
Rendering Nature - Ephemera

Rick Shaefer: Rendering Nature

2014

Rick Shaefer: Rendering Nature Brochure

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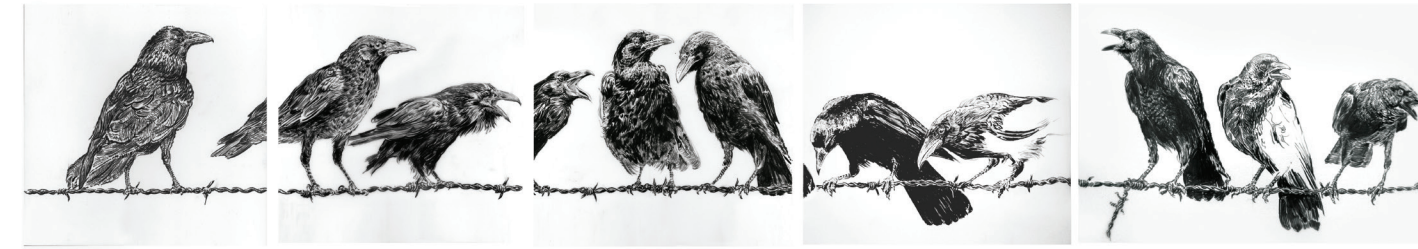
moments of beginning to lay down the initial quick perfunctory marks, the process takes over and all that effort put into the photo goes by the wayside. The paint immediately starts to dictate its own course. You are untethered suddenly and it becomes rather intuitive and primitive – often a wrestling match with the outcome uncertain. At some point it hopefully coalesces, appropriate for ephemeral clouds, and you can, if so desired, perhaps begin to draw on certain passages in the original photo which may not have intuitively felt “right.” As in the drawings, these quirks or specific anomalies can often add a wonderful fidelity to the piece. It’s done when it feels done (balanced or cohesive to some extent) and it’s hard to really know what that entails. A painting sitting around the studio for too long begs unwanted changes or additions if one isn’t careful.

The drawings are drawn from photographs due to the scale and the time needed to complete the work. In the case of the trees they are done with as much adherence to the actual scale and particular details of the subject as possible as these are obviously actual trees in my immediate environment. I had to develop a language of marks that would allow for the immense detail I wanted to convey without bogging the process down in photo-realist fussiness and simultaneously allow for a fluidity of execution. Up close the marks are almost abstract or at least seemingly unrelated to their meaning within the overall drawing. The bison and the rhino were both done in response to the sense of scale and bulk of the trees and the similarity I was seeing in the rendering of the bark and wood of the trees to the hide and skin of these animals. And that they are examples of bio endangerment writ large much like the elderly trees that have fallen or been uprooted. It was important in their case to have an engagement with the animals, albeit not confrontational, through their eyes. As with the trees, the viewer is presented with a unique opportunity to engage with these beings with an intimacy and proximity not normally offered in nature (or in the case of the trees, usually ignored) that hopefully leads contemplatively to a new appreciation and understanding. That is the hope anyway.

JD: *I can’t resist one final question: desert island painting – what would it be?*

RS: Perhaps Winslow Homer’s “The Gulf Stream” or Delacroix’s “The Raft of the Medusa?” That should cheer me up.

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 (formerly Director and Chief Curator of University Museums, Fairfield University)



Exhibition Checklist (all works by Rick Shaefer)

Cloud Studies, 1997-2014

Oil on canvas board
 11 x14 inches (each)
 Courtesy of Sears Peyton Gallery,
 New York City.

Rhino, 2012

Charcoal on vellum mounted
 on aluminum
 96 x 148 inches (triptych)

White Oak, 2013

Charcoal on vellum mounted
 on aluminum
 58 x 200 inches (triptych)

Crows on Wire, 2013

Charcoal on vellum mounted
 on board
 18 x 96 inches overall (five panels)

Untitled, Rough Sea 1, 2014

Oil on board
 24 x 36 inches

Untitled, Rough Sea 2, 2014

Oil on board
 24 x 36 inches

Mountains in Clouds, 2014

Oil and charcoal on board
 24 x 36 inches

Vertical Cumulus, 2014

Oil on board
 60 x 48 inches

Untitled, Crow Study, 2014

Charcoal on vellum mounted
 on paper
 38 x 30 inches

Large Cumulus, 2014

Oil on board
 66 x 84 inches
 Courtesy of Sears Peyton Gallery,
 New York City.



