DAILY**SERVING**

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Interview with Ewan Gibbs

As part of their 75th Anniversary celebration, SFMOMA commissioned British artist Ewan Gibbs
to make a series of "urban portraits" of San Francisco based on snapshots the artist took last year.
Addressing the delicate, pixellated, hand-rendered portraits, SFMOMA curator Henry Urbach said,
"...they hover between photography and drawing, between the documented and the half remem-
bered." The 18 drawings that comprise Gibbs' first solo museum exhibition are on view until June 27,
2010. Daily Serving's Bean Gilsdorf talked with Gibbs before he flew back to England.
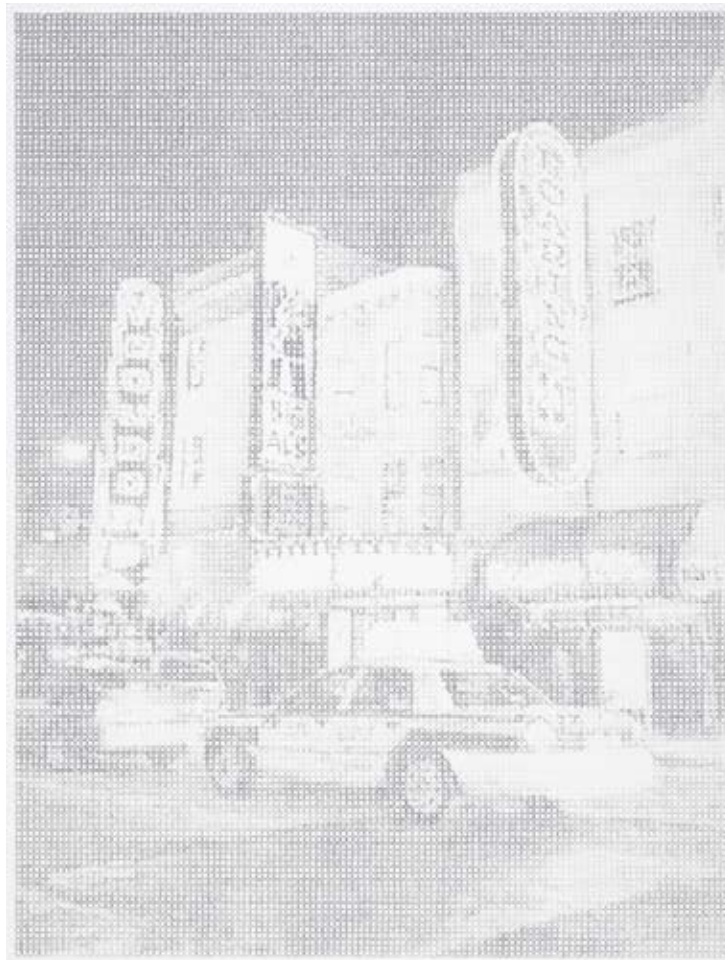
Ewan Gibbs, San Francisco, 2009; graphite on paper, 11 11/16 x 8 1/4 in.; Commissioned by SFMOMA;
© Ewan Gibbs; photo: courtesy the artist and Timothy Taylor Gallery, London

Bean Gilsdorf: How long have you been drawing?

Ewan Gibbs: I started making the work that was the origin of this in 1993, when I was twenty. I came across this language based on knitting patterns and I knew then that this was the thing I was going to do.

**BG:** When you say "language based on knitting patterns", what do you mean?

EG: Basically, I had been making paintings that were quite derivative of Lichtenstein: acrylic, flat color, black outline. I was very interested in interiors, but I just felt like it was all too derivative. I was almost paralyzed by the possibilities that were out there. And I just stopped doing anything—it's a weird place to be, but typical of being a student—and then I found a book on knitting patterns where there's a grid, and different marks determine what color [yarn] you use.

BG: And what was it that drew you to that?

EG: Well, it's a functional language, but it can also be quite naturalistic. [In the patterns] they use a darker mark to describe darker areas. There was a practicality, it had another purpose other than as just a drawing. I had people make me needlepoints based on my drawings and I made a couple, as well.

BG: But you didn't find that satisfying?

EG: I found it very satisfying, but it became a political issue of, "Why is a man doing this?" I wasn't interested in trying to make some comment about craft, or something that's traditionally seen as a female thing. Painting and drawing was what I was interested in. So I took an Edward Hopper painting, and I took the knitting pattern—a found image and a found language—and I put them together. It was a way of going back to square one to build my confidence. Then I decided to go into a holiday shop [a travel agency], and I got all the brochures and cut out thousands of these tiny pictures of hotel rooms. They were ready-made images, and they were free. I would never crop them. I thought, "There's an element here that's very subjective, I have to choose one, but once I've chosen, the composition is fixed." It eliminated all that subjectivity so that I could function.
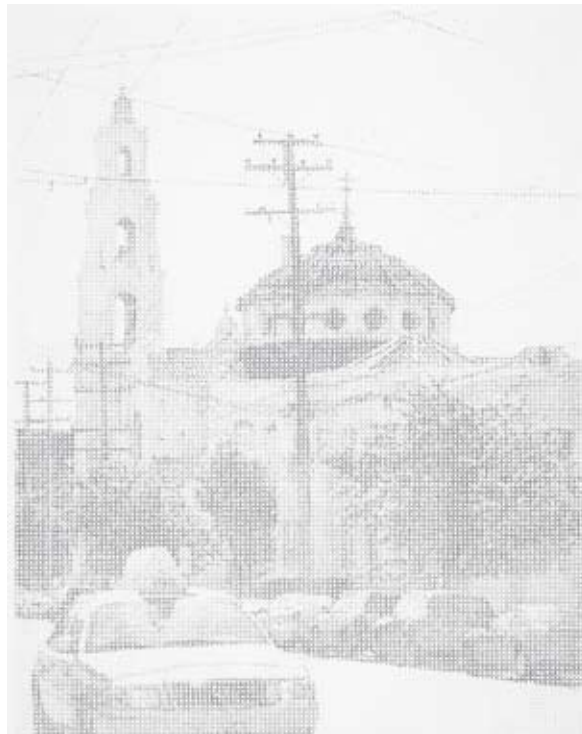
Ewan Gibbs, San Francisco, 2009; graphite on paper, 11 11/16 x 8 1/4 in.; Commissioned by SFMOMA;
© Ewan Gibbs; photo: courtesy the artist and Timothy Taylor Gallery, London

