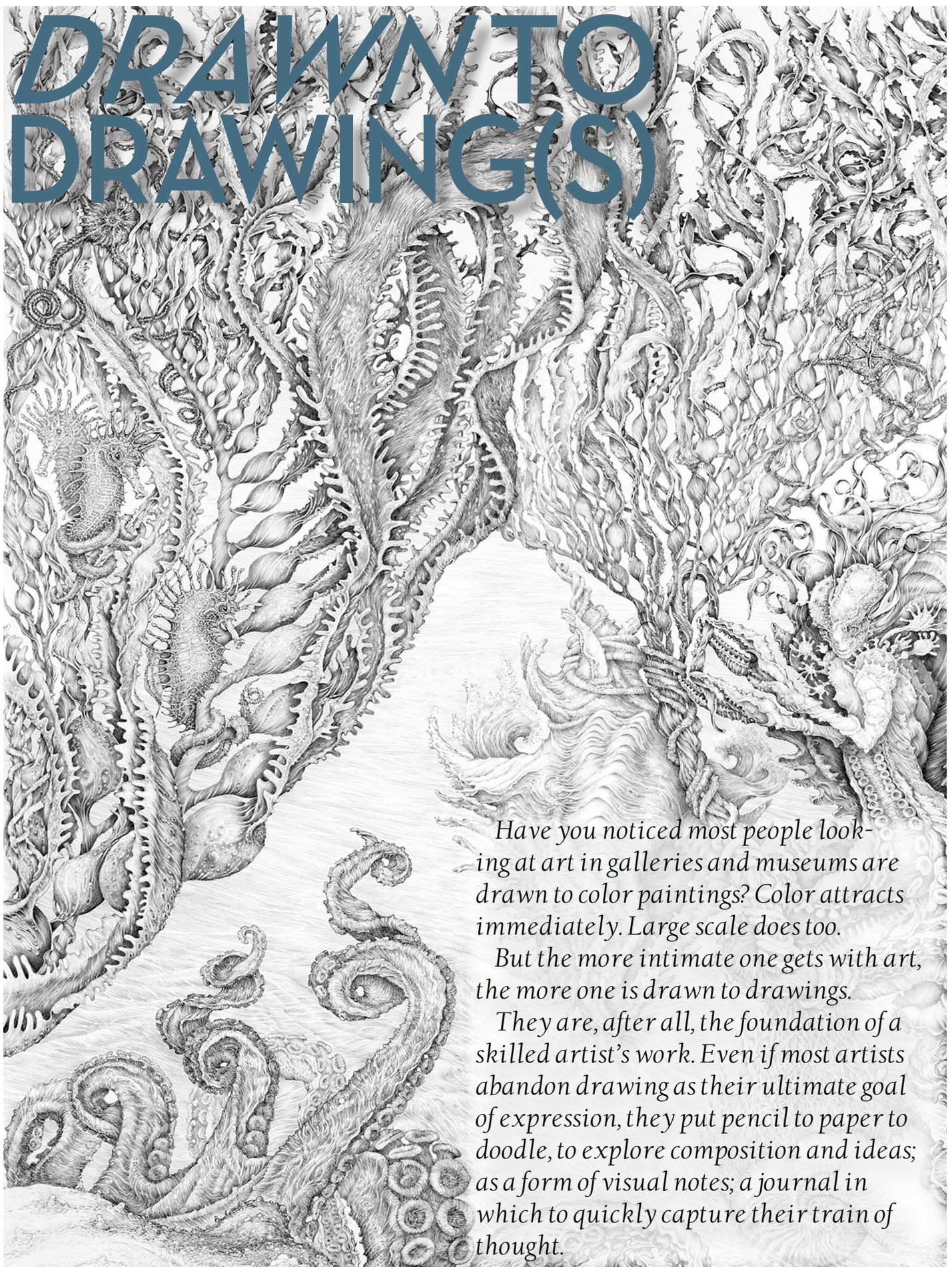


# DRAWN TO DRAWING(S)



*Have you noticed most people looking at art in galleries and museums are drawn to color paintings? Color attracts immediately. Large scale does too.*

*But the more intimate one gets with art, the more one is drawn to drawings.*

*They are, after all, the foundation of a skilled artist's work. Even if most artists abandon drawing as their ultimate goal of expression, they put pencil to paper to doodle, to explore composition and ideas; as a form of visual notes; a journal in which to quickly capture their train of thought.*

BY ANCA COLBERT

“Drawing is a kind of hypnosis.”

