

BROOKLYN RAIL

CRITICAL PERSPECTIVES ON ARTS, POLITICS, AND CULTURE



MAILINGLIST

Art

July 13th, 2015

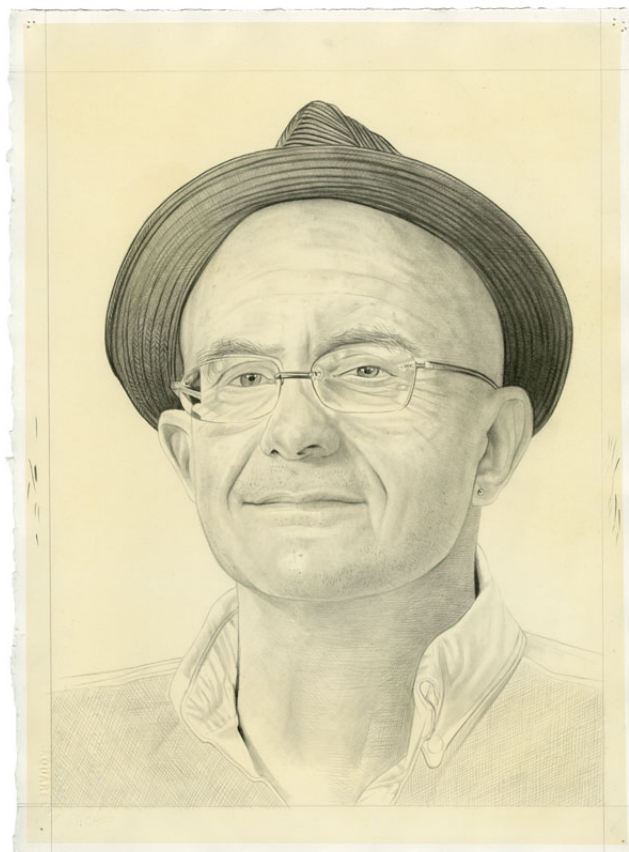
INCONVERSATION

SAM MESSER with Kiki Smith

Kiki Smith sat down with Sam Messer to discuss his collaborative work with the writers Jonathan Safran Foer and Denis Johnson, now on exhibit at Fredericks & Freiser. Smith and Messer met in 1996 at the Moonhole Artist Colony on the island of Bequia, which is part of St. Vincent and the Grenadines. Denis Johnson was also at Moonhole at the same time. While there, he wrote the story “Denis the Pirate,” which is the text for Messer’s animated video.

Kiki Smith (Rail): This is your first video piece, isn’t it? I know how much you love printmaking. Can you say why you decided to animate the etchings?

Sam Messer: In 2012, I sculpted the prototype for the Watchers in Darren Aronofsky’s movie, *Noah*, and I was an advisor during the transformation of the sculpture into a multi-million dollar digital animation. It was then that I decided I wanted to make an animation made entirely by hand and using no special effects. Johnson’s story “Denis the Pirate” stayed with me all these years and it seemed like a great choice for an animation. I chose etchings because they felt right for the story, which is set in the 1700s, plus I had never heard of anyone making an animation out of etchings and now I know why. It takes Liev Schreiber seven and a half minutes to read the story and there is an interlude with music by Sarah Neufeld and Colin Stetson so the whole piece is about nine and a half minutes. This required 1,117 etchings to animate plus seventeen drawings, including one of you I made while we were in Bequia together.



Portrait of the artist. Pencil on paper by Phong Bui.

Rail: Did you study printmaking or did you learn it on your own?

Messer: I learned by the acid/beer method. Etch a plate and leave it in the acid for one or two beers. This led to occasionally forgetting a plate in the acid overnight, which in turn got me interested in open biting.

Rail: It is beautiful when you see the result of the acid eating away the metal.

Messer: The residue in etching is unlike anything else I experience in the making of art.

Rail: The physicality of the image is made alive by the process. You could do the same with drawing, or any linear narrative form of animation, but it is really the physicality of etching and your controlled/uncontrolled manner that affords you such vividness.

Messer: I have gotten pretty good at controlling the uncontrolled process. I've learned to use contact paper to create an edge for the open bite that offers me the ability for a crisp shape. The crisp negative space of the pirate ship with the eye in the sail was eaten clean through. I left that plate in the acid for a few days to get it to that point.

Rail: You could use stop-out, too.

Messer: Stop-out makes more of a ragged edge that the contact paper doesn't.

Rail: That's interesting that it doesn't underbite.

Messer: A printmaking miracle that can be repeated at will.

Rail: What kind of needle do you use?