BG: How do you achieve the different gradations in the work?

EG: In the pen drawings, there are five different nib sizes, so I'm just picking up a different nib. There are only five variables for any square. In pencil, I've got ten different kinds of pencils, and each pencil I can use hard, light, or medium; so then I've got thirty different variables. One of the difficulties of what I do, or skills, is to be consistent over a few weeks, to make the same decisions and use the same pressure, so I don't end up with a stripy picture that looks like a Xerox that's running out of ink. I firmly believe I could teach anyone to do it, there's a logic to it.

BG: What determines the scale, if you are working from very small images?

EG: Originally, the source image was about two inches square and I blew it up to the size of the paper. When I started you didn't have digital photography or home printers, so I'd go to a Xerox shop. Now I take my own photos and print off the exact size I want. I still use A4 paper, which is the most familiar-sized paper, it's the size of your head, there's an intimacy. I have no interest in doing a massive one in some bombastic way to impress a crowd. I don't want people to go, "Wow, that must have taken forever!"

BG: People say that already!

EG: They might, but then I say, "It only takes two weeks," and they say, "Oh, that's not that long." Also, every bit of effort I make is visible, so it's really economical in terms of effort. We're fascinated with "work" in art, but it's so often out of sight. But I can make one mark in one square and it takes a certain amount of time. Multiply that by the total number of marks, and that's how long it took.

BG: Some of your marks are like counting, they're like the hatch marks a prisoner makes to mark time.

EG: Yeah, definitely. I was looking for a practice that would...not kill time or waste time, but spend time. Not that I'm interested in labor intensity for the sake of it. The reward in the end is the final image. It's kind of like, "Look after the pennies and the pounds take care of themselves"—you look after each unit, be diligent and rigorous, and you end up with a naturalistic image. And it's almost as if these things have made themselves.

Ewan Gibbs, San Francisco, 2009; graphite on paper, 11 11/16 x 8 1/4 in.; Commissioned by SFMOMA;
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BG: Do you feel like your work has a connection to mapping, or is it closer to photography?

EG: I've never really thought of it in terms of mapping. And I'm not trying mimic photography, I'm trying to take the best parts of photography, like the naturalism that we accept as the most developed way to view the world. I don't want someone to see my work and think, "Oh, is that a photograph?" When you get up there you see the marks, they're very evident. With photography you get up close and there's so much information. With my drawings you stand back and then you come in close to get more, and then you're repelled again because there isn't anything there. There's more clarity when you stand back.

BG: You've had three main bodies of work, Destinations, Hotel Facades, and Typical Interiors. What's behind that type of imagery?

EG: The interiors, I was just fascinated with the genre. But at a certain point I realized that was an easy way of making art-historical references, and kind of lazy. But in those same travel brochures were pictures of the outsides of the hotels. So that gets us away from the connotations of loneliness and art history and it becomes more objective. I'm not really interested in telling anyone about me, or my life. Then I started using pictures I had taken of landmarks, and I realized that they were more meaningless. A picture of the Chrysler Building doesn't really have any connotations other then your own anecdotal ones. It doesn't take you anywhere, you just recognize it, and you stop there. I quite like that. So I did a series of buildings [from photographs] taken from the Empire State Building. But the limitation I put on myself was that I could only take pictures from the viewing deck, because the thought of being able to wander around the city and take pictures of anything brought me back to that daunting subjectivity

BG: What makes one drawing more successful than another?

EG: Sometimes a drawing will fail because there's not enough clarity, or I don't feel like the marks work. I did a book of failed drawings. I did 300 drawings, of which 100 failed, and I wanted to make a book of them because if you're seeing my work for the first time it shows you how the process works and how the language is developed. I didn't want to make a monograph of my work as if I'm established...to me, this is like an artist's book rather than a catalog.

BG: But what makes one successful? When do you sit back and say, "This is good, I've done good work"?

EG: Well, I'm trying to find the perfect mark. For example, in some I've softened the mark with a Q-tip, and that worked for a few drawings. But the same technique failed when I was trying to draw these windows, so the drawing failed. You've got to have quality control, don't you? You've got to believe that if someone only saw one of your things that you would be proud. But I realized that there isn't a perfect language, there's only the right language for the right picture. If I like it, it's more like I was a conduit for the language to do its thing.