



#### ABOUT THE ARTIST

Joe Biel received an MFA in Painting from the University of Michigan and is currently on the faculty as Associate Professor in Studio Art at California State University, Fullerton. His work has been exhibited in galleries nationally and internationally at LA Louver Gallery, Roberts and Tilton Gallery, Acuna-Hansen Gallery and Angles Gallery in Los Angeles, Goff + Rosenthal Gallery in New York, Greg Kucera Gallery in Seattle, and Galerie Kuckei/Kuckei in Berlin. He has been included in group exhibitions at the Otis College of Art and Design and the Torrance Museum of Art in Los Angeles, the De Young Museum in San Francisco, the Laguna Art Museum in Laguna, CA, the Aldrich Contemporary Art Museum in Ridgefield, CT and Diverseworks in Houston, TX. He has been awarded residencies at the Bemis Center for Contemporary Art in Omaha, NE, at the 18th Street Arts Center in Santa Monica, CA and at the Ballinglenn Foundation in Ballycastle, Ireland. He was the recipient of a Pollock-Krasner Foundation award in 2003 and 2008. He lives and works in Los Angeles.

Artist's website: <http://www.joebiel.com>

*SENTRY: Large Scale Drawings by Joe Biel* was organized by UCR ARTSblock and curated by Jennifer Frias, Associate Curator, Sweeney Art Gallery, University of California, Riverside. Support provided by UCR's College of Humanities, Arts, and Social Sciences (CHASS), Gluck Fellows Program of the Arts at UC Riverside, and the City of Riverside. UCR ARTSblock would like to acknowledge the lenders to the exhibition: Blake Byrne Collection, Los Angeles, CA and L.A. Louver, Venice, CA. Special thanks to Joanna Roche, Brian Johnson, Patrick Mason, Devora Orantes and Kevin Stewart-Magee for their assistance in the project.

IMAGES: (Front cover) *Sentry*, 2013. Detail of drawing installation in progress. Watercolor and latex wall paint. (Insert from top left, clockwise) *Pax Romana*, 2006. Graphite, water color and color pencil. 50x38 inches. Courtesy of the artist. *Walker (for T.S.E.)*, 2005. Graphite and watercolor on paper, 83 x 96 x 2 inches. Sweeney Art Gallery Permanent Collection. Gift of the artist. *Jumper*, 2005. Graphite, water color and color pencil. 72x60 inches. Sweeney Art Gallery Permanent Collection. Gift of the artist. (Back cover) Joe Biel and drawing installation in progress.

## EVENTS + PROGRAMMING

### Fragmented Narratives – EXTRA CREDIT Workshop

First Thursday ArtsWalk, December 5, 2013, 6-9 PM  
Culver Center of the Arts

In conjunction with the exhibition, UCR ARTSblock challenges participants to put their design skills to the test by combining circles, squares, straight edges and curvy lines with their own imagination. Participants will be given an open-ended design with loosely placed elements and only one set of colors to use in drawing. With limitations such as these, the possible outcome of designs will be different in every masterpiece.

Fragmented Narratives is a UCR ARTSblock EXTRA CREDIT event and is supported by the Gluck Fellows Program of the Arts at UC Riverside. The Gluck Fellows Program is made possible by the generosity of the Maxwell H. Gluck Foundation. Organized by Gluck Fellows, Andrea Brown and Minh Vo.

### Visiting Artist Lecture at UCR Art Department

Tuesday, January 28, 2014, 4-7 PM, free admission  
ARTS Bldg., Rm. 335 – UC Riverside Campus

As a part of the Art Department at UC Riverside's Visiting Artist Lecture series, artist Joe Biel will present a lecture on his present work at the ARTSblock and future projects.

