the piece. For an artist who would probably sell his kidney to get to talk to Bruegel or Bosch for a few minutes there is a kind of perfect resonance with this old master pace and approach.

Acrylic and latex, Install view of wall drawing in progress, New York City

When we spoke I asked Biel if the content of his work had changed because of the nature and location of the home-based project.

"This piece isn't as dark, the balance of the horror and lyrical are still there, like two notes twanging simultaneously, but this piece is not quite as sharp, it's a bit more stoic."

Looking at the images of the work in progress it's easy to see that while some of the edge may have been toned down for the owner (the work moves from living space to bedroom after all) there is still a certain amount of Biel's interest in tension and the delicate balancing act between assumption and fact.

Acrylic and latex, Install view of wall drawing in progress, New York City

Biel describes working over a long period like this as a, "game where all the gears are moving at the same time at slightly different rates." The artist has a lot to consider as he manages the compositional complexity, the function of the work within the architecture, the changing narrative, the logistical intricacies and the balance between his own desires and owner's. After all, someone's going to be sleeping next to this thing for years and it isn't Biel. This is organized chaos and Biel handles it with the same agility as his mark-making.

Detail of "Load" drawing at Otis College of Art and Design

While the owner and site will remain anonymous for the time being, it's important to note that Biel is working for a collector who has given him generous license. It's refreshing to see an artist have the chance to create work at the pace required. The success of the project seems dependent on this. While waiting for this project to finish, check in with Joe Biel on his website or at one of his galleries to see work smaller than 39 feet wide.