

# R. Nott

Magazine

Interviewing Ethan Murrow

april 2015  
ISSUE#15

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**R.Nott Magazine Issue #15 – 04.2015**  
**Interview with Ethan Murrow by Vinicius F. Barth**



## How, where, when and why.

I grew up on a small unprofitable sheep farm run by teachers and writers in a very rural part of Vermont (northeastern part of the US). As a kid, this meant I spent a lot of time outside, working on the farm and exploring in the woods. Much of my love of landscape, deep spaces, exploration and invention come from these experiences. My brother and I also did a lot of stupid stuff. There are lots of ways to get in trouble on a farm, holding onto a sled attached to the back of a pickup truck and driving through the woods at top speed comes to mind. Perhaps my love of the idiotic and absurd comes from moments like this. Now, I make work that deals with the tender line between the fool and the genius and situations that examine the fragile, absurd and intractable fact of our own missteps upon the land and amongst one another. I blame my parents and grandparents for practically everything, in a good way. A long love affair with journalism, writing, education and the values and philosophies that run parallel to these professions define my family and as a result, my work. I care about discourses within the art world, but I frequently place

by Herman Melville has influenced more of my work than any other text, source material or conversation. I'm also deeply committed to the labor and craft of making both in my method and content. As a result my drawings are intentionally epic, even obsessive in their construction and this filters into the scenarios and characters that inhabit them. This comes as much from my childhood experiences as it does from the mentors. These individuals were tough and structured and helped me understand that repetitive practice and training lays the groundwork for conceptual development.

## How would you define your work? And why do you do it?

More than anything I strive to be a storyteller. It took me a long time to become comfortable with this and understand that the nature of "story" is much bigger than a stereotype of softness or sweetness. My work is defined by quiet human absurdities in loud and big landscapes. I care deeply about the power struggles we are all involved in, but I also see that much of what we do upon this earth looks ridiculous up against the sheer

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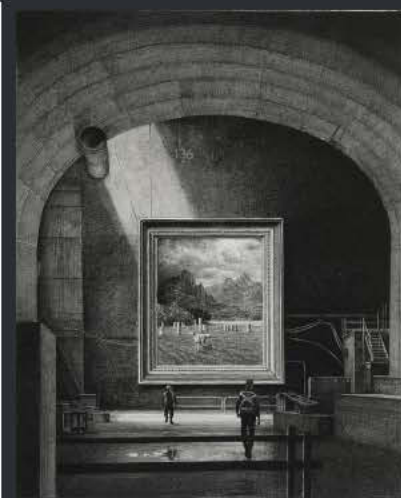
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face of inevitability. As a result, my drawings and projects delve deeply into moments of chaos and danger but I also hope to find the funny and ironic within. Narratives help us understand who we are and this, in the end, is the simple yet big reason I make what I do.

### **About materials, you use mainly the graphite. Why?**

I first returned to drawing (from painting and sculpture) as a way to build connections to the films photographs I was referencing in projects that sampled from explorers such as Shackleton and storytellers like Charlie Chaplin. That still matters to me and is evidenced within the work. Every time I think I'm going to move on from graphite or drawing I find new ways to set up challenges for myself and so I return again and again to this plain and minimal medium. The intense repetition of building marks over weeks and weeks gives me time to analyze the content, and I love these moments of investigation. Plus, it's a simple and no frills approach that puts the image at the forefront of the work.

### **Who are your characters, and where do**

Lately the characters have become much more anonymous or have disappeared altogether and I have been referring to grouping of people or figures that are out of focus and involved with a job or problem. If something happens, it will effect them all. Previously, character was a central part of my work and I was particularly interested in a self-deprecating conversation about single minded pursuits and a lust for solitary glory. These are still important factors to me, but I wanted to take the attention away from the individual so that the actions within the drawings put weight on a collective people. My sources range widely but I suppose they all come from books and films; from the bumbling idiots within Asterix (the French comic) to fictional narratives such as Agatha Christie's mysteries and then on to historical figures such as President Lincoln and the Duwamish Native American Chief Seattle.

### **What is the public reception to your work?**

Ideally that depends on the exhibition and the goals of the various projects. Part of the reason I started building wall drawings in ball point pen and sharpie was to change the discourse within my work. For example, at the deCordova

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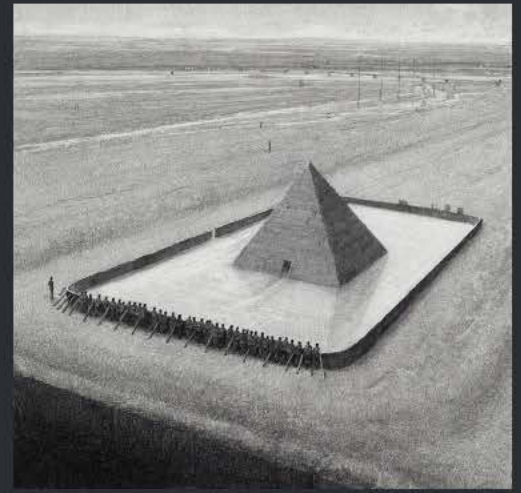
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and power hungry history of the United States via watercraft. Hundred of tiny drawings of canoes, freighters, destroyers and drug subs accompanied by a chatty and opinionated history in text. This project was meant to be a subjective history and function like a book. It was meant to be read and argued with and as a result was very different from some of the fantastical moments of wonder that I often have delved into within my works on paper.

### **What are your future projects?**

A big project I have coming up in the summer of 2015 is a multi story wall drawing at the Institute of Contemporary Art in Boston that will deal with rising water levels in the ocean. This drawing will be made in the atrium-like entry-way of the museum and I will be building it in front of the public as they stream in and out. I'm looking forward to the informal questions and critiques that might arise from this intersection of making and the public. I guess I enjoy this kind of pressure and the weight it puts on my shoulders to perform and take responsibility for my content and work. I will also open a new show of drawings at La Galerie Particuliere in Paris in December.

Beyond some of those literary and filmic heroes already mentioned I would add a few artists I'm currently and frequently obsessed with: Francisco Goya, for his ability to confront the realities of war with honesty, Thoba Khedoori for her ability to distill down to an essential while doing something massive and glorious with paper and image and James Turrell who creates architectural spaces for the contemplation of light, sky and place that feel democratic and distinct from the cerebral discussions of much of the art world. Finally, I have to give a shout out to my wife, Vita Murrow, who has been making work with me off and on for years. I've learned a tremendous amount from her about structure, direct and plain spoken language, the need for clarity within the absurd. She's my editor and collaborator and none of this work would be possible without her sharp critique. Collaboration with Vita and with others keeps me (somewhat) humble and honest and encourages the weird.

### **Something else you'd like to add? =)**

Thanks for the opportunity!

