

Troy Brauntuch

by
Robert Becker



TROY BRAUNTUCH PHOTOGRAPHED BY DIANNE RADLER. BACKGROUND DRAWING "UNTITLED," 1982, PENCIL ON COTTON, 9' x 8' (THREE PANELS).
SWEATER—PIETROVANNI BY JOHN RIMA; CAMERA—NIKON

In my visits to 28-year-old Troy Brauntuch's studio over three weeks time, only slight advancements had been made on the 9' x 8' work-in-progress covering the far wall. Troy draws slowly and deliberately with soft, white pencil on stretched, black-dyed cotton, dramatically lit and theatrically charged scenes of cool manipulated mystery. He borrows bits of his imagery from photographs: anonymous narratives shot by war correspondents, lonely, ambiguous, film noir-type stills, and snaps of grand, well-ordered architecture. No vignette is complete; the viewer must try and finish the story on his own. Troy teases the confidence we have in our ability to judge-with-a-glimpse and undermines what we think to be an infallibility of perception. These delicate and excruciatingly subtle drawings require serious thought.

Troy's latest work will be on exhibition at the Mary Boone Gallery this May—certainly worth a long look.

TROY BRAUNTUCH: So, did you do any research on me?

ROBERT BECKER: Some. There's not a lot written about you, which I think is because of a lack of understanding of your work. You're a pretty hard person to write about. Why are your drawings so subtle, why not draw more clearly using color?

TB: I don't like using color at the moment.

RB: There is something about the sharp contrast between black and white—I don't think color photography comes close to it. Why not use another medium? Why not make films? Why are you drawing?

TB: There are a lot of things that people want to do and they don't do them. Hopefully, I'm incorporating in my works my feelings about alternatives, or making my films via my drawings.

RB: Is it for practical reasons that you're doing what you're doing—in a studio, by yourself?

TB: Kind of. It's private, singular, one

person and only one person working.

RB: Do you enjoy doing it also?

TB: At its moments. I enjoy the moments when it transcends or changes, when something really works. It might be a detail. Like when you're a kid and you draw a face really well and you show your mom and she says, "Oh, that's really great." It operates on various levels.

RB: Which do you like better: actually drawing or seeing it when it's finished?

TB: Oh, seeing it when it's finished. I couldn't keep doing it if I didn't keep thinking about what it will look like when it's done. Actually, sometimes it's pretty depressing working.

RB: Depressing or just boring?

TB: Depressing. Most of it is that I don't believe in having any subject matter or any specific image that I stand behind completely.

RB: Is that why you only do a detail from a photograph rather than the whole photo-

graph?

TB: Everything becomes a detail, really, so there are no complete photographs. No matter what it is it all ends up being detail. It's all fragments. It's the dilemma of consciousness trying to decide what to make us see.

RB: I think of photographs as being a complete picture—there's no more to it, but you're right, photographs are really details of something much bigger. Your drawings are details of details.

TB: In my work there are images that could be continued if one wanted to.

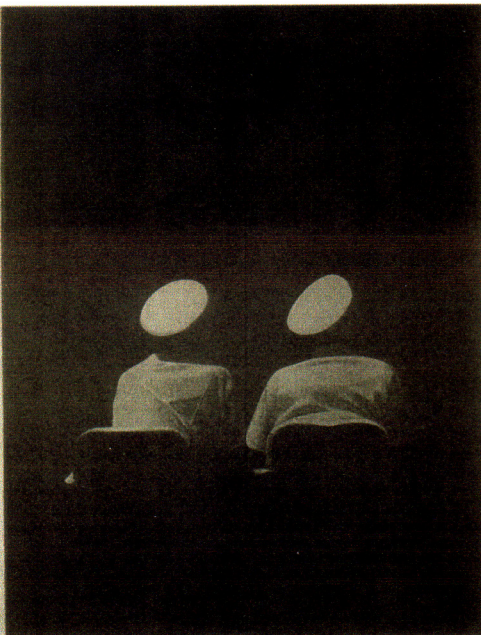
RB: Do you want the viewer to do that?

TB: Continue it? I think they automatically do.

RB: Try to imagine what the rest of it will look like?

TB: Yes, I think everyone does that. They automatically, whether consciously or unconsciously, make a place for it, like the piece I'm working on now, the soldier and

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TROY BRAUNTUCH, "UNTITLED," 1982. PENCIL ON COTTON, 96" x 68" (TWO PANELS). FROM THE SPEYER FAMILY COLLECTION. PHOTO COURTESY OF MARY BOONE GALLERY.

the jeep—finish the hood, wonder what's behind the door or give the guy a head. For me he has a head, it's really not a distortion—his head is missing because the light is hitting him in such a way.

