

For Sam Still, making art is a compulsion and a comfort. It is his love, his passion — and sometimes a source of hardship. He says it’s “an obsession that seems at times unhealthy; I have to create constantly. I quit my ‘real’ job in 2010 so that I would be forced to engage an art career fully.” Art is both his illness and his cure. In 2000, at age 47, Still sold a successful high-end framing business in New Orleans and moved his family to New York, where he eventually devoted himself exclusively to making art — while maintaining a sense of comfort and security for his wife and children. “It’s a very scary thing to think about: How do you actually have people become familiar with your work and then collect it? How do you actually make a living?” He’s not afraid to say that he actively ponders how best to optimize his earning potential. “I study the marketplace, constantly readjusting where I perceive I might fit,” he says. Still has always been an artist, but his artistic growth took place largely outside of art school. The son of a tool-and-die maker, he was born in Orangeburg, South Carolina, in 1953. He spent summers working in his father’s machine shop, where he became familiar with plate metal and cutting, welding, and turning metal.

His work reflects this: It has a metallic luster and sense of heft, as well as a strong suggestion of precision that can only be achieved through thorough familiarity with a material and mastery of the skills needed to shape it. Yet his childhood was troubled, his home life marked by alcoholism and violence. “All the strife in my family made me want to make these calming things,” he says. “I find pleasure in the rigorous process and the repetition. It’s akin to meditation. I lose myself; I’m transported to an ambiguous world of thought. The images both contain and obscure my emotions. They document my inner experience and the life cycle of the drawing itself.” His first muses were cars. Car doors, hoods, gas tank doors, and other parts were inspiration for what would become Still’s characteristically solid yet graceful shapes — rectangles distinguished and made beautiful by carefully placed and proportioned curves. Although purely abstract, his forms conjure familiar but unidentifiable industrial shapes. As befits the son of a tool-and-die maker, his modified rectangles — which, depending on your perception at a given moment, can be perceived as objects or openings — are finely honed. “Obsessively calculated edges define my practice,” he says. Still aims to be an artist who methodically and deliberately works to transform himself into a brand and his art into a commodity. His approach to “branding” and “commodification” is no sell-out. He makes the ideas of “product” and “market” part of his working process, integrating them seamlessly into his seamless art. “I try to make the best work that my intellect will allow me to make.” His goal is to develop an ongoing connection between people — as many as possible — and that work. Take his *Never Ending Drawing Project*. Every Sunday since July 29, 2012, Still has placed one nine-inch-square drawing on auction via eBay; each auction continues for approximately seven days. The drawings are created in a medium-cum-technique that is Still’s and Still’s alone: “Burnished ink on paper.” Still draws the