Messer: I use a diamond point when I want a controlled, precise line. The other night I used a beer-can opener to draw the image of the "last of his crew fell mortally wounded." I was drawing at a bar so it was convenient.

Rail: That will give you a good mark.

Messer: I always think of the story of Picasso using a broken bottle to draw *The Weeping Woman*.

Rail: Because you both erode and add to the image, the prints also have a great deal of surface noise, separate from the pictorial image. The fluid, energetic marks imply movement within the image. The animation is similar to Picasso's process of transforming the "naturalistic" image of a cow into his "cubist" cow. Picasso editioned the states, which showed the evolution of the image. Etching as a method of generating images for animation is a very laborious process. Within the process of printing, often one makes many states, but rarely is that process recorded or used for an animation. It is very unique.

Messer: I really think of the animation as one continuous evolving line.

Rail: Etching also makes a very physical line, which you can blow up twenty feet large and it will keep its integrity. The etched line has a density similar to a traditional opaque film animation, while the aquatint affords an ephemeral, atmospheric space. Intaglio can exist between the extremes of light and dark.

Messer: I love how the prints in the end have all the history of time recorded similar to an archeological dig.

Rail: It is true, in etching things are not lost. Through burnishing and scraping, the surface can be rich, evident, and nuanced.

Messer: The story provided me with the space of not having a defined end result. I fluctuated between illustrating and being inspired by it.

Rail: How did you know how to draw the ships?

Messer: At first, I made generic ones out of my head until I stumbled into the “Assyria to Iberia at the Dawn of the Classical Age” show at the Metropolitan. In the exhibition there was an extraordinary tablet depicting ships in a sea of monsters. I sat there and copied it. Then I researched ships from the 1700s. Most of the ones I found were artist engravings and etchings. Then, on Denis the Pirate’s ship, I added the eyes on the sails.

Rail: Can you describe how you made this image of one ship surrounded by white areas?

Messer: The pure white ovals that surround the pirate ship are the result of the open bite technique, which you and I perfected a few years ago. Each white oval originally depicted a British ship. I wanted to show the ships surrounding Denis the Pirate and then their demise. I put asphalt over the plate but cleaned the area covering the British ships. Then, I systematically etched the ovals deeper and deeper. Finally, it ate through the entire plate, which is why what you see is clean white paper. The plate is gone.

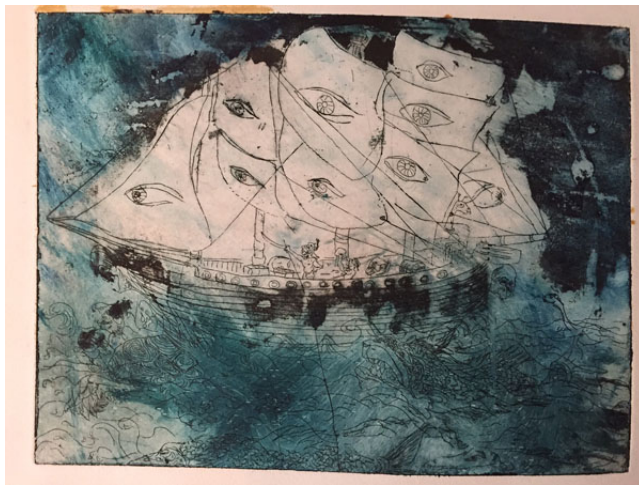
Rail: You could fill the holes with images by printing a second plate, because there are very bright moments, while everything else is tonal.

Messer: Two plates! I’m going to do that next time. I don’t know why I hadn’t thought of that. It reminds me of a story Leon Golub told about how dumb painters can be. It took him ten years to



Sam Messer, *D.T.P. and the Prophets*. Hand-colored etching, 9 × 12 in. (Still from *Dennis the Pirate*, 2015.) Courtesy the artist.

realize that if he applied paint with a palette knife it looked and felt the same as if he



Sam Messer, *Ship of Eyes*. Hand-colored etching, 9 × 12 in. (Still from *Dennis the Pirate*, 2015.) Courtesy the artist.



Sam Messer, *Richest Man in the World (after Delacroix)*. Hand-colored etching, 9 × 12 in. (Still from *Dennis the Pirate*, 2015.) Courtesy the artist.

built up a large surface of paint and then scraped it away and it took a fraction of the time.

Rail: Do you ever use Dremels?

Messer: I did use a Dremel and it made this amazing forceful line made up of little dots, which gave the image a frenetic vibrating sensation. I used it a lot when Babe Ruth, the monkey, was smoking magic mushrooms.

Rail: You could use Dremels as a polisher for making white areas.

