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Drawing

MAPPING THE FACE THROUGH LARGE SELF-PORTRAITS

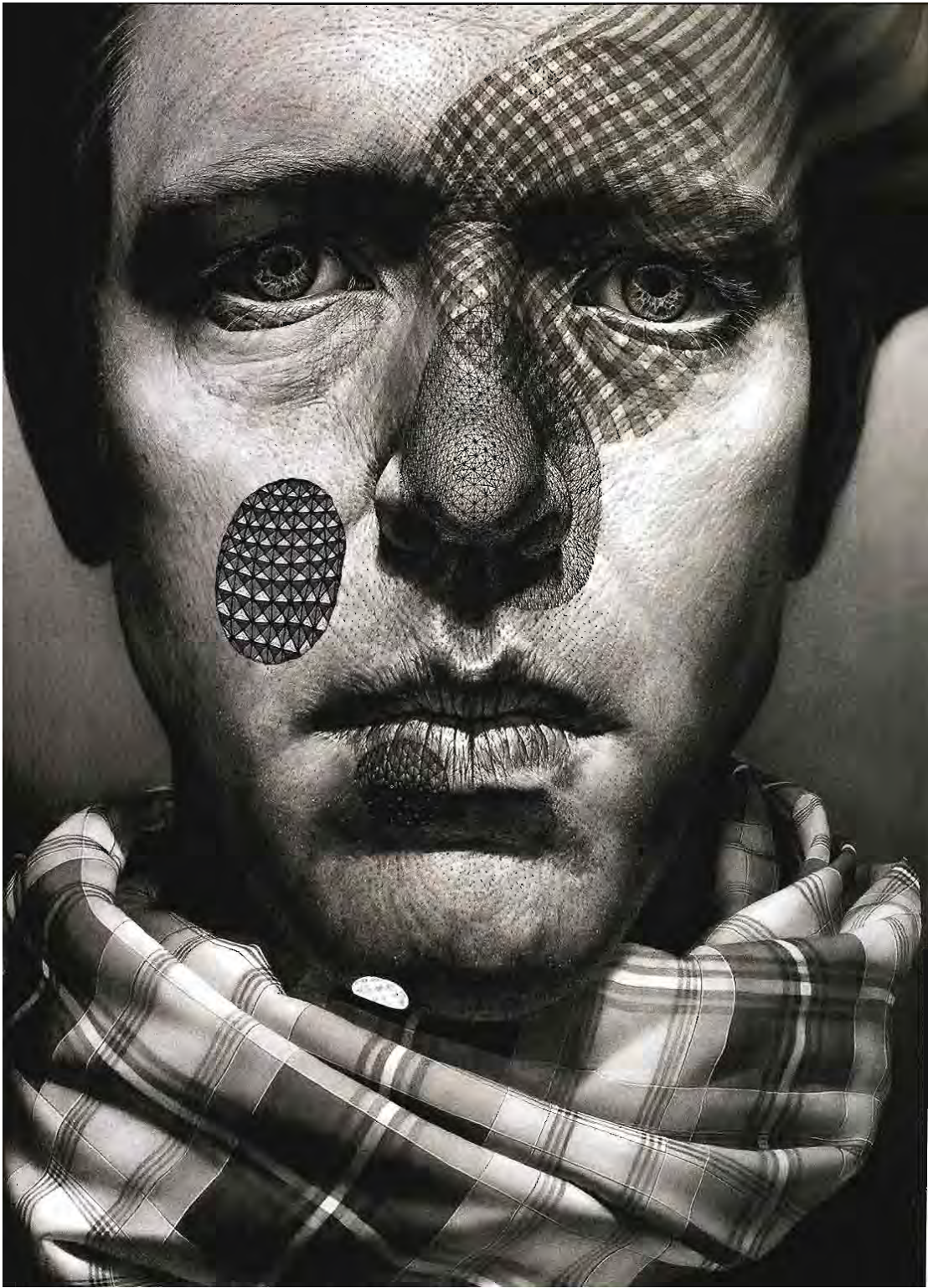
HOW TO DRAW ACTIVE, LIFELIKE FIGURES

Eight Falling on Thirty (detail)
by Ian Ingram

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Advice for Drawing
LEAVES + PLANTS
in Perspective



OPPOSITE PAGE

The All Most

2009, charcoal, ink, beeswax, string, and silver leaf on paper, 54 x 39. All images this article private collection, courtesy Barry Friedman, Ltd.

In his powerful self-portraits **Ian Ingram** combines obsession, philosophical musings, and scrupulous attention to the texture and details of his face. | **by John A. Parks**

