

# JAMES DRAKE by Frances Colpitt

Holly Johnson Gallery, Dallas TX October 19 · November 30, 2007



A dominant regional presence since the 1980s, James Drake, now living in Santa Fe, is admired in Europe and the U.S. for his forthright, personal style and use of a wide range of media, including sculpture, photography, video, and drawing. His recent exhibition in Dallas, "Border of Desire," was characterized by the affective authenticity of an expressive hand and the immense power of a serious adult mind.

Also included in Robert Storr's 2007 Venice Biennale, *Tongue-Cut Sparrows (Inside Outside)* played on two small monitors in the gallery. The black-and-white video depicts women standing outside a jail in El Paso (where Drake grew up) who communicate with prisoners on the inside using their hands and arms. At Drake's request, they "signed" passages from Shakespeare, Dante, Jimmy Santiago Baca and other poetic texts, choosing, according to the artist, "certain passages ... that exemplified their love and loss and desperate need to communicate."

Revealing the kind of skilled rendering and expressive hand rarely found in art today, "Border of Desire" is primarily a drawing show. Drake studied with classically trained draftsman (and pioneer Los Angeles abstractionist) Lorser Feitelson at Art Center in the 1960s, before and after his service in Vietnam. Drawing's capacity to convey emotion is especially evident in the most haunting work in the show, *Exit Juarez* (2007), based on a photograph of a tattooed ex-convict. Like other drawings here, this one is unframed and draped loosely on the wall. The support is a tattered quilt of torn sheets of previously used white and cream papers, pockmarked with charcoal smears, black tape, paperclips, and rubber bands, providing a sense of spontaneous process rather than studied compo-

sition. With an expression of beatitude, the longhaired, bearded sitter sports a thorn-crowned Jesus tattoo covering his shirtless upper torso. The index finger on his left hand points to Christ's mouth as if to thrust itself into the cavity in the manner of Doubting Thomas. The sitter's right hand falls between his legs where every finger and nail is lovingly defined, sometimes by an eraser that sharpens the contrast between digit and ground. In smudged charcoal and ink washes, the well-defined arms and shoulders provide a contrast to the loose, lighter pants that are creased at one knee and fade to nothing at the other.

Unlike the intimate piety of *Exit Juarez*, a shrieking turbulence threatens to engulf a tender familial moment in *City of Tells (Barca de Oro)* of 2005. The twelve-and-a-half-foot-tall charcoal drawing, streaked with large silvery gashes in the paper that conjure visions of heavenly tears, includes an open-ended narrative of a boy handing a gift to his grandfather. More remarkable are the appropriated figures, represented backwards, from Géricault's *Raft of the Medusa* (1819) and Delacroix's *Barque of Dante* (1822), as well as a giant upside-down, screaming head (identified in the press materials as one of Michelangelo's *Furies*), which are rendered with confidence and authority. All this ferocity frames the frozen gesture of the boy and man who appear to be adrift in a stormy sea. From elaborate details to abstract textures, every inch of this drawing demonstrates the meaningful immediacy of mark making.

Several other drawings reference the recurrence of war in American history. One depicts the artist's grandfather, Earl Wesley, as a WWI soldier, another, a female friend from high school who was killed in Vietnam. Also included is a portrait of his cousin who died in Japan during WWII. Emphasized by his self-expressive draftsmanship, Drake reminds us of our place in history, in which no family remains untouched.



JAMES DRAKE, (TOP TO BOTTOM) *EXIT JUAREZ*, 2006, MIXED MEDIA ON PAPER, 95 X 80 IN. *CITY OF TELLS—BARCA DE ORO*, 2005, MIXED MEDIA ON PAPER, 150 X 102 IN. COURTESY HOLLY JOHNSON GALLERY, DALLAS.