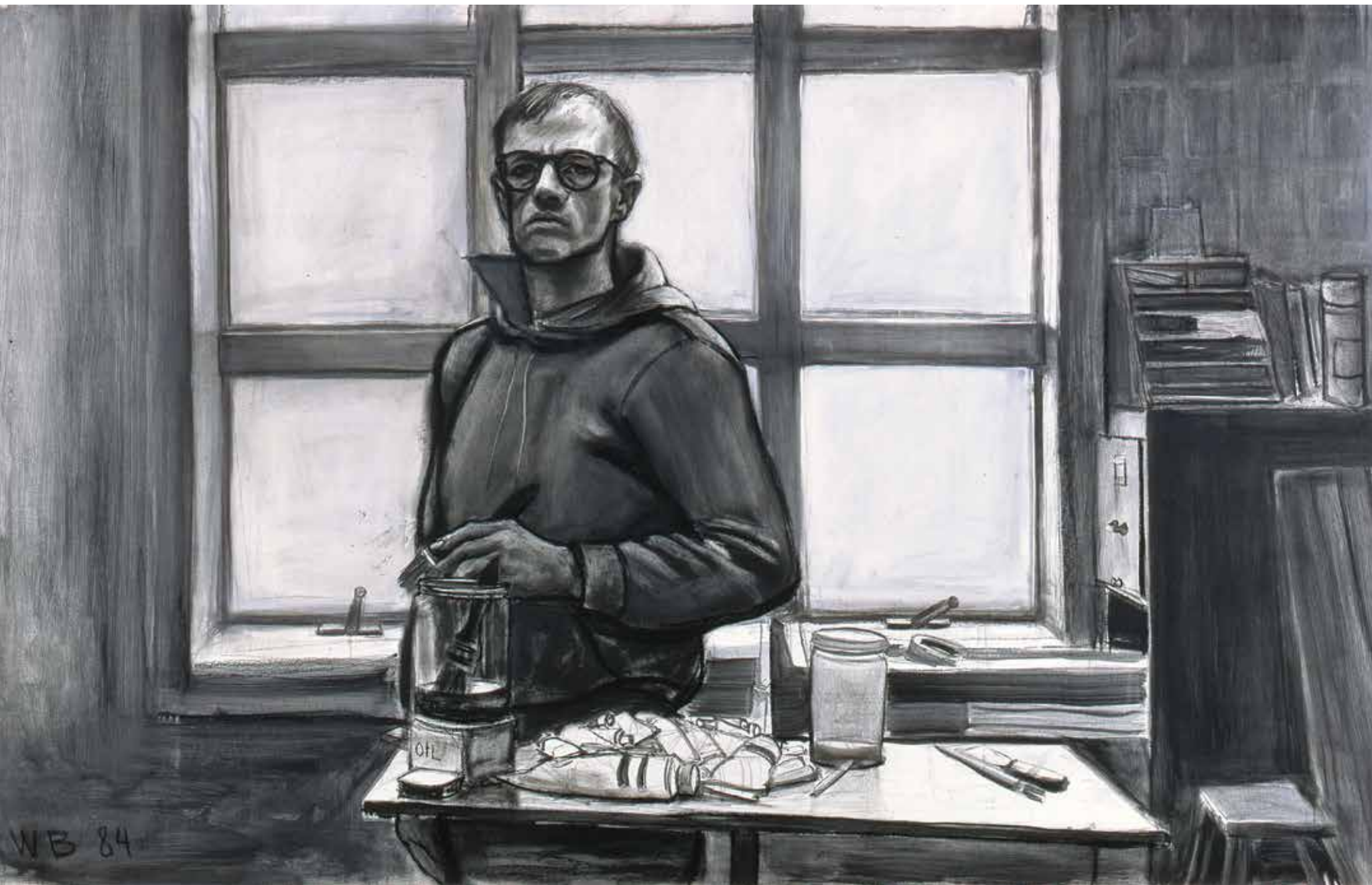


WILLIAM BECKMAN CONFRONTING

The massive drawings of this veteran artist show how the simple tools of line and tone can be used to ask provocative questions about identity, relationships, and individuality. **BY JOHN A. PARKS**

THE WORLD



WILLIAM BECKMAN

is known primarily for his exacting realist paintings of the human figure in which months of patient observation yield images of immense visual subtlety and surprising emotional insight. He frequently pairs figures in ways that explore the complexity and difficulties inherent in relationships between men and women, and his work also reveals the trajectory of the artist's own life: Beckman has often included himself in his pictures, and for many years his model was his second wife.

