

RICHARD GRAY GALLERY

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IN THE
STUDIO

Erwan Gibbs

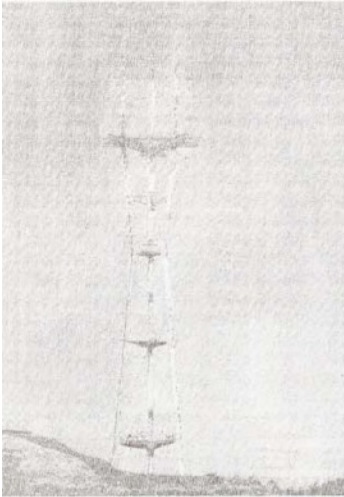
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THEY DEPICT

BY MARINA CASHDAN
PHOTOGRAPHS BY ANTONY CROOK



Ewan Gibbs in his studio. Each of his works requires weeks and months to complete. "In a world dedicated to developing speedy communication," says his London dealer, Timothy Taylor, "Ewan's drawings intriguingly represent a moment of respite." Opposite: *San Francisco*, 2005 in graphite on paper.

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EWAN GIBBS LIVES IN A PINK HOUSE ON THE EDGE OF Farringdon, England, a sleepy market town less than two hours by car from London. The three-story early Georgian structure, where he lives with his wife and their two young children, has all the characteristics of its architectural era and charming eccentricities of its age: stained-glass windows, creaky floorboards, hidden and oddly shaped doors, intricate moldings and sash windows. The smallest of the three top-floor rooms, which have low, beamed ceilings, is Gibbs's studio. "It's actually perfect, because I can't hear anything up here. It's physically a long way away," says Gibbs, who is composed and straightforward, with a gentle voice and a boyishness that's enhanced by his casual attire of striped sweater, jeans and sneakers. "If I want to get a cup of tea, it's a long walk, and so that gives me a mental break."

The studio is small, with just enough room for his drawing table, a chair and not much else, but the light on this September afternoon pours through the dormer windows, making it feel larger. A simple shelf is stacked with CDs—Gibbs follows emerging indie bands like Fleet Foxes, Vampire Weekend and Arcade Fire—and a CD player rests just behind the adjustable tabletop where he works, beside a massive pile of Faber-Castell pencils. Tacked to the wall are drawings of such San Francisco landmarks as the Golden Gate Bridge and the Coit Tower. Soon, they will be shipped to the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, which commissioned 18 drawings by the artist to celebrate its 75th anniversary. Also pinned up are pictures by his five-year-old daughter, including a Father's Day card, as well as a black-and-white photograph, ripped from a magazine, of an aging Edward Hopper sitting at his easel. "I like that picture," Gibbs says, "because it gives you hope—doing it for your whole life."

At 36, he is already clearly devoted to his craft. In addition to the SFMOMA exhibition, which runs from January 16 through June 20, a solo show of his work will be at Chicago's Richard Gray Gallery in March and at the Lora Reynolds Gallery, in Austin, this fall (he is represented by the Timothy Taylor gallery, in London, and also works with the Baldwin Gallery, in Aspen). Gibbs made his name with unique grisaille drawings of landscapes, hotel rooms and well-known buildings. These potentially mundane subjects are transformed by the way he renders them: On standard A4 paper (8.3 by 11.7 inches), using a grid as a structure, he draws hundreds of pen or pencil circles and slashes, symbols recognizable to anyone who has ever knit a sweater or a scarf. The image is thus deconstructed into something more pixelated, abstract and sometimes so faintly rendered as to be nearly absent.

Gibbs says the technique "found him" when he was stuck in a rut while still a student at London's Goldsmiths »

From top: Three of Gibbs's new graphite-on-paper drawings, each entitled *San Francisco*, 2009, commissioned by SFMOMA for its 75th anniversary this year. Center: The artist transcribes a photographic image into a series of intricate marks based on those in knitting instructions. "I liked the logic of them" he says of the symbols.

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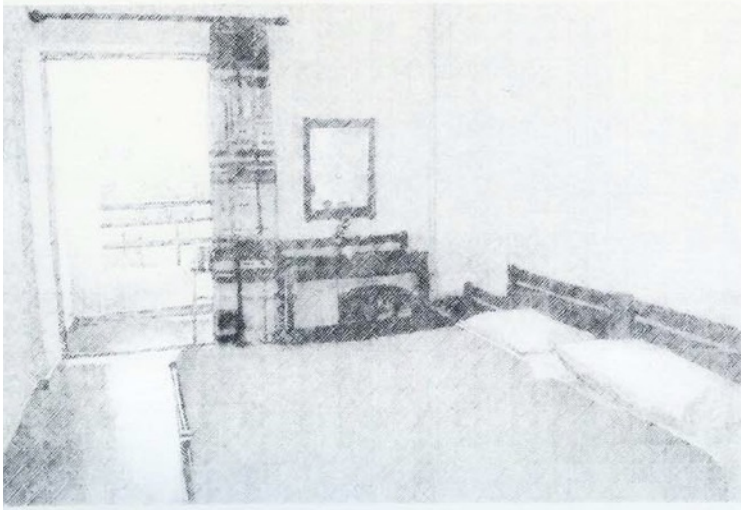


