JAMES DRAKE

interview by Clayton Porter and Lauren Tresp
photos by Clayton Porter

is interested in systems, the micro- and the macrocosmic. Having recently opened the show *Drawing, Reading, and Counting* at Arthur Roger Gallery in New Orleans (May 7 – June 18), the Texas-born, Santa Fe–based artist is still at work within a system he created for himself over four years ago: creating numbered drawings on nineteen by twenty-four inch paper every day. At the time of our interview, he was working on number 1,516. This structure—perhaps arbitrary to anyone but him—actualizes the continuity between the artist's every act of mark making. Despite the unique variations between pieces and the specificity of each piece to him, the work asserts a sense of passing time and shifting space that is deeply familiar. In our recent studio visit, *THE* talked to Drake about life in the studio, idealism despite sacrifice, and his total lack of hobbies.

How did your studio here in Santa Fe come about?

We bought this place in 1987 or '88, and it didn't have a studio. We were living in El Paso at that time, and we would come up for holidays, and I would work on the table in our living room. I obviously needed something here. So I built this space. I had to have at least sixteen-foot ceilings, because I wanted to do work that large. I basically built it thinking of drawing. There is an aesthetic aspect. I like the vigas. You've got to like where you work. If you hate where you work, then you should move somewhere else. So I enjoy this space; it makes me feel good and is conducive to what I do at this point in my life. I work seven days a week, believe it or not. Every day.

We only came here permanently in 2001, actually on 9/11. We were flying out of New York *on that day*. I had the place here, a studio in El Paso, a studio in Brooklyn, and a loft in Tribeca. All of that was too overwhelming: I couldn't maintain all of those spaces, financially, emotionally, psychologically. New York is a hard place to live, and I don't have any assistants. Every mark you see, I made.

Is that because you prefer doing everything yourself?

I totally prefer it that way. I keep it very basic: a mark on a piece of paper, made by me. Does that mean I don't like or respond to other approaches? Heavens no, it's just the way I like to do it. Plus, if I had an assistant, we'd be talking and listening to music… I like the introspection: you're alone in your studio, by yourself—so what do you do?

What are you working on now?

This is some new work I'm doing. I'm using envelopes, which I mount on archival paper and either draw on or include poems I've written. It just made sense to have letters on letters. Mail will probably, eventually, be a thing of the past, but when I grew up it was this ubiquitous thing that everybody got, whether it was bills, ads, letters. I like this idea that it's general and specific at the same time.

In the big show I did in California [at the Museum of Contemporary Art La Jolla/San Diego in 2014], I had 1,242 drawings; all are numbered. This is a continuation, so when this is done I will have completed 1,516 drawings of this size. This work relates to all of the work I'm showing in New Orleans and to all of the work I did for the show in California. It all integrates. Even though it is this in itself, it is also a part of something else. I like that continuity. It's my own personal art history.

Why do you like numbering?

Numbers measure everything—our years, time. They are incredibly important in human life. Without numbers you have no math; without math you have no civilization; without civilization we wouldn't be sitting here. There is only zero to nine. That's it. Those numbers can encompass the entire universe, and sometimes explain all different kinds of phenomena. I'm situating one piece of paper in this whole system of numbers, and this just happens to be number 1,516, and it is specific to me.

Most people will go, "So what? This sounds like a lot of highfalutin art talk," and that's fine, but it's important to me. I think it's a different way of looking at life and existences through numbers, through words and figures. That's why I still continue to draw figures. I like the continuation, again, of history.

Where do you see yourself in five to ten years?

To be honest, I don't know. I never knew I'd be using envelopes. It wasn't any kind of theoretical or intellectual idea; I'd run out of paper, so I used what I had. Sometimes those accidents—I really like chance, coupled with history—can take you in a whole new direction. I have absolutely no idea what I'll be doing in five years. I have no idea from piece to piece. It's sort of not a good thing career-wise, because museums and collectors like a certain consistency. People are not comfortable when you get out of your pre-described box. But that's what you're supposed to do, I think. I'm going to give the commencement address for the New Mexico School for the Arts this

