

Salisbury Post

Checking back in with artist Frank Selby

By Katie Scarvey
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When Frank Selby moved to Salisbury after having lived in Los Angeles and London, people warned him it would be the death of his career as an artist.

"It definitely was a risk coming here, and maybe I do miss out on certain things," Selby says.

But it's the work he's produced in Salisbury — created religiously and methodically, day in and day out — that has gained attention around the world. Selby has had exhibits of his work in New York, Paris, London, Athens and Chicago, among other places.

And in a few months, Selby will have his largest solo show to date — and you won't have to have a plane ticket or a passport to see it. In October, "Misunderstandings" will open at the Southeastern Center for Contemporary Art (SECCA) in Winston-Salem.

Selby, who was born in California and grew up in New Mexico, got married in 2009 to Jenn Gardner, an arts instructor at Rowan-Cabarrus Community College. The two met in London as they waited in line together at grad school registration.

They have a 14-month-old named Vivian, with whom Selby is besotted. In his studio, next to one of his own pieces that will be featured in the SECCA show, several finger paintings by Vivian grace the walls. Their bold, vivid colors and loose lines are in sharp contrast to Selby's tightly controlled drawings.

Although Jenn and Vivian are often close by, Selby's work is solitary. It's him, his pencils and paper in a well-lit space. He might be listening to a novel on CD — something substantial but not too heavy, like Scott Turow or Ken Follett.

Selby has had to adjust his habits — and temper his workaholic tendencies — since becoming a father.

"I'd have said (before Vivian was born) that I needed to reach a zenlike concentration in order to work," he said. "That's just not possible now."

Now, Selby gets down to work whether he's in the mood or not because he has to grab work hours when they are available. He works at his home on Sherrills Ford Road, and during the day he's able to work when he doesn't have to be directly involved with caring for Vivian. He and Jenn split child care duties, with a babysitter coming in two days a week. His biggest blocks of time come after Vivian goes to bed, when Selby will work into the wee hours. He typically works between 10-14 hours a day.

Crazy work schedule aside, Selby loves being a father and is a great dad, Jenn says. Having a child is "an incredible shot of energy into your life," he says.

To those who only casually know Selby — who still has the same laid-back vibe of the skater dude he used to be — the control and discipline he brings to his work might be surprising.

"I'm sloppy in my real life," he says. "I've always made a hash of things. I'm forgetful. I haven't gotten a haircut in five months. I sort of barely keep all my irons in the fire." But his art — that's the one part of his life in which he's thorough and meticulous. "If I do something sloppy in the studio, it drives me insane," he says.

Before Selby gravitated toward the drawing he does now, he did layered paintings, in the style of German expressionists, he explains. As he looks back, he deems them "sort of naive."

The last time I wrote about Selby, we discussed the idea of chaos as a theme in his art. As we talked, Louise the cat padded around his studio. If she got too close to his work, he'd put up a gentle forearm to divert her.

I worried about the dire possibilities inherent in having a studio cat — because Selby doesn't dash off a piece in a day. Some of his pieces can take months to complete.

When I visited recently, Louise was nowhere to be seen. She's still around but has been banished from Selby's studio because one day, the chaos that was always lurking beneath the surface exploded. Louise saw a bird at a feeder outside, charged for it and knocked over a glass of beer, ruining a drawing Selby had labored on for a month.

Considering the value of his work, it was a pretty traumatic occurrence. Even a small Selby drawing can fetch \$2,000; a larger image-based drawing can go for \$15,000. So....Louise isn't really welcome in his studio anymore.

Since we last checked in with Selby in 2005, he's had a lot of exposure, including several solo shows in Paris at the Galerie Jeanroch Dard and a solo show in Athens, Greece. He was also part of a two-person show at Waterworks Visual Arts Center in 2009 with wife Jenn Selby.

He's in a major group museum show called "Drawn from Photography" that has been exhibited in both New York and Chicago. It's currently at the DePaul Museum in Chicago, and Selby's image "Light Blue Riot" is the key publicity image for the show and was even printed on banners displayed around Chicago.

Much of his work these days is based on photographs of riots and unrest around the world — which is ultimately about people trying to communicate something important, he says.

It seems appropriate that in Greece, Selby's work was caught up in the craziness of the riots and was trapped in customs for an extended period of time — actually delaying the exhibition.

Although Selby has been making beautifully detailed renderings of old photographs (or combinations of old photographs) for years now, his approach has changed somewhat. Some of his earlier art, he says, was "insular" and not as connected with the world as the work he's doing now.

SECCA Curator of Contemporary Art Steven Matijcio explains how he views the meaning in Selby's work: By "documenting the riots, uprisings and conflicts that litter the human landscape," Selby is "pointing to the deeper flaws in our communication as a condition or cause."

The documentation of an image that was itself documentary becomes a "new level of communication of the idea," Selby says, although it might be a messy one. It's cerebral stuff, no doubt.

His new work doesn't have the sad, somber quality of his earlier pieces, like those drawn from Civil War photographs. As evidence, he points to a recent drawing of a "political scuffle" in London.

"It's kind of a goofy image," he says, noting that it reminds him of a P.G. Wodehouse comedy.

Although many of his newer pieces are about confrontation — a serious theme — he's moved away from the melancholy tonalities in his 2008 New York exhibit "We Weren't Never Here."

"So much of what is in an uprising or riot is geared to positive change," he says — think Arab Spring — which means there's an optimism that's missing in his older pieces that focus on the past.

Selby notes that he often draws images that have been used many times and in many different ways. The same photograph, he notes, might have appeared in many books, but for different reasons, and with different explanations.

"The more language that gets attached, the further you get from the actual truth — if there is such a thing," he says.

Matijcio first saw Selby's work in the 2011 "Drawn from Photography" show in New York. He was intrigued with Selby's "ghostly, yet meticulously rendered reflections of social and compositional break-down" and made a note to learn more about the artist.

At the time, Matijcio also happened to be in conversation with one Jenn Selby, who had gotten in touch with him about speaking to her students at Rowan Cabarrus Community College.

Eventually, Matijcio put the pieces together — Jenn and Frank were related — and reached out to Frank Selby, setting the wheels in motion for the upcoming show.

Matijcio says Selby's technical skills and draftsmanship "border on the sublime. "He is a true virtuoso when it comes to representation and the nuances of translating photo to drawing."

But elevating Selby's work beyond masterful copying, Matijcio says, is "his purposeful subversion of the process — of focusing not on getting every detail right, but on the slips, skews, misses and interruptions that are the essence of communication."

Selby has mounted a Kickstarter campaign — a relatively new way for artists to fund projects — to create an exhibition catalog for the SECCA exhibit which, he says, will be a mini-retrospective of his work. (The exhibit is slated to run from Oct. 25- Feb. 10.) Selby's drawings have not to date been collected in book form, so he's looking forward to this career milestone. While the original goal has been met, additional contributions would enable the book to be done as a hardcover.