



# MAKING HIS MARK



Santa Fe artist **JAMES DRAKE** explores the complexities, challenges, and contradictions of the human condition

BY NANCY ZIMMERMAN | PHOTOS BY PETER OGILVIE

**There's something both life-changing and life-affirming in the work of James Drake.** His drawings, videos, sculpture, photography, and installations offer wide-ranging commentaries on the state of humanity, addressing both the material world and the metaphysical realm via representations of people, animals, current events, and cultural and historic milestones. Impossible to categorize or label, Drake's work stands out for its ability to inspire contemplation, elicit discussion, and lure the viewer into an all-encompassing world characterized by both heroism and fatal flaws, cultural clashes and moments of joy. Whatever his medium, Drake has created a consistent vocabulary of images that function as allegories to explore deep questions about humanity, civilization, and the conflicts of good and evil.

While his work has developed maturity and depth over the years, there was never a time that Drake wasn't an artist, nor was there ever any question that art would become his life's work in some form. Even as a small child he was fascinated by the world around him, both visually and experientially, so the seeds that would blossom into a serious talent were sown early in his life.

"I was always drawing or making things as a child," Drake recounts. "I would draw pictures or put together model airplanes or boats, making things out of wood. I wasn't that good at sports, so I read a lot and enjoyed solitary endeavors. It's still like that to this day—I have no assistants to help with my art making and never did. It's kind of a solitary way to pursue your life, but I like it."

"Solitary" might seem an odd way to characterize the life of such an affable, accessible person. With his easygoing Texas drawl and a casual, unpretentious manner, Drake quickly dispels any awe one might feel in the presence of such a major figure in the art world. Throughout the four-plus decades of his career, his work has been included in the Venice Biennale in 2007 and the Whitney Biennial in 2000, and has also been shown in museums and galleries throughout the country, including SITE Santa Fe, the Smithsonian American Art Museum in Washington, DC, the Art Museum of South Texas in Corpus Christi, and the Museum of Contemporary Art San Diego, among many others. He is the recipient of numerous awards, including three National Endowment for the Arts grants, a John Simon Guggenheim Memorial Foundation Fellowship, and a Nancy Graves Award for Visual Artists.





Drake works on his large-scale drawing, *City of Tells*, charcoal on paper mounted on canvas. The piece, a continuation of his 2005 installation of the same name at SITE Santa Fe, is populated with the artist's family and friends as well as people of note through the ages: Diego Rivera, Michelangelo, Raphael, Goya, and Murray Gell-Mann, among many others. Opposite: Drake's worktable is alive with sketches and studies, some of which will appear in the mural while others are completed works. Another section of the mural features a banquet table, a recurring theme in his work.

Born in Lubbock, Texas, in 1946, Drake and his entire family moved to Guatemala when he was two years old. "Back in the 1930s, my mom and her sister wanted to seek their fortunes, but they knew that if they stayed in West Texas they'd end up being glorified secretaries. So they moved to Mexico City, then to Guatemala City, and they loved it there. After a while they came back to Texas and my mother married my dad, and later the whole family went back to Guatemala. It's been an incredible influence on me, and I remember everything about it."

Unfortunately, the political situation in Guatemala at the time was a turbulent one, and Drake remembers seeing tanks in his front yard and people shooting at each other. Deciding it was unsafe to stay there, the family moved back to Lubbock, where he attended elementary school. When his parents divorced in 1960, he moved with his mother to El Paso, where he went to high school.

"In high school I was that kid who was the artist," he says. "There's always one, right? In addition to the singer, the super-

athlete, the brainy one. I drew pictures, and I was the artist for the yearbook. I also took art lessons on the side."

Drake decided at age 14 that he wanted to pursue art seriously, and his supportive mother helped to facilitate that dream. "She took me to Mexico City to see the works of Diego Rivera, José Clemente Orozco, David Alfaro Siqueiros, and Frida Kahlo, and that had an incredibly profound effect on me," he says. "Also, as a kid I remember going to the movie theater and sitting there, completely enthralled by the scale of everything, that incredibly huge screen where all of this adventure was taking place. So now when I do something like a large-scale piece, I always have it in the back of my mind that I want to achieve that same scale and sense of adventure, of awe, of discovery."

