

lory pollina: man in black

The graphite sticks Lory Pollina uses to draw with are, in his own words, “almost inconceivably black”—so much so that rather than signing his name onto a completed piece, he often must incise it into the work. For some, this kind of blackness might seem to represent something sinister, but Pollina’s artwork reveals instead a depth that is far more freeing than frightening. Black is, for him, a source of endless possibility, and one that represents the intensity of his passion for another art form: classical music.

We meet at the pristine studio where he works and lives in the hills north of town, and Pollina immediately lets loose a torrent of thoughts about his development as a creative person: the observations, philosophical inquiries, life choices, and, most notably, the music. By alternately penciling and erasing to the rhythm of classical compositions, Pollina adds layers to a Bristol board surface until shadowy organic forms emerge. The resulting pieces are moody, complex, and dramatic, yet maintain a subtle emotional content—an expression of Pollina’s own “sub-conscious in present time.” With such a refined artistic vision, it’s astounding to learn that his path to its realization didn’t include the visual arts at all until 1995.

Long before he set pencil to board, the onetime philosophy student (University of California at Berkeley) applied theoretical notions to the study of piano and cello, on which he focused full-time for nearly two decades in Paris and New York. (Pollina is also an esteemed teacher of piano and cello.) It was during his first years as a musician that he discovered Bach, whose cadences now drive Pollina’s drawing process.

With the harpsichord tunes at high volume, he focuses so completely on the rhythm that he barely even looks at the page. “I build up some emotions and then attack with the graphite stick, and then attack with the eraser,” he explains. “And I repeat that until the piece is discovered.”

Pollina now shows his work in New York and Santa Fe, including a series of drawings on display this month at two events hosted by Salon Mar Graff—John Margraff’s monthly suppers and salons, which he conducts at his enchanting rural-chic Tesuque home. The independent spirit of these gatherings, in one of the only non-gallery venues in Santa Fe, suits the artist’s sensibilities well. “My mission in what I do,” Pollina says, “is to hold space for a miracle—stabilized—so other people can witness and experience it on their own.”

Back at the studio, Pollina begins pulling out drawings. He lowers the blinds one by one, explaining that due to the graphite’s reflectivity, the light must be dim to see the artwork clearly. At first, ghostly figures shimmer, and the varied lines within them look flat like children’s scrawls. But as he continues lowering blinds, the mirror-like quality vanishes. Layers take form, and suddenly I am looking *into* the drawings. I see a head, a pregnant belly, something wrapped in bandages. Smoke and clouds billow. The shapes are lit by flickering lights in dark passages. And the darkness, I see, is wide open. —*Marin Sardy* **sf**

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KAREN KUEHN



Above, details of graphite on Bristol board, all untitled, various sizes; left, Pollina in his Santa Fe studio