Mapping the Self

in Large-Scale Drawings

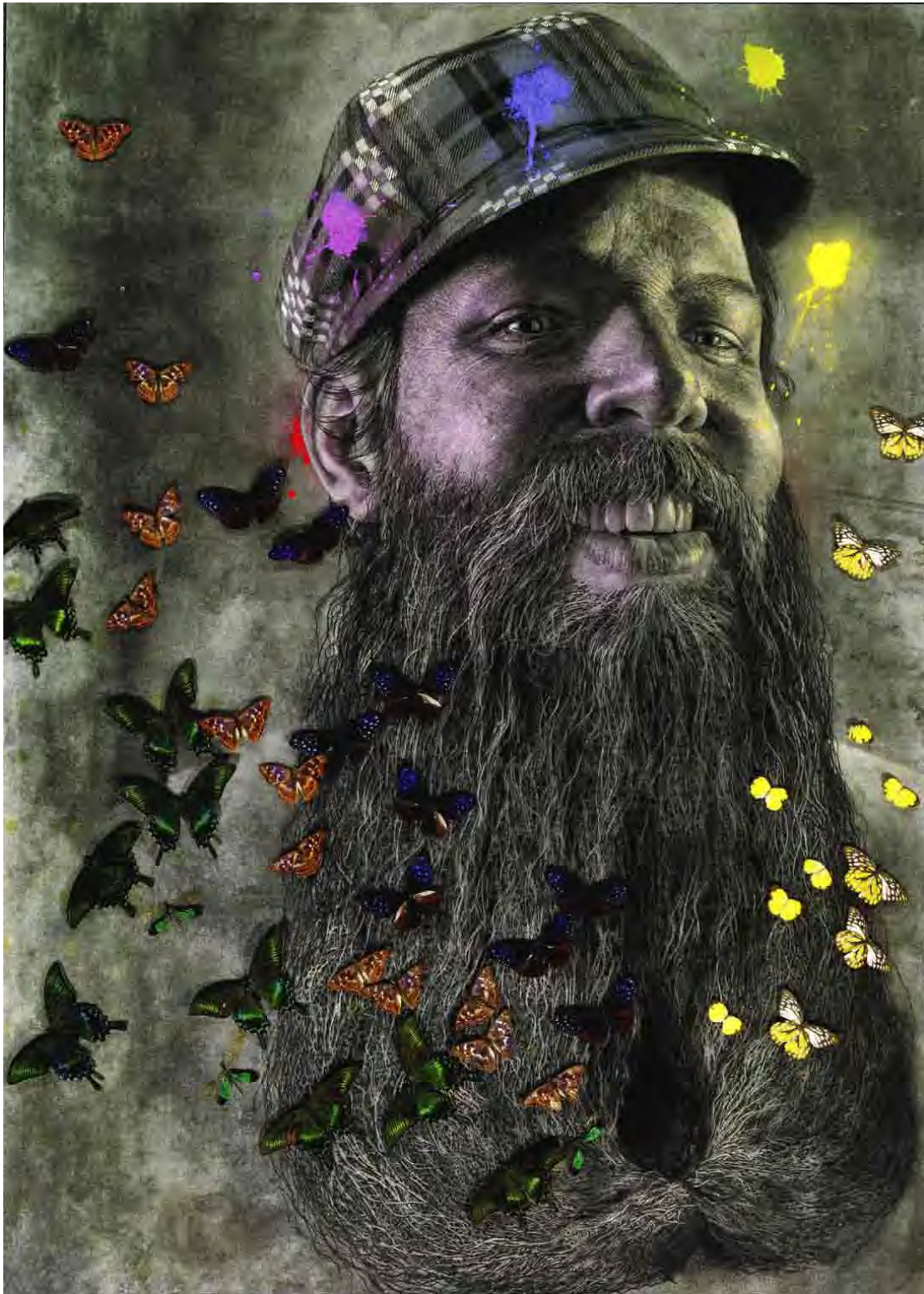
When it comes to putting in serious hours of highly focused labor, obsession can be very useful (when combined with passion, aesthetic delight, and intellectual curiosity) in driving an artist's work forward. Ian Ingram, an artist who draws arresting self-portraits on a huge scale with drop-dead technical virtuosity, benefits from obsession. Working on paper as large as 7' x 5', Ingram uses a combination of charcoal and pastel to build his images to a mesmerizing finish. Harshly illuminated with strong directional light, Ingram's self-portraits deliver considerable graphic

drama, even as they are loaded with an almost crushing wealth of surface detail. The final effect is one of a frozen, heightened reality—something like the early work of Lucien Freud on steroids.

Ingram works primarily from life and uses numerous tools. "I spend most of the three months it takes to make one of these drawings in front of magnifying mirrors of different strengths," he says, "but I will use any tool that helps me see more accurately. Photos, tinted lights to remove the confusion of full-spectrum light, various measuring devices—anything goes." He sets up a mirror on his left and views it through a large magnifying glass

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“For me, drawing is a discipline of the eyes. It is about seeing things honestly and feeling the brain’s influence over the eye’s accuracy.”

that is held by a retractable mount so that he can reposition it as he likes. On his right is the sheet of paper. The artist peers at the particular detail of his face that he is working on and then transfers his impression to the paper. “For me, drawing is a discipline of the eyes,” he says. “It is about seeing things honestly and feeling the brain’s influence over the eye’s accuracy.” This process of assiduous looking brings about a dramatic transformation of the artist’s image. Seen magnified, without color, and rendered with obsessive intensity, his face becomes a landscape, a curiously textured

terrain marked by networks of pores, subtle folds, and blemishes. Presented with all the strangeness of the surface of an alien planet, it demands that viewers reconsider their assumptions about the appearance of a human face.

One of the features of the head that most fascinates Ingram is the pattern of pores arranged across the skin like a fine web. “I have been seeing cross contours that correspond to the pattern of my pore separation, and I spend the first month drawing these contours accurately,” he says. “Once the face is covered with these multidirectional contours, I increase magnification and try to render the more specific details of the surface of the skin.” Ingram has often spoken of the relationship between the naturally occurring geometries of the human head and those of other natural forms. “For the skin to function properly there need to be pores at evenly-spaced intervals,” he says. “In finding and defining these patterns, I am seeing a blueprint for human skin. These patterns have their

ABOVE
Father (detail)
 2001, charcoal, pastel, and metallic thread on paper, 55 x 39.