### Artist Walkthrough + Reception

Saturday, February 1, 2014  
Artist Walkthrough, 5:30-6 PM / Reception, 6-9 PM,  
free admission to both events

# SENTRY | Large Scale Drawings by Joe Biel

December 21, 2013 - March 22, 2014

*SENTRY: Large Scale Drawings by Joe Biel* is a selection of large-scale drawings produced from 2005 through 2013 by Los Angeles-based artist, Joe Biel. It is his first solo museum exhibition. Working primarily with watercolor, graphite and colored pencil, Biel's work at UCR ARTSblock is delineated into two spaces—works on paper are presented in the Sweeney Art Gallery, and a site-specific, monumental drawing installation, produced during a three-week residency, takes precedence in the North Atrium Gallery at the Culver Center of the Arts.

Known for his figurative drawings sustained by panoramic or vast negative space, Biel's work raises several sentiments on the complexity and irony of the human condition. The characters in his work exist in frozen, fragmented "anti-narratives" encountering numerous contradictions that correspond to our everyday lives. These "contradictions" fall in categories of empathy, irony, neutrality, and vulnerability. The title of the exhibition attributes to the concept of a guard or "sentry" whose role is to prevent unauthorized entry to a place and keeps a watchful eye for threat. In Biel's work, the "sentry" is the impetus for contradictions—protecting what might appear as precious that could materialize into something detrimental. He unfolds the challenges of his figures through latent tableaux tampered by an absence of sequence. Much like the human condition, Biel frames the scenes in his drawings to a riddle allowing the viewer to both relate and negotiate his or her own conclusion.



## SENTRY 2013

"Irony has only emergency use. Carried over time, it is the voice of the trapped who have come to enjoy their cage."<sup>1</sup>

- Lewis Hyde

Joe Biel's latest body of work sprawls along a stretch of walls in the North Atrium of the Culver Center of the Arts. His site-specific drawing, *Sentry* (2013), is an ode to humanity and its trial to reconcile the contradictions brought by endless possibilities and constant changes in modern civilization.

Biel's figures are often anti-protagonists who are placed in situations in which they function as guises for concepts or ideas. But, unlike most allegories, his ambiguous tales never conclude with a moral. The fragmented "anti-narrative" landscape of *Sentry* is centered around two unknown, chained figures. They face away from the viewer and stand stoically waist deep in a non-descript body of water.

According to Biel, these figures are titans who have been subdued by a more "civilized" race of younger gods. These titans represent an old world culture whose inherent knowledge is being conquered by the irony of post-modern ideals in art, music, literature and film, particularly. To illustrate the dispute, each titan is heavily tattooed in classical music and poetry, respectively, which is meant to imply that they embody the authenticity of these art forms. Due to their roles as submissive guardians, the titans face the conflict of following either what is traditional and familiar, or choosing to embrace their full potential by experiencing a broader form of sincerity.

A shelf drawn in the center with a key hanging on a hook and a freshly lit cigarette gingerly placed on the edge separate the figures. Biel refers to this trompe-l'oeil shelf as a bridge between the titans and the viewer. While the entire landscape of *Sentry* is frozen in time, the center tableau is drawn to exemplify movement and to signify time passing. It also presents a possible outlet for these figures to escape or take action.

*Sentry* exists in the North Atrium gallery of the Culver Center as an architectural frieze offsetting the artifice and the real. The titans emerge as impressionistic pastiches of ideas and observations that link to sources in the arts. As effigies, the titans are unreliable witnesses to their surroundings



and counterbalance the experience of the viewer who, in turn, is invited to join the voluntary gesture with them. This dichotomy is particularly suggested in the hyperrealistic rendering of the dangling keys prompting the viewer to mediate on authenticity with the external dimension of experience. Biel's *Sentry* weaves between what is real and what is symbolic which implies that something may be missing and something may always be in its place<sup>2</sup>, to which one may wonder who is watching these figures, and as to whom, precisely, is the sentry?