— Pablo Picasso



Picasso's sketchbooks illustrate his masterful ability to capture the essence of a subject in a few bold, quick lines, as do Leonardo Da Vinci's and David Hockney's. For anyone fascinated with the creative process, these artists' drawings are an exquisite treat, chocolate mousse for the eyes. But sometimes dessert is the main course.

“A Catalogue of Unnatural Works” is the intriguing name of the exhibition coming this Fall to the Porch Gallery. The show features the large drawings and carbon ink prints of Jeff Mann.

This is his first solo show in Ojai. It is also his first show after a long hiatus in his career as an artist, which started after he graduated from California State University at San Francisco. Mann had a studio at the famed Industrial Center Building in Sausalito. His last art show took place there in 1972. At that time he was strongly inspired by an efferves-

cent Bay Area art scene, and particularly by Robert Bechtle and Richard McLean “for their Super-Realism,” and Walt Kuhlman “for his atmosphere and painterly style.”

But then Mann's path took a turn; he got involved in the film industry. Most of us are familiar with some of the spaceships and strange creatures he helped create for movies like “Star Wars,” “Men in Black,” “Jurassic Park,” “Indiana Jones,” “Forrest Gump,” “Star Treks II, III and IV,” and “E.T.” among others. Working with George Lucas and his Industrial Light & Magic team, the studio production backlot to the legendary Skywalker Ranch, he held a succession of positions: from the Character Design Group, to Vice President of Creative Operations, to Director of Production Operations, and Creature and Model Supervisor.

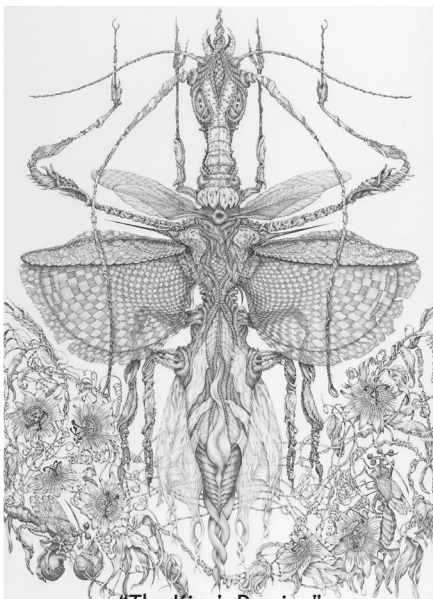
His work with Lucas was “obsessive problem solving” in a variety of films. His has truly been a stellar career in a world of magic

storytelling that turns surreal imagination into virtual, visual reality.

Now settled in Ojai's East End, Jeff works and draws in his studio every day — a quiet man, in a quiet oasis. He is both meticulous and intuitive in building his works. His drawings are intricate. They are complex. The details and layers take a long time to complete.

Mann loves to do the actual work of shading, contrast, depth of field; he loves to draw parallel lines, using just one soft pencil to vary the thickness, volume or strength of the lines by sheer pressure from the hand.

It has taken him almost two years to assemble the group of ten large drawings included in the exhibition. Each is translated in a limited-edition carbon ink print of exquisite quality. Carbon ink printing combines a 19th century photographic technique with modern-day technology that baffles with its precision of line and subtlety of nuance. The resulting



“The King's Passion”



“The Queen's Ascent”



“Paris Still Life”

**“DRAWING IS STILL BASICALLY THE SAME AS IT HAS BEEN SINCE PREHISTORIC TIMES. IT BRINGS TOGETHER MAN AND THE WORLD. IT LIVES THROUGH MAGIC.”**

**— Keith Haring**

shading and gradation do justice to the refined execution of the original drawings.

Of course I had to ask Jeff Mann the question we all love to know the answer to around here: “Why Ojai? What brought you here?” Jeff met his wife Lis Blackwell, a watercolor painter, at a Skywalker Ranch Christmas party. Lis had grown up in Ojai and was still living here at the time. “We had been coming here all those years to visit her family from our home in Marin County where we worked and raised our family. We celebrated our 30th anniversary this year.” So Mann moved to Ojai with his wife and their two dogs.

