

RANDY SIMMONS

A COLLECTION OF DRAWINGS EXAMINING LIFE, DEATH, & RELATIONSHIPS



FEBRUARY 26 - APRIL 30, 2023

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new semantics
GALLERY

New Semantics Gallery

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Professor of Art Randy Simmons teaches at the Paducah School of Art & Design, now for 20 years. Numerous awards and grants include First Place in the 2015 *Cedarhurst Biennial* and two Kentucky Arts Council grants. For ten years, he has been taking students overseas to study art in Europe with the Kentucky Institute for International Studies. In the Summer of 2023, Simmons will take art students to explore Paris, France.

COVER IMAGE

"Say You Don't Love Me, My Salamander"
2022, Charcoal and White Conté, 36" x 48"

Catalog Design & Caption Texts by Randy Simmons

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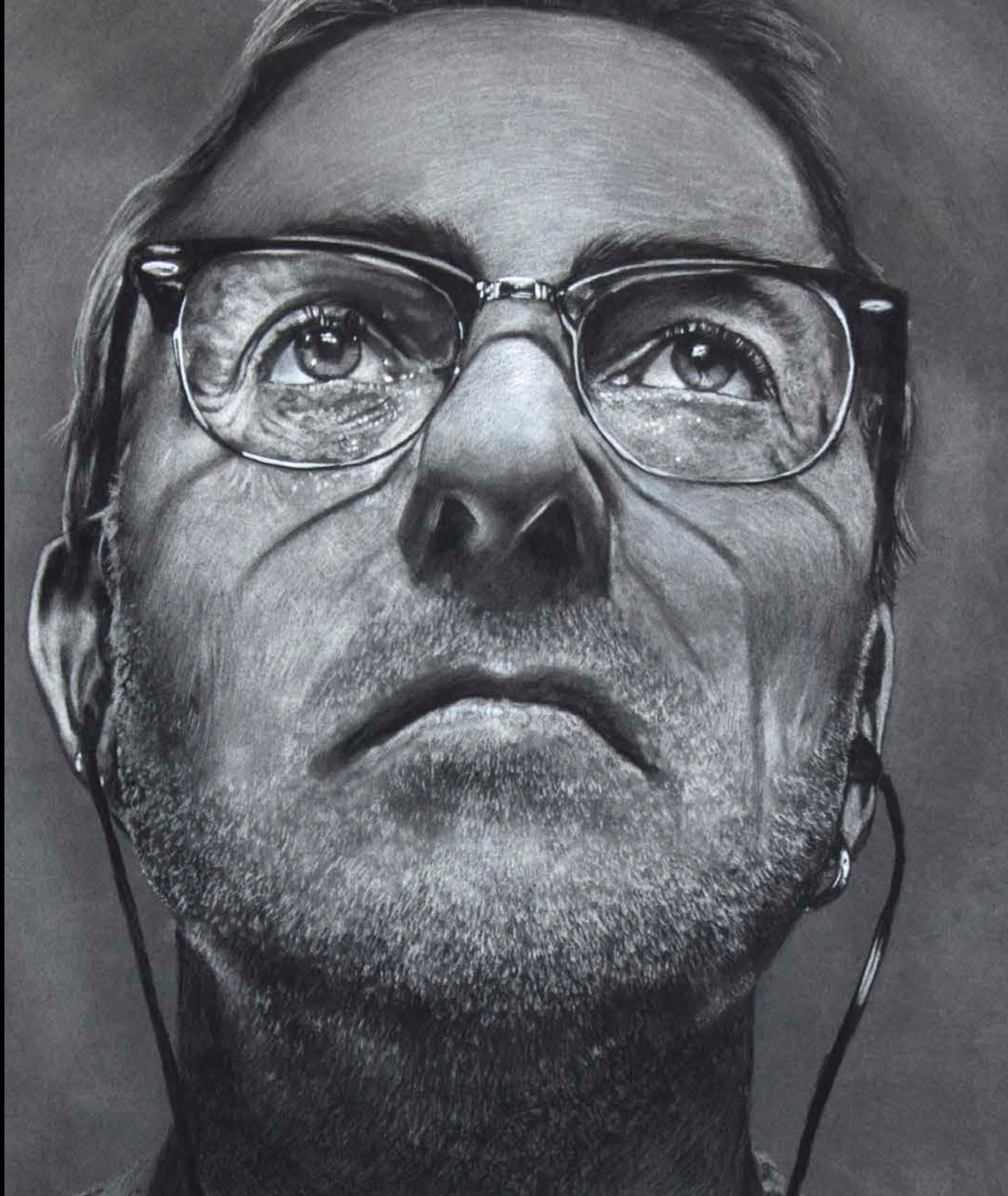
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FOREWORD

BY JERRY SPEIGHT

I've had the pleasure of knowing Randy for four decades and have watched his work develop since being a student at Murray State University. Randy has enjoyed success with his drawings having exhibited nationwide and continued success as a drawing instructor at the Paducah School of Art and Design. His work has developed tremendously over the years and his current series of work is his best yet. I hope you find his work in this exhibition and booklet as intriguing as I do.

Professor Emeritus Jerry Speight's career began in Jasper, Indiana, where he taught elementary, middle, and high school art. He taught at Brescia University in Owensboro, Kentucky, and the University of Kentucky in Lexington. Retired in 2005, Speight was a Professor of Art at Murray State University, watercolorist, and published biographer and nonfiction writer.