RB: Should I try to figure out what the image is? Should I spend time with the image or should I just sit back and say, "What I'm looking at is lovely," and leave it at that?

TB: I think you'd probably try to figure out what it is. Assuming that one does, I think when the work goes up in a gallery, people probably don't spend much time looking at it—I know I don't. It's usually, "I like that," or, "It's really interesting," without much thought. I think if one really wants to know what the image is, there's usually enough information in the drawings that they can figure it out.

RB: Do you want to hold people? People don't really look at art, as you said, it's too hard. We just run in and out quickly.

TB: Well, I believe it should go on a wall where people will be around it for a long time. I'm conscious of that prior to making the work. Some may never see it though. I'm not really sure how people see.

RB: Why be mysterious? What are you hiding?

TB: People think that obscurity is hiding something, that by not being so readable I'm hiding something.

RB: Is that right?

TB: No, I don't think I'm hiding anything. It might be failing in terms of being something. Someone said to me, "Do you want it so hard to see?" I find that hard to understand because they're easy to see.

RB: Is the glass in the framing for protection or is it a shrouding device?

TB: It's a shroud and a completion. I wouldn't call it a device though. It's not such an act that one should spend time with it. If you isolate it in a frame and frames have glass in them, then you can go from there and say, "Well it's making it a little hard to see, but the fact that it is contained that way is probably important to the work." Basically it's just an extension of the idea and it's not so outside of that point that I'm concerned with one seeing himself in glass.

RB: You mentioned that you'd like them hung in a place where you have to see them and see them and see them. Doesn't the gallery defeat that since one's shows are so short?

TB: Well, it's defeated already by the fact that it's up in a gallery like that. It's very sterile and cool. It's so public.

RB: Where would you like them hung?

TB: By a beautiful table or at the top of a stairway or in a bedroom at night when the lights are out or in the morning—private. The nature of the work is private.

RB: Why do you put them in a gallery then?

TB: Well, I do like shows. I want to see the work all together up on the walls. It's still private to me. Publicly, I can't read what people are seeing in terms of how it looks in a gallery.

RB: Do you go to your own openings?

TB: I have to. I think everyone has to. I certainly don't want to, but I guess it goes with the job or something. Everyone would think I was terrible if I didn't.

RB: There are some artists who don't.

TB: I think it's just that if other people are going to go and friends are going to go then you have to go or it's not a very nice

gesture.

RB: What do you think about people asking you questions about your work?

TB: People don't usually ask questions in public—they either acknowledge that they kind of like it or they don't.

RB: Is it very often that people will question you?

TB: Mainly people I talk to are good friends—there's a different relationship then. It's an understanding between artists. Usually work that is very good is, I think, ultimately addressed to other artists.

RB: Do you see other artists' work? Do you go to the galleries?

TB: Yes, but less and less.

RB: Are there artists whose work you feel close to or like?

TB: I don't know if I should say anything about that.

RB: What kind of art do you like?

TB: I don't know, I just like good art.

RB: How early on did you want to become an artist?

TB: Very early. I could draw good pictures so people thought I should be an artist.

RB: What did you draw as a child? Did you draw freehand?

TB: I think I was appropriating imagination.

RB: Did you trace or did you have something to the right of you and you would draw from it?

TB: I would draw from something. It was a real dilemma and it seems to be a dilemma that's going on now. I had a very good friend when I was young and I used to go over to his house and we used to draw pictures three or four days a week. We were the two artists in the grammar school.

I would always draw the same thing which was a face, a figure, a house or a castle—I could draw those very, very well. He, on the other hand, would draw war scenes and perfect figures and could make up pictures. I couldn't make up pictures. He had so much imagination and I had—I hesitate to say facility, because it sounds like I was lacking imagination, but...

RB: You were a draftsman.

TB: I was a good drawer. But, he somehow knew how to draw a gladiator. This was when I was eight or nine years old. I was very young.

RB: It was a real competition.

TB: It was a very heavy afternoon we'd have. Then we'd put the pictures up and throw darts at them.

RB: Do you still feel competition now? Maybe you don't have your best friend next to you, but is there a general feeling of competition?

TB: You mean making art now? Yes, sure.

RB: Where does it come in? Is it the speed with which you work, the amount, the quality?