He has also produced a considerable body of drawings, works that span his career and provide a wealth of insights into his artistic growth and development. More than simply illuminating the artist's painterly interests, the drawings have sometimes explored areas untouched by the paintings to become major statements in their own right. This summer the Columbus Museum, in Georgia, has mounted a retrospective exhibition of Beckman's drawings, providing a unique opportunity to contemplate the artist's achievement in this area. (For details about the exhibition and accompanying catalogue, see page TK.)

Self-Portrait in Studio

1984, charcoal,
60 x 96.
Collection
Milwaukee Art
Museum,
Milwaukee,
Wisconsin.

All artwork this
article courtesy
D Giles Ltd., Lon-
don, UK.



ABOVE
Study for Diana 1, Facing Left
 ca. 1971-1972, graphite, 22¾ x 18. Courtesy the artist and Forum Gallery, New York, New York.

ABOVE RIGHT
Tarzan (comic-book cover)

ca. 1950-1951, graphite, 12 x 10. Collection the artist.

RIGHT
Untitled

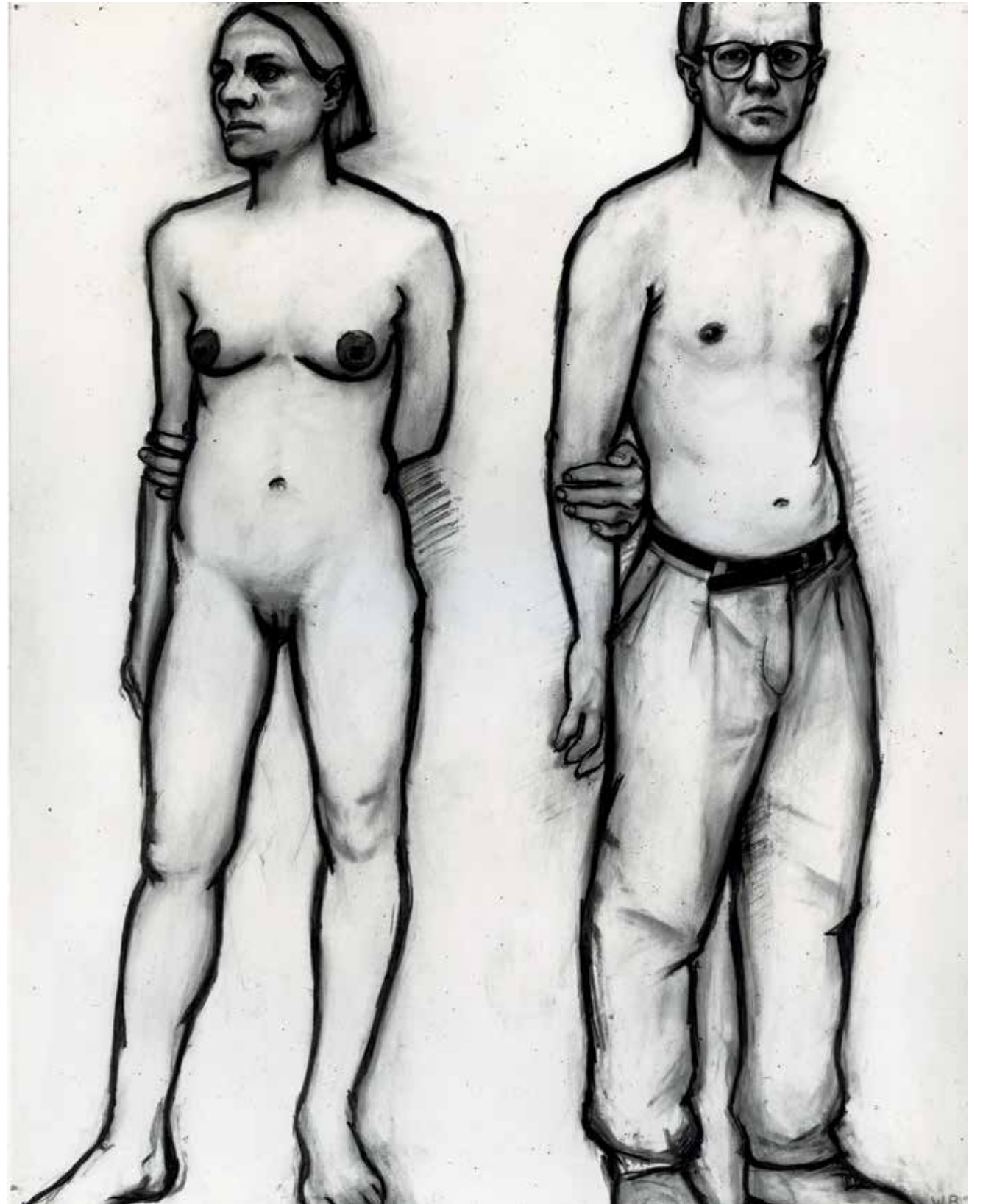
ca. 1967-1969, graphite, 21 x 16. Collection the artist.



