

NEW
YORK
CITY

SERENADES

We recently spoke with **Susan Grossman**, who uses charcoal and pastel to stage large, dynamic scenes of pedestrian life.

INTERVIEW BY **AUSTIN R. WILLIAMS**



Intersecting
2015, charcoal and
pastel, 50 x 60.
Courtesy Jerald
Melberg Gallery,
Charlotte, North
Carolina.



Come Back
2016, charcoal and
pastel, 50 x 60.
Collection the artist.

DRAWING: *How did the city become your main subject? Have you always been fascinated with urban spaces?*

SUSAN GROSSMAN: I've been fascinated with them since I moved to New York—wherever I am is sort of what I draw. Because I've been in New York City for a long time I know it well, and I use it in many ways as a metaphor, as we all do. It's my muse, I could say. And since I know it well I don't have to work as hard to find the imagery. I know what I'm looking for, and I just shoot images. I then use several images to make one drawing—I don't work out of one specific photograph.

DR: *What are some of the things you're looking for when taking photographs?*

SG: Usually a time of day or a type of weather. For instance I like nocturnal scenes, and I like when it's raining or blustery out. Eight o'clock in the morning in the fall has beautiful shadows. It's as simple as that. In many ways it's a formal need.

I surprise myself when I develop these photos into drawings. In some ways these moments are kind of banal, but when I draw them and blow them up, those banal moments become something quite different, and it becomes an interesting narrative.

DR: *Many artists present cities as seemingly deserted places, but in your drawings the city is always alive, filled with people of all ages. Do you think this is essential to the look of a city?*

SG: I don't think I've ever done a New York City piece without people in it, although as some observers have noticed there are no faces in my drawings—I don't want the viewer locked in on a person's eyes. I like to use the figure in an almost iconic way. A woman whose head is bent carrying a bag or a child running a certain way—we know who they are, I hope, from how they move and from recognizing our own gestures.

DR: *Do you have favorite corners of the city for finding material?*

SG: I don't search for a particular spot. When I started doing these drawings I was raising twin boys, and to be honest I would just go where they had to go. I took my camera everywhere, but it was driven by me having to go there. It could be on the way to the theater or dinner or a doctor's office. It's amazing—if you go down one or two different streets to walk to a park, you can see infinite things on different days.

There are a few times when I try to find something specific. I might want, say, someone walking to the left, and I'll go out with my camera and find someone. But for the most part I don't plan trips to get images—I have enough images just from my walk home.

DR: *How did you come to work primarily in drawing? And what about your combination of charcoal and pastel—why do you think they work so well in tandem?*

SG: What I love about drawing is that we've all done it. As little kids we pick up a pencil or a piece of chalk and we draw. It isn't precious. I can spend the time creating these objects, but I love that everyone can relate to them. I also love that the sweep of my hand can change the image. There's movement in drawing for me, there's a physicality

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to it, and the gesture of my hand is always involved.

As for the charcoal and pastel, over time I’ve been able to work them almost like paint. I love the notion of a painterly drawing.

DR: *Talk about scale—what do you like about working big?*

SG: I think it started because historically, drawings and works on paper have been thought of as studies and as a certain size. So one reason is the idea of taking a drawing and blowing it up so that it’s a work unto itself—so that people don’t see it as a drawing but as a work of art comparable to painting. A second reason is that there’s a different drama to a piece when it’s large, when it’s physical. A large drawing invites the viewer into a very different world. This isn’t to say I don’t love intimate drawings, but large is where I’m more comfortable. And going large lets me get physical—I love using my body to create the image.

DR: *Once you’ve gathered your source material, do you do much sketching or preliminary work, or do you dive right in to working on the finished drawing?*

SG: I dive right in. When I say that there’s no preciousness, I mean it, and that’s what I love about drawing. If I think something is not going somewhere, I rip it up and throw it away, and that allows me a freedom.

My process starts with taking a photograph. Then I go to a pharmacy and have maybe 100 of them printed. I take those to my studio and find

things in some of the photos that excite me, and I pin 10 or so of them up on my studio wall. Suppose I want to make three 50"-x-60" drawings. I put those three boards up. I put my earbuds in, turn the music on, and I just start.

That’s not to say it will all work. The next day I might come in and scrap what I’ve done. If my photographs aren’t allowing me to find a storyline, I’ll go get more photos. I’ll change it.

DR: *Do you have a pattern to how you work? How do you begin?*

SG: I like to do a very fast drawing. I will get everything in, at least initially, in about a five-hour period. Then I like to bring it together all at once, not to finish one part at a time.

I begin by putting in what I call my “stage setting,” or my environment. If I’m drawing a view of Lexington Avenue, that stage setting will stay the same, but I’ll keep changing the people in it until they work for me. The color just happens—it works itself in during the process. I don’t plan that, but I do like to have an all-over sense of composition on the paper. It’s more of an abstract expressionist way of taking in the whole paper—not the apple first, then the vase, then the table.

DR: *What materials do you use?*

SG: For charcoal I use jumbo soft dark charcoal that I get at New York Central Art Supply. Eventually those charcoals are sort of an underpainting. The pastels I love most are Diane Townsend—I order them straight

from her; they’re glorious. I also use some Sennelier pastels, the jumbo ones. I can’t work with small drawing implements. I use my fingers a lot, but I can’t get tied down in little movements or sharp tools.

My surface used to simply be paper, but the large pieces were difficult to frame, so now I work on paper mounted to board. I also spray the drawings a lot, which lets me build up the layers. If you take a paper towel and rub a highlight out, then spray it and put a white back on, it’s more luminous.

DR: *Did you have any teachers who were especially influential?*

SG: I studied at Bennington College, which had an incredible art world that I became immersed in. I got my master’s degree at Brooklyn College, where Lois Dodd and Leonard Anderson taught. From Bennington to Brooklyn I was fortunate to have extraordinary artists guide the way I thought and teach me a new language, a new way of thinking.

Getting out of graduate school I was lucky to have people interested in my work. I was mostly painting then, but I had some drawings sitting in a corner of my studio, and Rick Davidman, who ran DFN Gallery, in Chelsea, saw them and said “Those are good drawings!” I realized there were better painters out there, and drawing came easier to me. Why force yourself to do something that’s more difficult? I don’t want any more barriers.

DR: *Do you have any advice for a young artist or for someone wanting to get serious about drawing?*

SG: I’m a great believer in artists going to graduate school. You get a studio, a place to work, and you connect with other artists. It’s very important to get criticism. There’s a language to learn. I also think you have to have an absolute passion for this thing. There’s business and creativity, and they have to go together. And then—go for it. It’s tough. ❖



Stay

2015, charcoal and pastel, 50 x 60. Courtesy Jerald Melberg Gallery, Charlotte, North Carolina.

SEE MORE ONLINE >> For additional images of finished work from Grossman, visit DrawingMagazine.com.

ABOUT THE ARTIST

Susan Grossman graduated from Bennington College, in Vermont, and received an M.F.A. from Brooklyn College, in New York. She has held numerous solo exhibitions, and her work is found in the collections of the Mint Museum, in Charlotte, North Carolina; de Saisset Museum, in Santa Clara, California; and the New-York Historical Society, in New York City, among others. Her work is represented in Charlotte, North Carolina, by Jerald Melberg Gallery. She also exhibits with the Elins Eagles-Smith Gallery, in San Francisco, as well as with galleries in New York and elsewhere. For more information, visit susangrossman.net.