

The Un-Storyteller

Los Angeles' Joe Biel

BY PAT BOAS

Walter Benjamin once characterized storytellers as those who offer us comfort and counsel by spinning daily experience into captivating tales. While Joe Biel's spare, graceful drawings of solitary figures in impossible situations might not provide much useful advice for negotiating this world, they look as though they may come in handy should we stumble into some Beckett-like zone. Biel's interest in narrative already has taken more than a few turns, yet he doesn't consider himself a storyteller. "Not that I wouldn't want to be," he said during a recent conversation in Portland, Oregon, "but if I try to look at the work from a distance, as much as that is possible, I realize that what I'm really interested in is charging images with narrative possibilities."

Over the past three years, the LA-based Biel has produced a visual compendium of all the ridiculous, unfortunate and anxiety-producing things that come into his head. His desire to achieve what he calls "the most direct visual transaction" with the viewer marks a return to the conventions of straightforward illustration. The drawings feature more or less generic characters—the central figure is often a youngish male with a shaved head, sometimes naked, sometimes wearing a pair of striped pajamas—caught in a frozen moment after something absurd, or even mildly horrific (Biel forces us to put these two words together), has happened. They depend largely on the cartoon's built-in blunting of experience. Cruelties may have just occurred, but the characters, some pierced or hacked or standing waist-high in swirling water, hardly seem to notice. And if danger and pain pack no wallop, pleasure is equally dulled. Melancholy, at once nostalgic and perverse, tinges the humor that rises to the top. "They are like bombed-out structures that have one little place where you can set your stuff up," Biel says. Though the compositions begin with regular sessions of people watching, inspired by a gesture or a glance, Biel is more interested in how it felt "back then." He sees himself fashioning retreats into a world where the past has more force than the present, "the way medieval music gives you a total impression of that era in a flash."

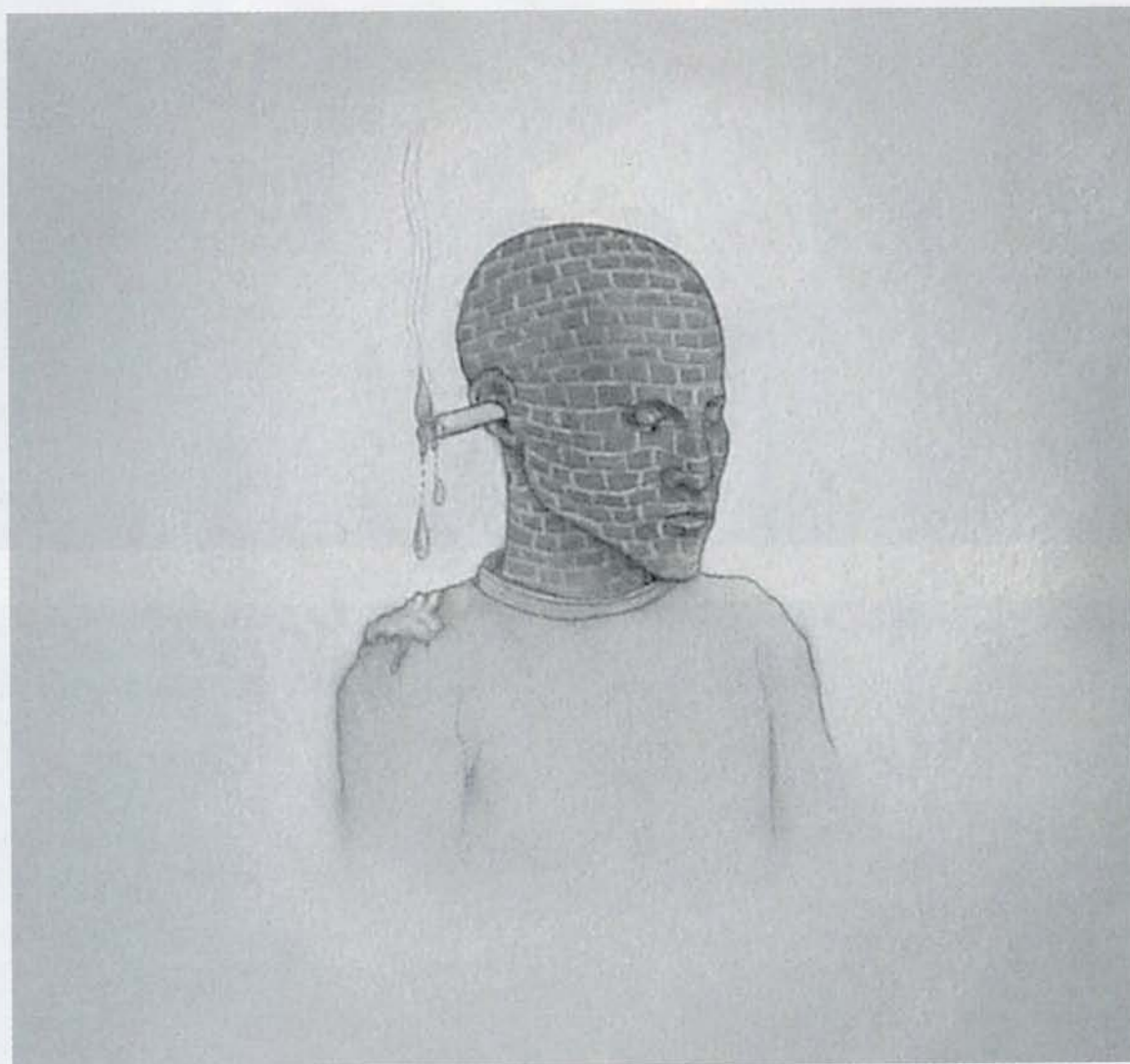
Benjamin maintained that "traces of the storyteller cling to the story the way the handprints of the potter cling to the clay vessel." A brief look into Biel's background bears out Benjamin's claim. The son of a violin professor, Biel grew up in Des Moines, Iowa. There, for all its middle-American trappings, his childhood was steeped in Mitteleuropean culture. He studied painting and art history at Drake University before earning his MFA at the University of Michigan at Ann Arbor, where he joined forces with