After graduating from high school in 1964, he headed to Los Angeles to study at the ArtCenter College of Design, where he earned a BFA and an MFA. "Los Angeles in the '60s was a pretty exciting place," he recalls fondly. He got involved with music there and met a lot of big names in that industry who were interested in

PREVIOUS PAGE: PHOTO BY PETER OGILVIE, COURTESY OF THE TIA COLLECTION







Drake fills in a geographic detail of a new iteration of *City of Tells*. On the far wall is a self-portrait in pastel and ink beside a series of smaller works in ink and iodine.

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art. He also explored the galleries that lined La Cienega Boulevard, including the Ferus Gallery, famous for showing the early work of contemporary artists like Ed Ruscha. “I really loved LA, and always thought I would stay there and teach.”

Despite a few interviews, however, he was never offered a job, so he returned to El Paso, where he felt at home with the Hispanic culture that recalled his days in Guatemala. “El Paso is a very interesting place,” he says. “A lot of my work then revolved around the border—the tensions, the conflicts, the humanity. I still do a lot of stuff like that to this day.”

Although Drake had majored in painting at ArtCenter, he was most attracted to drawing. “I came to the conclusion that the world didn’t need another painter,” he says. “I liked drawing because to me it was the basis for everything—painting, sculpture, even film. When I did my first video, drawing was the basis of my first storyboard for the film. It’s my core.”

The video, called *Exit Juárez*, was filmed with a Betacam. “It was about a guy tattooing a friend of his using the old style, where you take a toothbrush and cut off the ends so you just have the handle, with needles embedded in it. You do it by hand, not with a machine,” he explains. “I was in several galleries then, and I went to them and told them I wanted to include the video in my exhibit. It was 1979, so they didn’t even have the equipment to display a video. I agreed to pay for it. They had never heard of including video in an art exhibit, but it was a big hit.”

In the course of gathering material for video, Drake was also acquiring ideas for his drawing. “I’ve done about 10 or 12 videos,” he says. “I started carrying a video camera around with me, and when I saw something that intrigued me I would film it. When I crossed the border into Juárez, Mexico, I would tape the camera onto the dashboard of my truck so I would automatically film everything while I was driving around. I still have hours and hours of that kind of footage that I might use for some project in the future.”





*Can We Know the Sound of Forgiveness* (2021), charcoal on paper mounted on canvas. Drake made this drawing during the pandemic lockdown, a time when he wanted to address the issues everyone was grappling with: chaos, desperation, and, ultimately, forgiveness.





Drake is known for his ability to capture the beauty and versatility of the human figure. His subtly executed representations burst with life, implying physical strength and action even when the muscles are in repose. *Exit Juárez*, in charcoal, tape, and various small objects on paper, demonstrates his skill at combining sweeping gestures with fine detail.

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His venture into video was actually an outgrowth of his interest in photography, some of which accompanied his drawings in the Whitney Biennial of 2000. “I never considered myself a photographer,” he says. “I was a recorder of people and street scenes in different locations, mostly in El Paso. I used a lot of the photos as a basis for my drawings and sculpture. I also went through a 20-year period where I did lots of steel sculpture, such as a Civil Rights project that covered the Alabama police dog attacks on protesters, the Children’s March, the fire-hosing of the people.”

Drake doesn’t delve into the mechanics of the art forms, however, preferring to let professionals do the technical work of developing the photos or entering the edits for his films. “Even though I do video, I’m not that technically proficient and don’t particularly want to be.” It’s the same with photography. “I wasn’t interested in developing the film or using a darkroom. I was more interested in immediately capturing the human element, the human condition as I saw it.”

For the past 10 or 15 years Drake has been creating drawings almost exclusively. “I like to draw on a really large scale,” he says. “I like the physicality of it, the drama, and the engagement—not necessarily my own engagement but the viewer’s.”