EARLY WORK: POWER AND PRECISION

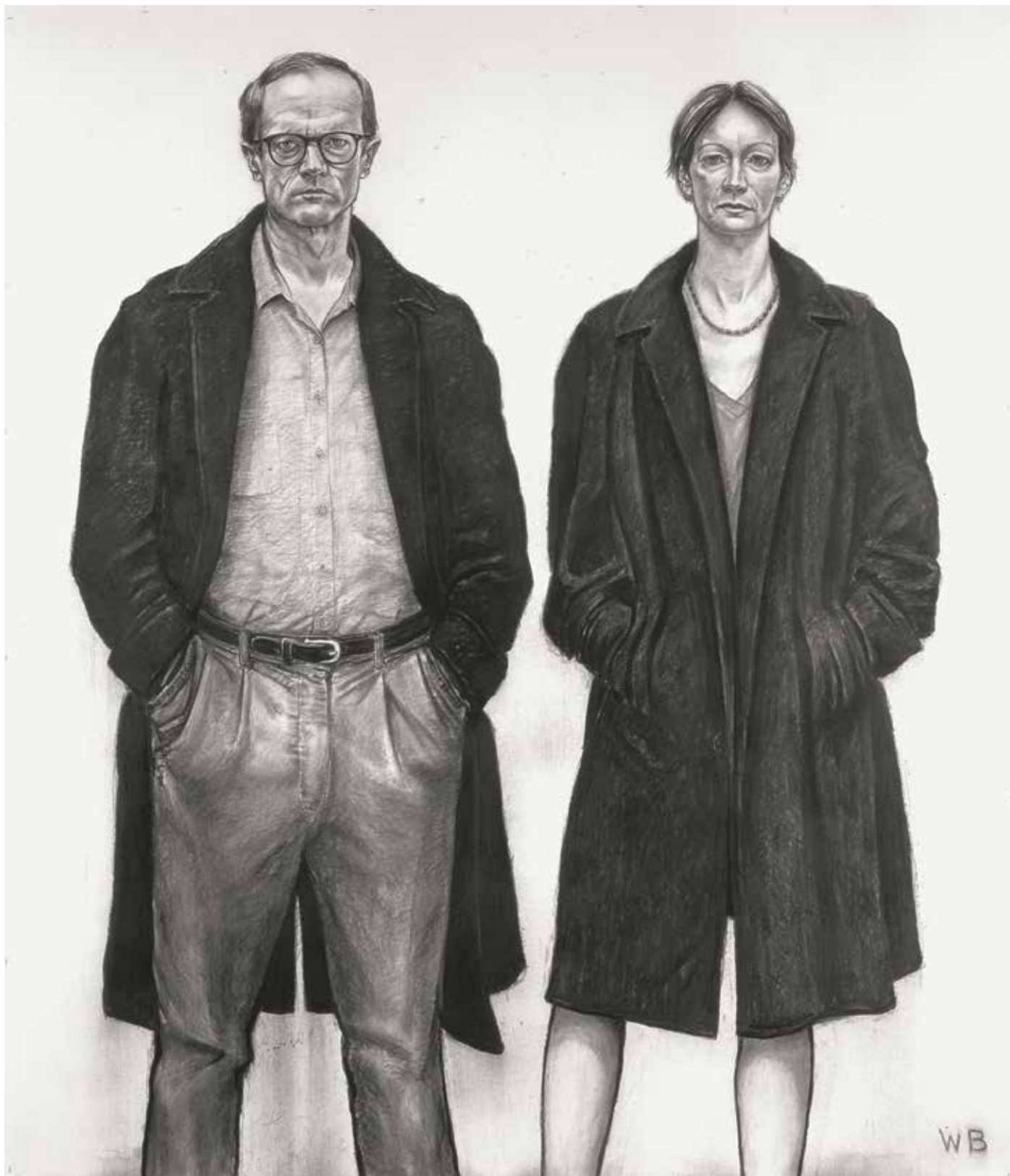
"I've always loved drawing," Beckman says. "For me art begins with drawing." Raised on a farm in western Minnesota, he remembers drawing during long church services when he and his brother were given paper and pencil to keep them quiet. The young artist drew cattle and sometimes comic book covers, copying from originals or inventing them wholesale. The exhibition in Columbus begins with one of these works, a pencil drawing of a cover for a Tarzan comic, made when the artist was just nine years old. "After my mother's passing, I discovered that she had saved several of these drawings," he says. Although obviously a piece of juvenilia, the drawing is remarkable for the way in which the boy carefully articulated the line around the figure, looking for subtleties of curves.

Formal artistic training would not come about until much later. "Art wasn't spoken about at home," the artist says. "It wasn't something we knew about." It wasn't until the age of 19, when Beckman was already working as a draftsman for the Control Data Corporation, that he made a trip to a museum. It was a revelation. "I knew from that moment that that was what I was going to be involved in," he says.

