

Publication: **Fine Lines Literary Journal, Winter '21**

Words by: **Lisa Weiss**

My Husband's Heads

My husband Howie Lee Weiss is currently working on a series of heads. His medium is charcoal on Lenox 100 paper. The paper comes in large rolls.

I cut a sheet of it into smaller piece, he says. I get into a Zen-like state doing it. The paper is archival, very good quality, and has a nice texture that works well with charcoal. It comes in white or cream, but I like the white. My fingertips coat the paper gray first, and then I draw loosely and freely, searching out my characters.

His tools are vine charcoal, which is a soft type; erasers, a compass for big curves; a straightedge. He tapes the charcoal onto the edge of the compass. He doesn't always use the compass. Sometimes it's free-hand. But if he does, it's towards the end of the process when, to quote his website, he is "replacing one type of drawing (malleable) with another type of drawing (precise)."

On the website, he also writes: *Drawing with vine charcoal allows me great freedom to search for significant forms. The charcoal's erasing capacity enables me to keep the drawing loose, open and flexible for several weeks into the making of a piece: this is important as I make innumerable changes while tracking down the specific subject and images of each particular drawing.*

He calls this underlying information "armature."

It's early morning and we are roving between the dining room and kitchen. We are already each inside our divergent artistic mental spaces, but we're still softened by sleep and the freshness of the new day, and our words flow easily over coffee and cinnamon toast. This is the last of my interrogations, which have been going on for a little over two days.

"How did you get the idea for a series of heads?"

I hadn't thought to ask him this previously even though he began making them a few years ago. Just as the Earth is three quarters water, we were three quarters silence. We communed as artists, which is to say, we let each other be.

Well, I looked at my bigger drawings one day and thought, they were mostly all boys or men, so maybe I'll draw some women's faces as a kind of practice. I thought I'd do three or four and that'd be it, but then I did three or four more and it began to take on a life of its own as a project. I started to actively like doing portraits. All types. Male, female, a blend of male and female...

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Before breakfast, I'd brought a miniature crystal vase filled with baby red carnations into the kitchen from my piano studio and set it on the counter next to the sink. The water needed refreshing. The counter, white and luminous when clean, was stained with coffee spills and had food crumbs on it. There was also a spotted, worn dishtowel, an unwashed plate, a tall bottle of dishwashing detergent in a painfully artificial shade of blue, and a smaller bottle, cantaloupe-colored, of liquid hand soap. Howie came into the kitchen, wiped the

counter down and cleared everything away except the vase of carnations and the bottle of hand soap. He centered the vase and moved the hand soap back against the white tile wall, about eight inches to the left of the vase. He did this for me, not for himself.

He is always doing something like this for me, as a way of forcing me to remember to enjoy being in the present. As soon as I wake up, I pitch forward, mentally, worrying and pressuring myself about a future outcome. It could be about my practicing of a Bach prelude and fugue or set of Beethoven variations, or the bedding being overdue for a change. It is all equal to me: a personal shortcoming, for sure.

See how they complement each other?

He's wearing his customary half-smile, like the world smells good, and I succumb, resist as I might wish to.

He works in greys, blacks and whites. I give him a prompt: "Say something about your color palette."

Prior to the start of making heads, most of my larger work was in pure line with very minimal grey. Shades or tones of grey were not included. But as the portraits went on I began to incorporate more tonalities, more colors. That was unexpected. It led to an exploration of stylistic lines.

"Translate what you mean by stylistic lines."

The line quality is unchanging. It has no inflections. It's geometric to some extent, and not very realistic. It's more of a shorthand for something that could be realistic. A simplification of a complex form.

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“But you’re not making cartoons?”

Some might consider them cartoonish. Another word might be reductivist.

The world might smell good, but all kinds of flowers and grasses cause an allergic reaction in him. As I took notes, he blew his nose and cleared phlegm from his throat. I wondered if carnations needed to be added to the list.

Others say they look Egyptian, Greek, or Medieval because of their stillness, flatness, and bold lines. There is a kind of timeless quality to them. Expression is minimal. There’s not a lot of facial contortions. They’re straight-up, frontal images. Almost like “Wanted” posters.



