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Art Where You're At

'Drawing Inspiration' From Artists Who Make Their Mark On Paper, Not Canvas

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Alyssa Monks, *Transfixed* (drawing), 2020, vine charcoal on paper

Copyright Alyssa Monks/Courtesy of Forum Gallery, New York

What's your guess? Is that a photograph? The face is so close and specific. Did the photographer hold the camera in one hand, and an umbrella in the other? Maybe want to hold the umbrella over the woman so she wouldn't get any wetter? Not a bit of that.

It's a *drawing*. A most remarkable, painstakingly created drawing. I'll tell more about it later, but since drawing is the subject of this essay — and a New York exhibition — that includes Alyssa Monks' gorgeous example, let's linger a while on the many faces that drawing can express.

"Drawings show the hand of the artist," Nicola Lorenz thinks. She's executive director of Manhattan's Forum Gallery, and curator of its show "Drawing Inspiration." You get a more personal connection to the creator of a drawing. "No two artists make their marks in the same way, just as no two people have the same hand writing," she says. Plus, it's something we've all done — doodles as kids, pathetic stick figures, or maybe really nice ones if there's a bit of talent. For some artists, drawing is essential.

Picasso once said, "I draw like other people bite their nails." He drew in all media — pencil, ink, charcoal, chalk, crayon, watercolor. Yes, watercolor. As a work on paper, watercolor is also considered drawing, as it sort of straddles the worlds of painting and drawing.

At the Forum Gallery, Rance Jones, who did the watercolor below, is a gifted straddler. He carries a sketchbook when he travels and found the life and culture of Cuba a rich source of inspiration. On many visits, he turned his small, quick impressions into larger works, pictures of Cubans as they go about their daily routines. "You see life etched into their faces," says Lorenz.



Rance Jones, *Azucar y Tabaco (Sugar and Tobacco)*, 2020, watercolor on paper
Copyright Rance Jones/Courtesy of Forum Gallery, New York

All his life this man has been selling sugar and tobacco. "Which is quite an odd mix, if you think about it." But not in Cuba. They're major crops. Jones' watercolor shows the shop's old scale, also the man's constant companion — a cigar.

Jones is one of 28 contemporary artists in this drawing show. Forum represents them all. The pandemic shut the 60-year-old Park Avenue gallery down for several months. Sales have been sporadic for drawings that go from \$5,000 to \$55,000. That's a lot cheaper than paintings, and new collectors sometimes start off by buying them. Some buy only drawings. If you have some spare change, this one goes for \$14,000.



Guillermo Muñoz Vera, *Young Man from Mali*, 2019, conte pencil and charcoal on paper
Courtesy Guillermo Muñoz Vera/Courtesy of Forum Gallery, New York

Is that a face!? A little mischievous, up for adventure. The drawing — with conte pencil and charcoal — is so meticulous. Guillermo Muñoz Vera, a Chilean, lives in Spain and is considered a virtuoso, a master realist known for his paintings.

For centuries, curator Lorenz says, drawings were "rehearsals for the feature performance" — i.e., paintings. Kind of like stretching before a 10-mile race. Degas and Seurat changed that in the mid-19th century when they presented their works on paper as fully developed artworks. Like pieces by Muñoz Vera, or the American, Steven Assael.



Steven Assael, *Henry and Hammer*, 2020, graphite and crayon on paper

Copyright Steven Assael/Courtesy of Forum Gallery, New York

"His drawings come off the page," Lorenz says. You can almost see them breathe. Assael has been described as "a new Old Master." He draws every day. "Gets him away from the labors of painting." And he draws from life. Old man Henry up there is a

model and an actor. He dresses in character, puts on makeup and appropriate clothes before leaving home for a sitting. On this day, Henry came to Assael's studio dressed as he imagined someone homeless might dress. How pensive he is, in the drawing. Resting? Thinking of the repair he needs to make with that hammer? Or maybe wistful for easier days he once had? Assael, drawing him, shows such compassion. The artist is imagining a life, as well as getting it on paper.

Finally, again Alyssa Monks' drawing *Transfixed*. The woman is still there, looking out, but not directly at us. Monks' models are naked. In showers or tubs. I've never seen anything like this style that is her signature.



Alyssa Monks, *Transfixed* (drawing), 2020, vine charcoal on paper

Copyright Alyssa Monks/Courtesy of Forum Gallery, New York

The beautiful bather is hard for us to see. That's deliberate. Monks starts by taking a photograph of what she wants to draw, and then decides what to do about it. To me, the decision seems technically impossible. She has us look through water, to see what's behind it. Here, a woman peering through the wet glass wall of a shower. Monks always shows faces through some kind of veil — glass, water, droplets, steam.

Something that interferes with our seeing clearly. Lorenz says that's the goal: "So that we have to slow down, to look and understand, without our brains immediately jumping to an assumption." What a mood this makes.

The secret of the mood-making, apart from talent and imagination, is vine charcoal. It's a lot softer than regular charcoal, and leaves trails of fine dust with each stroke. With her fingers or smudging sticks, Monks moves the dust around to get it where she wants it (that takes hours), and then sprays it in place with Sennelier Delacroix Pencil and Charcoal Fixative. The brand name fixes my memory to a story I did in Paris for *Morning Edition* in 2006. Sennelier is a postage-stamp art supply shop across the Seine from the Louvre.



Dominique Sennelier, owner of Maison Sennelier, is pictured at the Sennelier shop in Paris on on April 7, 2014.

Joel Saget/AFP via Getty Images

Inside, the shelves are stuffed with ambition and hopes. Generations of artists have come here for art supplies — charcoal, fixative, pastels (Sennelier invented the oil pastel for Picasso), paints. In full view of the great Paris museum, young and old, men,

women and children come here to buy the tools of creation. Like the artists of Forum Gallery, they'll take blank pieces of paper and, with their supplies, share the worlds of imagination that they see.

Art Where You're At is an informal series showcasing online offerings at museums and galleries you may not be able to visit.