ESSAY BY DAVID LUCHT

We enter into another's suffering at great risk and with uncertain reward. Yet we must go. The only option is the sterile isolation of narcissism. When put that way it is really a necessity rather than a choice that draws us there. Yet it is also the paradox of a deeper freedom; we are drawn outside ourselves to an encounter with the stranger, a journey that demands that we escape from our incessant self-serving.

Randy Simmons recent show "Achromic" at the Bill Ford Gallery — Paducah School of Art and Design is at once emotionally wrenching and liberating. He relentlessly explores the trauma of watching his mother age and decline in a series of portraits rendered in charcoal and white chalk. The title of the show suggests the choice Simmons makes in a reduction to basic media; the black and white of pencil on paper, which provides the force and focus of his work.

In the quietude of an image we are allowed space to process and reabsorb, translating cacophony into something more sonorous.

The elemental nature of the media, the recurrent suggestive phrase it evokes: "in black and white", the raw simplicity that comes from denying us spectral color, these constitute a language of direct expression. It seems to speak a language of this... and nothing more. It makes the viewer resist the urge to wander but instead encourages us to linger, to focus.

And yet this aesthetic choice ultimately does the opposite of limit or constrict. By helping us to navigate through the dark waters of despair, fragility and hopelessness, the basic-ness of black and white becomes at last a comfort and a guide. And the form that Simmons gives to each piece; the pictorial clarity, the transporting imagery of associated objects that each portrait inhabit, suggest at last the light of hope that gets us through.

As I took time with each of the large drawings on exhibit, I was consistently reminded of the powerful companion that art can be. The theater that art inhabits provides an opportunity to examine at a distance what general life presents to us, an experience that can typically fluster and overwhelm. In the quietude of an image we are allowed space to process and reabsorb, translating cacophony into something more sonorous.

The exhibit is not an easy stroll through. Simmons has watched his mother decline in health and attended to her diminishing mental acuity in recent years. No visitor to the gallery escapes the resonances that resound from these images into each of our lives. I have just returned from a long delayed memorial service (due to Covid) for my own Father. A friend recently attended the death of her dearest friend due to cancer. None of us are untouched.

So much of this is taboo. We recoil from visiting these dark waters and our culture

certainly provides every option to lift any pain from us. Even the suggestion that suffering might be a significant human experience is frequently shrugged off or made risible. “Get over it!” and “Get on with it!” are the loudest voices we hear in response to confessions of pain. But we need to go through, not around.

Simon Critchley offers insight to this in his essay “We Can’t Believe / We Must Believe”, here speaking of Oscar Wilde’s notion of the “religion of agnostics”:
“The truth of art, according to Wilde’s romantic aesthetics, is the incarnation of the inwardness of suffering in outward form, the expression of deep internality in externality.”

Randy Simmons has helped to place each of us in that moment of turning. Our absolutist notions of the subjective self are exposed as fraud. His trials with the raw

emotions involved in being human become transformed through his art into a moment of communal grace. It is a request to participate in every aspect of life in order to understand. For these things are shared.

David Lucht is an artist and writer with a studio in the Lower Town Arts District in Paducah, Kentucky. His art is created in the wax resist method of batik painting with a range of subject matter. His most recent work focuses on seed pod imagery, used as a lens to examine our world. You can find more of his writing at [Medium.com/@davidlucht](https://medium.com/@davidlucht).

This essay was originally published for the exhibition “Achromic: Drawings Randy Simmons,” Paducah School of Art & Design, 10/29 — 12/9/2021

(Early stage of “You and the Clouds,” page 15)



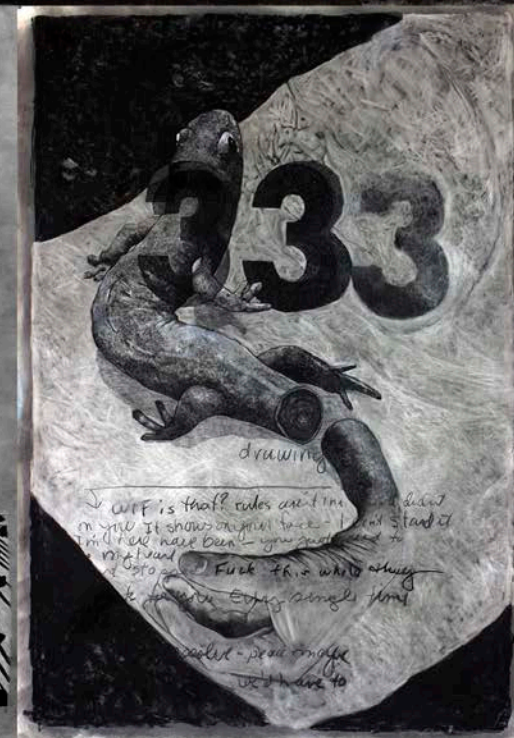
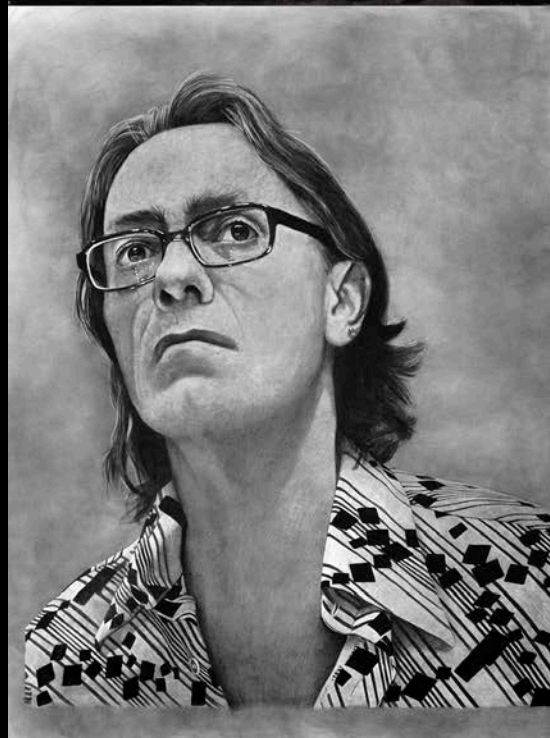
2022 "Say You Don't Love Me, My Salamander"
Charcoal and White Conté, 36" x 48"