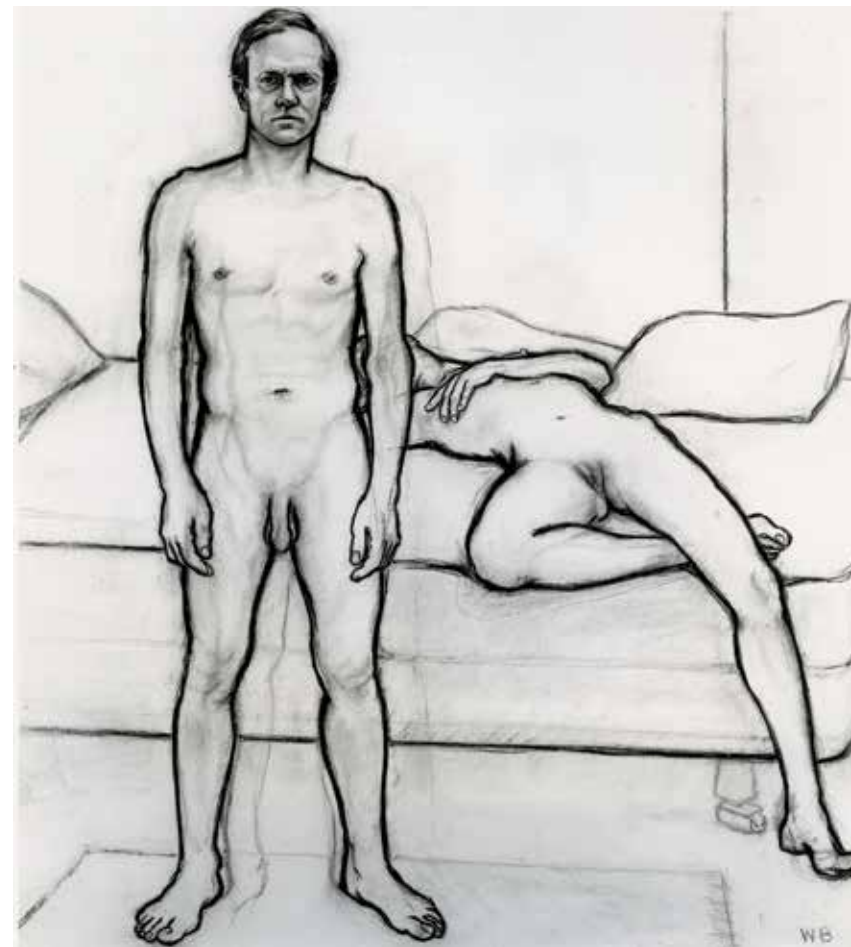


Woman-Man

1988, charcoal, 90 x 70¼. Collection Arkansas Art Center, Little Rock, Arkansas.



Overcoats 2
1998, charcoal, 90 x 78. Collection Leticia and Philip Messinger.



Bed Study
1991, charcoal, 90 x 80.
Courtesy the artist and
Forum Gallery, New
York, New York.

“MY WORK HAS ALWAYS INVOLVED CONFRONTING THE VIEWER WITH THE SUBJECT.”

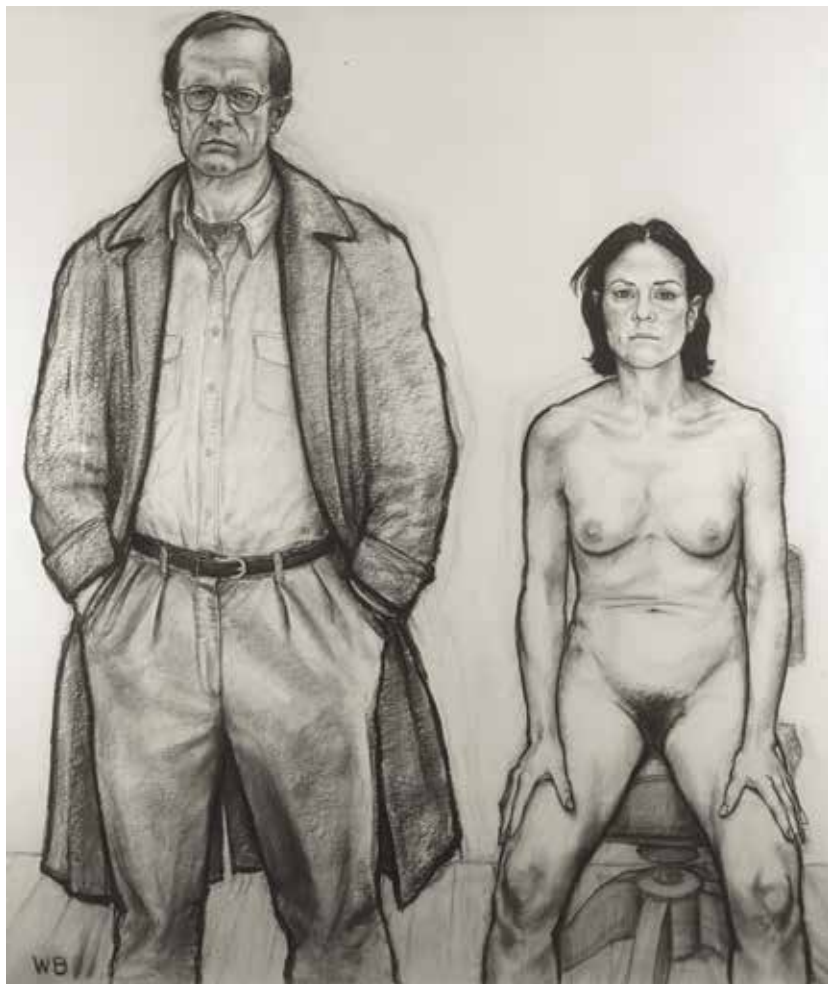
Beckman’s art training took place at St. Cloud State University, in Minnesota, followed by graduate work at The University of Iowa. Although he took drawing classes his recollection is that he mostly learned by teaching. “I didn’t have a great draftsman who taught me,” he says. “In grad school I was a TA and found myself teaching drawing. I learned as I taught.”

