



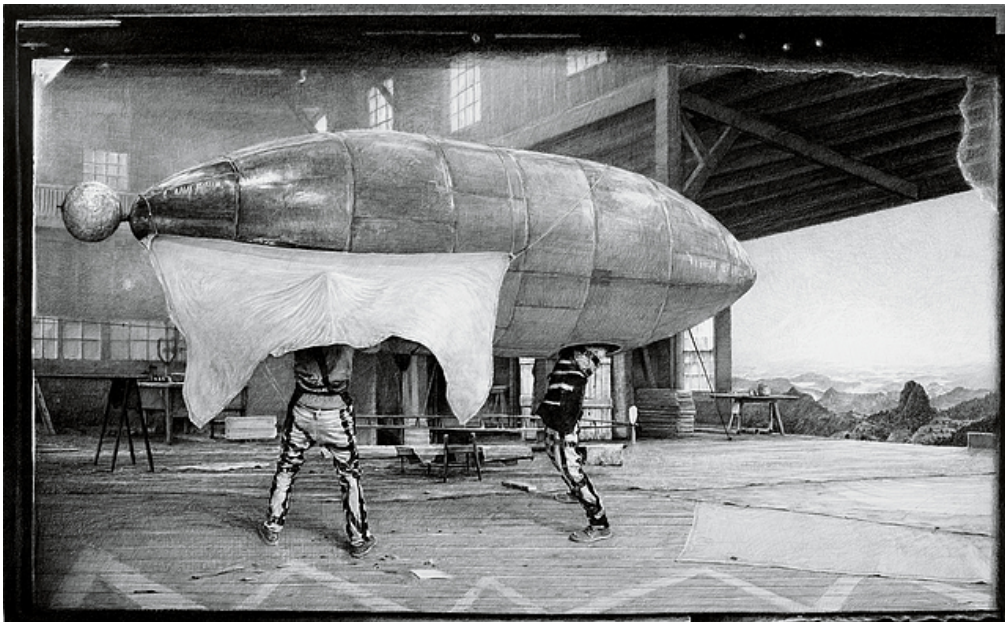
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The Earnest Absurdist

By David Schimke

Ethan Murrow '98 doesn't want you to take his art too seriously. Unless, of course, you can't help it.



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Three graphite drawings in progress, rendered on large pieces of white cotton paper, dominate artist Ethan Murrow's south Boston studio space.

On one wall, two bungling, Chaplinesque characters—their heads stuck up inside a small, early-21st-century weather blimp—work feverishly to expedite a stratospheric joyride. In a separate scene, taped up just a few feet away, the same monochromatic duo, dressed in white pants with black prison stripes, use a jerry-rigged rope and pulley system to haul bundles of nondescript bounty up a mountainside.

In a drawing across the room, the begoggled screwballs are at it again, slogging through ankle-deep floodwaters in modern-day rain gear, their ropes and pulleys connected to a massive nautical vessel that hovers over the setting like a storm cloud. Upon closer inspection, an observer schooled in the oeuvre of Rembrandt would recognize the floating boat as the upper half of his *Christ in the Storm on the Sea of Galilee* (minus Jesus himself).

Viewed in toto, the somewhat surrealist series suggests a darkly comedic, colonially corrupted netherworld.

“A common theme in my work is theft and appropriation,” Murrow says of the drawings, which he was finishing for a spring exhibit at La Galerie Particulière in Paris. “A show I did recently in Seattle dealt with myths and stereotypes of the cowboy to examine westward expansion. In this show, the main characters are sampling whatever is in the shining light at the end of their tunnel. It’s about white men stealing things from all over the globe.”

Cultural embezzlement is a self-consciously ironic refrain for Murrow, who graduated from Carleton in 1998 with a degree in studio art and has since become internationally known for producing beguiling visuals that revolve around borrowed media, including but not limited to commercial film stills and fair source photography, pop art and classical portraiture, painted landscapes, and arcane architectural ephemera.