college, in 1996: "I was making paintings, and then I got in this weird position where I knew I wanted to paint but I didn't know what I wanted to paint or how, in what language. And I felt like I was being really derivative of painters I admired at the time, including Patrick Caulfield and Lichtenstein and also Bonnard and Vermeer." Then he found a book on knitting patterns. Gibbs was intrigued by the way many of the instructional symbols stood for colors of yarn, which, for his purposes, he translated into tonal marks made with a pencil. "I liked the logic of them," he says. "That was the turning point."

His initial knitting-symbol drawings—in his first gallery exhibition, at Maureen Paley Interim Art, in London—were based on photographs of hotel rooms he collected from vacation brochures. But viewers insisted on interpreting the pictures, rather than focusing, as he wished, on how they were created. "When I was doing the hotel interiors, people would start analyzing that they were about loneliness or isolation," he says. "[So] I moved to façades, thinking that they had less meaning."

Top: The artist's studio, a tiny room on the third floor of the rambling Georgian house he shares with his family. Clockwise from far left: *New York*, 2008; Gibbs, taking a break in the countryside near his house; another *New York* drawing from 2008; and *Typical Interior*, 2006, one of his early depictions of hotel rooms based on vacation brochures. Viewers would start interpreting the drawings as about loneliness or isolation, so, he explains, "I moved to façades, thinking that they had less meaning."

He followed those pictures with a series of baseball pitchers in balletic positions (shown at the Lora Reynolds Gallery in 2008) and then with portraits of New York, London and Paris landmarks, including the Chrysler Building, Big Ben and the Eiffel Tower. These drawings, first shown at Timorhy Taylor in 2008, have garnered Gibbs the most >>



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recognition, including a commission from the Armory Show in New York to create the visual identity for its 2009 edition. "Drawing is a primal activity and, in Ewan's case, a painstaking one," says gallerist Taylor. Each drawing is the accretion of weeks and months of minute mark making, and through this labor- and time-intensive method, "Gibbs also addresses the question of time. In a world dedicated to developing speedy communication, coupled with a desire for higher clarity and definition, his drawings intriguingly represent a moment of respite: The image is dissolving rather than appearing."



Gibbs's works are clearly influenced by those of Hopper and the Photorealist painter Robert Bechtle, but they also evoke the delicate drawings by Vija Celmins, whom he cites as a "huge inspiration." To a list of art-historical references that may be detected in his pictures—realism, Pointillism, Minimalism—Gibbs adds Pop, because of his use of iconic images. "I think of these almost like celebrity buildings," Gibbs quips. His aim is to prevent any contextual emotional analysis; the images are so familiar they almost lack meaning. Instead the drawings' power lies in their intricate honeycomb patterns and the irresistible nostalgia aroused

by the postcardlike scenes. Both engaging and mesmerizing, they are accessible despite their extraordinary complexity.

The artist gets a special thrill from the dissociation of the creation from its creator and the very act of creating. "I think it's interesting that with this drawing, for example," he says as he works, "that someone will look at this mark but not know that at this moment I was having a conversation with you." No matter what is going on around him, he continues, "the drawing remains constant. I'm not interested in telling people about myself. [My work] is more to do with perception and the way we look at pictures and how pictures are made—that's what I'm interested in, rather than some political idea."

Gibbs now bases his drawings on photographs that he takes himself, spending a week or two in a given location with tourist books and a digital camera. Despite such preparation, he insists that his representations are not exact: "The weird thing is that they kind of look precise, but they're not at all precise; in a way they're very generalized." If the representations lack precision, his approach does not: At his drawing board, with the graph paper turned upside down, his pencils neatly lined up next to him, using a pointer to guide himself as he meticulously makes the circles in varying pencil grades, he appears engaged in a nearly scientific process.

"I'm not interested in telling people about myself," Gibbs says of his practice. "My work is more to do with perception and the way we look at pictures and how pictures are made." Top: The artist, leafing through a portfolio of his works, and a detail of the pile of pencils he keeps at his drawing table. Left: *San Francisco*, 2009.

He is at his drawing board by 9 A.M. each day and works, with small breaks, until 5:30 P.M. "Then we have dinner and hang out with the kids and put them to bed, and I work from about 8 to 10:30," he says. The routine doesn't appear to him at all monotonous. "I've done it for 15 years, and I still feel as excited by it," he says. "While I don't change that much, the world is changing around me." ☐



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