Ashley Elander
21 April 2010

<center>this is the ~~worst~~ best (?)</center>

Drawing. It always starts with drawing. By 'it,' of course, I am referring to just about every art-related project I have ever done, whether the 'it' has been graphic design, animation, painting, sculpture, or video work. Naturally, when the time came to planning my Integrative Project, a pencil and paper were the first two materials I needed. Little did I know they would be the only two I would need.

If there is one thing I have always done, it's drawing. The earliest memory I have of drawing is with a neighbor. We must have been five years old and were drawing people. Simple enough, right? Wrong. I remember looking at her character's head-body-combination with stick legs and thinking, "That's just not right." I, myself, could barely draw and already knew good drawing from bad. Drawing really gets nostalgic for me when thinking how my older brother, Geoff, and I used to copy X-Men characters from his comics when I was around seven or eight years old. He would help me to get the figures just right, well, as right as a twelve year old could draw them. It should come as no surprise that when I sat down last summer (July of 2009 to be exact) and opened my sketchbook one quiet evening, I went straight into drawing a character. That character being the basis for my I.P. project, *this is the worst*.


this is the worst documents the personality of one character through a series of situational drawings of that character, Boxhead. He came to be known as Boxhead

because he is just that, a boxhead. When I first began drawing the character last summer, I drew a box instead of an actual head because the shape of heads and the expressions on faces can really make or break a drawing for me. It wasn't something I wanted to deal with knowing I wanted to draw this character a couple of times that night. Placing a box on his head changed my way of thinking about not what I was drawing, but *who* I was drawing. The box really brought him to life. I thought, "Well, if he has a box on his head, he can't be happy. He doesn't fit in." This melancholy mood that Boxhead adopted in those first drawings molded the way I thought about how having a box on your head would inhibit your everyday being.
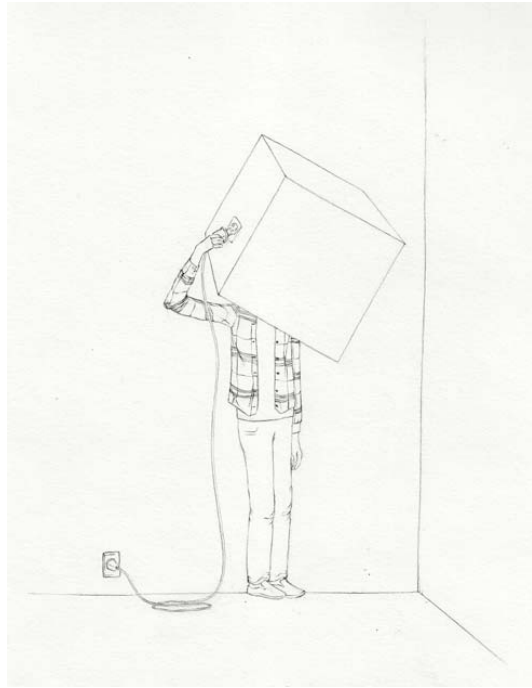
The thoughtless act of drawing a box in the place of a face unveiled a whole new side of my drawing. I have always loved drawing, but it has become a painstakingly tedious act. It is the only aspect of my life where I practice devout perfectionism. One drawing would take hours upon hours and still not be completed. Class deadlines would be missed, friendships lost (ok, that last part isn't true, but you get the point). I could account my perfectionist ways to always drawing subjects as they are in real life. Portraits and still lives. These have consumed the majority of my drawing career. With Boxhead, I wanted to take a stab at not only drawing faster, but also giving my drawings some substance. A concept, if you will.

In order to draw faster, I had to petty up some details. I couldn't explore the ins and outs of my character thoroughly if each drawing was going to take hours to crank out. Lines became simplified and shading became non-existent. I began by drawing the outlines of Boxhead. The lines were hard on the paper, but Boxhead was delicate in gesture and personality. The drawings looked very clean. There was no sketching seen behind the final line. I was still a perfectionist drawing at her desk, just working a little quicker this time.
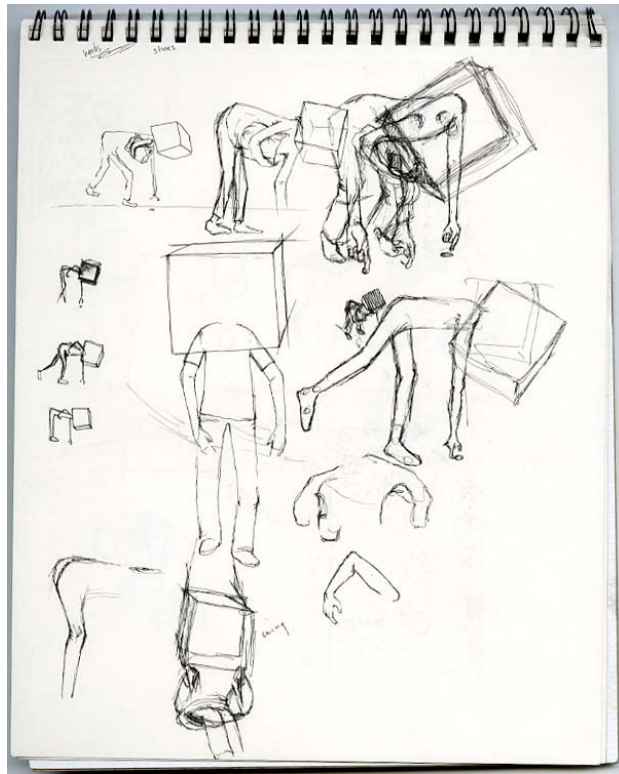
       I can account my faster drawing pace to the increase in sketching this year. Sketching has become an integral part of my process. It is necessary to quickly work out every drawing I'm thinking of, especially for my *this is the worst* series. Though I draw with a light pencil, I sketch with a pen. Doing so prevents me from erasing and makes me less aware of mistakes. My sketchbook is my diary. No one will see it unless I show them. I don't have to worry about creating an image that I think is good, let alone what others will think is good. Looking at my sketches is like taking a look inside my brain, after it's been hit with a baseball bat, that is. They're messy and at times illegible. Those mere scratches on paper are important to work out each situation I draw Boxhead in. They are where I first feel the weight of the box on his shoulders, figure the angle of the box positioned on the body, and work out Boxhead's frame.