OPPOSITE PAGE
Our Koruna Muse
 2009, charcoal, pastel, encaustic, silver leaf, and butterflies on paper, 55 x 39.

echoes in all cellular bodies. I see them in sunflowers and cauliflowers, snails and pine trees, and I chose to focus on them as an accurate portrayal of that larger sense of connection to the world.”

Ingram’s devoted study of natural forms leads to the development of work that has a rich narrative content. “The more subtle content generally comes out during the meditative act of drawing what I see,” he says. “I find access to quiet parts of my mind in the action of drawing.” Ingram’s narrative strategy begins with a generally neutral facial expression and the occasional

inclusion of one or two props in the form of clothing or facial hair. He is acutely aware of the dramatic impact of factors such as the tilt of his head, the gaze of his eyes, and directional lighting, which can bestow a theatrical excitement on the subject. All these variations, though, remain somewhat suggestive. Apart from the enormous grin he adopts in one piece, *Our Koruna Muse*, Ingram generally leaves us to wonder about his state of mind. He never goes as far as the photographer Cindy Sherman does, for example, with her deliberate adoption of a wide variety of identities.

For Ingram, the relationship between the conscious ideas he brings to his art and the emergence of meaning through the intuitive process of looking and drawing is one of considerable tension. “I find myself most engaged in drawing when my eyes assert their authority over my mind,” he says. “My mind is constantly trying to take the reins, and the most difficult aspect of my practice is the discipline to trust the physical body acting and reacting to the physical world. The mind insists upon its ‘correctness’ and tries to steer the hand. But each time the mind is responsible for a mark, that mark strikes me as inferior and dishonest. So I take a moment and reconnect with the eyes, with what I am seeing, and start again.”

In other words, Ingram is very aware of how the Mind rushes in with assumptions, pre-programmed information, habits, and shortcuts. “In fact, I am looking for cross-contour lines that are actually there as opposed to the ones I was taught to make in school to define forms,” he says. “You see those marks a lot in Old Master drawings—the rhythmical crosshatching. The outlines are often wonderfully observed lines that reveal a connection between the eye and the hand, but usually the form-defining crosshatch marks are imposed by the mind. I look for the creases and scratches and wrinkles and scars that are on the surface and lend information to the forms they define.” As a drawing develops, Ingram will sometimes take up geometric patterns that he has identified in the head and draw them as stark diagrammatic additions to the piece. These ideas break into the seamless quality of the rendering and invite new dimensions of thought and meaning.

During the last few years, Ingram’s large drawings have become a kind of psychological diary in which meditation, role

