

New  
American  
Paintings

Novel Graphics: Richard Forster and Ewan Gibbs at Lora Reynolds Gallery

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Take two fortyish male English artists sporting intricate, process-driven drawing prowess: one a bespectacled, intellectual northerner (Richard Forster), the other a bearded, loquacious southerner (Ewan Gibbs). Put them in a room together. Wait two years. What do you get? An intense discourse on drawing and its ability to convey emotion as acutely as a photograph.

OK, a bit of that was hyperbolized for effect; they weren't actually locked in Lora Reynolds Gallery, their elbows coated in graphite until their dual exhibition commenced. However, the fortuitous meeting of Forster and Gibbs — two artists from terminal British Isle regions who each translate photography to drawing in a rigorous, graphic way — at a 2011 Drawing Center group exhibition is as incredible as it is entirely real. That fateful encounter, where Gibbs admitted "drawing envy" for Forster's dense, photorealistic style (though Forster himself corrects it as "photocopy-realistic", reflecting his preference for Xeroxed source material), led to the artists comparing notes, visiting one another's home studios, and eventually a year's worth of works on paper, conceived and created independently but shown together here.

Gibbs commands the front gallery space and the project room with Arlington National Cemetery (previously exhibited at the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston) and, complementing the reverent rows of gravestones and rolling hills, a newer suite of soldiers based on 1940s U.S. paratrooper portraits that Gibbs sourced online. Despite executing his methodical compositional style in both series, Gibbs commented that he minimized the grid for the portraits, lightly scoring the paper and filling the handmade dot matrices with differing intensities of X's ("kisses", he said). As such, the Unknown Soldiers float over untouched paper, embodying an uncanny blend of warfare memory and innate familiarity. Take away the helmets, and they could be someone we know, a mate we'd meet for a pint. I wondered if this had to do with the frozen youth of these men sent to war, and Gibbs observed the Unknown Soldiers may even be alive today — or he could have photographed their tombstones as reference for an Arlington National Cemetery drawing.

Forster's six drawings in the back gallery space are a seductive counterpoint to Gibbs' charged lightness, partially due to their inky density. Starting from the left side, they segue from classic "nymph in the woods" (culled from a contemporary fashion shoot) to '20s-era pinups juxtaposed with geometric patterns radiating Ostalgie that Forster researched in East German museums. These apparent collages belie the artist's unwavering hand, working from top left to bottom right to steadily unveil a single, united composition, precisely drawing masking tape or ultra-realistic paperclips to further the illusion. Yet despite Forster's assiduity in this tight array, he "shows his hand" in two major ways. One: in Austin Drawing II (Notes from an Architectural Underground), he duplicates the right flapper girl by working entirely off the left version, versus referencing the original (photocopied) source material, resulting in a slightly imperfect mirror image. Two: this oddly squarish work contrasts with Forster's intentional 2:3 proportion of its five neighbors. Like when Gibbs modified his grid for the Unknown Soldiers ("marginal improvement", he said), and the stunning outcome, Forster's deliberate tweaks to a painstaking craft attunes him to further innovation — and it dovetails into Forster's deep interest in the Modern Project.

The average viewer may not deduce Modernism from Forster's "collages", let alone 20's American Pastoral mixed with GDR-reminiscent patterns. They don't share the immediate populist imagery in Gibbs' own Americana-universal. Yet both artists

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continually balance one another: Gibbs' literal light touch parallel's Forster's heavy imagery, both in layered meanings and physical application. Likewise, Forster's Xeroxes eliminate the original photos' visual information, simplifying them into high contrasts. Gibbs may "empty out" his images by choosing such familiar subjects, yet it is precisely in their familiarity that we grasp them readily, and it is in Gibbs' discrete tonality shifts that these images resonate with life.

Ewan Gibbs (born 1973, London; lives and works in Oxfordshire, UK) has had solo exhibitions at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art and the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston. His work has been included in group shows at institutions including the Drawing Center (New York) and the FLAG Art Foundation (New York). Gibbs was the 2009 commissioned artist for the Armory Show (New York). His work is in the collections of the Museum of Modern Art (New York), the Tate Modern (London), the Jack S. Blanton Museum of Art (Austin), the Denver Art Museum, and the Museum of London, among others.

Richard Forster (born 1970, Saltburn-by-the-Sea; lives and works in Darlington, UK) has had solo exhibitions at the FLAG Art Foundation (New York) and the Middlesbrough Institute of Modern Art (England). His work has been included in group shows at the Tate Britain (London), the Weatherspoon Art Museum (North Carolina), and the Drawing Center (New York). Forster's work is in the collections of the FLAG Art Foundation, the Zabludowicz Collection (London), and the Lodeveans Collection (London), among others. This dual exhibition at Lora Reynolds Gallery is his first in a commercial gallery in the United States and continues through May 11.

*Brian Fee is an art punk currently based in Austin, TX. His culture blog [Fee's List](#) covers his three loves (art, film, live music) occurring in his other three loves (the Lone Star State, the Big Apple, and Tokyo).*