Richard Kraft, a London-born photographer equally involved in the traditions of European Humanism. Establishing a base in Portland, Oregon, the two began to collaborate on increasingly complex site-specific installations and cryptic, gesture-based performances. For the next seven years Kraft and Biel constructed non-linear narrative environments immersed in an old-world sensibility, piling up hundreds of appropriated nineteenth century engravings, found and fabricated objects, fictional documents, and original paintings and photographs.

In 2000 the pair moved to Los Angeles and began working independently. Biel's current work may be both a direct result of and a reaction to his work with Kraft. "I realized that narrative had always been a kind of monkey on my back, but it had been a problem only because up to that point I felt compelled to stand clearly on one side of narrative or the other—to embrace it or reject it entirely. Finally I began to realize that I could leave the issue in the middle, in a sort of murky pool of water. I began to focus on details like expression, character type, clothing, objects, environment, aspects of time, and I found the weight of the monkey became lighter and at times almost comforting."


The work earned him a Pollock/Krasner grant and has been exhibited in several cities around the United States and Europe. Given Biel's interest in how viewers construct meaning, showing in other countries has been instructive. At the Frankfurt Art Fair, he noted, "people tended to approach the work with different expectations. They took the literary roots for granted and regarded the drawings more as parables. You meet up with new ideas in different places and though the work is not about place, it's interesting to see how different cultural influences foster different readings."

While in London last summer he visited the National Gallery to study paintings by artists like Robert Campin and Rogier van der Weyden. "I realized that what really interested me was not the story that was being told, but the strangeness of the world these painted figures and their often stranger environments created. It was all in the details, the strange distortion of a head or a hand, the way a gesture seemed forced when compared with photographic naturalism. Or the fact that the rider was too big for the horse so that a sort of toy-like quality invaded the whole scene, or that the artist set the scene partially in his own time and place and partially in a place with some biblical or historical reality so that the combination created an almost surrealistic quality. All those details hinted at their own narratives, always quite independent of the larger, usually



Joe Biel, *Candle/Brickhead*, 2003, pastel and graphite on paper on panel, 10 by 10 inches (courtesy the artist).

biblical, narrative. But at the same time the larger narrative was absolutely necessary as a structure to hold the details."

That interest in what the hand produces—beyond an artist's desire or intention—drives Biel's work now. Newer drawings include characters with more distinctive features in more elaborate settings. Gradually situations are replacing gestures as the motivating force, and Biel eventually may realize his ambition of creating an epic approaching the scale of Breugel or Bosch. But whether striving toward a gesture or a theatrical extravaganza, the question of what Cézanne called "thinking in images," of finding and illuminating the story, remains. 

Joe Biel is represented by Mark Woolley Gallery in Portland and by Greg Kucera in Seattle. His work will be in the group show "Drawn Fictions" at Marylhurst University's Art Gym January 1—February 13, 2004.

To see this and other images by Joe Biel in color, read this article online at artpapers.org.

PAT BOAS is an artist and writer in Portland, Oregon. Her work will appear in the "Drawn Fictions" show this spring. Her most recent contribution to ART PAPERS was a review of Stan Gardner in the May/June issue.