OPPOSITE PAGE

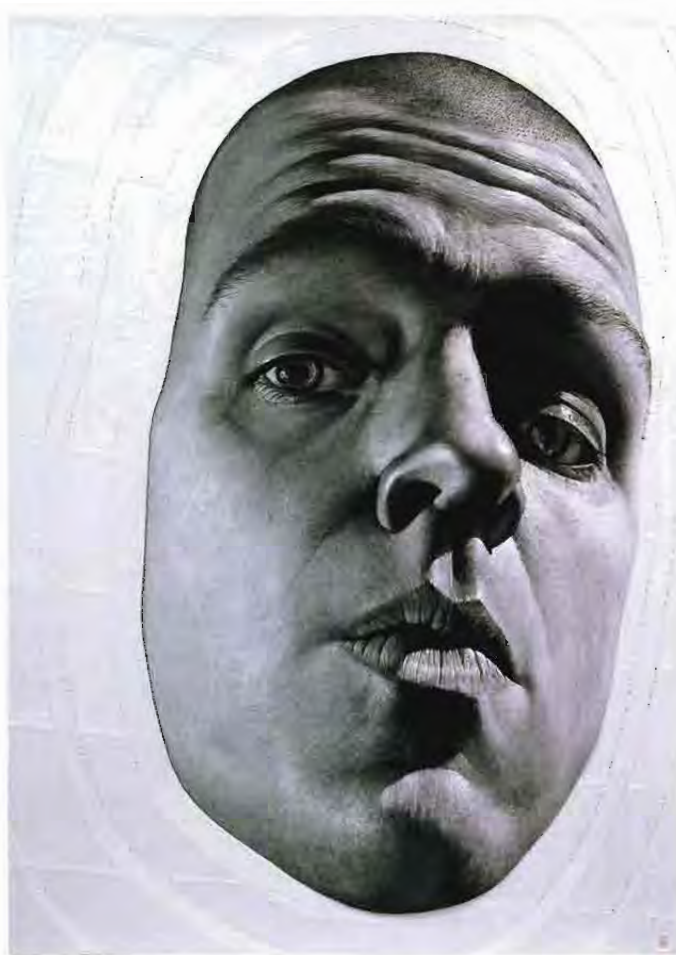
Of Ash or Lead

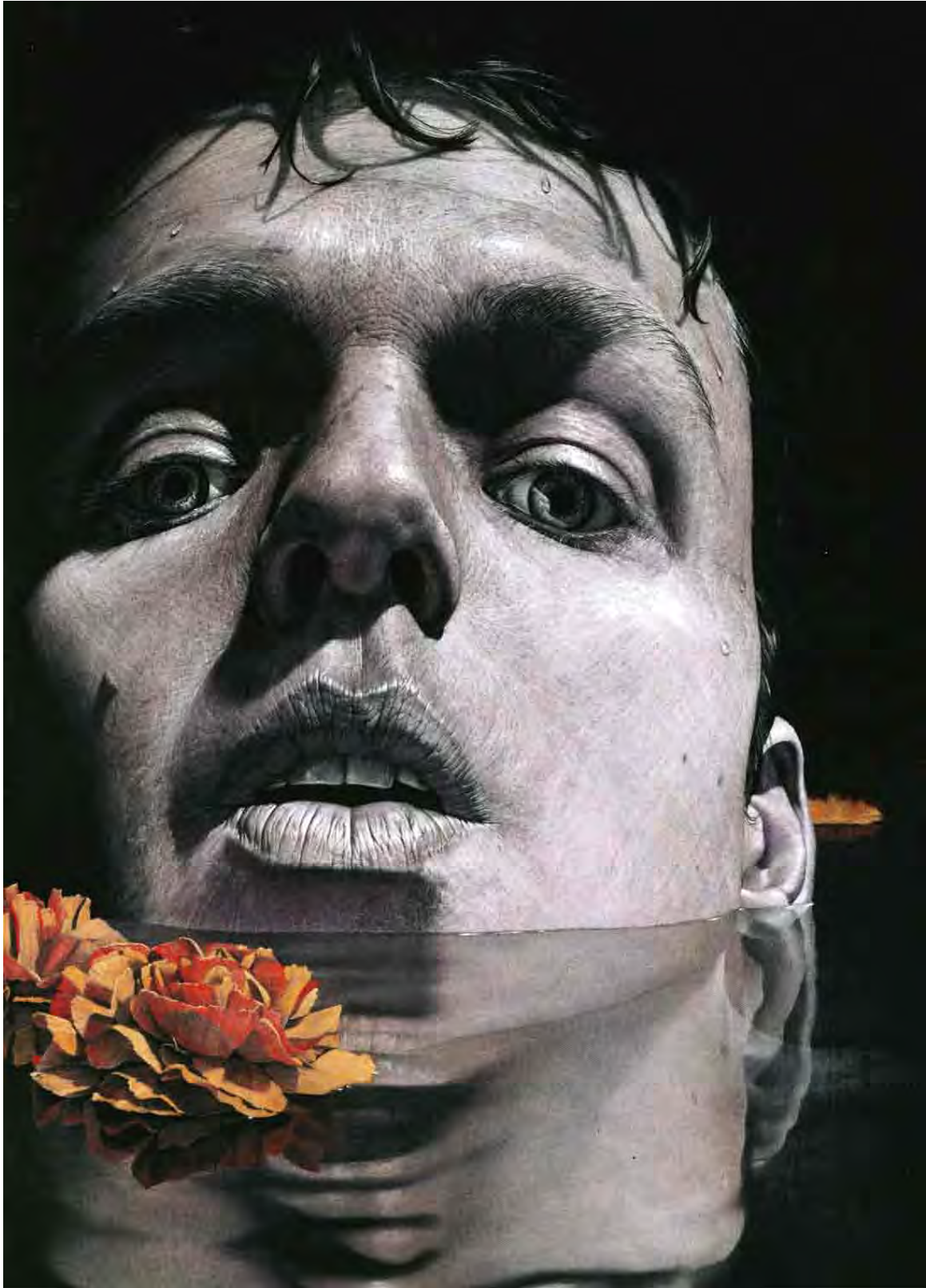
2007, charcoal and pastel, 60 x 44.