An untitled work from the late 1960s (pageTK) shows how far the artist had come in his mastery of the figure. The pencil line is delicate and searching, finding the nuances of movement as bones, muscle and fat make their presence felt in the outer shell of the body. The combination of sensitivity and precision is achieved with a hard pencil; the artist recalls using a 4H and a 2H. “In part this sensitivity to pencil was a product of my early work as a draftsman,” says Beckman. “When you are drafting you learn how to keep the pencil sharp by twirling it in your fingers as you make a line. You are also very aware of the different hardnesses of pencil. You have them all laid out in order in front of you.” Mechanical drafting is a skill that places a premium on precision and readability, qualities that Beckman incorporated in his work from the beginning.

In addition to its technical achievement, *Untitled* is also a highly charged account of a young woman’s body that we are invited to examine in an intimate manner. “My work has always involved confronting the viewer with the subject,” the artist says.

The most powerful influence on Beckman's work has been that of Northern European artists. "When I want a lesson in drawing I look at Holbein or Dürer," he says. These great masters were part of a linear tradition in which artists prized exactitude and close observation along with a sense of finish and closure. Beckman also greatly admires Raphael. "The exquisite way he moved every nuance of the contour to reveal bones and muscle beneath the flesh is something I try to do myself," he says.

A graphite study for his painting *Diana I* from the early 1970s (page TK) finds Beckman reaching an almost classical balance of line and tone. The drawing shows the artist's second wife standing on a small mat and leaning on a wall. The line is precise and taut but varies considerably in weight and thickness. Tone is supplied by delicate crosshatching in which the artist has included an account of the contour of the form in the direction of his pencil marks. The floorboards and moldings on the wall have been achieved with ruled lines, adding a further sense of cool exactitude. Once again, in spite of the almost scientific nature of the observation, we have a powerful sense of the physicality of the subject, the living, breathing and sexual creature in front of us.



Overcoats 3
1998–2002, charcoal, 94 x 84½. Columbus Museum, Columbus, Georgia.

GOING BIG

Around 1980 Beckman's drawing practice underwent a considerable change. Whereas his earlier drawings are mostly graphite pieces on hand-made paper of a modest size, he began to draw in charcoal on a very large scale. He used a roll of machine-made rag paper some 90 inches wide, with many drawings approaching nine feet in height.

This shift in scale and medium was inspired in part by a trip to London in 1976. "I encountered the eight-foot square cartoon drawing by Leonardo in the National Gallery," Beckman says. This was *Virgin and Child With Saints Anne and John the Baptist*, a drawing in charcoal highlighted with white chalk. "It made a huge impact on me even though it was exhibited in such low light you practically needed a flashlight to see it."

Beckman soon discovered that drawing on a large scale was a completely different enterprise from his earlier work. "With a small drawing everything is in the hand and the wrist," he says. "It's fine motor control. But drawing on a large scale involves moving the whole body. The change in physical relationship with the drawing changes your mental approach."

The large scale brings about a much more forceful sense of touch and decision. "I began with a hard charcoal that made a lighter line," says Beckman of his early large-scale works. "It's something of a slow process. You start out drawing really light. But you make multiple lines. You are kind of feeling your way to find your form. I might make six or seven lines. You keep looking at it, and you eventually make a decision about which contour is the one you are looking for. Once I have a sense of where this is, I will change to a softer charcoal to get a heavier weight, a darker line."