I wasn’t expecting such a practical and punitive description. It jolted me out of our esoteric realm and I chuckled, looking up from my computer into his cool, leveling eyes that are, for me, the salt of the earth.

Two days earlier, I’d paid a surprise visit to his downtown studio, barging in on him to begin my questioning. Later, we took our customary evening drive, which we’d been doing since the Covid-19 lockdown began. We never have a predetermined destination. It’s a nightly ride to nowhere. He is always the driver, so I let him determine the exact location of that nowhere. If we head towards the city via the highway, we pass Baltimore’s TV Hill off to the right, the highest land point in Baltimore. There, two very tall towers transmit the signals for multiple tv and radio stations, while a third, much smaller one connects to city police, fire and rescue personnel. The second tallest, 500 tons of nickel-chrome alloy steel covered with two and a half tons of red paint, has a distinctive tri-mast candelabra structure. I identify with these towers on a personal level. I am the candelabra tower, Howie the taller, straight-up one, and our son Billie, now a grown man, is the little one.

On this particular drive we left our suburban cul-de-sac and got onto York Road, headed towards the city that way instead of via the highway. The closer we came to the city line, the more interracial it became.

“You always claim you don’t have a political, social or cultural agenda in your work. But what about these heads?”

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I'd have to push them in a certain direction if I had those kinds of agendas, but no, I don't. I've never had a "message." What interests me is the formal aspect, the perfection of the line. If people want to see them as political, that's their interpretation. It's about working within strict limitations. A specific type of charcoal that I use exclusively. A kneaded artists' eraser. Paper. Sometimes a straight edge or a compass. And that's it.

"I doubt that's going to be enough for people if you have a gallery show with a catalogue. They're going to ask the same kinds of things."

I wasn't disagreeing with him, personally. I understood him and that understanding was enough for me. I've spent my life, from the age of five, playing primarily Western European white composers from the Baroque, Classical and Romantic periods and white American composers of the 20th century. My mentors assigned me these works and I learned them unquestioningly; their ethos was my ethos.

A lot of people insist Georgia O'Keefe's paintings of flowers are sexual, but she insists they are not. Her attitude is, if that's what you see, fine.

"So, you don't set out to make a black person's head, an Asian person's head, and so on?"

No. They are traits, features, varying just as traits and features vary all over the world. And they often come out as a blend.

We were alongside the Korean War Memorial Park that runs along the water of the Baltimore Inner Harbor. My mother, who passed away six months ago, always said she would come back as a seagull after death. Howie parked so I could get out of the car and wander off to watch and listen to them. One of them glided and swooped towards me and I said hello.



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Today I finished two heads.

The night before I visited his downtown studio, he announced this. We were in our dining room, and it seemed the track lighting brightened when he spoke these words. His voice was a mezzo-forte volume, not quite loud but tensile and strong. He tends to decrescendo at the ends of sentences. The last few words drop off precipitously and I often have to ask him to repeat what he's said. This time, though, the sentence was mezzo-forte from beginning to end, with no decrease in volume.

"How do you know when they're finished?"

When they receive a strange presence.

We were setting out dinner. There is a saying by Roethke: "May silences become more accurate." Although I needed an elaboration, there was a delicacy, an intimacy about delaying it for later that I savored. Deliberately, I detoured.

"Why do they take as long as they do to complete?"

Often when I'm making these heads, I'm thinking, I should have left it two hours ago. Instead, I go back in. I have it but I don't trust it. And then it disappears and after that keeps changing. It becomes a mess.

"But you know from the outset if it's going to be male or female?"

No. It changes back and forth.



We ate. Penne pasta, tomato sauce from a jar, ground hamburger mixed in, and a green salad. He has always had a loud chew. I call him a horse and he's used to me saying it. I often eat with my hands instead of using a fork, even though I know this rattles him, so we are even.

When I first started making them, it was easier. I made them freely, quickly because there was nothing to compare them to. When they started to accumulate, I needed to be sure each was distinct from the other. Now it can take me weeks or months to finish one head.