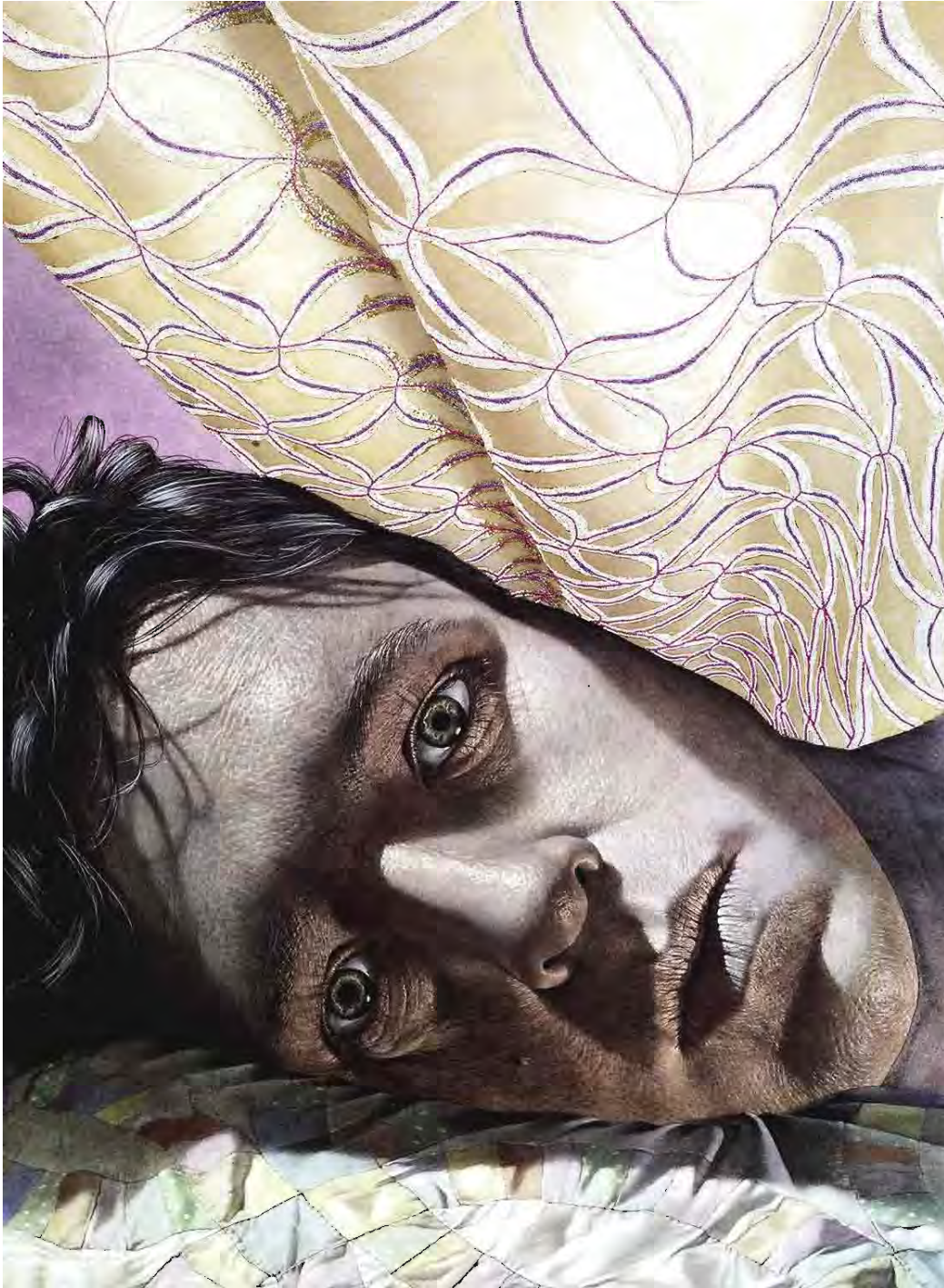
BELOW

and This Never Ends

2007, charcoal, pastel, beeswax, and string on paper, 60 x 44.