Messer: I could, but I like the aesthetic of open bite and practically it allows me to work on two things at once. I made all the prints myself and there are no digital effects other than a few fades and overlaps. It took two years before I was willing to even add color in different areas. I started doing mono-prints on top of the etchings.



Sam Messer, *Babe Ruth Escaping*. Hand-colored etching, 9 × 12 in. (Still from *Dennis the Pirate*, 2015.) Courtesy the artist.

Rail: How many chapters are there?

Messer: I am not sure how to answer that. Some phrases in the story were inspiring to draw and resulted in over a hundred prints while others, which were more expository, I only made two or three. The magic-mushroom dream sequence was my favorite because I left the narrative completely behind. It begins with a slow dance between the monkey, Babe Ruth, and Denis the Pirate, moves onto Denis having sex with mermaids, and winds up with him meeting the prophets, Moses, Jesus, and Buddha. Many of the etchings throughout the animation are compositional references to other artists: Rembrandt, Delacroix, Picasso, Dubuffet, but the sequences with the prophets reference Pasolini films, especially *The Hawks and the Sparrows*.

Rail: I like when the dense animation calmed down so I could see the image and have a moment to reflect upon what I was seeing.

Messer: That has been the challenge for me to learn how to pace it. I think of Jimi Hendrix playing “The Star-Spangled Banner” as my map of staying on message, riffing off and then finding your way home.

Rail: My favorite moments are where the etchings stand alone. Labor, like line, has a residue.

Messer: Spoken by someone who works all the time.

Rail: The images are so rich and unexpected and strange that they do not need tricks. Because it’s a story, someone else’s words, it gives you a form to work within.



Sam Messer, *Scientific Experiment*. Hand-colored etching, 9 × 12 in. (Still from *Dennis the Pirate*, 2015.) Courtesy the artist.

Messer: And it inspires me to be inventive. I hadn’t thought of drawing sea monsters since I was a kid. Once I decided to draw sea monsters I had to think about what they would look like. They are part imagination, part online research, and part inspired by books at the Museum of Natural History.

Rail: Since I’ve known you, you have always painted in series, different from this, but similar in the way of reiterating the same image, like the typewriters or the portraits of Jonathan Safran Foer. Why do you think you work this way?

Messer: I become obsessed with something without understanding why. Through remaking it, I slowly understand why I was drawn to it in the first place. This can take a long time, and during that



Sam Messer, *Serious Peace*, 2015. Bronze, 24 × 23 × 17 in. (Still from *Dennis the Pirate*, 2015.) Courtesy the artist.

time the meaning also changes as I too have changed. When I start a series, at first it is the thing itself or, as Denis Johnson once wrote, “it is impossible to mistake the thing for anything other than itself.” But slowly over time it can be mistaken for something else.

Rail: Well that’s the thing I think it gives you. If you stay in this parameter, you then have tremendous freedom as you do not have to address the impetus every time. You are then free to have an experience of making that is very different than having an attachment. It gives you a task at hand, something to do, and then you’re free.

Messer: I am always negotiating the difference between working from observation and imagination.

Rail: With art making you have an initial impetus to do something, but you need time for the work process to see what is needed. It is something you cannot know from the beginning. It is necessary to the process that the work has time to reveal itself. References change and what you are responding to can also change. You have to follow the work.

Messer: The etchings push my paintings. Something happens in printmaking and then I wonder how to translate it into painting.

Rail: I think it is true for many “painters” that printmaking is a rich laboratory for thought and what they discover is often evident in their paintings several years later. For myself, I know that many of my sculptures and other activities start in printed form and are often generated from printed material.

Messer: You’re unique in that way.

Rail: When is the show?

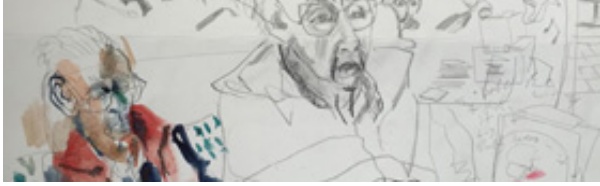
Messer: It opens June 18th and runs through July at Fredericks & Freiser. One room will have the animation, a wall of etchings, and a painting of Denis the Pirate. The other will have sculptures of Jonathan Safran Foer as well as collaborative drawings and prints he and I have been working on together for the past ten years.



Sam Messer, *Pieta*, 2013 (detail). Oil on canvas, 88 × 98 in. Courtesy the artist.

CONTRIBUTOR**Kiki Smith**

KIKI SMITH was born in Nuremberg, West Germany in 1954 and now enjoys living in a state of confusion. Besides that, she likes art and nature and the color blue.

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