The title derived from the opening line of Paul McCartney's 1979 song, "Getting Closer." In this drawing, I am being critical of my ability to have and maintain a relationship.

This idea and pose has existed for at least a year on post-it notes, legal pads and scrap newsprint. The salamander was supposed to be a cockroach but I started going back through older drawings and looking at the symbols I had already worked with.

The shirt I'm wearing is a vintage polyester shirt that I wore in a drawing from 2011 "In Absentia". The salamander is the same one I used in another break-up drawing from 2014, "The Past, Present and Future of the #33", in which it comes to represent a restless friend leaving a distraction so no one notices the exit. But in this work, the salamander is upside down, helpless, and forms a question mark while being lured or pulled into the light like a moth to a candle.

Charcoal has such a great way of absorbing light and I love to push and pull the materials with my hands and fingers. Shape repetition, an extensive value scale, and treatment of space are big technical aspects that I love about drawing. And once again, my love for science and space exploration is evident.



2022 *"It's Not A Matter of If, But When"*
Charcoal and White Conté, 51" x 41"

This drawing is about my mom and also references relationships specifically to some people's ability to dump their partner and move on quickly. Have you been deleted by a former lover?

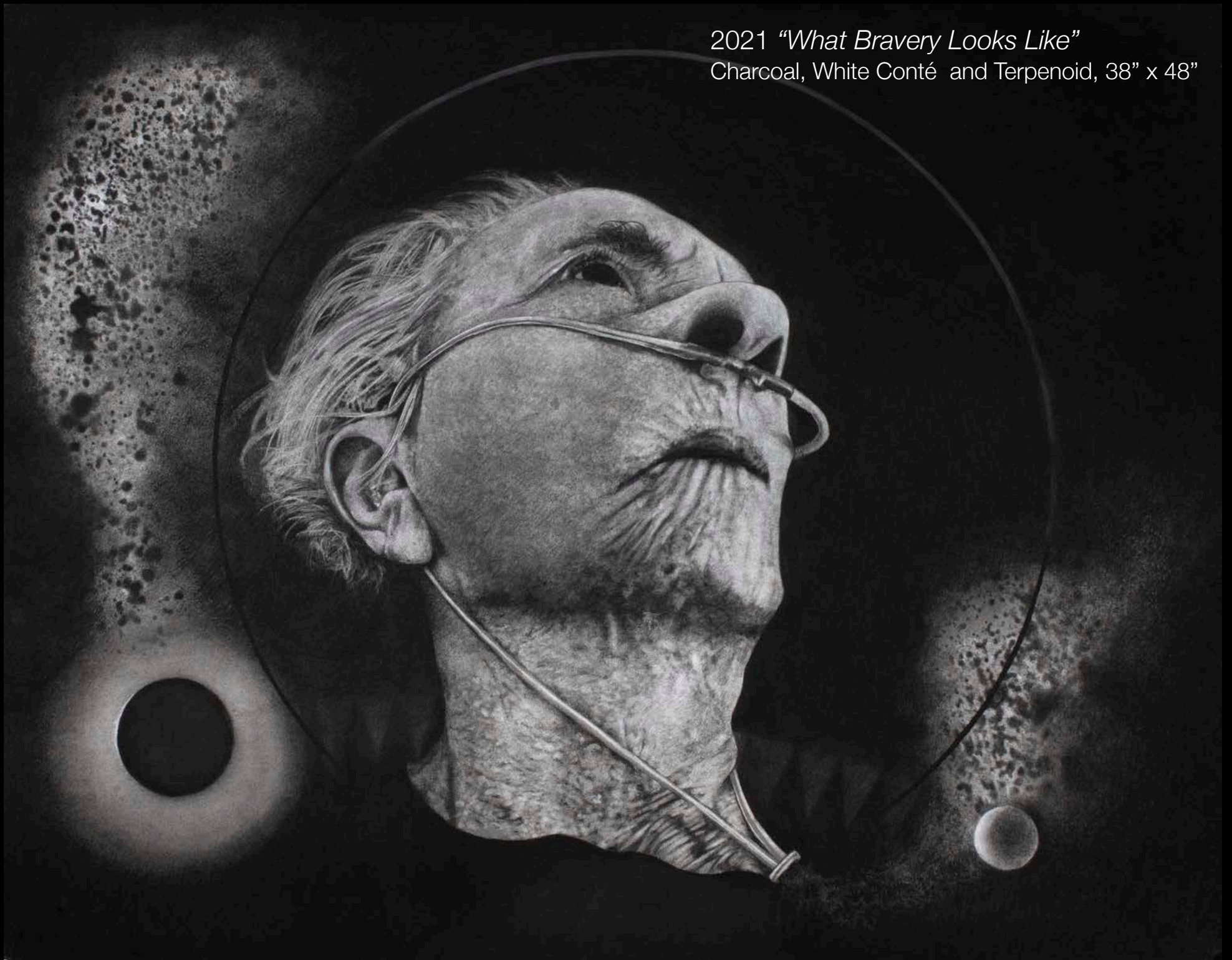
Months before Mom passed, she was hallucinating that the staff where she stayed was taking her outside at night. Sometimes they left her in a field, other times, she was taken to a small raft and was transported to a larger boat in still black waters. She was scared and floated alone. She talked about this happening several times, and got visibly upset. I imagined the terror she felt being left alone in the dark in water, choking on the fear of drowning. I learned that people who have dementia start hallucinating at sundown thus giving them the name "sundowners".

