

SHOW AND TELLS

Not content to rest on his sculptural laurels, James Drake draws with passion

BY DOUG MACCASH

I love artists who let their styles evolve over time. And 58-year-old Lubbock, Texas, artist James Drake, whose knockout exhibit "City of Tells" is now on display at Arthur Roger Gallery, certainly has.

Drake was one of the first bona fide postmodernists -- those artists who base modern works on classical models. He achieved fame with his big, scary welded steel sculptures, many of which were based on classical masterpieces, from the ancient Greeks to early 19th century painter Theodore Gericault. If you want to know what Drake's old style was like, check out his "Winged Figure," a full-sized nude woman about to take flight in the side courtyard of the New Orleans Museum of Art.



Drake could have ridden his popular welded-steel wave forever, repeating past successes. Instead, he's let his art shift over the years. He says he always began his sculptural projects with drawings. These days he's just letting the drawings themselves come to the fore. And what drawings they are.

"City of Tells" is dominated by a pair of super-large-scale old-fashioned realistic drawings -- with a contemporary conceptual edge.

The germ of Drake's concept, as he explains in his artist statement, is the "tell," what poker players call an unconscious mannerism that gives away an opponent's intentions. Drake sees all human interaction as a long series of unintentional tells. As a metaphor for human interaction, Drake created a gorgeous 12-by-32-foot charcoal drawing of a dinner table surrounded by great artists and authors from the past: Diego Rivera, Eugène Delacroix, Dante, etc. At the end of the table stands a little boy, a self-portrait of Drake as a child. And on the dinner table crawls a huge python.

It's the same python -- and the same table -- that appears in Drake's three-part video being shown in the gallery back room on three flat-screen TVs. The big snake elegantly crawls through the

silverware and wineglasses, hunting a scared chicken. The video ends just before the reptile swallows the bird. For that, you have to look at the stunning 10-by-15-foot charcoal drawing of the python hugging the deceased chicken (a masterpiece of pattern) in the next room -- gulp.

What does all this have to do with the "tell," you ask? Or the gathering of great artists? Or the little boy? Darned if I know. I don't know what it has to do with the video of the muddy pigs trashing the same dinner table, either. One even tries to eat the tablecloth.

Drake explained his point of view, by cell phone from the Louis Armstrong airport, like this: "Basically, I wanted to set up this elaborate banquet table in the woods to see what would happen. It was interesting because certain animals did come to the table, birds and feral hogs. There was that element of chance, just like poker."

Drake says that he enlarged on the idea by videotaping a friend's python on the same table. "I said, well, lower animals have instincts, they react a certain way. They don't have tells. But humans react entirely differently. What would happen if you put a lot of people around a dinner table? They'd eat and talk and be nice. So I took it another step and said, what would happen if all these other people, artists and writers and scientists and my family got together. It would be different. What would happen if modern artists like (Bruce) Nauman would talk to Delacroix?"

OK, so Drake's metaphors may be a bit clearer to him than they are to us (he's an artist, after all), but the skill and passion behind his ambitious recent work is crystal clear. "City of Tells" is a royal flush show by a mature master with the guts to keep on gambling.

CITY OF TELLS BY JAMES DRAKE

WHAT: Enormous charcoal drawings with a conceptual video installation by the well-known Texas artist.

WHERE: Arthur Roger Gallery, 432 Julia St., 522-1999.

WHEN: Mon-Sat, 10 a.m. to 5, through Oct. 30.

PRICES: \$2,000 for small detail drawings to \$75,000 for a major work.