

## AROUND THE GALLERIES

# Drive of the human spirit

By HOLLY MYERS  
Special to The Times

Men decked in elaborate equipment poking around in nature — much of human history is distilled in this one archetypal image, and it forms the basis for an impressive L.A. debut by Seattle-based artist **Ethan Murrow**.

The men appear in his drawings in wet suits, hard hats, goggles and headphones; we see them digging, trolling, wading, chasing, listening, watching and waiting in a variety of desolate locales. What they're looking for is unclear and seems to be largely beside the point, though the title of the exhibition at *Obsolete*, "Digging a Hole to China," gives some hint of their projects' scientific merit.

There is a fine line between the genius and the harebrained, and Murrow makes no attempt to delineate it here. What these characters hope to accomplish is their own affair; what interests Murrow — and what he captures beautifully — is the drive.

In a statement for the show, Murrow recounts the experience of building a makeshift vehicle with friends as a child and running it through tests on a dirt road. The vehicle itself "barely moved," and Murrow, needless to say, went on to study art, not engineering.

But the spirit of the endeavor clearly persists in his art making. It colors nearly every aspect of this exhibition, from the boyish



ETHAN MURROW

**AN EAGERNESS TO ACHIEVE:** In nearly three dozen graphite drawings, Ethan Murrow captures men and women in the midst of various endeavors that go unnamed.

eagerness of his characters' demeanor to the ragtag quality of their equipment and the naive nature of their exploits. (Of the four series, one involves lava, one catapults, one butterfly nets and one the "Hole to China.") What he brings to this project that he may have been lacking as a child is the skill to bring his ambition to fruition.

And this is indeed an ambitious body of work. Nearly three dozen graphite drawings range from 11 inches square to 10 feet tall, all lavishly rendered in a

style that is sharp and articulate without being finicky or academic.

The drawings are based on stills from videos that Murrow produces in collaboration with Vita Weinstein, in which he dons these costumes and enacts these peculiar experiments himself. One video, portraying Murrow on a beach with a contraption that looks like a megaphone on wheels, appears alongside the drawings as a work in its own right.

The fact that Murrow main-

tains a connection to these other media — video and performance in this body of work, sculpture in the past — makes the scale and the refinement of the drawings all the more remarkable. There is nothing dilettantish about Murrow's embrace of the medium.

Indeed, he has tackled it with an audacity akin to that of his characters, pushing a typically slight and ephemeral medium toward epic proportions. He doesn't always get it right; there are several drawings in which he seems to be still finding his foot-

ing. In the best works, however, technical precision and compositional intelligence combine with a knack for facial and bodily expressiveness to rousing, often spectacular effect.

**Obsolete**, 222 Main St., Venice; (310) 399-0024, through Dec. 31. Closed Tuesdays.  
[www.obsoleteinc.com](http://www.obsoleteinc.com)