All of the figures in this drawing are faceless and are placed in a wet marshland environment at night, the cat tails casting a faint spark of light at their ends. It's unclear what the connection of the children is to the female or couple form but they appear to be in a pensive state. The space portrayed makes sense yet is impossible. Surreal and dream-like, closer to being a nightmare, this image is really dark for me and I found it emotionally difficult to create. The composition refers to a wedding cake and doubles as a face looking back at the viewer.

The best place to view this drawing is kneeling on the floor in front of it so as to be with the children. Someone needs to be with them.



2021 *"What Bravery Looks Like"*
Charcoal, White Conté and Terpenoid, 38" x 48"





2021 *“What Bravery Looks Like”*

In Progress Studio Shot

Charcoal, White Conté and Terpenoid, 38” x 48”

I think of the day when mom left her home to go to assisted living at the end of January. Did she know she would never return? When she transferred to Mayfield, did she know this was the last car ride she would ever have? Is every day a “this could be the last”? This is what bravery looks like.

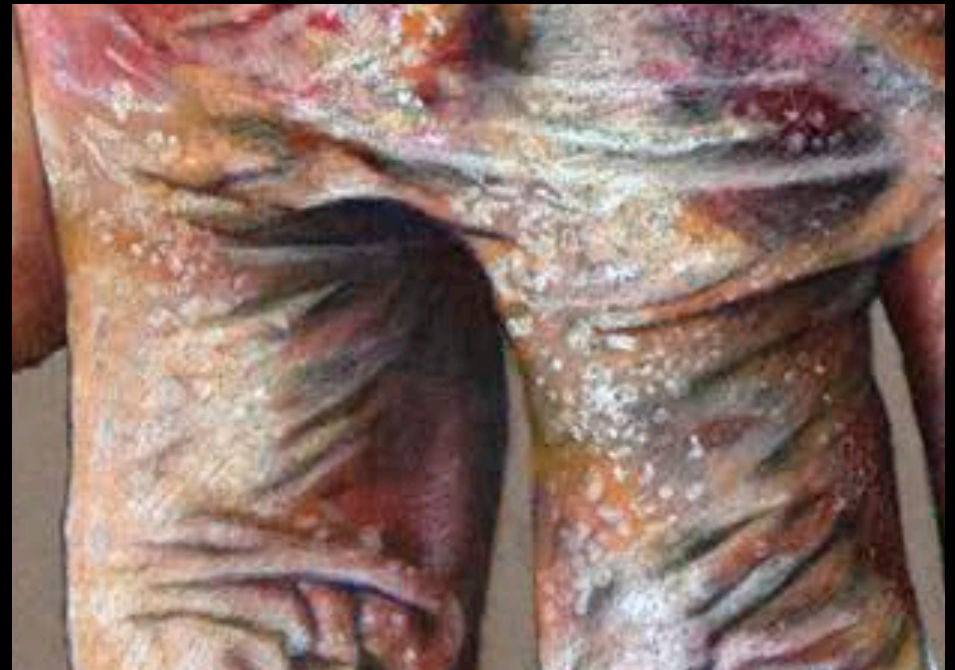
Humans and our galaxy are composed of 97% of the very same atoms.



2022 *"Stories Are Hidden Here"*
Pastel & Charcoal, 26" x 19"

I think I have finished as much as I need to. Before mom had passed, I paid attention to her hands, the hands of someone who had worked hard all of their life. Her hands were bruised a lot and I took some liberties with the color. I had hoped color would work with my narratives. I don't know. As I came to the right side of this drawing, I forgot I was drawing a hand and started playing with the lines and layers of color.

The textures of her skin reminded me of the paper used in a party streamer: crinkled, thin, translucent...joints swollen from working on a farm and being a custodian. I had an idea to do a casting of her hands but I never made it happen. I really wish I did.



2021 *"The Last Meridian Ray"*
Charcoal and White Conté, 44" x 30"

Mom sits slumped like a defeated boxer in the corner of the ring. Her paper skin is so fragile she bruises easily. She and her wheelchair float inches above the ground surface while her head/hair turns into a blooming peony and at her feet, mushrooms bend to move out of her way. They represent the circle of life. The star in the center relates to two things: the gold star children receive as an award for a good deed or behavior and the star some people hang on their house.

