

The Work of Art That Disappeared

The SMFA's Ethan Murrow created a monumental drawing installation dedicated to industrial workers. Then it was painted over.



by

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Video by

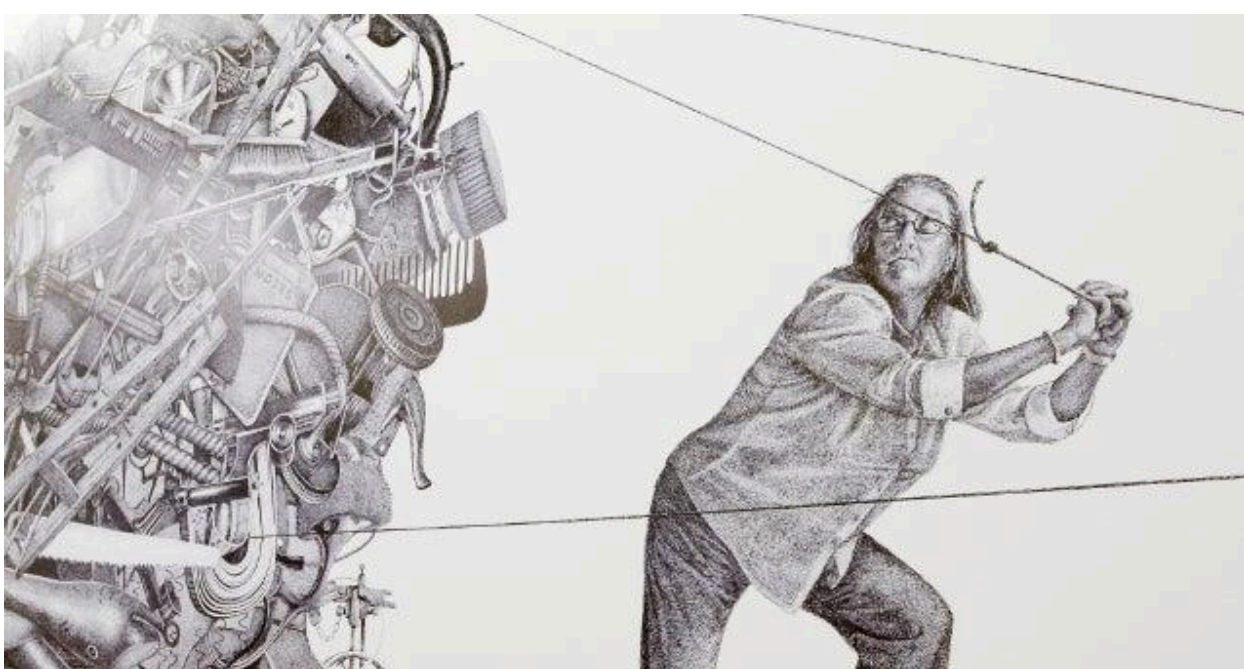
Steffan Hacker



After taking more than 900 hours—and using more than 1,000 black Sharpie pens—to create his latest art exhibition, Ethan Murrow seemed quite calm about what happened two days after it closed. A crew came in with trays of beige paint and rollers, and in an hour painted over the monumental drawings, which had taken up more than 150 feet of gallery wall space.

It was all part of the plan, of course. Murrow, professor of the practice of painting and drawing at the School of the Museum of Fine Arts at Tufts, had conceived of the exhibit as a testament to the physical labor that had transformed Manchester, New Hampshire, with textile mills and industry in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries—and a way to acknowledge that all that work had mostly simply disappeared. The show, called *Hauling*, was on display at the Currier Museum of Art in Manchester from September 2018 to May 2019.

Murrow, who is also chair of the SMFA painting and drawing department, worked with the curator of contemporary art at the Currier on the concept of the show, and enlisted Manchester residents to pose for photos pulling, tugging, and lifting objects. Those images then became the basis of sketches for the final art. Murrow enlisted former art students and other artist friends to join in the creation of the wall drawings—it took him and nine assistants twenty-one days to create the final art.



A detail from “Hauling.” Photo: Steffan Hacker



Most of the assistants were former students of his, many of whom are now artists in their own right. “While this project certainly has my name on it, it really is a testament to all these people who have been helping—from research assistants to sculptors to the huge team that helped with the wall drawing,” Murrow said. “It’s a genuinely collaborative effort.”

Murrow talked with *Tufts Now* about the process for creating *Hauling*, how work plays such a central role in our lives, and how drawing as an art form deserves more attention.

***Tufts Now*: How did the exhibit come about?**

Ethan Murrow: Samantha Cataldo, the curator of contemporary art at the Currier, and I had begun talking about Manchester’s history of labor and industrialization. I have an interest in looking back at historical narratives and finding my own way to mine them for re-interpretations. Manchester’s rich history—in terms of textile mills and all the different ways that the city has changed over time—presented a unique opportunity to build a project that was in conversation with history.