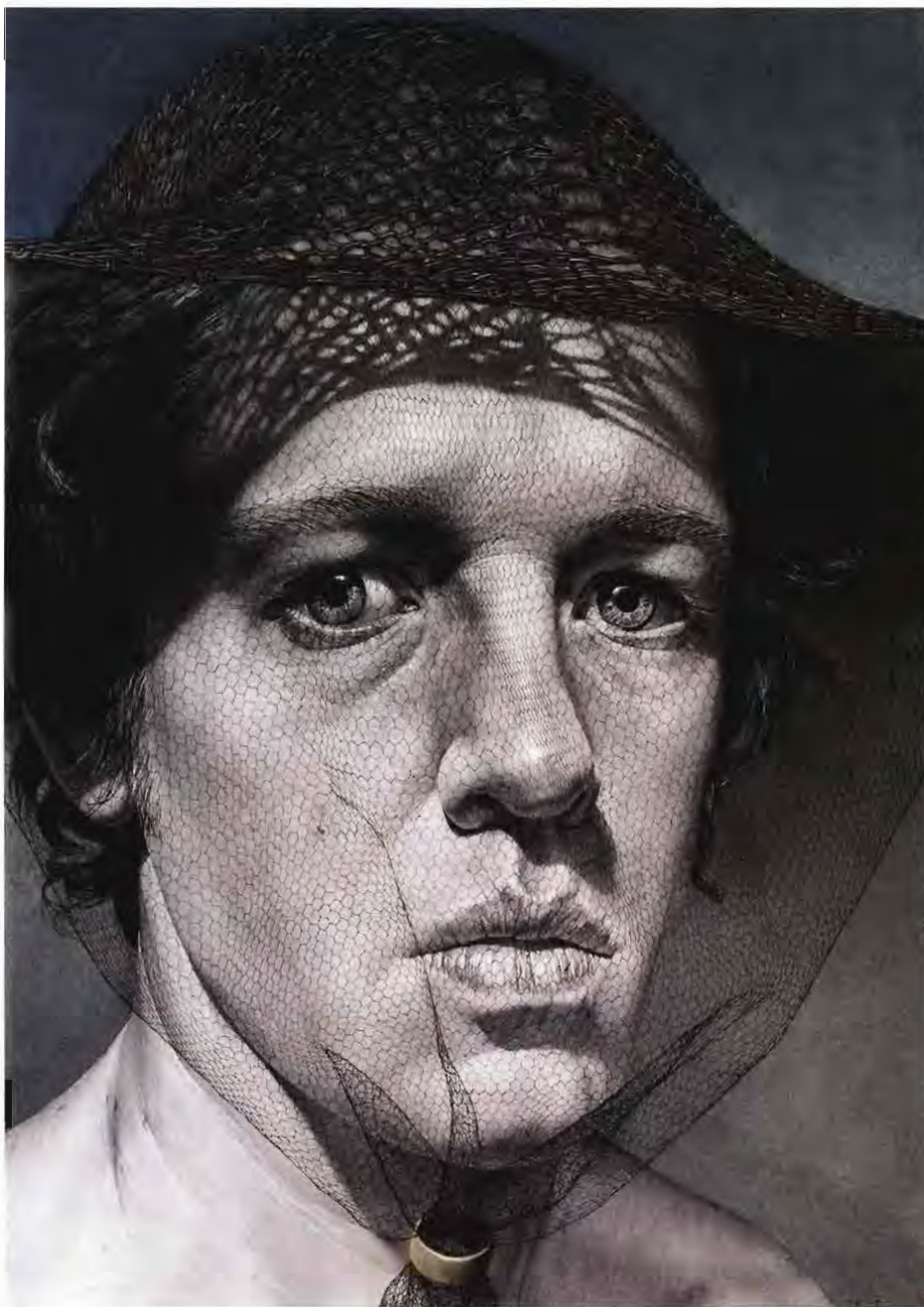


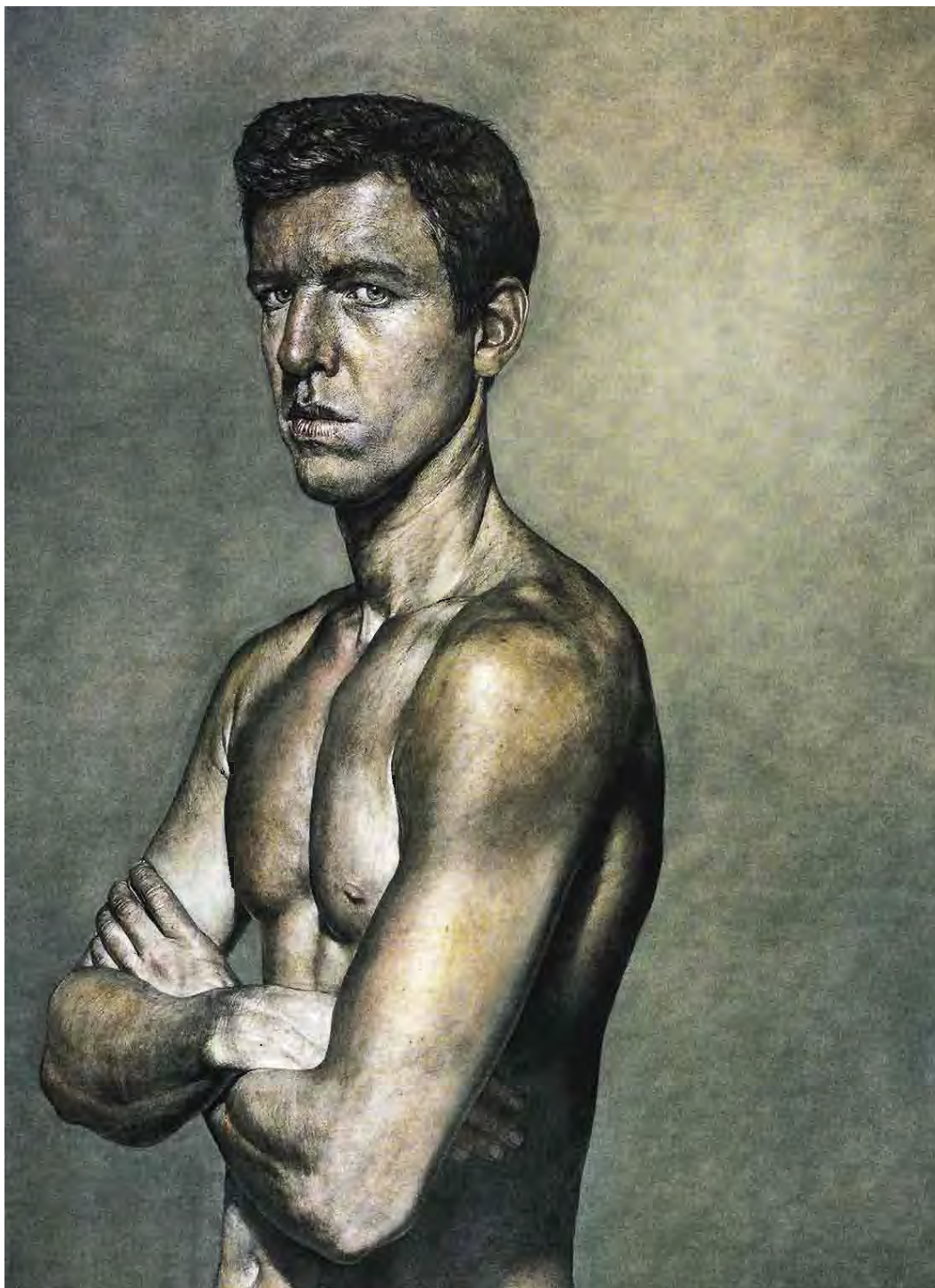


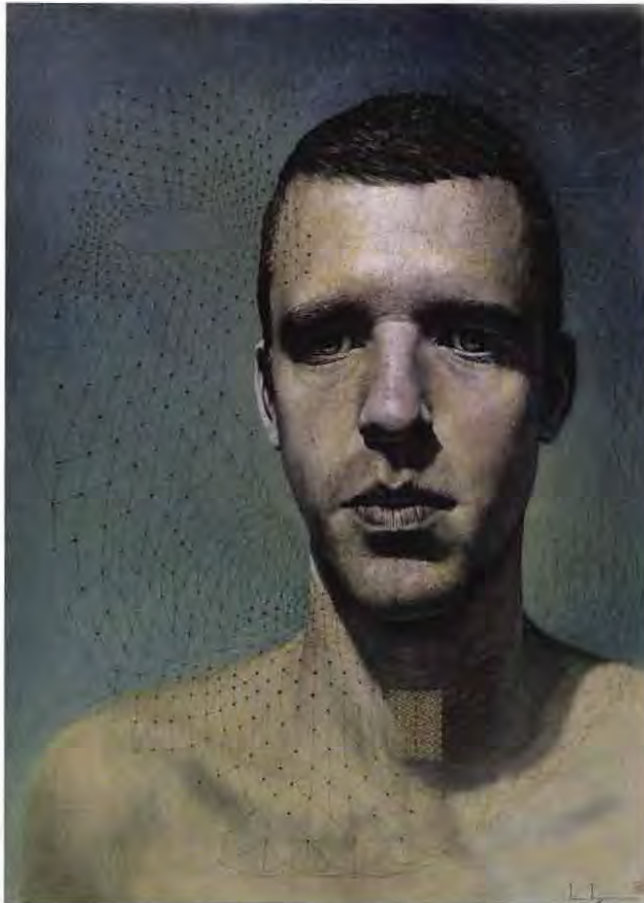


OPPOSITE PAGE
Wedding Quilt
2008, charcoal, pastel, beeswax, and beads on
paper, 60 x 44.