The popsicle stick form in the upper right comes from a drawing I did in 2011, *"A Map Home For My Children"*. It repeats the star shape and loosely looks like a house. It also repeats the sharp triangles from her wheel chair. Above mom's head is her halo of numbers which comes from an old wooden protractor I have hanging in my studio. The protractor is also called my halo maker. I had the protractor completely drawn but I decided what was important about it was the circle of numbers and not a protractor itself which also repeats and balances the shape of the back wheel of her chair.

The title went through many versions but this one is a direct reference to her house. She was born across the street and many Ray family members (her parents, brother, grandparents) have lived on Meridian Road for over a century. She is The Last Meridian Ray.



2021 "Voyager 2"

Charcoal, White Conté, 44" x 30"

Listening for signals.

Communicating with mom is incredibly difficult. Her existence is nestled into a cloud of fading recognition. Even with hearing aids and these headphones, we struggle to have a conversation.

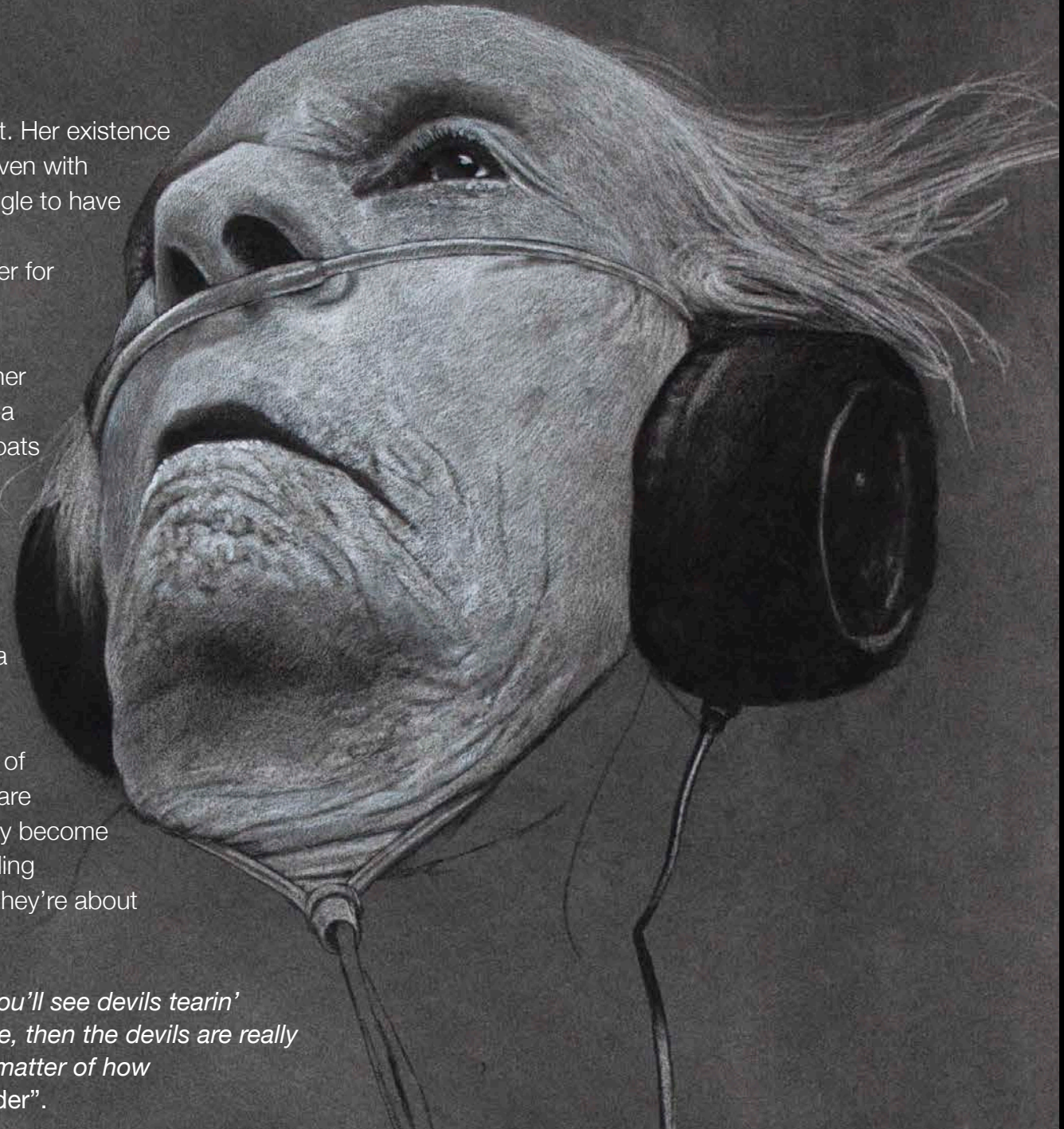
I let her do all of the talking now...it's just easier for the both of us.

She told me in early October that the staff at her rest home take her out nightly and put her on a small raft and take her to a larger boat. She floats in the water in the darkness alone. She thinks she will drown and she is scared.

After I finished her head, I wasn't sure that I needed anything else in this piece. Her head floats tethered to the bottom of the page like a balloon. I know what she is waiting for.

