



SHELBY SHADWELL

November 21, 2015 – March 13, 2016





APEX: SHELBY SHADWELL



"I believe that my work fits into the ongoing dialogue that elevates the mundane, the ephemeral, or the vulgar to a higher status, thereby reflecting parts of society that we often refuse to acknowledge in the mirror of traditional norms."

— Shelby Shadwell

The grotesque has long held a fascination for artists, not only as a challenge to audiences – to “shock the bourgeoisie” -- but also as a challenge to their own sensibilities. Antecedents of Shelby Shadwell’s disturbing drawings can be found as far back as the 15th and 16th century in the work of Hieronymous Bosch, Pieter Bruegel the Elder and Matthias Grunewald. Italian Renaissance artists Michelangelo and Leonardo Da Vinci made graphic portrait sketches of horribly malformed men and women. Nineteenth century French artists such as Chaim Soutine and Gustave Caillebotte painted butchered meats hanging in Parisian shops. American artist Thomas Eakins cloaked his fascination as scientific inquiry in his infamously accurate depiction of a surgery, *The Clinic of Dr. Gross*, of 1885.

In fact, contemporary art is replete with grotesque imagery. However, the masterful technique and observational drawing deployed by Shadwell are rarely seen in the contemporary art of the Northwest United States. His elegantly rendered, grand scale charcoal works on linen and paper attract the eye with stunning draughtsmanship, strong contrast and deft modeling and repel it with their abhorrent subject matter. Magnified in scale, and drawn in meticulous detail, the drawings are simultaneously riveting and disgusting. Wolfgang Kayser wrote, “The grotesque instills fear

of life rather than death. Structurally, it presupposes that the categories which apply to our worldview become inapplicable.”¹² Certainly, Shadwell upends conventional notions of appropriate subject matter and calls into question ideas of what is beautiful and what is shocking.

The inspiration for this body of work came from Shadwell’s memory of childhood hours spent in the school library. He recalls being among friends who would seek out books with pictures of spiders, snakes, and other fearsome creatures and dare each other to touch the photos. The resulting superstitious, fear-induced adrenaline rush thrilled the students. The ritual eventually helped them conquer their terror and provided them the ability to deal with creepy domestic visitors later in life. More recently, at the University of Wyoming where he is Associate Professor, Shadwell began a dialogue with Professor Jeffrey Lockwood, author of *The Infested Mind: Why Humans Fear, Loathe, and Love Insects*. Sharing his interest in entomology, he mused with his colleague about childhood memories, wondering, perhaps wryly, if there might not be a sort of therapeutic aspect to his current practice.

Shadwell’s approach to art is process-driven. He often assigns complex problems to himself as well as to his students. *Self Portrait* (2015) is one of a number of self-portraits he completes



Auniversal Picture 3, 2012



annually. Embracing an artists' tradition of illustrating themselves at work, Shadwell shows himself kneeling in front of his studio wall holding a large piece of charcoal in his raised hand. The portrait offers a clue to how he begins a drawing. Behind him, a prepared linen panel is gridded with intersecting lines, poised and ready for the artist to block in areas of dark and light. The panel has been toned to a mid-range value with the charcoal he holds. The grid lines will assist in the magnification of his subject and its accurate placement on the field. Like a contemporary version of a Caravaggio painting, the drawing's deep chiaroscuro dramatically accentuates the figure's structure, boldly defining the planes of the face, folds of the tee shirt, and the triumphantly raised arm.

Teaching is an essential part of Shadwell's practice. He teaches the way he draws, encouraging his students to understand how form works in space by promoting the development of observational skills and by explaining how positive and negative shapes define three-dimensional form. His teaching style is essentially academic, rooted in tradition and fostered in institutions such as the École des Beaux Arts in 18th and 19th century Paris. Just as the academicians spent hours drawing from plaster casts and live models, Shadwell believes in the foundational value of learning observational drawing.

Shadwell's approach is methodical and contemplative. His drawings often take over fifteen weeks to complete. He carefully observes his subject, whether a pile of bugs, a diaper supporting a tarantula, or his own image for a self-portrait. The beauty of the drawing is the paradoxical element offsetting the challenging subject matter. Conceptually, it is the yin and yang in his work, the light and dark, attraction and repulsion, representation and abstraction that deeply engage the viewer. Technically, his handling of the charcoal medium, with its ability to produce rich, velvety blacks and a wide range of grays, amplifies the seductive quality of the images and invites deeper engagement with the subject. The visual warmth produced by the powerfully rendered darks gives the drawings their tactile quality. In the cockroach drawings, pushing the value contrast to extremes with solid black passages offset by bright white reflections on the insects' shiny exoskeletons further enhances both their sensual appeal and visceral impact. Shadwell orders bugs from biological supply houses, as many as one thousand roaches at a time. He sometimes works directly from life, while at other times, from digital images he has made.