By 1983 Beckman had begun to make drawings with a much heavier



line. "With the heavy line I'm using a charcoal stick and I'm really crushing it into the surface," says Beckman. "Very often lines will get erased or softened when I move the back of my hand across them." The physical power required for this approach gives the drawings from this period a new strength and authority.

Beckman varied his technique somewhat for his 1984 drawing *Self-Portrait in Studio* (page TK), adding a coat of gesso to the paper, creating a less absorbent surface. "I also used a brush-and-wash with the charcoal to move the tone around," he says. "It was almost like painting with charcoal." This drawing is unusual, not only for its horizontal format but for including the whole light envelope, with the subject silhouetted against a window in a shadowy room.

Beckman's drawings of the mid-1980s became increasingly emotionally charged. Several draw-

ings, including *Woman-Man* from 1988 (page TK), pair Beckman with a female figure recognizable as his wife. In these images the artist faces the viewer with a scowl, his torso bare, while the woman, naked, looks off in another direction. The line settles into a kind of monumentality, suggesting that separation may bring some sort of resolution. The surety in the drawing may also stem from the fact that the artist no longer asked his wife to model. "I knew her body so well at this stage that I could draw her entirely from memory," he says.

The couple divorced in 1989, after which the artist's wife was generally replaced by other female models. "My original plan had been to make my work a record of the relationship between a man and a woman," Beckman explains. "But after the breakup of the marriage, obviously this wasn't going to happen. Life is not perfect. Then I realized that it could

involve any woman and any man. I began to hire models and continued to work."

Several of Beckman's drawings from the 1990s revisit the theme of his *Woman-Man* series. In *Overcoats 2* (page TK), for instance, the artist once again stands side by side with a woman. Instead of the fraught interpersonal tension evident in the earlier series, the two figures now face confidently forward. Both are fully clothed, hands in pockets, staring out at us with grim expressions as though daring us to stare back. Once again the viewer is confronted with the subject, but this time it is not physical intimacy so much as a kind of confident remoteness. Heavily clothed, their vulnerabilities are no longer available to us.