The Voyager probes were launched in August of 1977. In 2018, they left our solar system and are heading into deep space where they will slowly become weak and die on their trajectories while recording scientific data as long as they can. Currently, they're about twenty-two light hours away.

"If you're frightened and you're holdin' on, you'll see devils tearin' your life away. But if you've made your peace, then the devils are really angels, freein' you from the earth. It's just a matter of how you look at it." -From the film "Jacob's Ladder".



2021 *"Self Portrait at 15: If The Vision Were Only Clearer, I'd Be Standing So Tall"*

Charcoal, White Conté, 48" x 36"

"Go hide outside and don't tell anyone."

I began this in 2014 when I completely finished the tin duck and bike but left the background blank. I never abandon drawings but I did this one for seven years.

New life was breathed back into it when I hung this on my studio wall while working on other things and saw the potential for this in my latest series of narratives.

I drew the flowers with sharp, pointy ends and rendered them crudely by caking the white conté on the petals. They wrap around the cyclist as he navigates through them in the darkness guided by two disconnected, dimly lit light sockets. The bottom right corner is the soft underbelly of reality being pulled and sewn together to conceal its contents.

A .22 caliber bullet closes the drawing like the period at the end of a sentence.



2021 "We Hid In The Fields"

Digital Photograph, 48" x 36"

On July 21st this year, 2021, a strange thing happened. I was watching late night tv when I had the urge to go to my collection of children's books (from when I was a child) and look at a specific book that I had enjoyed reading called "Sir MacHinery". I pulled it out, opened it and a diary I had written in from 1981 was hidden in the middle of the book. I had completely forgotten about it.

I read most of the entries. But one entry stood out the most. It was on July 21st, 1981. Exactly forty years to the night and could have been to the exact hour.

My mom's boyfriend had come home from a day of drinking and attempted to beat me and her. He destroyed a lot of furniture. Mom took many of the punches as we ran out of the house and into the bean fields surrounding our place.

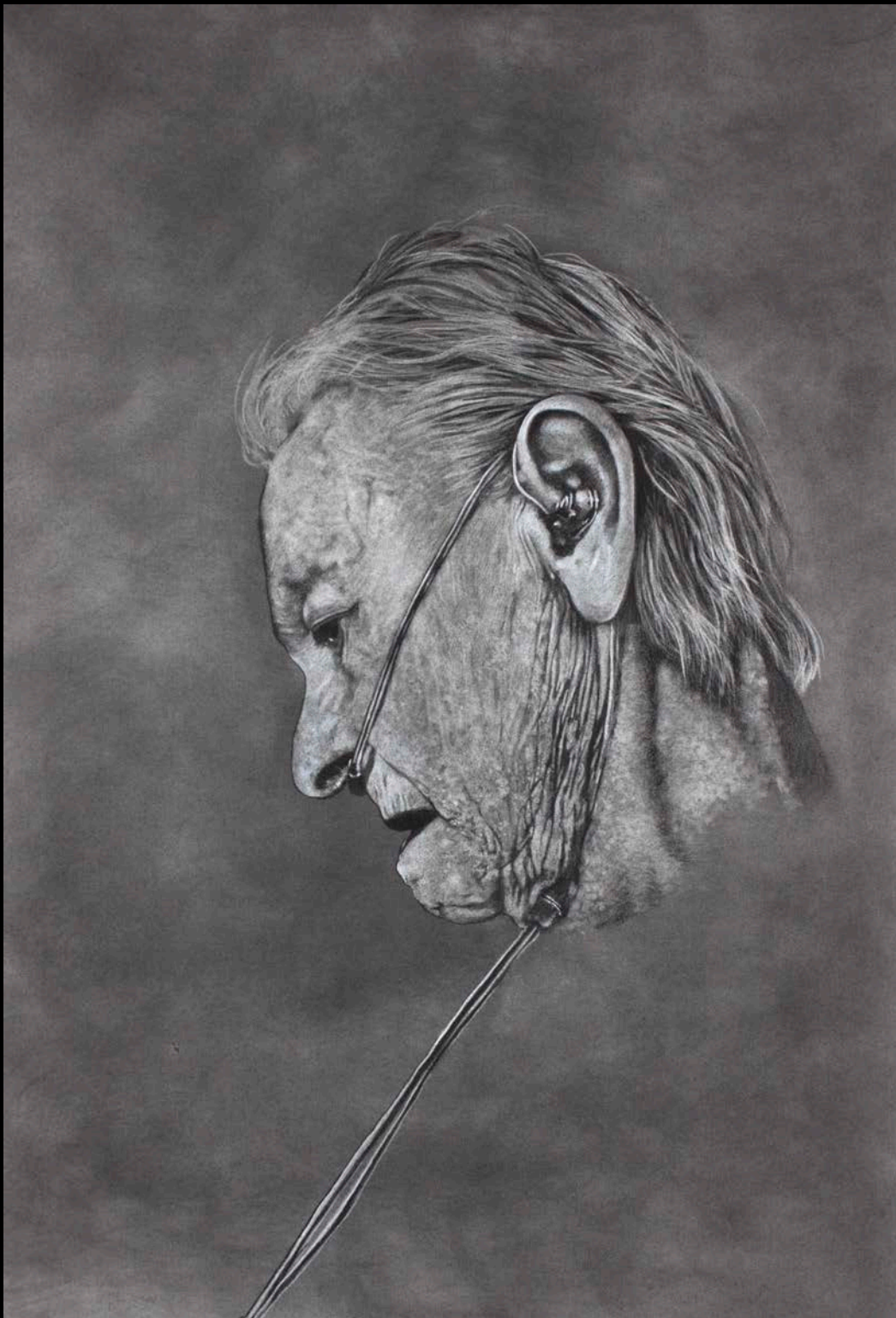
This happened quite a bit and he had threatened to kill us on numerous occasions. Whenever we heard the yelling and commotion after a night of heavy drinking, my sister and I would slip out into night and hide between rows of soybeans. I remember him holding a gun and his flashlight shining over our heads as he stood at the edge of the yard looking for us. When the fighting subsided, we would look through the windows in the house to see if it was safe to come back in.