TB: It's a feeling that one can translate better or just make better art. I can't say

anything specific in terms of one idea being better than another. I think that everything has gotten sort of arbitrary right now. If I like someone's art and I think it's good art, then I think it's a tragedy that we compete the way we do. Obviously, I operate from that and it's necessary for me to make my work, but I can't think of anything being done right now that should sell that much over something else.

RB: You're in an interesting position because of the gallery you show in. I wanted to ask you about a competition between you and some of the other artists in your gallery who get a lot of attention.

TB: I don't like the word competition—nothing is settled right now so there is nothing to worry about.

RB: That's right, the textbooks haven't been written yet.

TB: Nothing is very clear. We talked about obscurity in my work, that is, it's read in such a way that either you can or can't see it. The nature of art is becoming basically obscured. It's our passionate love for hide and seek.

RB: We were talking about imagination, do you use an opaque projector?

TB: Yes.

RB: Do you draw directly over the projection or do you just flick it on and off?

TB: Flick it on and off. I don't think any of those things matter. I don't think it has anything to do with imagination. It doesn't matter whether one draws freehand or makes up a face. What we are dealing with is the art piece. That's all we're really concerned with.

RB: Do you alter the original photographs ever?

TB: Sure.

RB: When I first noticed your work I looked for titles. I needed titles to find out what was going on.

TB: I certainly at times want to title artworks. It's very hard to do.

RB: If you were to title them, would you title them what they are?

TB: No.

RB: Would you say "Soldier and Jeep"?

TB: No, but there are some pieces that I've come close to titling. I drew the Berlin zookeeper going to the zoo at the end of W.W. II, walking the prize baboon. I loved the title "Zookeeper." It would be the title and narrative of a movie if I were to make one—"Zookeeper."

RB: Is there a medium you feel closest to following what you're doing now?

TB: No.

RB: Do you read books?

TB: Yes.

RB: What kind of books do you like?

TB: I don't like novels.

RB: Do you read poetry?

TB: Not much. Now and then. I usually read history or philosophy—something that seems to open up a door or is directly

thinking about something that's not—I don't like reading fiction or reading stories. I guess I've been nurtured on TV and movies and imagery. I get bored with not being able to pull from something. That's the problem then because there's so much to pull from that it's impossible to assimilate it. If one can't assimilate it all, there's almost a futility in doing any of it.

RB: Why do you use war imagery, why Nazi imagery?

TB: I don't think I've ever used Nazi imagery the way people have written about and objected to.

RB: You've used the swastika before.

TB: I've never used the swastika, I would never use a swastika.

RB: What about a German soldier from World War II?

TB: Once. The closest I've come to using a German soldier was—

RB: Never Hitler?

TB: Never his face. Never really Hitler. Never the man we know as Hitler.

RB: What about war though? Why has that been something you've used? I don't need to be so specific about it. Here we have a jeep right in front of us, with a soldier at the wheel. There's the piece we talked about earlier where, even though it's a still from a movie, a child is shooting off a rifle over the body of a soldier. Plus the piece with two, I think they're naval officers, reviewing battleships or having tea.

TB: Right, the backs of two naval officers looking out on...

RB: Do you think that warfare is somewhat charged, the whole idea of the military is a charged topic?

TB: Yes. There's no judgement though. It's open to someone, it's open territory.

RB: But it's controversial.

TB: I don't understand it's controversy, really.

RB: Most people condemn it.

TB: You condemn it, but it's a fact. I don't think my relationship to it is the battlefield or the enemy or what it feels like to be shot. I guess it comes much more out of its existence, which is undeniable. We have constant references to it. When I started, I was amazed by all of the books on the shelves on the war—W.W.II.

RB: So there are no politics involved in what you're doing. You're not saying, "This is war, war is bad." It's simply a fact.

TB: Obviously, in my thought that's there. I don't think the politics of it exist in the world. I don't think my concern is the pros and cons of does war exist or doesn't it, or even its meaning. Basically, they're images. They are a thing to look at. I wouldn't, again, title the work or describe it to someone in terms of a war. I wouldn't say, "This is 1938 or 1941 and this is the outskirts of Paris." The nice thing about most of those photographs is that there's no photographer's credit. It's very non-specific. If you look through the books—talk about fragmenting—you'll see pictures on top of pictures. Buildings and guns and hands in the ground and people talking to each other and someone going over a hill. That would move you if you saw it on TV and then in the newspapers. Their concern turns into aesthetic. Taking a good shot is kind of an aftermath on a different level: put it on paper, put it in an ad, use it as propaganda, blow it up. There's no point in even starting to talk about whether it's a good picture or not. □

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