- Jennifer Frias  
Associate Curator, Sweeney Art Gallery, University of California, Riverside

<sup>1</sup> From *Alcohol and Poetry: John Berryman and the Booze Talking*

<sup>2</sup> Jacques Lacan's theory on the order of "the real"

## WORKS FROM 2005-2013

Spending time with the art of Joe Biel gives us an open space to think and breathe. Inside the frames of these large and small-scale drawings, we experience a clarity, where seeing edges towards understanding, parallel to those elusive instants where we glimpse our own lives from the outside in. This clarity might include compressed moments of direct engagement—seeing and being seen—observed in *Jumper* and *Edenville*, where children stare knowingly back at us or more prolonged moments, where we watch another human journey through the disjointed complexity that is contemporary life, as in *Walker* and *Promenade*.

The latter, particularly, stopped me in my tracks with its outpouring of personal and historical objects, pulled by that memorable she/he (Biel keeps the gender purposely ambiguous), who drags his/her universe of artifacts as if on a Sunday stroll. Maybe that's the point: we carry our personal and cultural burdens without awareness that we are hauling throughout life a crazy parachute of stuff. "There's a postmodern idea of not being aware, reading is misreading, translated here in that all the figures who are chained figures are not aware. They [the chains] can be read as: a) internal, not real and b) real, but they don't know it." Biel adds, "We aren't agents of our own actions. We don't understand them."

Indeed, the artist asks us to consider throughout this exhibit: did the figures chain themselves or were they chained? It's unclear who has attached these figures to what they are bound to. And there's no single answer, but we can sift through layers of meaning here to discover connections that are both literal and symbolic. In *Pax Romana*, for example, a young cowgirl holds the string of a balloon in one hand and a whip in the other—symbols that comment on American imperialism and "the double image (nature) of the USA."

The strings in *Walker* (which could be Bruce Dern's character in Alexander Payne's recent film, *Nebraska*) read as though the bent yet determined figure is going back and uphill, up some invisible slope, tethered only to (or by) his flags and tin cans. We can read this walk as the journey into old age, into wisdom, into a beyond. I comment to Biel on the wonderful indifference of his figures who have their backs to us. "Their indifference comes from their interest in what they are doing. They are in their own zone," he says.

The emptiness that the figure in *Walker* navigates is intriguing. "The negative space is aggressively blank, it's loud, like a crowd. They are performing, but they are also alone," the artist clarifies. Both *Walker* and *Promenade* reveal figures who are their own vanishing points, their chains the orthogonal lines that form the one-point perspective of their respective journeys.

Roger Shattuck comments in his introduction to Rene Daumal's allegorical tale, *Mount Analogue*:

...how many related—or in fact unrelated—strands of attention the mind can simultaneously pursue has provided a large area of innovation in the arts... techniques for packing the universe into an instant of intensified consciousness... no psychologist can explain to us how we divide and co-ordinate our attention in such complex actions as looking at the stars, listening to a fugue, or reading an allegory.

This packing (and unpacking) of the universe is what we are doing when we engage Biel's art. Shattuck ponders how we achieve such complex actions as star gazing or absorbing Bach. I'd argue it's deeply connected to the intensified consciousness required when we examine our own strings-of-being, when we glimpse ourselves from the outside in. It's like unraveling an allegory. Biel brings us into the open space of self examination, but never ties us down.

- Joanna Roche  
Professor in Art History, California State University, Fullerton

<sup>1</sup> Biel stated in an interview of November 20, 2013 that the figures here are reminiscent of Old Master portraits, where "the person looks out at the viewer; they have a secret but they can't tell you—they are on the other side, both literally and figuratively." He situates us in the realm of the subject, but ever separated from the secret they possess.

<sup>2</sup> *Promenade* also bears a direct relationship to Biel's current undertaking, *Veil*, which he states is "an extension of these massive collections of objects." He considers *Promenade* to be a "precursor" or "preview" of this epic project. "I'm interested in seeing these [the works in *Sentry*] up and thinking about their relationship to *Veil*."

<sup>3</sup> Biel, interview (*op cit.*).

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>5</sup> Daumal, Rene, *Mount Analogue: An Authentic Narrative*, translation and introduction by Roger Shattuck (San Francisco: City Lights Books, 1968): 10.