What were you hoping to accomplish?

I wanted to build a project where I could talk about work and labor in relationship to my own practice of drawing. Drawing takes thousands of forms, but many drawing traditions involve really simple, economical means of making things. That kind of skill building and the practice of repetition—the manufacturing of a drawing—reminded me of a lot of the work and labor that happened in Manchester.

View a 360 degree image from the installation of “Hauling” by dragging the photo in any direction. Photo: Steffan Hacker

I’ve had the chance to build really massive wall drawings before, using Sharpies, ballpoint pens, things like that, and this project uses a very similar tactic in terms of the wall drawing component. I worked with nine assistants with Sharpie pens across about 150 feet of wall, building a huge display of individuals pulling and tugging and holding and hefting tools, from all points in Manchester’s history.

The thing that is really different in the exhibit was a moveable drawing, a 52-foot scrolled drawing on Tyvek paper also using Sharpie pens. It depicts a series of knots and ropes as they’re twisting and scaling across the page. It moved very slowly in the center of the gallery, using a motor and some drums on either end. It was meant to evoke both the



textile mills and farming equipment, because part of what I'm trying to do in this project is think about what are the essential tools that we need and that we use over and over again.

You are documenting labor and work with this labor of your own.

The most important thing to me is really the effort implied by these individuals as they're pulling and hauling things. At the same time, the effort of making the work itself is kind of herculean—drawing on a 150-foot-wide wall. All these people, all this time. It's a kind of marathon of effort. If you look back at the history of Manchester, hundreds of thousands of people came to the city from all walks of life—and parts of the world—to find work.



"It's a kind of marathon of effort," said Ethan Murrow. Photo: Steffan Hacker

And yet, most of all that work they did is forgotten. These things, these people pass, and history passes, too. The drawings are a kind of memorialization and history of that effort.

It's also, you've said, a conversation about the American dream.

We have this idea in this country that you have to work hard to get ahead. You're supposed to put in crazy amounts of hours and not take vacation—and if you do that, you



will somehow be upwardly mobile. I don't think that that's usually true. I think most people work really hard and don't get a lot of pay, or even a lot of thanks for it.

Part of what I'm trying to get to in this show is this idea, "Is it really worth it to put in all this work?" I'm hopefully making a comment about it, too, because I am making an enormous piece of art that will be destroyed. So in a way, I want to make sure that people understand that I am a part of this, too.

It seems like much of the exhibit is about tools.

I view tools as a kind of classic archive of human living in the world. There's an archaeological site called Neville in Manchester where artifacts were found that are thousands of years old—they pre-date Abenaki and Pennacook native communities. There are spearheads and cutting tools, stone-cutting tools.

Not much is known about the people who lived at that time, but we do know about their tools. Tools are so much of the way in which we find out about the past. So I put tools in the drawing—with people depicted hauling them around.



Shailinn Messer, SMFA17, left, works on the "Hauling" exhibition, along with Ethan Murrow and Nick Papa, SMFA18, on a ladder. Photo: Steffan Hacker



We can invent a thousand different robots, but there are some things in which humans just still have to push and struggle and haul. And that's the common factor in the show. My hope is that these figures were seen as doing things that seem above and beyond what is possible.

Tell me why you are destroying your drawings—painting them over—when the exhibit ends.

I think of it as kind of a beautiful moment, when the wall drawings are painted over. It's destructive, it's a kind of death. There's so much celebration in the art world of the luxury good, and here is this pretty neat piece of art—we should preserve it forever, right?



Ethan Murrow working on his “Hauling” exhibition. Photo: Steffan Hacker

Part of what I'm trying to talk about in painting something over and destroying something, is that we have to remember that the idea of making the piece is for people to talk about and bitch about and argue about and celebrate.

Making things that are temporary hopefully forces people to just think a little about why they would want to keep things—what is the thing that they think should be preserved? I think it's a good challenge too, to think about how I can make something that only exists for a finite amount of time and still have it be worth something to people. Because ultimately, it's for others, not for me.



Is drawing a neglected art form?

I was trained as a painter, and I came to artwork through oil painting. We go to museums and the first things we see are paintings. A lot of my art work still, even though it's drawing, talks about painting and painting history. But drawing is always struggling against that history.



Everything that has a beginning has an end: painting over the “Hauling” installation two days after it closed. Photo: Steffan Hacker

Even so, what's cool right now is that the contemporary art world has really elevated drawing. Artists are using it in super dynamic ways across all different platforms—it really has a kind of integrity that's new and exciting. But it still gets diminished compared to painting, so I have a chip on my shoulder about it. I am teaching in a drawing and painting department and so I am fully aware of the need to create this kind of equitable balance.

Drawing is a universal language. If you and I didn't speak the same language, we could use drawing to communicate. Everyone draws, whether they think about it that way, or not. Writing is a form of drawing. And to me, I kind of look at it and I'm like, “This is like the Rosetta Stone of art.”



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