HOME ON THE RANGE

Although Beckman's decision to start drawing bulls on a gargantuan scale in



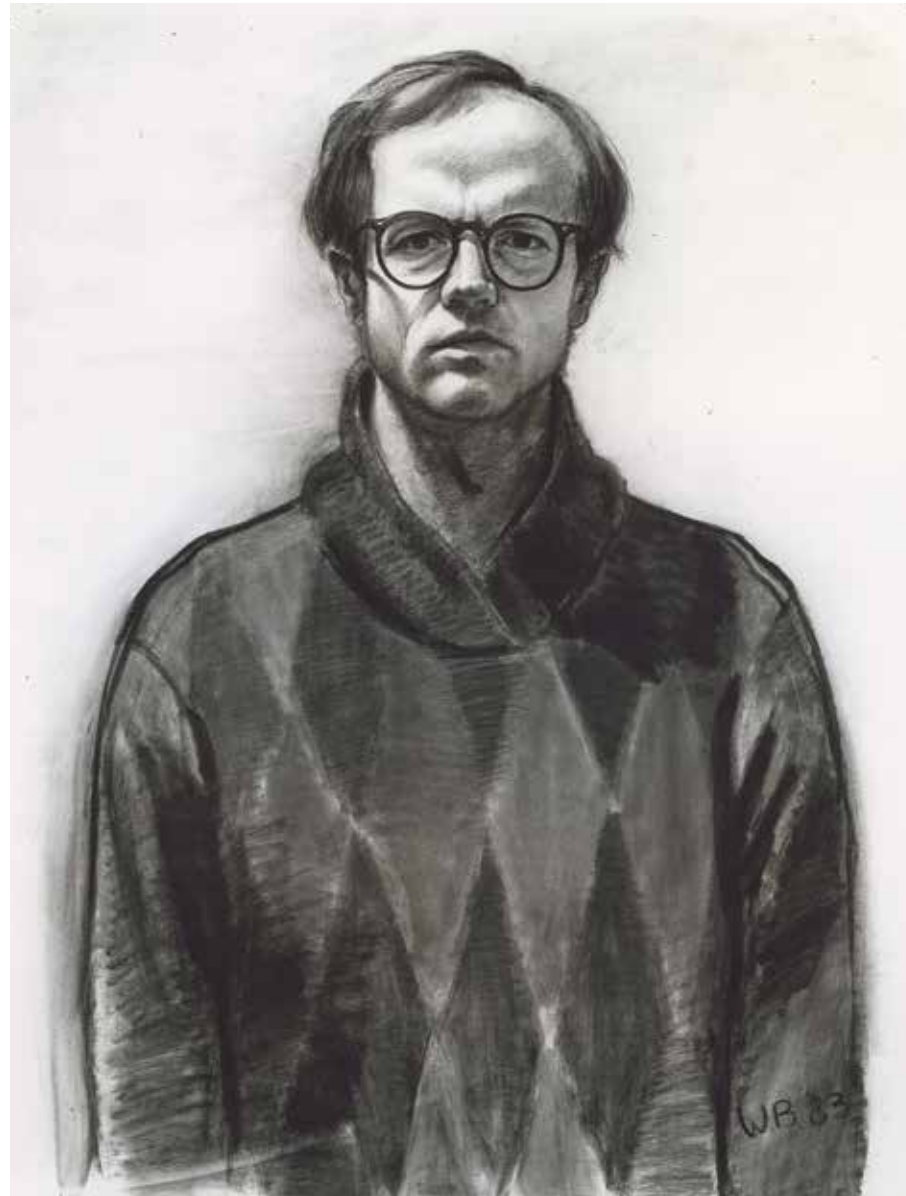
Bull Series No. 9

2012, charcoal, 60 x 132. Courtesy the artist and Forum Gallery, New York, New York.

2009 may seem a complete departure, he was actually embracing a subject that played to his lifelong interest in gender issues. Inspired by his annual motorcycle trips back to the Plains, he made drawings in which a line of bulls appears to be approaching the viewer. The confrontation this time is very physical and perhaps dangerous. Moreover, a new power is evident in the drawing in which shapes and forms have been simplified to take on a considerable sense of presence. Unlike his figure drawings, here the tone is blocked in heavily using a chamois to create an almost painterly layering. The sheer amount of charcoal used has caused delicate falls of dust at the base of the drawing. "It almost feels as though they are standing in water," says the artist. "So I decided not to draw the hoofs."

The drawings culminate in *Cody*, in which a single animal advances toward the viewer. He is rendered with great dynamism, his massive neck and shoulders powering him forward. Beckman came across him on a visit to a rodeo in Cody, Wyoming where the bull threw every rider before the eight seconds required to remain mounted in order to score. The artist persuaded the rodeo workers to allow him to observe the bull in his pen and make some drawings. "He was a truly magnificent creature," says Beckman. "I was just able to make some loose drawings of him on some rough paper. But I knew that I would be able to go back to the studio and recreate his physique."

The bull, of course, has been the quintessential image of maleness throughout history. "They've been a symbol of strength, power, fertility and dominance," says the artist. Now in his 70s, Beckman is clearly tackling the qualities of maleness and contemplating its mysterious mix of generative and destructive forces. As usual, when he draws something, his stare is unflinching, a confrontation with the world that spares neither artist nor viewer. ❖



Self-Portrait With Glasses
1983, charcoal, 43 x 34.
Courtesy the artist and
Forum Gallery, New York,
New York.