“Artists are constantly appropriating and rethinking old histories,” says Murrow, who is also a professor at the School of the Museum of Fine Arts at Tufts University. “My work often lives in an amorphous middle, where we’re not quite sure whether we have the right to do this or we don’t. It is intended to be a drama in which the absurd is continually amplified, and a faking-upon-faking creates new fictions.”

Murrow uses a laptop to resize, repurpose, and brew together found visuals in a collage-like fashion. Typically, he will then add his own props and images to the mix (often including photos of himself, creating buffoonish caricatures in simple costume). After using a projector to blow up the results, he’ll sketch a rough outline on a blank wall or paper and use pencils or markers to add texture, create depth, and tease out details exact and imagined.

This distinctive variety of augmented realism is visually accessible and intellectually fluid, says Carleton art professor David Lefkowitz ’85. As a result, Murrow has found audiences among people who respect facility and appreciate literalism, while simultaneously attracting viewers with a more conceptual bent. “The layers of meaning that are in Ethan’s work are really exciting to me,” says Lefkowitz. “He’s referencing an illustrational tradition, but the way he isolates figures in space is very much a recognition of more modernist compositional choices. There’s almost always a blank surface where this activity is playing out—almost a theatrical space.”

It’s on this metaphorical stage, it turns out, that one can begin to place Murrow’s creations in context. A storyteller at heart, he pirouettes on a dotted line separating fact from folklore.

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Murrow grew up on a “small, unprofitable” sheep farm in rural Vermont, where the solitary time he spent in the nearby woods stoked his interest in expansive landscapes and spatial exploration. Raised by parents who earned a living teaching public school and writing young adult fiction, he came of age believing that a “creative, freelancing platform” was par for the professional course. His initial interest in art, however, was fueled by something even more instinctive.

“It started when I was five years old,” Murrow says, a knowing smirk on his face. “My brother was in an after-school art class and I wanted to draw better boats and airplanes than he did. And he, of course, couldn’t have cared less.”

As a college freshman, Murrow thought his drawings were “pretty hot shit”—until he received a first-year evaluation from Fred Hagstrom, now Carleton’s Rae Schupack Nathan Professor of Art. After Hagstrom pointed out the “100 things that were off and could be different,” says Murrow, he grew determined to show the master he could meet the challenge. “To this day, I’ll sometimes walk into the studio, look around, and

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wonder to myself: Am I doing this because Fred said, 'You have a lot of work to do,' and I'm still out to prove him wrong?"

Hagstrom doesn't remember the review, but he does recall that Murrow—who spent a gap year in Ecuador doing community service, deferred at Oberlin College after one semester, and then spent another semester at the National Outdoor Leadership School in Wyoming—came to Carleton with a more evolved sense of self than his peers, which may have prompted the rigorous critique. He also points out that Murrow's renown is a product of his liberal arts education, which transcends mere practice. "Ethan came here with a strong drawing facility and strong painting facility," Hagstrom says. "And he left with a strong sense of what he wanted to do with it."

Murrow received an MFA from the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill in 2002, taught for a year at Appalachian State University, and eventually moved to Seattle and then New York with his soon-to-be-spouse, photographer Vita Weinstein Murrow.

At the time, Murrow was making elaborate paper sculptures and painting landscapes inspired by the Pacific Coast's forever skies and open water. He was struggling to get into a rhythm, though, and after a gallery installation failed to generate an audience, Vita asked if he even liked the pieces he was laboring over. Without hesitating, he said he didn't like the results and, even worse, he found the process of creating them boring. When Vita suggested that Murrow consider making something he actually enjoyed, a creative paradigm began to emerge.

"I always loved historical fiction, comedies, film, and photography," Murrow says. "So I put it all together. Until then, I was trying to make work that was ultraserious, because I thought that was what you were supposed to do: make people look at your work and put their hands on their chins. But I realized that what I wanted to do was indulge in things I was enamored with and make people laugh. Suddenly, making art was fun again."