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Howie's downtown studio is located in Baltimore's Woodberry neighborhood, adjacent to TV Hill. When I dropped in on him, he was listening, as usual, to WBJC, a classical music station on which I am a guest critic on a program called "Face the Music" several times a year. It is not part of the TV Hill conglomerate. A violin concerto, dark, dreary and full of foreboding, went in and out of reception, depending on where I stood in the studio.

"How can you work to that?" I asked.

He turned the volume down. *Before you came, it was Beethoven's 32nd piano sonata. Have you played it?*

The 32nd sonata was Beethoven's last, and one of the most famous compositions of his late period. There is transcendence, optimism, anguish aplenty; impending chaos saved by ultimate order. The opening of the first movement is right away a physical struggle for the pianist and one I was familiar with, beginning as it does with a downward leap of a seventh in the left hand. The second movement is a pure and mystical distillation of human experience. The two movements are perfectly balanced against each other. The pianist Jeremy Denk says that

Beethoven "whittles away everything down to the absolute difference of the two movements, an Allegro and an Adagio, two opposed poles," and suggests that "as with the greatest Beethoven pieces, the structure itself becomes a message."

I would read Howie the Denk quote later, but for now I simply nodded, sparing him an account of how hard I worked to learn and how many months I'd spent with this sonata.

He is working on a larger piece, a single 54" by 45" sheet, in addition to his heads. *This is a new one, he says. Rough. The images in it change a lot. The big orb shape, the little figures on a table – these may all disappear. I'm letting it sit for now.*

The studio is a spacious 20' x 40.' He has five walls to hang his paper on and work from. Two others have frosted windows and another has multiple egg carton windows. The high ceilings and abundant light compensate for various rough edges: the walls are slightly crooked. Previous artists have altered the space not to carpenter specifications. The building has no heat. When the floors get too cold, Howie stands on cardboard. At one point, birds were coming in through a little space in the ceiling. He has blocked it with cardboard, which helps keep in what little heat a hanging gas space heater provides.

He keeps it sparse. Two white enamel tables, whose lines he likes, hold supplies. One of them is his grandmother's kitchen table, which he says he is very attached to. It served as her counter

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from the 1930's through 50's and he remembers the dough rolled out to make cookies. There's a butter yellow wood chair that came from his grandfather's clothing store, called Weiss's. Other than this, there are only two folding bridge chairs that he moves around to sit on as he contemplates whatever piece he is working on. Rolls of paper and yardsticks lie on the studio floor.

The space could hold a grand piano and an audience. If we were a different couple, we could be hosting soirees, or "happenings," combining music and art, and, if it were up to me, literary readings as well. The piano would suffer from the building's lack of climate control, and this is enough for my husband to justify discouraging such usage. But in truth, such scenarios hold no attraction for him. He is intensely private about his work, especially in work in progress. Rarely will he invite even a single visitor to this studio.

It is divided in two by a partial partition wall. On one side are his earliest heads, long completed, hanging next to bigger pieces still in progress. Slightly newer heads are slowly added to this wall. On the other side are the incipient heads, still in their primitive stages. The very newest completed heads, eighty-four in all, are pinned on boards and carefully stacked to keep the charcoal surfaces from touching one another and are stacked in unused corners of the studio. Gradually he'll add these to the older heads, building volume. He is going for a wall completely covered by heads, as a kind of statement in and of itself.

The egg carton windows are covered in plastic to keep water from leaking in. All of his art is kept covered as protection from fading caused by sunlight, the studio's dampness, and grit from the street traffic. He uncovers everything just for me.

He gets up on a silver ladder and removes a large white sheet of paper covering some newly and nearly finished heads. I take his picture on the ladder. He has remained lean, with the narrow hips and small buttocks of a boy. His legs are shapely and toned as a dancer's. As he spreads his arms he reminds me of Christ on the cross, an ordinary man and an ethereal creature simultaneously. I have observed the way he suffers deeply – for me and for others – for anyone in physical or emotional pain. If I have thrived at all, it's in no small way due to the healing power and abundance of his extraordinary capacity for compassion. He seems to feel everyone's innermost workings. No one is a stranger.

