

BELLWETHER

134 Tenth Avenue
New York, New York 10011
212.929.5959
www.bellwethergallery.com

july/august 2008



prints
drawings
photographs
books
ephemera



July/August 2008 • VOL. 12 • NO. 6

Features

Diaries of a Young Artist

Sixteen artists in their thirties write personal diary entries that address working artists

With contributions from Ellen Altfest, Adam Broomberg & Oliver Chanarin, Simon Evans, Ryan Gander, Katy Grannan, Beate Gütschow, Nina Katchadourian, Terence Koh, Ruben Ochoa, Peter Piller, Mika Rottenberg, Sterling Ruby, Kateřina Šedá, Zoe Strauss, and Kevin Zucker

With Diary Entries by **Ryan Gander** / **Katy Grannan** / **Terence Koh**
Mika Rottenberg / **Sterling Ruby** / **Zoe Strauss** / and more

Dear Diary,

Yesterday, my model, X, quit in the middle of the painting. Three months of work, gone. Ugh. I'm actually glad that he left. But I also feel that nagging "Now what?" creeping up. I asked X to pose because of his red hair. (I had the idea I would make paintings that spanned the whole spectrum of body hair color.) And he came recommended by a close friend. At first, he seemed eager and cheerful. He told me he was a hippie and a very mellow person and said I was one of his favorite artists. He had a beard and kind of looked like one of the men in Picasso's Vollard series, which has been a recent inspiration. During the breaks he would lounge around naked and I would visualize future compositions.

Early on, however, I noticed that X didn't stop talking; it was like his mind was set to output and the words just kept coming. Content was an abstraction. After weeks of listening, I reached my breaking point. One day he began a monologue that went something like, "Do you ever think about how beautiful dolphins are, the rippling water swirling around their glistening bodies and the white mist in the air..." It was then that I realized I couldn't paint and listen/respond any more. I came up with the idea to drown out his constant chatter with podcasts, quality programming. But X talked over them trying to one-up whatever the subject of the podcast was with some personal association.

X also had trouble sitting still. The pose I'd had him take was somewhat difficult to get into—a reclining position with the shoulders turning away and the hips turned forward. Still, it was the same pose every day, and I'd have to give him the same instruction over and over during each twenty-five minute session. It'd go from polite to less polite. I'd start with "Please keep your shoulder down," but toward the end it would devolve to "Shoulder! Shoulder! Shoulder!"

Then there was the stretching in the middle of the pose. There's a moment, for an observational painter, between when you look at the model and when you put the paint onto the canvas. You keep the image of what you have seen in your mind and it's as if you're still seeing it when you mix the paint. Well, he'd see me looking down at my palette and stretch, and the movement would take my attention away from the painting and back to him. He'd stare into my face and make eye contact with me, which made me feel oddly self-conscious.

I'm willing to endure a certain amount of discomfort to make the painting I want to. So I forged ahead. I told X I needed to focus and implemented a no-talking rule. That was the beginning of the end. You can't have two people together in a studio all day on mute.

X began to deteriorate. He was fired from his other part-time job and a series of personal misfortunes resulted. He came down with the flu and he'd come in virtually incoherent and sit there and groan with discomfort. He'd ask me to pay for his coffee, after I'd bought him the teapot, tea and honey he'd asked for. He criticized the sandwiches I brought in for lunch and the portion size. He'd ask for additional snacks ("Nuts would be nice"). He asked for recommendations to Yale, Hunter, and Skowhegan. He stopped bathing and that soon became unpleasant. He had frequent erections. In addition, X was chronically sleep deprived. He'd come in at 9:30 after going out till four the night before and then fall asleep. Then his head, unsupported, would start jerking around.

Two days ago, we had an argument about the heater. I said that if we turned it on he'd fall asleep. This infuriated him; he said I was depriving him of his basic needs and his humanity. There was some truth in this but it was also true that he was a person who was not doing his job. I could have fired him but I had worked so long on the painting I was in the vulnerable position of needing him more than he needed me. He could find a new job but I needed his specific body to finish the painting. I wondered if I had set up a bad dynamic between us by cropping his head out of the composition.

I asked what we could do so that he could feel comfortable and stay awake and I could get my work done. He suggested I buy him some expensive vitamins for energy. I suggested he go to bed earlier. At the end of the next break he wouldn't get off the phone. I asked him if he could wait till lunch to make the call and it was then that he quit. I said that I couldn't believe he'd do this to another artist, after all the time I'd spent and money I'd paid him. "Thanks for all the money," he replied. That's when I told him to get out. He continued talking and I yelled it several times until he left. I'm not sure it felt good but it felt justified.

Today, working with Tom, my other model, who is even-tempered and mild-mannered, I feel more relaxed. I'm painting the hair on his legs one by one onto a small canvas. I paint little marks on his leg that look like freckles then matching marks on my canvas to mark my place. He plays Akron/Family for me on his Ipod, and I like it. We listen to Devotchka and the Savage Lovecast. I remember that people who visit my studio always seem to like the painting I was working on of Tom best. Had the conflict with X become manifest in my painting of him? My mind drifts between disappointment, relief, and thoughts of what I'm going to do next. Could I trust another model? Maybe it is time to make a still life. Even though I'm excited to start something new, as I'm writing this I can't help but look over and reflect on the promise in that now permanently unfinished painting.