The drawings are done on paper, or linen prepared with numerous coats of sanded gesso. Shadwell builds up the image by filling in the strong dark shapes and removing the light areas with kneaded gum eraser. He draws with the eraser as well as with charcoal and pastel, sculpting shapes by opening negative space around them. White pastel and Conté are used for highlights and to modify and lighten gray areas. The additive and subtractive



Comedie 2, 2015

process becomes increasingly focused as the drawing progresses. The artist moves from expansive gestures to smaller moves, picking out highlights and dropping in small linear marks. The finished drawing is startlingly realistic, while retaining evidence of its journey towards completion in the form of smudges, erasure marks, and even fingerprints. In the end, Shadwell's richly specific, beautifully rendered drawings become paradoxical, contemplative objects that pose questions about primeval fear, not unlike the dilemma of Franz Kafka's protagonist in the brilliant existential novel, *The Metamorphosis*:

"As Gregor Samsa awoke one morning from uneasy dreams he found himself transformed in his bed into a gigantic insect. He was lying on his hard, as it were armor-plated, back and when he lifted his head a little he could see his domelike brown belly divided into stiff arched segments on top of which the bed quilt could hardly keep in position and was about to slide off completely. His numerous legs, which were pitifully thin compared to the rest of his bulk, waved helplessly before his eyes."³

One wonders if Kafka and Shadwell shared the same childhood fears.

— Bonnie Laing-Malcolmson

The Arlene and Harold Schnitzer Curator of Northwest Art

¹ Quoted from the artist's web site www.shelbyshadwell.com

² Kayser, W. (1981). *The Grottesque in Art and Literature*. New York: Columbia University Press.

³ Kafka, F. (1915). *The Metamorphosis*. Leipzig: Kurt Wolff Verlag.

BIOGRAPHY

Shelby Shadwell (American, born 1981) received his BFA degree in Studio Printmaking and Drawing from Washington University in St. Louis, Missouri in 2003, and his MFA degree in Studio Printmaking and Drawing from Southern Illinois University, Carbondale in 2006. His work has been featured in solo and two-person exhibitions at Jackson Center for the Visual Arts, Wyoming; Sidney Larson Gallery, Columbia College, Missouri; threesquared, Nashville, Tennessee; Box 13 ArtSpace, Houston, Texas; Manifest Creative Research Gallery and Drawing Center, Cincinnati, Ohio; Visual Arts Center Gallery, Arkansas State University, Jonesboro; and the 222 Shelby Street Gallery, Santa Fe, New Mexico. A selection of juried exhibitions in which his work has appeared includes: Texas National Juried Competition, First Place Award, Cole Art Center, Steven F. Austin State University, Nacogdoches; Icebreaker 5, Ice Cube Gallery, Denver; 26th Annual Northern National Art Competition, Monetary Award of Excellence, Nicolet Art Gallery, Rhinelander, Wisconsin; and 21st International Juried Exhibition, Veridian Artists Contemporary Art Gallery, New York. He has received a Visual Arts Fellowship from the Wyoming Arts Council, Cheyenne; an Extraordinary Merit in Research Award from the College of Arts and Sciences, University of Wyoming, Laramie; and an Unrestricted Monetary Award from Dave Bown Projects 6th Semiannual Competition. Shadwell is an Associate Professor at the University of Wyoming, Laramie.

APEX

An ongoing series of exhibitions featuring emerging and established artists living in the Northwest. Presenting contemporary art in the context of the Arlene and Harold Schnitzer Center for Northwest Art, this program continues the Museum's 120-year commitment to exhibiting, collecting, and celebrating the art of the region. APEX is supported in part by The Arlene and Harold Schnitzer Endowments for Northwest Art, The Paul G. Allen Family Foundation, and the Exhibition Series Sponsors.

COVER: Auniversal Picture 18, 2015 (detail)



PORTLAND ART MUSEUM

WORKS IN THE EXHIBITION

Dimensions: Height precedes width precedes depth

COMEDIE 2, 2015

Charcoal and conte on prepared linen
85 x 85 inches

COMEDIE 3, 2015

Charcoal and conte on prepared linen
85 x 85 inches

AUNIVERSAL PICTURE 18, 2015

Charcoal on prepared linen
85 x 85 inches

Self Portrait, 2015

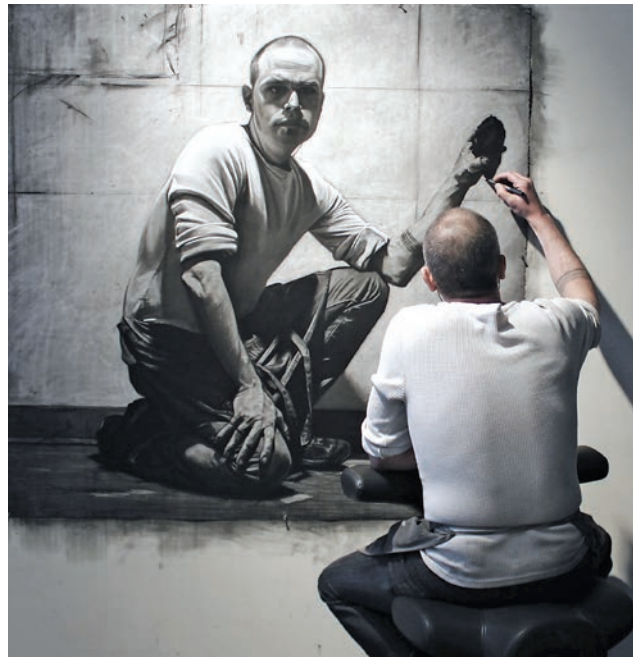
Charcoal and conte on paper
50 x 50 inches

AUNIVERSAL PICTURE 16, 2014

Charcoal on prepared linen
43 x 43 inches

AUNIVERSAL PICTURE 3, 2012

Charcoal on paper
80 x 80 inches



Self Portrait, 2015