He begins these large-scale drawings by making marks, using charcoal, graphite, and ink to create dots and lines that eventually morph into complex figures and objects. The worlds he thus envisions are seductive ones, leading us to re-examine relationships and reactions as he underscores the tensions, anomalies, and realities of human interaction and development. The exhibitions that come out of this process tend to be epic and memorable, more like major events than typical art shows.

His landmark 2005 installation *City of Tells* at SITE Santa Fe, for example, consisted of two large pieces about 12 feet high by 32 feet long. One was a video in three parts that chronicled

the spontaneous behavior of a hummingbird, a python, and a herd of swine when confronted with a banquet table. The video’s soundtrack was composed by Pascal Dusapin, a recipient of the Victoire de la Musique—the French Music Academy Award—for the composer of the year. The other piece was a charcoal drawing on paper, mounted on canvas, of a social gathering, with the same banquet table in the background. The gathering’s attendees were a collection of people who were important in Drake’s life. According to SITE’s catalog, “...by using the motif of the table as a Renaissance tableau, Drake references biblical tales and cultural mythology. *City of Tells* poetically addresses a collective Western history and life.”

Another memorable exhibit was 2002’s *The Hummingbird’s Equation*, in which Drake collaborated with Nobel Prize-winning physicist Murray Gell-Mann. Drake created 30 drawings on paper of hummingbirds enhanced by penciled captions of mathematical equations by Gell-Mann that together quantified the bird’s seemingly magical ability to fly more than 600 miles on 2.1 grams of nectar.

In 2014’s *Anatomy of Drawing and Space (Brain Trash)* at the Museum of Contemporary Art San Diego, Drake created 1,242 drawings in pencil, ink, and charcoal that encompassed mathematical formulas, skeletons, and wild animals to examine violence and division between humans and animals. The museum characterized the exhibition this way: “Drake’s confidence as an artist and virtuosity as a draftsman are on display in this retrospective reckoning of his overriding themes of order and chaos, life and death, and legacy and innovation. Contemporary and traditional both, this cycle of drawings serves as an echo of the artist’s studio—the artist’s mind—played out on an epic scale.”

When it comes to his own legacy, Drake is less interested in enduring fame and more concerned with maintaining the honesty





These sketches on paper were inspired by the larger work *Can We Know the Sound of Forgiveness* (page 136). Drake says, “The smaller drawings are more of an intimate response to those feelings of desperation evoked by the pandemic.”



Drake in his studio, where he puts in hours of work daily, even when not preparing for a show. While his discipline is rigorous, his enjoyment of the process yields a prolific output and adds freshness to his work even as he revisits the recurring themes that have become his trademark.

that is the essence of his work. “I’d simply like to be known as someone who actually contributed to art and the way we see it,” he says. “I try to maintain a high level of honesty and quality.”

That honesty extends to his motivation in creating the art in the first place. “You have to engage people somehow, but how do you do that?” Drake asks. “That is the mystery. If you have an idea of how you want people to feel, and you create a work to do that, it’s a kind of manipulation. People will resist that. They’re not stupid, and they know when you’re being insincere. And they also can tell when you are honest. It’s an interesting quality of human beings, and animals have it, too.”

He says that he doesn’t believe in creative epiphanies, either. “You have to work at it every day. Then the work just evolves. You

don’t even need to have an idea to start with—you just work until it comes. I like the physical aspect of making marks on a two-dimensional surface, and I like using my hands. That’s how it all starts, and that’s why I like to work without assistants other than to put things up or take them down. I don’t want anyone else making a mark on my work. I don’t belittle others who do it that way, but it’s just not my way.”

Ultimately, Drake’s purpose is to continue to mine life’s mysteries for his subject matter. “Having to create work for an upcoming exhibition motivates me and keeps me engaged with the world,” he says. “I like the give and take—the conversation with the world. I want to retain my excitement and wonder over something new, and for me that means making art.” \*