Fairfield University

THE BELLARMINE MUSEUM OF ART



Rick Shaefer: Rendering Nature

(September 18 - December 19, 2014)

Connecticut-based artist Rick Shaefer is best known for his remarkably detailed works in charcoal on vellum. Inspired directly by the textural richness of the natural world as well as the communicative power of “the line,” Shaefer gravitates towards imagery that is as visually compelling as it is intellectually engaging.

Massive oak trees felled by the forces of Nature and majestic creatures, including the American bison and Indian rhinoceros, number among his preferred subjects. They equally reflect his profound interest in the capacity of bold mark-making to evoke the rich visual patterns of our lived environment and speak to the artist’s stated interest in the powerful intersection of the human and natural worlds. The resulting dialogues to which these collisions give rise embrace the historical, the mythological, and the anthropomorphic. They also create deep veins of narrative content, which the artist so masterfully mines in his work.

Raised primarily in Europe, Rick Shaefer studied at Duke University, where he first engaged with painting. He continued his education at the Art Center College of Design in Pasadena, Calif., with a focus on photography. Following a successful career in commercial photography and editorial work, Shaefer – who found himself increasingly drawn to drawing and painting – decided to concentrate on these disciplines in 1994. His experiences as a photographer, however, left an indelible mark on the artist, whose aesthetic sensibilities reflect a fascination with texture and line that closely tracks black-and-white photography’s reliance on tonal contrasts.



Among Shaefer’s other key sources of artistic inspiration are the etchings, engravings, and woodcuts of Northern European Old Masters, including Rembrandt van Rijn (1606-69) and Albrecht Dürer (1471-1528). He has also been influenced by the drawings of the American illustrator and cartoonist R. Crumb (b. 1943), who – like the Old Masters – privileges a confident and bold line. This same confidence resonates in the work

of Shaefer, who has stated, with regard to his own *oeuvre*: “I tend to always come back to the line work. I find what I respond to and admire in other artists’ work, past or present, is usually the integrity of the line – whether it’s a single stroke or a mass of scribble in the shadows. If the marks are put down with validity and assurance they will resonate and the piece will vibrate. False or uneasy notes stand out and unsettle and even demoralize. A confident fluidity of movement and gesture is what is consciously and unconsciously felt and appreciated by the viewer.”



Such gestural boldness is clear in Shaefer’s works in charcoal on vellum. In these pieces, the artist very consciously refrains from stumping and smudging, relying instead on line alone to create depth of field, contour, and shadow. This same audacity is apparent in his cloud studies, though the resolution of these works is entirely different. Painted in muted, often monochromatic tones, these works feature loose but determined brushstrokes. Cumulus clouds erupt across Shaefer’s canvases, dazzling the viewer with their bravura and foregrounding the sublime power of nature. The 18th-century English landscape painter John Constable immediately comes to mind when one regards these pieces, which are remarkable for their lush finish and visceral impact. Constable’s colleague and rival J.M.W. Turner (1775-1851) is equally conjured in these studies, as is the 19th-century Russian painter of tempestuous Romantic seascapes, Ivan Aivazovsky (1817-1900).

Shaefer has exhibited widely throughout the greater New York City metro region and New England as well as in the South and in Western Europe. His works are held in a number of private and corporate collections, including Microsoft, American Express, Prudential, Goleb Enterprises, Michael Lynne, Arthur G. Rosen, and United Yarn.

I was fortunate enough to have visited Shaefer’s bright and airy Bridgeport studio on several occasions in the run-up to his show, and to have had the opportunity to discuss with him his practice as a professional artist. Below are some highlights of our conversations:

JD: *You spent a great deal of time in Europe as a child growing up. I would imagine such early exposure to the Continent’s rich cultural tapestry influenced your later educational and professional trajectory. Was this your lived reality?*

RS: When we were living in Europe my mother, an amateur painter, did introduce me to the museums there and I was especially taken with the landscapes – Dutch, English, a smattering of the Italians and Russians. I was enthralled with the weather in Northern Europe and its constantly changing light even as a kid. I loved the shadows of clouds traversing the fields and the sporadic rainsqualls and the sun breaking through. I suppose it was a kind of outdoor theater to me. So naturally Constable and Turner were early favorites. And later the Flemish/



Dutch and German landscapes with their imbedded symbolism. But I was not considering painting or drawing at that point – it was just pure enjoyment and a touchstone for my work much later.