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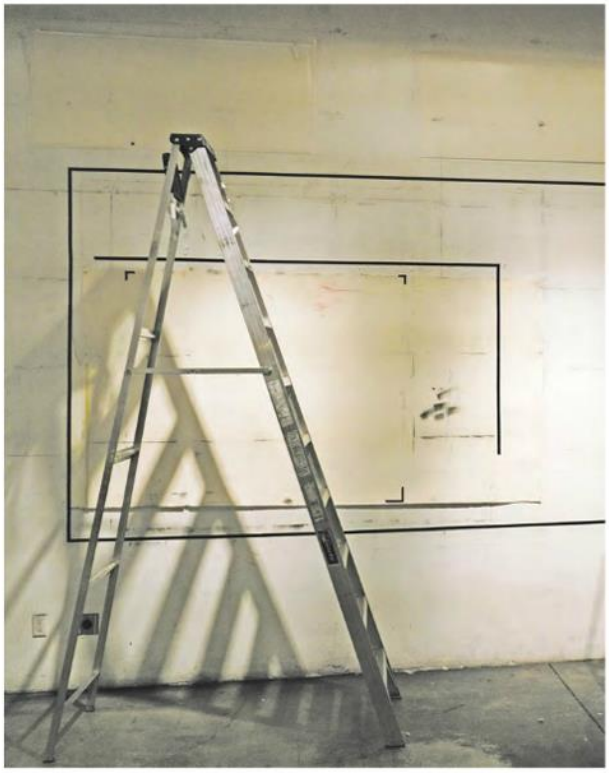

year, and I've been thinking, what do you say to eighteen-year olds interested in music, drama, writing, art? What do you say? And what did someone not say to me that I wish they had?

I was the kid that was always drawing in class, the only kid that actually looked at the pictures when we went to the museum. I wanted to go to art school to learn certain skills. And I still believe there are skills you have to learn, but they don't have to be tactile: there are intellectual and emotional skills, thought processes. How do you learn those things? Do you learn them, or do you just have a certain talent?—which I think is an overused term. All I've ever done is just work really hard. I had an affinity for it in that I loved it and was idealistic about it, and I'm still idealistic. I still get excited going to an art show.

How did you maintain that?

There was a point in my life—and it happened with drawing—I just seemed to understand it. It just made sense to me in the world. It was a moment—I even remember where I was, where it occurred, how it occurred, the people that were there, it was that specific—that I knew I got it. There are people who scoff or laugh at it, but that's not important. I believe it. That has sustained me. Every day—and I know this is clichéd stuff—I get excited about coming in here. Are there days that I'm incredibly depressed and think the world hates me? And think, "Why doesn't the Louvre have a room dedicated to me?" That the art world is horrible? Of course.

So you have your moments.

Every day you have those moments. For me, they are always overcome by that incredible, thrilling joy of looking at something and going, "I did that, and it somehow expands the world for me, and maybe it will for someone else."

You mentioned something about hard work versus a God-given gift, could you expand on that?

Yeah, I couldn't be a mathematician. I don't think I have that particular insight. I think it is the pinnacle of intellectual endeavors. People are born differently and have all different kinds of attributes. We only know about the artists and musicians that took their natural talent and expanded on it. That was their beginning, and then they worked like crazy to see where they could take their ability.

Do you take vacations?

No. I don't even have hobbies. I've played golf twice in my whole life. I hated it.

Do you cook for yourself?

No. I'm really, really boring. Other than my wife and family, my kids and grandkids—who are the coolest in the whole world—I like literature, music, and film.

As a kid, I grew up in Lubbock, Texas. I'd go on Saturdays—it cost a dime—and see films. I was so enthralled. I think that's why I've shied away from using color to this day, because those films, *Flash Gordon*, the Tarzan movies, early cartoons, were all in black and white. It showed me a real creative world. I loved and still love music; it takes me to places in my mind that I never imagined. And literature does the same thing. My wife complains that we never go sit on a beach. And I go, "And do what? See the ocean?" That's great, but it's just not my thing. Maybe I've missed out. I don't know.

Just about everything I read and listen to informs what I do. Watching a Harry Potter movie doesn't inform me in any way. But watching a Chet Baker documentary really did. Or a really good, thoughtful movie that shows me some part of the world that I had no idea existed.

I think the biggest challenge maintaining a studio practice is not getting sucked into ordinary things like paying your bills. There's a division you make in your life as an artist.

It's a real challenge. It doesn't mean everybody is going to be wildly successful just because you adhere to your own visions and your own conscience. That's not a blueprint for success. There are more artists now than there have ever been in the history of the world. When I lived in New York, there were 90,000 artists in New York City! It's just unbelievable, and it's unbelievably difficult. That's why I, personally, really respect all artists. Because I know how difficult it can be. And some sacrifice a lot of things to pursue that talent and vision and skill.

Do you think sacrifice is inherent in being an artist?

Maybe not the cut-your-ear-off kind. But there are certain sacrifices.

Did you make those?

Sure. I wish I had been around my daughter more when she was in grade school, high school. I was always working. Looking back, I think, was that really worth it? Missing out on my daughter's life? So that I could pursue this idealistic dream? *Was it really worth it?* I can't answer that question; I don't know. Each person has to deal with that on their own.

I like artists. They are some of the smartest people around. And the most informed, knowledgeable, and intellectual. It's really pretty amazing to me. A lot of them can discuss philosophy, economics, muscle cars; they have a broad range because it informs what they do. ▪