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William Beckman: Drawings, 1967-2013

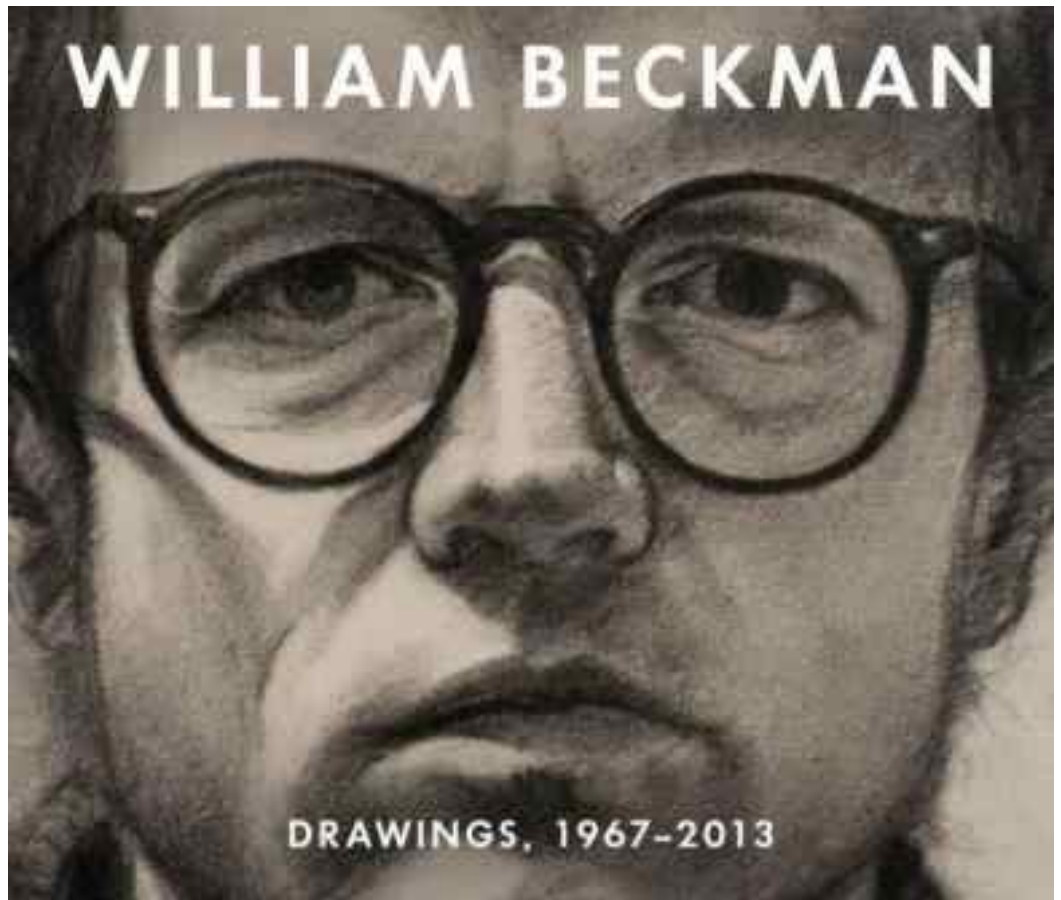
May 17 - September 7 , 2014

As one of the leading realist artists working in the United States, William Beckman is celebrated for the intimacy and emotional power of his figurative drawings. In the first major retrospective of his works on paper, this exhibition explores Beckman's primary subject matter: the individual. The nearly fifty portraits run the gamut of captivating expressions from self-possession, to rebellion, and vulnerability. This exhibition is curated from both private and public collections and reflects the Columbus Museum's commitment to promoting, exhibiting, and collecting American drawings. (right: William Beckman, *Self Portrait with Glasses* (Detail), 1983, Charcoal. Private Collection, New York (catalogue cover)

Beckman's inspiration comes from diverse sources, which include northern European painting, the writings of Russian author Nikolai Gogol, and the farm on which he grew up in western Minnesota. Throughout his career as an artist he has examined human relationships -- the quiet of solitude, the intimacy of marriage, and the complexity of gender issues. Unlikely as it may seem at first, these issues are carried over in the recent

survey of rodeo bulls. Often working in series and experimenting with scale, Beckman's process is at the fore, producing compelling images that engage the viewer directly.

Accompanying the exhibition is a 112-page, full-color catalogue of Beckman's work, as



well as archival photos from his childhood and college days. The catalogue, (published by D Giles, Ltd., London), *William Beckman: Drawings, 1967-2013* includes an interview with the artist as well as an exploratory essay by noted scholar Carter Ratcliff.

William Beckman: Drawings, 1967-2013 is on display at the Columbus Museum May 18 through September 7, 2014. The exhibition will travel to the Arkansas Arts Center in Little Rock in late 2014 after it closes in Columbus.

Excerpt from interview in the exhibition catalogue

TB indicates Tom Butler, Director, The Columbus Museum. WB is William Beckman.

TB: Bill, although we had a similar discussion in your studio in 2010, let's focus more on the project at hand now that we are moving towards the

exhibition which opens in Columbus in May 2014. I remember clearly when I first saw one of your monumental drawings -- *Woman-Man* (1988) -- it was included in the *Large Drawings* traveling exhibition that Townsend Wolfe organized from the Arkansas Art Center's (AAC's) great collection of drawings in 1996. We were one of the host institutions on the tour and even though I knew it was part of the exhibit from the initial checklist, I still was unprepared for the scale of the *Woman-Man* drawing when it was unpacked. What were your thoughts on incorporating such a large scale for these drawings?