JD: *Of the different countries you spent substantial amounts of time in, did one in particular inspire you to pursue a career in the arts? Or were there different influences at work that you could share with me?*

RS: England was especially formative because of the picturesque landscape on the one hand and the awakening art scene in London on the other. Like anywhere where the new and the “old” are juxtaposed, the art in London was vibrant, hip, colorful, and radical. You were caught between Jimi Hendrix and the quaint little village you went home to. I was naturally more drawn to the excitement

of the 60s/70s cultural revolution and when I saw Antonioni’s movie *Blow-Up* I was hooked on becoming a photographer, which I eventually became. I also dabbled in painting at that time – influenced by esoteric (to me anyway) art mags that I found coming out of Eastern Europe – Poland especially. Odd mix of rather somber subjects with bright color.

JD: *I find it fascinating that, while still a young man, you joined a German Surrealist Group. Tell me a little bit more about that experience: what interests led you to the group, the lasting impact of your time with them, etc.*

RS: This happened while on a sabbatical of sorts from university in the States. A German-American woman we knew introduced me to this group of older German artists in their 50s and 60s who met regularly and, between beers and sausages and kraut, discussed art in the old “salon” way. I was a young punk kid so I guess they took me in as kind of a curiosity although I think they liked the work I had been doing at university that I thought of as very raw and fraught. Their work was mostly pre-war German Surrealist in nature – dark, somber, but interesting. I showed with them a little bit but spoke very little German and eventually returned to school in the States.

JD: *There would seem to be some obvious aesthetic connections between your work in charcoal on vellum and your early work as a photographer. Can you describe for me what you see as the links between these two very different media in your own portfolio?*

RS: When I was doing the photography, early on and at school and then later as a fashion/editorial photographer in N.Y., I was still enthralled with the tones that I saw in the early prints of Steichen, Stieglitz, and the whole array of early paper printing processes that had that velvety, painterly tonality. I really liked the early work where the first photogravures, or even the glass plates themselves, were often “touched up” or enlivened by the photographer or the hand of a manual engraver. The combination of the chemical/mechanical with the personal/manual really spoke to me. When I discovered (or was introduced by a friend to) a magical effect that could be gotten from altering the development process of a unique industrial paper it all came full circle for me. The sensual tones of those early prints were now available and I embraced drawing and painting on them with gusto pretty much always violating the “purity” of the mechanical print itself.

Art is about light, and photography perhaps most obviously so. In black-and-white photography, the richest array of tonality between the white of the paper and the black of the silver is the goal. When I started the charcoal drawings, this was also in my mind but I had also been studying the etchings of Rembrandt where tonality had to be achieved through scratching of lines. Grays were crosshatched or dotted or scribbled to hold various amounts of ink. So I felt I wanted to maintain this integrity of line while still implying the full range of tonality. Because of the scale of the drawn pieces, I work from my photographs and am always trying



to maintain or even augment the mid- and shadow tones that are there in the digital capture. For me the surface texture of the vellum allowed for a creamy marking that held the line well and permitted a wide variation in pressure and tonality. I also suppose by fixing the final drawings and having them open to the air in a way mimics the presentation of the photography I did.

I never try to be photorealistic with the drawings – I just attempt to capture the texture and shadows of the subject – but inevitably there is a photographic referencing to the work. Up close, the markings are intentionally loose and gestural but they do coalesce as you back further off and the eye and brain assemble the parts and probably read them as “photographic.” I don’t mind this disjunction as long as the viewer is aware of the play going on and moves back in for a reorientation of the drawing process.

JD: *I know that you include Dürer, Rembrandt, and Crumb in your personal pantheon of great artists. Are there others that you would add?*

RS: I suppose like many, I have been a recipient of many, often discordant, influences when it comes to my art. Sometimes these can live happily side-by-side or can be blended perhaps, and sometimes they are just incompatible and can lead to a sort of schizophrenia of intent.

I love such a hodge-podge variety of art and artists that it is impossible for me to organize them or to narrow it down to an orderly selection. It is almost an act of will that you end up pursuing a particular avenue of inquiry as opposed to all the other possibilities and influences that are calling you. I mention those three as they directly influenced the vocabulary of marks that I started with but there are many others, way too many to list, such as Tiepolo, Redon, Goya and Picasso (of course), Hopper and Sloan, and more recent Lucien Freud, Raymond Pettibon, James Drake, Elizabeth Peyton, among many.