There are sixty of these new heads, in rows of four.

"How do you decide on a feature?" I ask.

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As the character unfolds, eyes, noses, mouths and ears vary in size and color within the grey palate. A character can have small squinty eyes, or big, wide-open eyes, and it makes a difference in its overall persona. Some have flat-bottomed, some flat-topped eye shapes. Sometimes they look at you, and sometimes they look off to the side. Some have big lips, some

thin. They are all inventions of various facial features. Some may seem more realistic than others. They can exist in many stages. Some of them that I have rubbed out after working on them for a long time will end up a shade of white that glows because of all the previous erasing.

These ones, he says, are special.



I hear birds chirping on the window ledges and in the trees. It is a beautiful day in early May, the temperature in the 80's. The studio walls are white brick. He has painted the concrete floor a light, cheerful cinnamon as opposed to the battle grey of many artist's studios. The traffic on Druid Park Drive just outside is intermittent, cars humming by followed by periods of silence, as the light changes on either end, up at the intersection with 41st Street or down by Cold Spring Lane.

The warehouse is part of a complex of warehouses, all of which once made up a factory complex, Hooper Industries, which manufactured nylon military belts during wartime. Now managed by descendants, one of the other buildings still makes belts for the military. The other warehouses have been turned into rental units for artists and others. The floor below Howie's was rented out to a soap making company that came and went, along with the smell of soap wafting up into his studio. A scooter company – the kind you stand on to get around the city - moved into that space for a while. Howie is a professor at MICA – the Maryland Institute College of Art – and says MICA has done similar repurposing; the building he teaches in was once a clothing factory.

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The rent in Howie's warehouse is relatively cheap because nothing gets fixed up. The bathroom, down the hall is in deplorable shape: grungy, dingy, rusted and creepy. In the winter he works for hours in the cold studio. The ceiling heater does practically no good, but he refuses to bring his portable space heater, which confounds me. It is a kind of visual artist's mindset.

Nobody stays here for long, Howie says. Except for him.

When he moved in, the studio was filled with couches and chairs the previous artist left when he moved to New York City. Howie would agree to take over the space only if everything were removed, which the landlord did. (The artist, Howie learned, committed suicide in New York.) *I like everything trim and spare*, he says.

He lives like that outside of his studio, too. Sometimes I daydream of overstuffed wine-red velvet couches in our living room, but I wouldn't dream of actually getting them. It would hurt his eyes. It would disrupt his breathing and digestion. His is the purest, the whitest of souls and I have learned to live with it. In my writing room upstairs, I've put up pink curtains and there's a mattress on the floor covered with a red, white and pink floral quilt. I also keep a Queen Anne's couch in my teaching studio on the first floor that is upholstered in cherry red with embroidered gold stars, brought home upon from my school office when I retired as a Professor Music. The studio is closed off by French doors.

Back home after my studio visit, we had dinner, took a short drive, and then I followed him downstairs to the basement of our house, where he has another studio. It is far smaller and has far less light than the downtown one, but it is fully functioning and he enjoys working late into the night in it.

I'd made a stir-fried dish of ginger, chicken, peanuts and vegetables with rice. I cook at least one stir fry meal, always with ginger, each week. My sense of smell was compromised by a viral infection decades ago, and often I cannot smell the ginger while I'm cutting it up. I will yell down to the basement to tell Howie to come upstairs and put a slice to his nose to let me know if it's fresh and potent.

Time consuming cooking frustrates me; my hands are always telling me that life is short, and they'd rather be working on some piano piece. I'm impatient with the half hour to forty-five minutes of chopping and peeling required to prepare a stir-fry meal, and handling raw chicken makes me squeamish. But when it's finally cooking on the stove and I'm using my hands to stir, and especially when I pour in white wine, and when I get approving comments from Howie as I bring it to the table, I am subtly, dare I say *gingerly* content with life.

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Tonight, he has decided he will show me how he finishes a head after dinner - how he knows it is complete. He will put on a kind of act, speeding up the finalization process for my sake. There are four heads in a row pinned on the basement wall. He selects one for completion.

