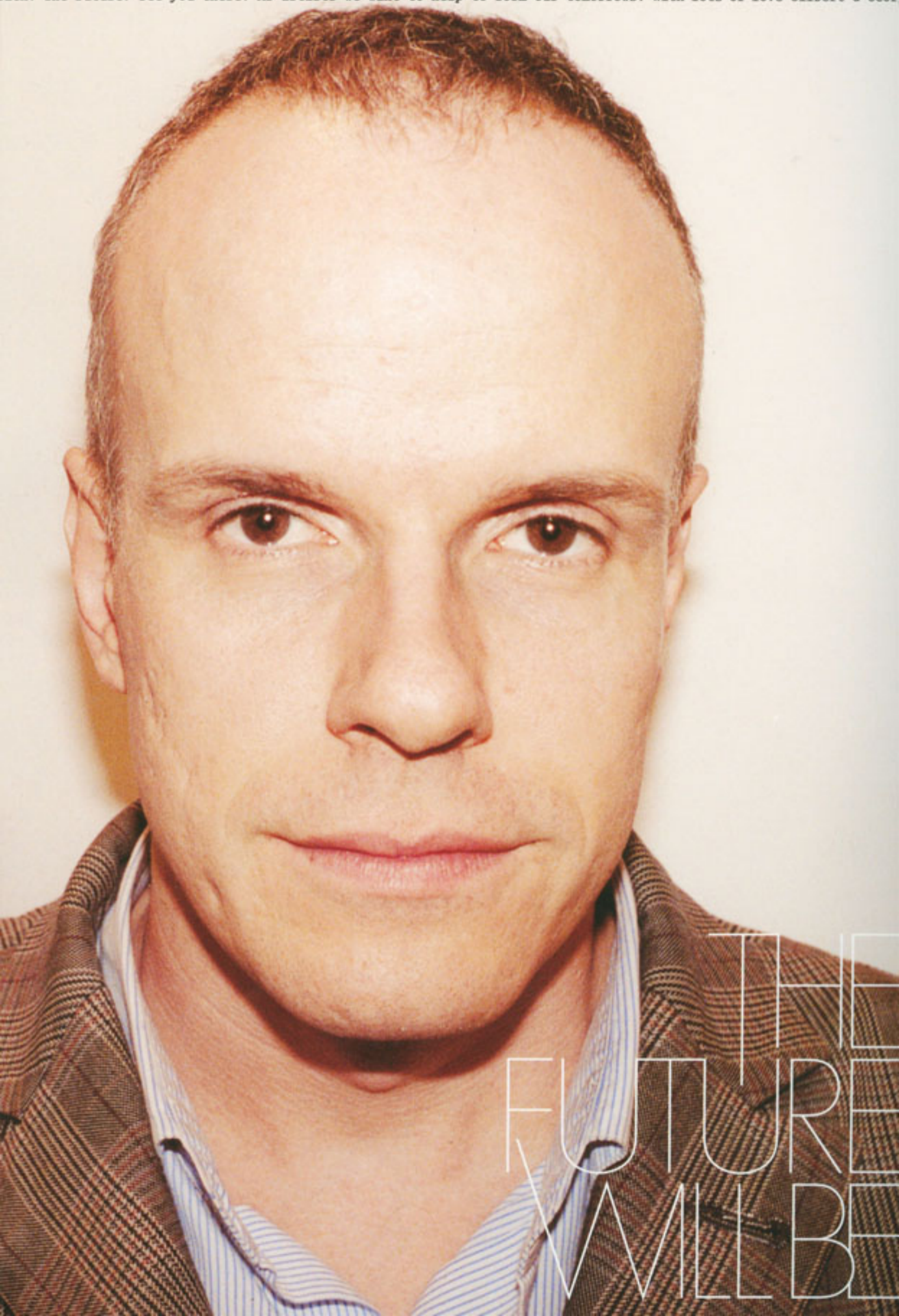


Art Review

rich! The Future? See you there! As artists we want to help to form our tomorrows. With lots of love Gilbert & Geor



THE
FUTURE
WILL BE



bedtime fairy tales these are not

Words: Tom Morris

At first glance, Joe Biel's water colours are ostensibly sweet, pretty but rather sparse compositions. In one, a girl wears a party frock and bunny ears; in another, a little toddler plays in what seems to be a sandpit. They are sketched in graphite, with the bare and faultless detail of children's illustrations. Look a little closer, though, and a fascinating world of horror and disquiet reveals itself. Bedtime fairytales these are not. The girl in the *Alice in Wonderland* dress holds a pistol and a skull; the boy is actually rooting around in a pile of detritus, toying with a bone and dagger.

"I take horror and lyrical sweetness as equal components in telling a story," Biel says. The result is timeless images of the type found in picture books but with a spirit that is wholly menacing. When seeing *Pistol* for the first time, one of Biel's friends said, "Poor Yorick, she blew his fucking brains out."

Biel's interest in contradictory imagery is not an isolated event: a growing number of artists working on paper seem to share this attribute with him. Tracy Nakayama, for example, with her explicitly pornographic ink drawings in a pubescent sketchy style. Another is Daniel Johnston, who borrows childhood icons such as Casper the Friendly Ghost and Captain America and transfers them into a context that is hardcore and totally adult in its essence.

It could be that these drawings are the nearest things we have to modern-day Dada: the selection of a fixed artistic category and its simultaneous reversal and re-appropriation. In Biel's case, conventional imagery is turned on its head, with beautifully unsettling – sometimes sickening – results. Biel: "For me that bringing together of opposites gives the work a richness and a possibility to exist on many levels, both from a formal and interpretative level."

So what is it about works-on-paper that has inspired so many artists to use it as a springboard from which to approach serious subject matter like poverty, death, sexual identity and, yes, paedophilia? Historically, the medium has always been considered lightweight and temporary, things not concerned, in Biel's own words, "with their own eternity". Yet, fragile and degradable, it makes sense that works-on-paper discuss contemporary issues. It allows the artist to slip in the punch when the viewer least expects it, or to take on a boisterous subject and discuss it in a very quiet way. Biel compares this to the resurgence in popularity of basic singer/songwriters, explaining a cultural yearning "to interact with art in a more basic way".

And indeed, drawing has an immediate quality, a minimalism, which does not over-complicate its relationship with its audience. This comes



Opposite page:
Pistol
2006
66 x 58 in
Watercolour,
coloured pencil,
pastel and graphite
on paper

Kingdom
2006
63 x 54 in
Watercolour and
graphite on paper

after decades of heavy conceptualism which slowly managed to "disenfranchise a good deal of the viewing public". Biel's works-on-paper do not announce themselves too heavily, despite their size (most are at least 170 cm tall). They represent a return to simple storytelling – contemporary, difficult stories. Paradoxical to the extreme, Biel is at once tame in his methods, and yet totally solemn in his intentions.

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