Two more odd coincidences: I was already working on sketches for this very idea when I found my diary. Second, the last few times I have visited mom, she told me the staff at the rest home were leaving her in a field overnight.

This image is from my photoshoot for the drawing version and possibly a painting. But now, I'm not sure that I need to do anything but leave this alone as digital art.



7-21-Thu Burch came home from drinking all day. He tried to hit & beat me & mom. He wrecked our kitchen & living room.
7-22 Wed - spent the day with mom at work.
7-23 Thur - Feel good not having Burch around



2021 *"December Descending"*

Charcoal, White Conté, 44" x 30"

It's with hesitancy I draw this and even more to post it for everyone to see. I love my mother and this is the hardest of times... I feel helpless. We all do. Everyone who knows my mom knows she's such a fighter.

Mom's world is defined now by how far she can reach her arm. She will never be mobile again. She has difficulty hearing and repeats herself. Sometimes she shakes.

When I visited her this week, I was holding her hand when she told me she is miserable and wanted to go home, and then she said, "I know I can't". Though she has never asked for it, I left her cell phone thinking it could give her a link to the outside world. Now I wait for the phone call I'll never get.

My original idea for this drawing was to give her a collar of flowers (peonies) around her neck and flowers over her head in an arc. The title has changed many times. But now I am reevaluating and this drawing could be finished as it is. Her head could be the flower and her oxygen line the stem.

I think this drawing works best with the drawing "Voyager 2".



2020 *"You And The Clouds"*
Charcoal and White Conté, 45" x 45"

A portrait of my mom at the onset of the Covid-19 pandemic (roughly April of 2020) and the start of my family portrait series.

I photographed her after putting her groceries away. We had taken her car keys. Her hearing had worsened and she uses a walker now, but despite all, she seemed in good spirits. I wanted a busy drawing, lots of details and patterns and heavily drawing on an organic, floral Art Nouveau style.

This was the last work of art I made when my mother looked this healthy and radiant.

By February 1st of 2021, Mom's health had declined to the point that even she knew she couldn't be left alone.



2020 "Stendhal Syndrome"
Charcoal and White Conté, 47" x 48"

"Stendhal Syndrome" is the second drawing of four from my series of family portraits I completed during the Covid pandemic. I had previously drawn my mother and followed this with portraits of my sister and brother. My self portrait alludes to my constant use of an inhaler due to allergies and asthma. This work reminds me of a mix of Chuck Close and Frida Kahlo. The dandelion reappears in my siblings drawings as well as a connecting theme while the title is a psychosomatic condition involving rapid heartbeat, fainting, confusion and even hallucinations, allegedly occurring when individuals become exposed to objects, artworks, or phenomena of great beauty.

2020 "Take The Long Way Home"
Charcoal and White Conté, 47" x 48"

This is a portrait of my sister, Darla.
The delicacy of time and memory...

I've left her dress and arms unfinished. My original idea was to address her eczema which covers her hands (I have this too). But the drawing, like most of them recently, took a different turn. It became more about elevating her to an angelic presentation. I used some of

the very same photographic references from my self portrait "Stendhal Syndrome".

I wanted a child-like presence in the piece so I used one of Jon's cat drawings he made for me when he was six.



The title is taken from Supertramp's song "Take The Long Way Home". After many lengthy discussions with my brother and sister and reading through some of my childhood diaries, I've discovered none of us wanted to be home. I had forgotten this.

"When you feel your life's become a catastrophe, oh it has to be, for you to grow boy".



2020 "The Deer Hunter"

Charcoal and White Conté, 47" x 48"

The fourth narrative drawing in my series of family member portraits, this one of my older brother comes after discussions with him and my younger sister on our childhood. It's amazing that the three of us had the same parents but totally different experiences growing up.

He stands very stoic in a field looking slightly upward to the sky. Who is the hunter and who is the hunted? Is it day or night? Are those clouds or is this pillaging smoke and hot sparks from the burning field? The representation of memory as a darker Rorschach figure composed of leaves and organic forms, stands behind him, wearing a crown, slightly out of focus, looking over Larry's shoulder, showing its teeth and mimicking his pose. The dandelion seed on the right appears in my previous self portrait and my sister's portrait, floating through all three images as a unifying symbol of delicacy and possibly optimism. His hands are bound by a thin sliver of a halo.

I'm really into playing with this off-center composition and repeating patterns. Circles are truly the perfect geometric shape and I can't help but to utilize them and their symbolism in my work. I used more variety in erasing methods and charcoal hardness/softness and layering these together. Build and destroy, build and destroy...this creates the thick textures and spatial form. There



were moments I felt like I was painting. Each of his arms are drawn slightly different from one another. Edges of objects lose definition in some areas and stay really sharp in others much like how our memory works. His shirt

values were drawn by smudging tissue paper with the beginning raw tone. This is the darkest drawing I've done in a while and is in stark contrast to the first drawing of my mother I did in this series.