Why did he return to making his own art with such passion after so many years in the movie industry? “About five years ago after an amazing time working on some of the coolest projects ever with some of the most talented artists on the planet, it was time to make a change and pursue my own personal art,” he said. “We wanted to move to a place that had a creative community and a country feel. We had always planned to move to Ojai and were fortunate to find a home on a lane in the East End that had all of the elements that we were looking for. We had to spend six months renovating an old 1940s home in a great area with room enough for space for an art studio for each of us.”

As for his connection with the Porch Gallery, Jeff said: “I became acquainted with the Porch Gallery through Guy Webster. Over time I became friends with Lisa and Heather and the idea of a show of my work in the community I live in became a reality.”

Lisa Casoni and Heather Stobo, co-directors of the Porch Gallery, elaborated on what attracted them to Jeff’s work. “We had met him socially in Ojai and knew about his background and career, but did not know that he was still creating art. One day, he invited us to his studio. We were impressed with not only his impeccable technique but also the imagination that went into creating his pieces. It’s as if he had an alien mind living in his terrestrial body with access to a world full of beings that we had never seen.”

Jeff Mann is still drawn to the great classics, in particular Ingres, Delacroix, Da Vinci, Courbet, Moreau, and Picasso. He is also fascinated by H. R. Giger’s “weirdness,” and enamored of Walton Ford’s imaginative paintings, which “between the obvious and the mysterious” navigate strangely familiar waters.

While interviewing him for this article I took some photographs in Jeff’s studio. This one (preceding page, top left) shows the only two tools he uses to create extraordinarily complex drawings: a pencil (Staedler Mars Lumograph 2B) and an eraser (Prismacolor kneaded rubber.) He draws only on one paper: Arches Watercolor 140lb Hot Press.

“The teaching of drawing is the teaching of

looking. A lot of people don’t look very hard.”

Words of wisdom from one of the master draftsmen of our times, David Hockney. Looking closely at Jeff’s drawings is entering a world of fantastic realism, dream-like scenes full of optical shifts and illusions. “The King’s Passion” and “The Queen’s Ascent” explore that territory as a pair. Are they bizarre botanical plates? We do recognize passion flowers in “The King” and poppies in “The Queen.” Are they zoological studies of as yet uncategorized insects? We do notice eyes, mouths and antennae. Whatever they are, there is a thread between them, they mirror each other and make the viewer reflect in wonderment at their existence and relationships.

In “The Kelp Harvester,” twisted tendrils guide the eye on a trip up the branch of a bizarre plant (real or imagined) that transforms into algae. Then the vegetal illusion seems to dissolve into an animal form: is it a sea creature, a conch, or the mysterious folds and recesses of a human body? Is it the artist’s bizarre, not-quite-accurate cataloguing or the viewer’s vivid imagination? I bet on a bit of both.

The phantasmagorical drawings of Jeff Mann create strange, shifting scenes playing mischief with the natural world. Jeff’s drawings have us guessing and questioning our perception, as the eye follows lines from reality to illusion, and back. Mystery, doubt and ambiguity rule his art. What a delicious visual torment.

Jeff knows his classics. Grotesque creatures inhabit the elaborate, decorative ornamentation of precious illuminated manuscripts of the Middle Ages and Renaissance. Griffins and gargoyles startle us as they emerge from foliage in paintings. I had a hearty laugh looking at his “Paris Still Life” as I recognized the familiar characters adorning Notre-Dame Cathedral. Somewhat ominous, yes, but they are not too frightening when surrounded by the stylized orchids and majestic protea, and that hilarious upside down little bat looking like a relative of a character straight out of Star Wars’ fauna!

Everybody doodles. Everybody scribbles. From children playing with crayons, to the automatic drawings of the Surrealists, to masterful draftsmen like Degas, Picasso and Hockney, “pencil-and-paper” is a simple and powerful tool.

Drawing precedes writing as a form of human communication and expression. The 17,300-year-old depictions of animals on the cave walls at Lascaux bear witness to that human impulse. It makes us wonder about the enduring power of drawing, from prehistoric times to our space age technologies.

It always seems to start with the desire to tell a story and leave a visible trace of life, real or imagined. ☺