WB: First, the drawing Townsend Wolfe included in his 'The Figure' exhibition of 1990 was *Woman-Man* (1988) whose dimensions are 90" x 80", and which the Arkansas Arts Center owns. The scale goes back to an experience I had on my first trip to Europe. During a visit to the National Gallery in London I encountered an eight-foot square charcoal drawing by Leonardo. I was aware of the Renaissance artist's use of large cartoon drawings to transfer images for their frescos. Seeing one first-hand left its impact. Working large allows body freedom, drawing with my arm, not my fingers. The physical action changes your mental approach to the image. Movement becomes part of the creative act. At this scale, larger than life, process opens doors to new discoveries. In a strange way because of the scale, you become a living partner to your work.

TB: This seems as good a time as any to ask about your technique. Do you use a camera? Do you do smaller studies first before you start drawing on these very large, and very expensive, pieces of paper?

WB: I don't have a problem with the camera; I just prefer a living subject, and of course, when necessary, memory. I believe all artists working from life, or camera end up with their personal view. Art comes from inside. The small pencil drawings tend to be earlier. Charcoal drawings are, generally, larger than life around 30" and up, sometimes reaching more than 12 feet. I draw directly on the large

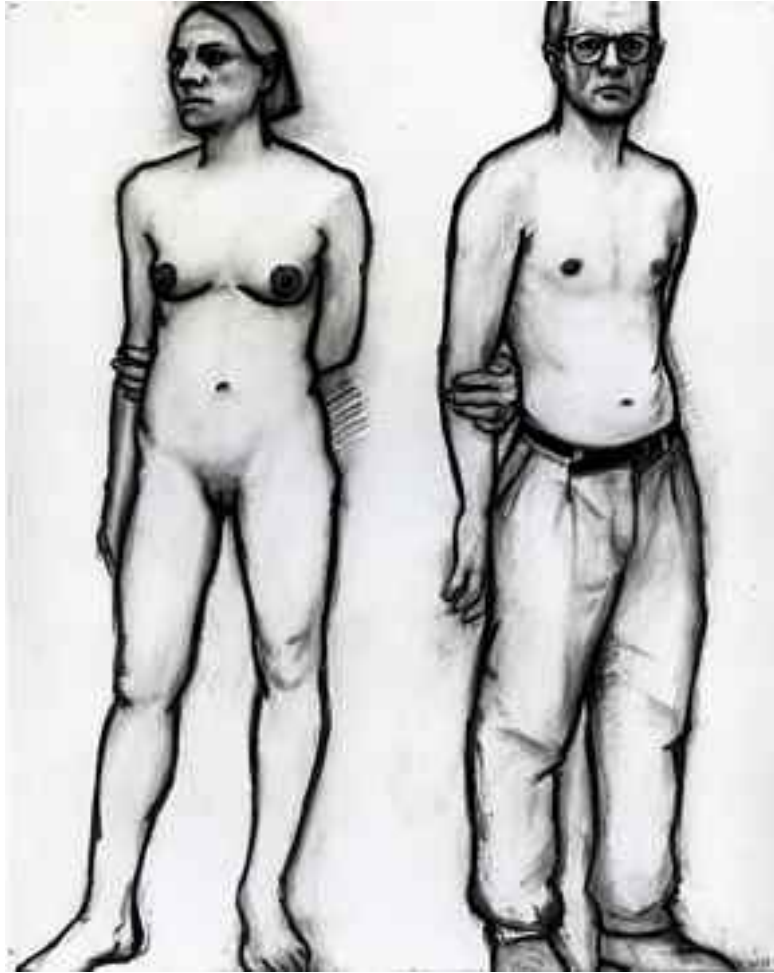
sheets, no preparatory studies. In a sense, each drawing is a study for the next.

TB: Bill, you have talked about the time while in Minneapolis that you realized that you were destined to be an artist and thus began to focus on your training and your discipline to make art. Would you mind telling me that story again?

WB: I was working at Control Data Corp. as a draftsman in 1960-61. My girlfriend, later, my first wife, Carol suggested we go to the Minneapolis Institute of Art. With one look my world turned upside down. Even though this was my first experience with an actual painting, I instantly knew where my life would go. I wanted to be an artist.

TB: In general, how do you work in the studio? What is your progression? Drawings first? Paintings? Although this exhibition is about drawings and spans the length of your career to date, just where do they fit into your studio hierarchy?

WB: My work habits have remained the same. As a farm boy I am an early riser, working until late afternoon when I take time for physical exercise. Often my best solutions come while running or cycling. I do not have a set or standard way of working. Drawing for me is an ongoing affair, truly, my first love. Many of the drawings in this exhibition were done during or after the paintings were completed. Drawing can be an advanced study, but, more often than not, it is a different version, a new possibility. Drawing carries the raw thought, as close to the birth of creation as it gets.



(above: William Beckman, *Woman-Man*, ca. 1988, charcoal. Arkansas Arts Center, Little Rock, Arkansas)



(above: William Beckman, *Self-Portrait in Studio*, ca. 1984, charcoal. Milwaukee Art Museum, Milwaukee, Wisconsin. Gift of the American Academy and Institute of Arts and Letters, Hassam-Speicher Purchase Fund M1985.100)



(above: William Beckman, *Bull Series #8 (Cody)*, ca. 2010, Charcoal. Promised Gift. Columbus Museum, Columbus, GA)