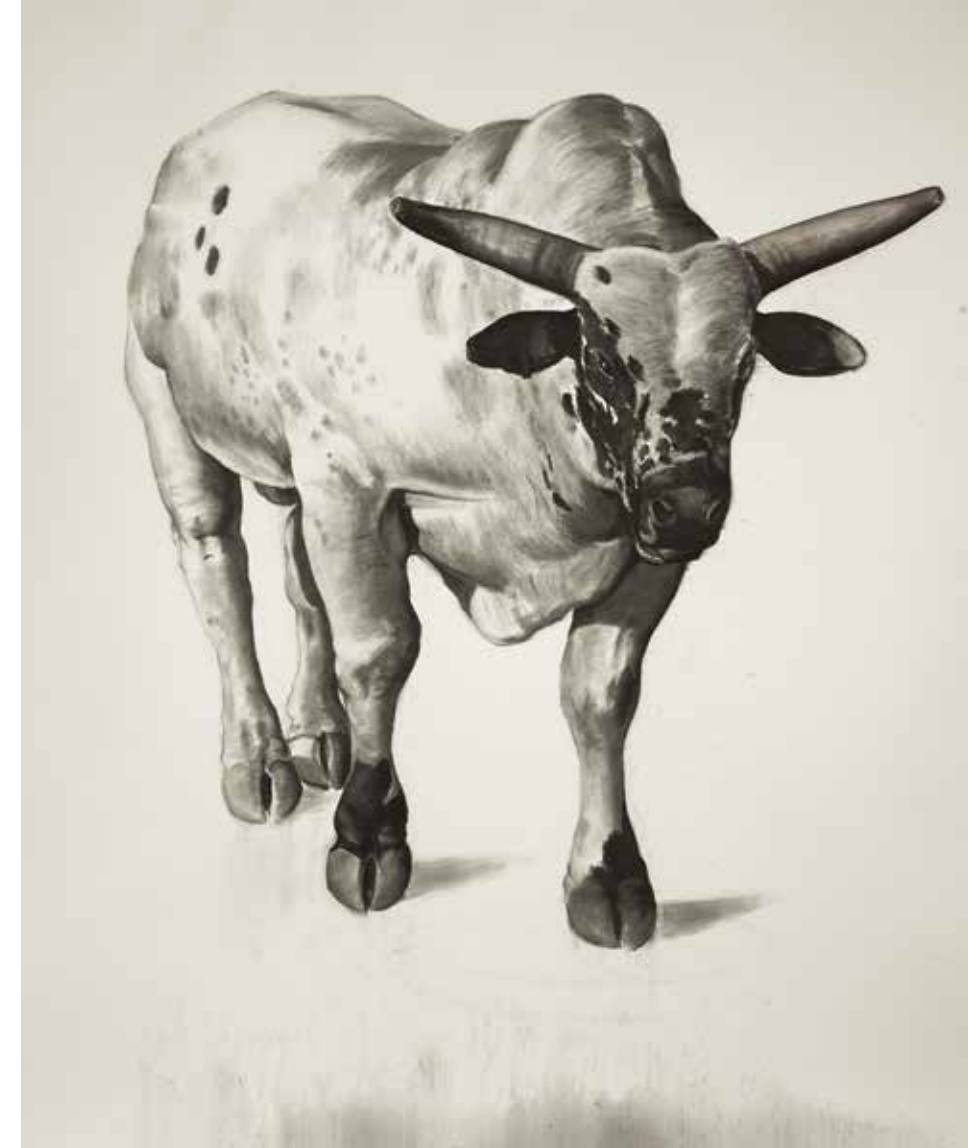
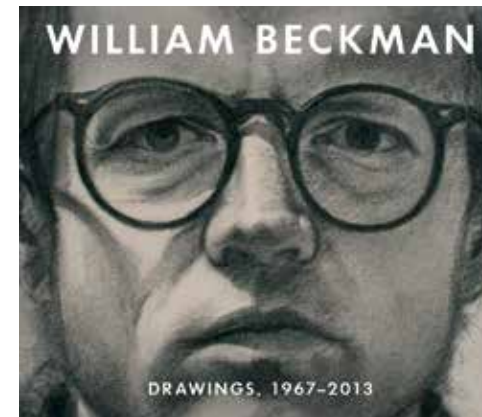
ABOUT THE ARTIST

William Beckman was born and raised in Minnesota. His artistic career has spanned six decades, with his most recent solo exhibitions—prior to the current museum retrospective of his drawings—held at Forum Gallery, in New York City. Beckman's artwork can be found in numerous public collections, including those of the Art Institute of Chicago, in Illinois; the Carnegie Museum of Art, in Pittsburgh; the National Portrait Gallery, in Washington, DC; and the Whitney Museum of American Art, in New York City.

EXHIBITION & CATALOGUE

The exhibition "William Beckman: Drawings, 1967–2013" is on view at the Columbus Museum, in Georgia, through September 7, after which it will be on view at the Arkansas Arts Center, in Little Rock, from October 24 to February 1, 2015. An accompanying catalogue, published by D Giles Limited, of London, includes an interview with the artist and an essay by the scholar Carter Ratcliff.

"William Beckman is among the finest of contemporary realist painters," says Charles T. Butler, the director of the Columbus Museum. "He is brutally honest, particularly when it comes to recording the aging process in himself. It's fascinating to see how the artist came to use charcoal in such a forceful way, with its thick application and the use of wiping for tonal application. There is also a romantic aspect to the work in the artist's passion for childhood memories on the farm."



Butler feels that the Bull series forms a continuum with the figures. "When I stand in front of *Cody* (above), I am seeing another self-portrait," he says. "While the other bull drawings show a herd, *Cody* stands out alone, frontal, strong, confident and undefeated. It speaks to a lot of the attributes that Beckman is trying to achieve as an artist."

Both museums are renowned for their focus on drawing. "The Columbus Museum has long had a commitment to American art," says Charles T. Butler, the museum's director, "while the Arkansas Arts Center has had the resources to develop a collection of international drawings. I think it is important that these museums outside the major art centers provide such pockets of excellence." Butler is retiring this year as the Columbus Museum's director. "It is doubly sweet that my last exhibition is something so powerful and so personal," he says.

FOR MORE INFORMATION ABOUT THE EXHIBITION, VISIT WWW.COLUMBUSMUSEUM.COM OR WWW.ARKARTS.COM. FOR MORE INFORMATION ABOUT THE CATALOGUE, VISIT WWW.GILESLTD.COM.

Bull Series No. 8 (Cody)

2010, charcoal,
108 x 90. Columbus
Museum, Columbus,
Georgia, promised gift.