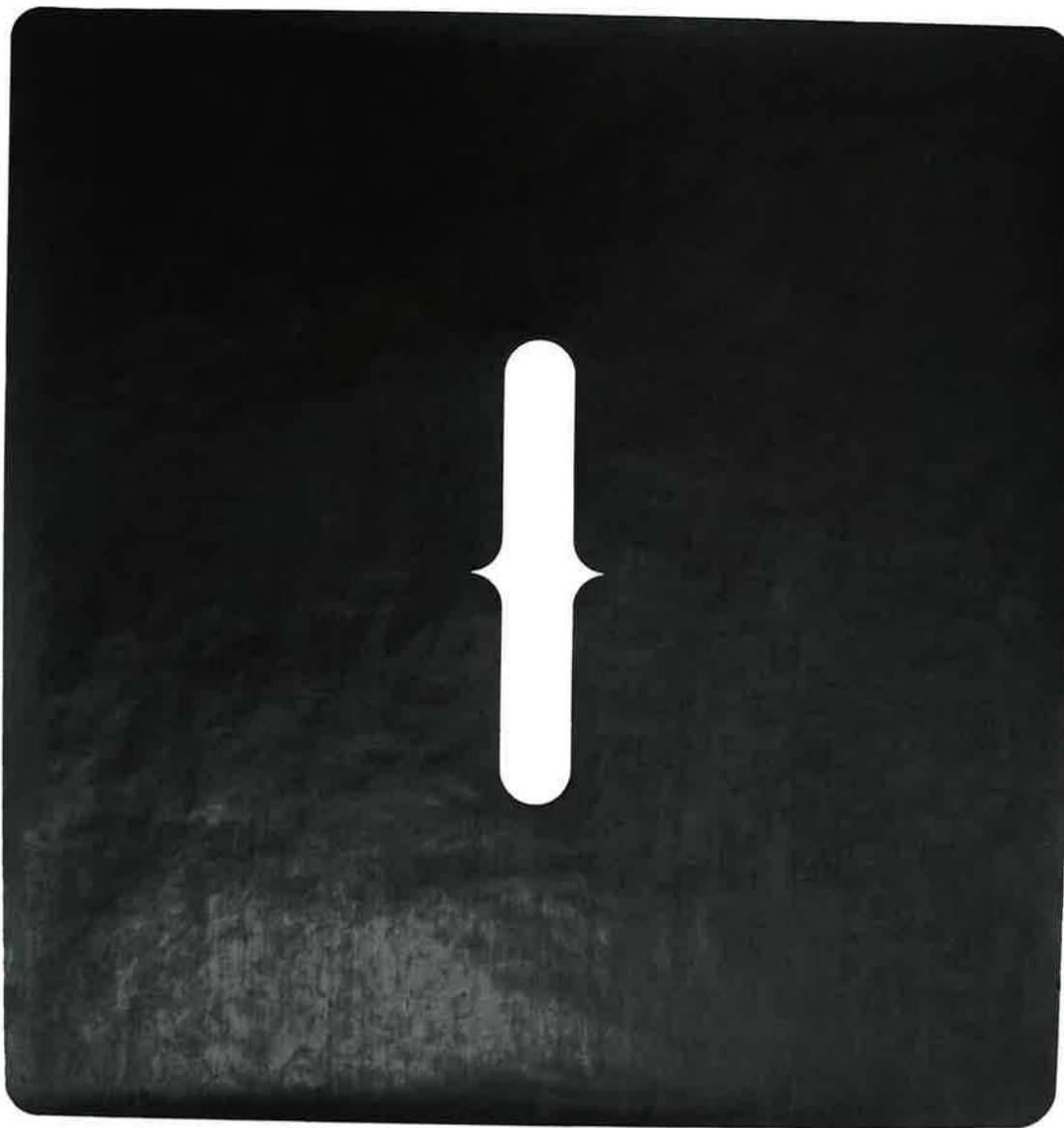
INTERVIEW : MATT SINGER

outline of a shape and then fills it in with ink. In the case of the *Never Ending Drawing Project*, the initial shape is created in Photoshop via a layered TIFF that produces endlessly varying iterations of a partially bisected square. The variations are seen where edges meet — is a given corner a 90-degree angle or is it rounded? If the corner is rounded, to what degree, to what depth? He puts the ink down in multiple layers and then burnishes it with an agate stone. The result is work that is both machine-made and hand-wrought. It employs the latest technologies and the most timeless human creative gesture — the making of a mark on a surface.



Still describes the *Never Ending Drawing Project* as “a platform that follows the process of creating an object and that object entering the marketplace.” But the drawings are still distinctly his drawings.

Their creation involves every bit of the highly visceral sensuality he expends and experiences in making his art, and which makes his work — with its uniquely textured, sometimes cloudy, sometimes gleaming, but always strikingly and surprisingly dimensional surfaces — beguiling for the viewer. Still’s description of his experience of making art testifies to energy



channeled in a way that engages and excites all senses. It is almost sexual in its narrative of a building tension culminating in a release that merges destruction, transcendence, and creation.

“My act of drawing is the push and pull of the radiograph barrel against the paper grain,” he says. “The delight in the ink’s power to overcome, obliterate, saturate the white as the barrel passes along the paper. The smell of the ink, the sound of the barrel scratching a pathway as the ink is pulled out of the pen. The almost giddy anticipation of the act of drawing, the chase. Oh, what animalistic pleasure is derived.”

Still titles each work with the time and date of its completion. “I think of them as a trip that’s over. Each drawing is a record of a journey. A journey of thought and contemplation. Sometimes brief, other times long and involved. My drawings record the time spent.”

As for connecting with people, Still’s eBay audience has been small but steady, and that’s just what he wanted: a platform that changes weekly and keeps his name in viewers’ minds. “I was prepared for no drawings to sell the first two years,” he explains. “The interest is slowly growing, just as I want it to. If interest occurs too quickly, I’m afraid it would be a flash in the pan.”

His hope for the viewer — the potential collector — is simple and deep. He wants love. “I hope they fall in love,” he says. “I hope they love the piece of paper as much as I do. If you don’t fall in love with it, then move on.”

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