2020 Family Portraits Together, Four Panels
Each Charcoal and White Conté, 47" x 48"

2020 *"The Church At The Back Of The Closet"*
Charcoal and White Conté, 56" x 43"

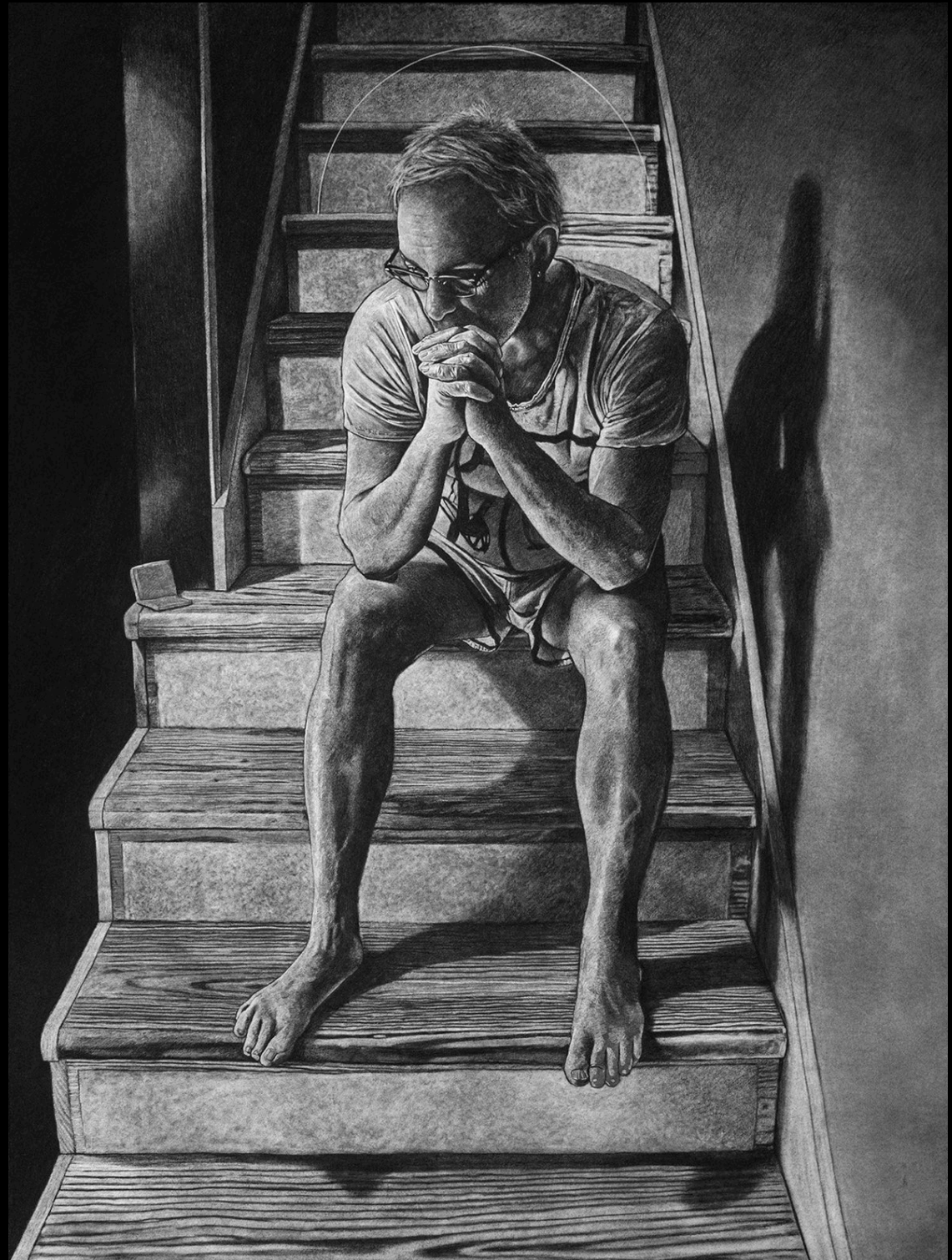
The image came from the beginning of the pandemic lockdown in spring of 2020. The title was taken from my smartphone when it transcribed a voicemail into text and botched it with the line "This is the church in the back of the closet calling for Randy Simmons.....".

I was hoping God would return my call but this seems to be the best I can get.

Voicemail

Transcription Beta

"Hello this is the church in the back of the closet ____ this message is for a member Randall Simmons would like to hear from you as soon as possible to discuss a program





2019 "Mighty Like A Rose"

Charcoal and White Conté, 50" x 36"

Definitely inspired by Renaissance and Art Nouveau, this drawing's title came from an Elvis Costello release by the same name. Pictured is my girlfriend at the time as a Virgin Mary-like character sitting in an antique barber chair. Her hands are clasped in prayer position and her halo is not quite perfect in comparison to the roundness of the table in front of her. On the table is a wire rack with glass tubes that I picked up at a consignment shop. The label said it was a rose nursery.

The composition is made from geometry: circles, squares, cube, and a triangle and shape repetition.





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