Murrow began frolicking in a farcical realm where slapstick and subtle social criticism shared space. Failed explorers in wet suits, helmets, goggles, and scuba gear. Fantastical water vessels and bogus inventions. The long list of exhibits and installations chronicled on Murrow's website, BigPaperAirplane.com, is a testament to his discipline and drive. They include drawings that examine a failed aerial experiment in *Zero Sum* (2009); mull over the famous doctor's legacy in *Freud* (2012); and consider the "bluster, power, and twisted history of the United States" in *American Ego* (2013). He also has done corporate work and a stint as an artist in residence at Facebook.

Lefkowitz and Hagstrom point out that contemporary artists who experience this sort of success are often encouraged to avoid other pursuits and focus on cultivating relationships with exhibitors and potential patrons. But Murrow is happily moored in academe. He says that working with talented students at Tufts has kept him immersed in art history, taught him how to perform in front of groups, and helped him hone his managerial skills.

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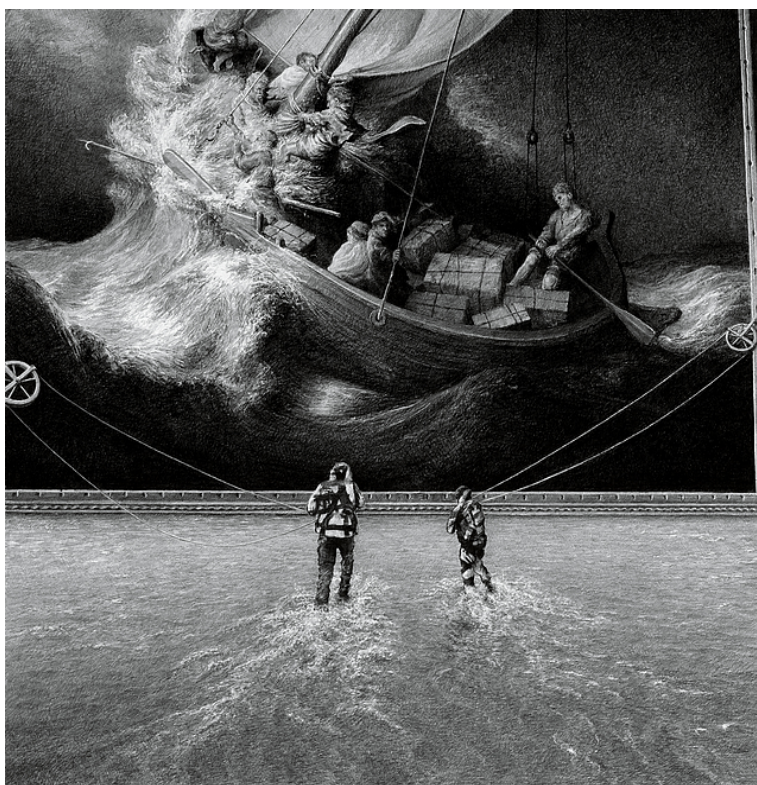
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Dig deep enough into Murrow's ever-expanding biography and you'll eventually find mention of his grandfather, the late journalist Edward R. Murrow, celebrated for his dispatches from Europe during World War II. His 1950s television program *See It Now* was iconic for its reporting on communist witch hunter and U.S. Senator Joseph McCarthy.

Edward died a decade before Ethan was born. And Murrow vigilantly refuses to trade on his family name (Hagstrom didn't know about the connection until after his pupil graduated). The newsman's legacy was front and center during Murrow's childhood, however, thanks largely to his grandmother, Janet Brewster Murrow. "She told me a lot of stories about their life together, and the importance of understanding the impact of your actions and the work you do in a larger societal context," Murrow says.

Once the family tree is revealed, it's hard to ignore the roots. Consider, for example, Murrow's exhibit *Hauling*, commissioned by the Currier Museum of Art in Manchester, New Hampshire, which will close the second week of May. Made up of a multisurface, gallery-dominating set of wall drawings, the show celebrates northern New England's industrial roots while questioning the purpose and consequences of productivity.