This one is all over the place. I've been tweaking it for a week.

It's a girl with long hair. First he erases her grey face out. He grunts as he erases, pressing in. There's the sound of the eraser and a ticking clock on the wall.

It got too grey from too much pushing it around. I need to lighten it, so I'm whitening it out. This will give it a white glow.

Initially, when I sat down to watch, the girl had heavy eyelids, a pronounced cheekbone, a slightly crooked mouth, and plaited, curly hair. He makes the eyes bigger, deletes the lids, enlarges the mouth, gets rid of the dreadlocks, as he calls them, and changes the neckline.

I like to see how many other things it can be before arriving at its final state.

He changes the direction of her eyes so she is now looking backward. He keeps walking around, almost dancing like a boxer. He raises her eyebrows.

He delineates space sometimes by coloring things in using crisscrossed grey lines. It is very controlled, allowing the light through. But for this head, he uses a rubbed technique, which makes the space appear as a simpler, more uniform grey. By virtue of having been rubbed in and out so often, however, the grey is actually quite complex. By this time his erasers have been worn down to nibs and are darkened by the charcoal. At this point, he takes out a new, clean eraser.

Some I let go completely dark, he says, but not this time.

"Are your heads linked to the narratives in your bigger works?" I ask.

Yes.

"Okay."

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He firms the girl up with dark, strong, crisp lines for the eyes, hair and ears. He explains that the dark lines signify the piece is finished. This time they are drawn free-hand, without his compass, but his game plan, of precision replacing malleability, is clear and by now there is no mistaking what kind of final image is intended. On his website, he writes:

The one-quarter inch sticks of charcoal never change, but are asked to now perform in a much more rigid fashion. This is when the process becomes most exciting. Depending on the complexity of each piece, the number of decisions, big, small, or even miniscule are staggering. It's an exciting balancing act of control until perfection is achieved.

Out loud, he says, *It's agony, all these choices. The little negative spaces are really important. Like the edge of her ear, for instance.*

I circle around to an earlier discussion as if it were a brand-new topic, to see what it might open up. "Are the heads ethnic?"

Well, yes, they are ethnic variations, but not pushed that way on purpose. They just happen. Often, they are an ethnic mix. A black person with white hair and lips, for instance. I just let it go. Some are caught between being a guy or a girl. Rarely, some end up being the same as their earliest, roughest sketch. I sometimes wish I could trust myself more to do that.

He picks up his straight-edge from the floor and uses it to draw a thick black line on the top and bottom, as a border.

"Do you ever hate one?"

No, I have never destroyed one or thrown in the towel. I will keep working until I find it. I often hear my old mentor, Abby Sangiamo, commenting as I work. Technically, I never took a portraiture course with him, even though he taught portraiture. It was very late in his life, in his nineties, I would visit him regularly and let him look at the faces. He would say things like, "It has attitude," or "You're overdoing it. It doesn't need that line." Or, "Just the facts, please."

I thank him for the "show" and go upstairs, my socks a little dirty from charcoal, pour a glass of wine and watch an episode of "Call the Midwife" on Netflix. Connections are firing off in my brain between the way I work pieces out as a pianist and the way he works things out as an artist, but I am tired. I recall an interview I'd read earlier in the day by the pianist Vladimir

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Horowitz, from the 1990's, which still rings true in matters of touch, tone, technique, color intellect, heart and everything else that goes into making art. At some point I will talk about these things to Howie. It could be in the middle of the night, when we're not quite asleep, or at lunch or dinner, or while we're out driving around, or while we're listening to WBJC or sitting on a bench by a stream. I am terrified of the day it all stops, as it inevitably must.

"What do you mean by strange presence?" I ask, when we are lying next to each other in bed, around midnight that night.

They're just there. They're just being heads.
I don't say anything.



There's no babies, no children at this point, he adds out of the blue. My heads are all adults. That could change.

His back is towards me. I lean in, literally, touching his neck, ear and hair all at once with one of my hands. I gently push in the back of his knee with the front of mine until they lock together just right.
Quiet now, he says.