JD: *I wonder, too, about the impact of artists who have made a name for themselves working specifically in charcoal – William Kentridge and Robert Longo spring immediately to mind – on your own evolution as a practitioner.*

RS: William Kentridge is indeed wonderful and I should have included him (and others) above. You were thinking of his crows perhaps but also a great sense of humor. As to Longo, I did enjoy his very early jumping figures (dodging pebbles he was throwing); I don’t really respond to any of the photo-realistic genre. But mostly I enjoy a lot of charcoal artists. I even really like the over-wrought drawings (and paintings) of Joyce Pensato.

JD: *There is something almost primordial about charcoal, which is not only a wholly organic material but also has been used for, literally, millennia to create expressive images – be these on the walls of ancient caves or on modern manufactured supports. Charcoal also, of course, played a critical role in the creation of so many masterworks in the Western canon, serving as under-drawings in Renaissance frescoes, for example, and preparatory sketches for works in tempera or in oil. Did elemental qualities and storied legacy – play any role in your decision to work with charcoal so extensively?*

RS: Well, good point. The initial idea, when confronted with the black oak (“Van Breem’s Oak”) as a subject, was to use materials directly related to the tree – so, charcoal (burned wood) and wood pulp paper on board. The charcoal stayed, the paper and board morphed into more climate friendly or neutral synthetic vellum and aluminum panels. But drawing a tree with its own byproduct definitely played a role – seemed somewhat

totemic and shamanistic and right. And yes, I have always loved the depth of tone and even the inherent smudginess of charcoal in historical drawings (even if I have personally avoided that smudginess, for now anyway, in my own work). It’s an ancient (primordial as you say) and magnificent medium that one never gets tired of.

JD: *Turning to your other body of work that is being featured at the Bellarmine – your less well-known but equally impressive cloud studies – let’s talk about your sources of inspiration. Canonical art history would draw a clear line from the 17th-century Dutch Old Masters, like Meindert Hobbema and Jacob van Ruisdael, through to the 18th-century English school of Thomas Gainsborough and, later, John Constable and J.M.W. Turner, to the 19th-century Romantics. But life of course is never linear. Describe for me, then, how you would trace your aesthetic roots – and evolution – in this particular genre.*



RS: Canonical. I love all those genres and schools and movements, and draw mercilessly from them. But there is also the fact that everyday we have above our heads this majestic opera – sometimes Wagnerian, sometimes Gilbert and Sullivan – going on and I for one have been dangerously aware of it since childhood. I’m dangerous on the highway or just walking about, looking skyward (or toward the woods) and I haven’t tired of the pageant yet. Clouds are endlessly fun to paint because they offer unlimited variation and you can never really get it “wrong” unless you try too hard. The looseness of the cloud studies also offers a welcome diversion

from the comparative rigor and effort of the drawings. I keep pushing my own technique into more and more gestural and minimally descriptive directions.

JD: *What is really fascinating here is that your oeuvre embraces approaches that, historically, were seen as antithetical: colorito (or an emphasis on color, as epitomized by the 16th-century Venetian school) and disengo (with its emphasis on careful drawing and “the line,” as embodied in the work of the late 15th-and early 16th-century Tuscan School). This theoretical antagonism continued throughout the centuries, ultimately pitting the academies against the Romantics and Realists of the 19th century until these distinctions collapsed in on themselves in the face of late 19th- and early 20th-century expressionistic movements. Your work seems to embrace both modalities with an apparently equal sense of ease and comfort. Is this a dialectic you have consciously considered in your work before?*

RS: I think it’s conscious to a certain degree because, from this vantage point, I think we are much more at ease with synthesizing disparate or conflicting ideas of what art should be. I love the “bad” stuff, the old Salon tripe, as much as the masterworks that were eventually lifted above the fray and canonized for us by history (or by academics). I think we all do to a certain degree. So, back to that idea of schizophrenic influences, you follow what feeds you without hopefully losing your way. I have a hell of a time reining myself in sometimes and would easily fly off in many disjointed directions without some checking of the personal map occasionally but I like both expression and draughtsmanship. As to your question, probably the two mediums of paint and charcoal, for me, permit the dialogue you reference at a slight remove without bogging down either one trying to mix the two in a way that is awkward or artificial for me.

JD: *Let’s talk a little bit about methodology. Walk me through your creative process, from the moment of inspiration to the time when you declare in your mind a piece to be “done.”*

RS: For the (cloud) paintings, I sometimes begin with a photograph that I have spent time preparing for the purpose – that is with the tonality and coloring, etc, that I think I will want to head toward. But then, within