The central images depict tools used by laborers from the time of the city's founding to the present day: fishing lures, saws, bottles, clamps, wheels, even weaponry. Mashed together in clumps that play with scale and vantage point, the collages seem to defy reality and are connected by the image of a thick rope, being worked by a diverse group of modern-day residents. (Murrow used actors from Manchester as models, photographing them pantomiming various actions.)

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“When I began brainstorming, I was thinking about the carpenter who loses his job but still has his tool belt. That was my model for the show,” Murrow says. “The tools and the skills don’t go away when the job does. The tools are a metaphor for the individual and what it takes to create sustainability in the world.”

Unlike his permanent paper pieces, which he creates in solitude and fusses over incessantly, Murrow’s wall drawings are typically painted over at the end of a show’s run. In this case, the eventual erasure will function as another nod toward the impermanence and ludicrousness of the modern obsession with efficiency.

To create this set of drawings, Murrow led an eight-person team made up of his students and other local artists that helped gather the source materials, outline the various projections, and—most significantly—flesh out the black-and-white details using hundreds of black Sharpies. “This show was intended to be in conversation with collaborative effort,” he says. “The most important thing is that everyone has a chance to touch everything. Some people are good at detail, others are good at filling in, others are great at building texture. At its best, the drawing mixes and matches all of that and yet you can’t find one person’s mark over another. It’s looser than my works on paper. It has a language all of its own.”

Cleverly chronicling the region’s fraught relationship with child labor, native exploitation, and the environmental consequences of “progress,” the Manchester show functions as both an allegorical dreamscape and a piece of raw historical reportage.

“There are connections in some of the ways journalists and I look at the world and at the kind of things we look at—ideas about the American dream, imperialism, and expansionism,” says Murrow. “But the tone and outcomes are different. Reporters have to take a factual approach to storytelling. I like to compile the facts and data and the experiences around us and then take total license. Their goal is to be objective. Mine is to be both funny and fantastical.”

Photos by Stewart Clements



Hauling by Ethan Murrow '98 *Install views of Hauling at the Currier Museum of Art*

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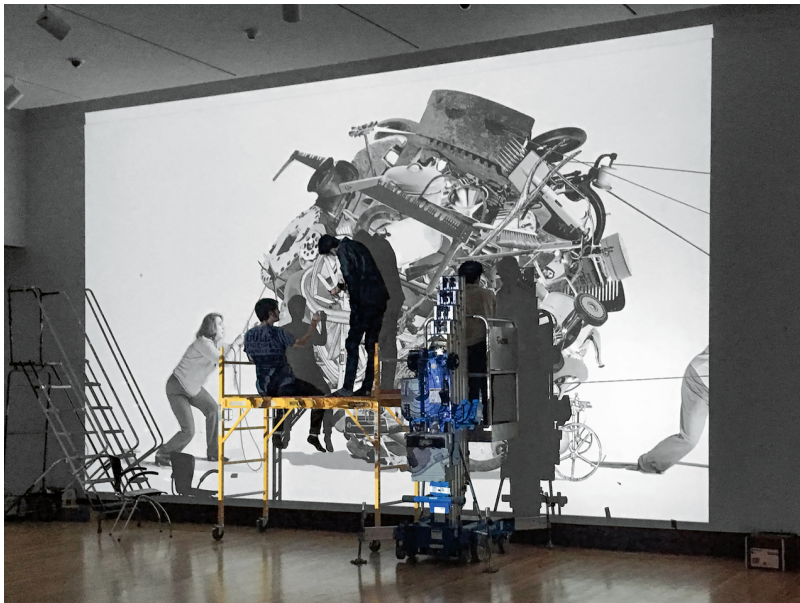
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Hauling by Ethan Murrow '98 Detail of Hauling by Ethan Murrow '98 at the Currier Museum of Art



Hauling by Ethan Murrow '98 and other artists A group of local artists works with Ethan Murrow '98 to create wall drawings for the 2019 exhibit Hauling, commissioned by the Currier Museum of Art in Manchester, New Hampshire.

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