BELOW
Bridegroom Widow
2008, charcoal and pastel, 54 x 39.







“This is the first of the paternal stirrings. It is the result of my proximity to the wonders of a life’s origins.”

playing, and philosophizing have emerged from the development of his own life, his marriage, his introduction to fatherhood, and the gradual aging of his features. He worked on a much smaller scale in the preceding years, but in 2007 he drew the 60-inch-tall piece *and This Never Ends*, a seminal departure. The artist rendered his face—without the surrounding head or neck—emerging like a mask in such stark contrast that it seems to extend out

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LEFT

Father

2001, charcoal, pastel, and metallic thread on paper, 55 x 39.

OPPOSITE PAGE

Self-Portrait as Father

2009, charcoal, pastel, and watercolor, 54 x 39.

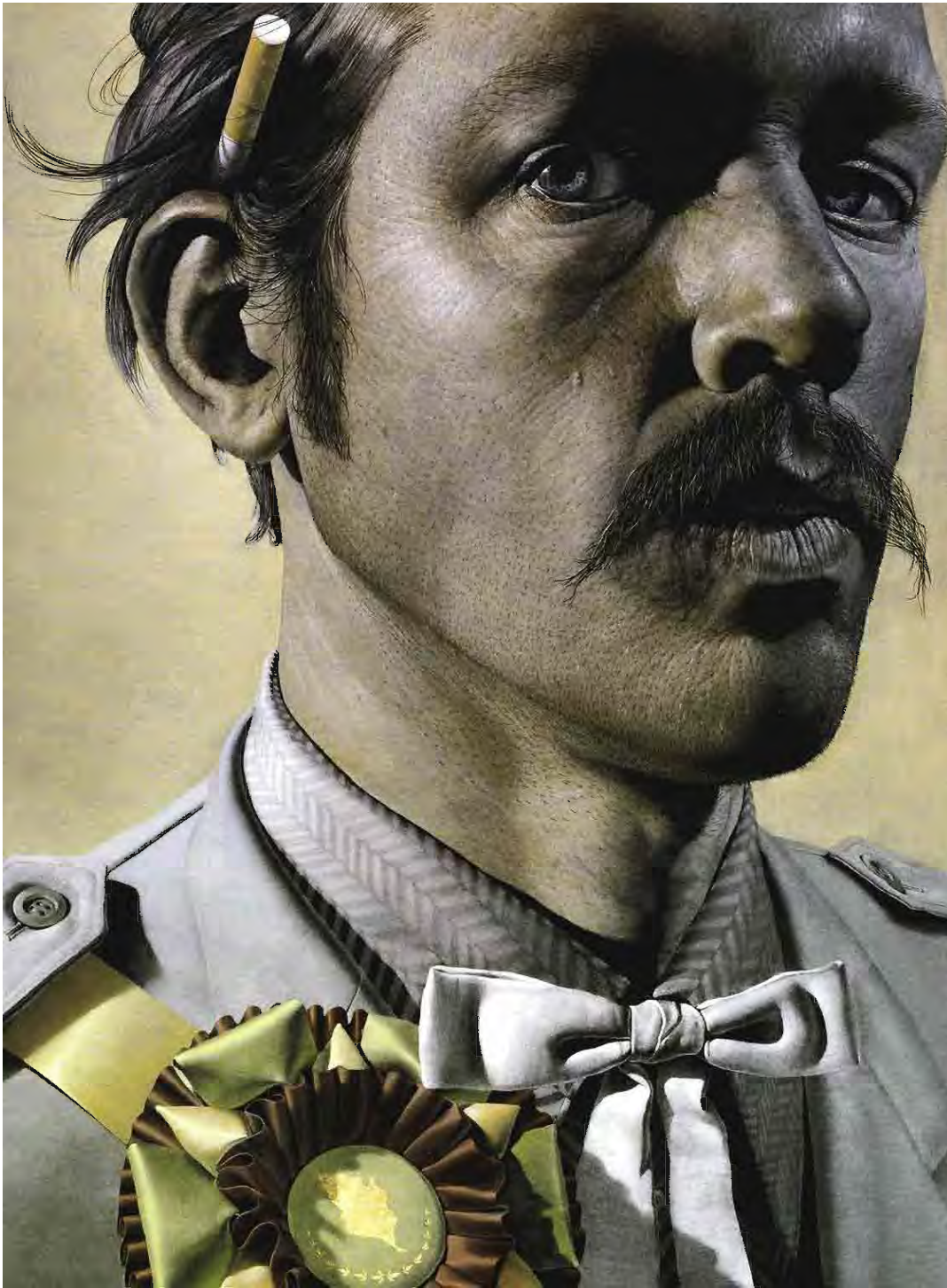
into the space in front of the paper. The forms of the features have a bold clarity that suggests that some kind of simplification and editing have gone on during the drawing process. The specificity of skin texture, with its pores, hair follicles, and beard, is remarkable.

Ingram’s next drawing, *Of Ash or Lead*, introduces much more narrative drama. Here the head is placed off-center, peering at the viewer from a limpid pool of dark water on which float several flowers. The subject seems to be under some stress—he is sweating and holding his head awkwardly above the surface of the water as though anxious about his prospects for continued breathing. Ingram began the drawing after seeing the touring exhibition “Bodies,” which he says made him want to see “the physical location of the soul, some semipermeable membrane where matter transcends the material world and becomes spirit.” Whether humans have a soul that is distinct from the body and whether that soul has a physical location are matters that will remain forever in debate. “This feeling of inconclusiveness,” the artist says, “feeds into the drawing’s title, which I lifted directly from the definition of gray: the color of ash or lead.” It is worth noting, though, that artists are

not always reliable when it comes to pinning down the meaning of their own work. For this viewer, *Of Ash or Lead* projects not a sense of inconclusiveness but rather a stark, anxiety-ridden image in which life and breath seem under threat.

In his next drawing, *Pride of the Perdites*, Ingram pursued his interest in symbolism. He presents himself with moustache and sideburns in the guise of a somewhat

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less-than-trustworthy Southerner, a cigarette tucked behind his ear and wearing a spiffy bowtie. The rosette on his lapel shows the shape of the Louisiana Purchase, and the colors are borrowed from Mardi Gras. Traditionally, green represents faith, gold is power, and purple is justice. But Ingram replaced purple with brown as a tribute to the native peoples who suffered during the westward expansion, or as he puts it, "to honor the skin of the displaced and murdered and to thumb my nose at the very idea that justice existed." The cigarette refers to the tobacco industry, with its enslaved population and its unhealthy contribution to the world. The imagery is intriguing, although the artist departs somewhat from his usual technique in the rendering of the clothing. Hard lines containing the forms of the bow tie, collar, and epaulettes confer a somewhat collaged feeling and bring an uneasy break in the continuity of the space of the drawing.

More symbolism appears in *Wedding Quilt*, which Ingram drew in the months before his marriage. It shows his head lying sideways, staring wide-eyed and anxious. It rests on a traditional wedding quilt patterned with interlocking rings, which was a gift from the artist's future mother-in-law. The drawing *Bridegroom Widow* takes on the idea that attachments bring not only joys but also the threat of loss and separation. He draws himself wearing a woman's stylish black veil, held together under his neck by a wedding ring. The drawing of the individual cells of the veil against the white skin is, in itself, a remarkable tour de force. But the slightly fearful and sorrowful set of the eyes is the most powerful and galvanizing feature of the work.

Father is a drawing that Ingram completed while awaiting the birth of his first child. Although more conventional in stance and presentation than some of his other portraits, this one is distinguished by the superimposition of a geometric net. "I started this piece by mapping the patterns of pore separation on the surface of the skin," says the artist. "I filled the background in and then photographed and projected the grid I had been seeing back onto the surface of the paper but slightly larger, and I drilled out holes with a Dremel power tool and connected the holes with gold thread. The end result is a gossamer image of the 'self' projecting outward into the ether. The rectangle at the throat represents the collar of a priest, 'father' to a larger flock."

Again, the artist seems to be thinking about the location of the soul and its relationship with the cosmos, but he is also musing on the idea of a new part of his life opening up. "This is the first of the paternal stirrings," he

OPPOSITE PAGE

Pride of the Perdites

2008, charcoal, pastel, and gold leaf on paper, 60 x 44.

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About the Artist

Ian Ingram was born in 1974 and studied at Washington University in St. Louis, in Missouri, where he credits his teachers Bill Kohn and Dawn Guernsey with providing inspiration. The artist went on to study in Italy through Temple University, and he finished his B.F.A. at the University of Georgia, where he studied with Art Rosenbaum and Susan Hauptman. Ingram has appeared in many solo and group exhibitions since the late 1990s, and his work can be found in the collections of the de Young Museum, in San Francisco, and the Arnot Art Museum, in Elvira, New York, as well as in many private collections. He is represented by Barry Friedman Ltd., in New York City. For more information, visit www.ianingram.com.

explains. "It is the result of my proximity to the wonders of a life's origins. For the father, there are no physical signals that anything has changed, so access to the miracle of this creation is granted only by a confident leap into the mystery of it. The journey for the father is outward from the contained self. In much the same way a mother watches her body in awe at its new abilities, I watched my mind abandon its habitual demand for answers and soar out in all directions with wide-eyed wonder. It felt like a lid was removed and a part of my self declared its kinship with every other thing from here to the stars."

In *Self-Portrait as Father*, Ingram seems to relinquish his metaphysical concerns and returns to the act of looking with the utmost intensity, as though determined for all time to give a true account of himself. There is no idealization, no role-playing, and no intrusion of poetic or philosophical thinking. "My intention for this piece is for my daughter Koruna to be able to see it when she is my age and find an honest depiction of her father at the time of her birth," he says. "Not an imagining of what I wished to be but an honest image, stripped of an ego's posturing and revealing me flawed, oddly proportioned, and with concentrated curiosity."

Ingram has varied ambitions for his future work. "I always aim to increase my commitment to my eyes," he says. "I want to feed the practices that inform my work outside the studio. I want to speak more fluently the language of humanity and share my work with more people. I hope to become less fearful of color's intensity. I would like to work outside. I hope to sculpt. I want to find ways of translating the pure joy of experiencing natural phenomena. I am in the middle of a series of large self-portraits. When that is done, I would like to work on a different continent for a while. As an observer of self, it is always interesting to do what I can to change my perspective; travel is so useful in gaining new understanding about what defines me." ♦