first drawing style   final drawing style
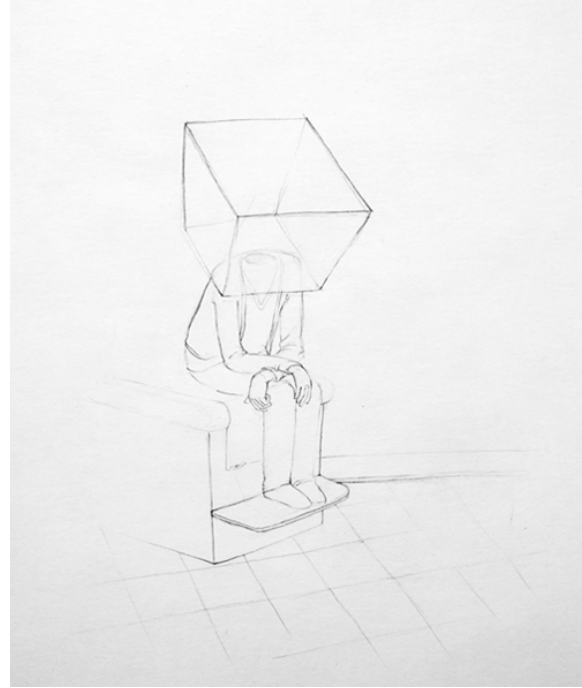
Plenty of sketching throughout my two semesters in I.P. helped me develop a drawing style that is unique to the project. As explained earlier, my first drawings of Boxhead started out with darker, heavy lines and, to be honest, they were a bit stiff. Of course the drawings still displayed the mood of Boxhead, but the drawing itself added nothing to the image. Loose sketching and ultimately moving from drawing flat on my desk to taping the paper on giant, upright boards freed up my final drawings of Boxhead. I brought that rough quality found in my sketches to the actual drawings, allowing there to be a happy medium between the two opposite styles. This looser style of drawing is less restricting. Now I can focus on modes of representation, playing with line quality and the idea of drawing an object without needing to show the entire object. The drawings of Toba Khedoori were influential in this respect. She creates work that makes the viewer focus on one small part of a much larger whole, only showing that which is absolutely necessary for the message to be communicated. Through variation in line quality, I hint the viewer in to small details within each Boxhead drawing. There may be darkened lines around the hand grasping a bowl of lemons, a wrinkle in the shirt that stands out, or lines that no longer exist around that second foot. If the spectator looks hard enough, there are gentle, human qualities to be found deeper into the image.

Toba Khedoori
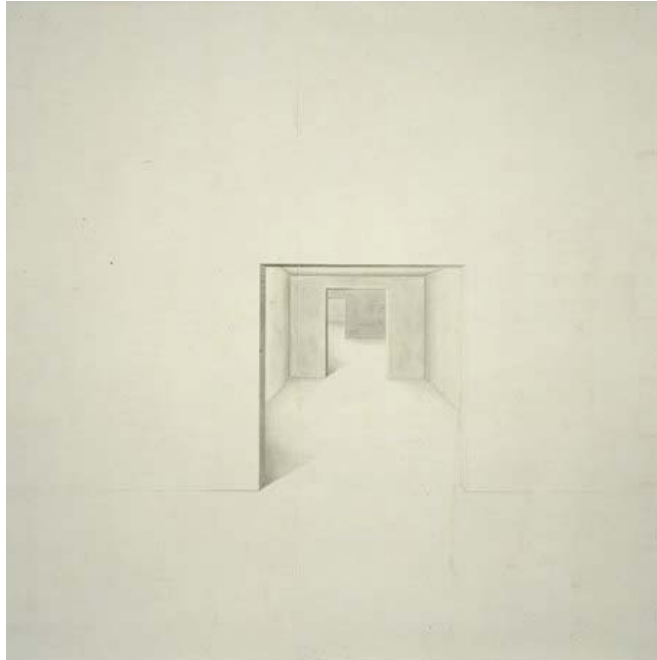
Loosening up my final drawings also allowed me to connect with the paper I'm drawing on. With these drawings being light, I wanted them to mesh with the paper rather than lay right on top of it. This is the reason for lines tending to fade in and out. A light, varied line quality would not make an abrupt break with the paper, but rather seem like it's swimming above and below the paper's surface. I began to create another relationship with the paper I was using. When I draw, I have a tendency to lean in closely, drawing with a immensely sharp pencil so I can get in every small detail. Being so close to the paper, I started to realize it wasn't so smooth after all and saw the slight marks and grooves in it. These would help to shape how I drew my next line into or around it. Part of me knew exactly what I was going to draw and another part of me left it up to chance.

Canadian artist Marcel Dzama has had an influential position over *this is the worst*. His small-scale illustrations invite the viewer in with their welcoming color schemes and 1940s-styled characters. However, when you actually get to look at the images, they are somewhat disturbing. They contain guns, death, ghosts, missing limbs, monsters, debauchery, hooded figures, and more. What can seemingly be normal is

always skewed. Dzama also creates his compositions with blank backgrounds that make the illustrations come across quite clear to the spectator. All of these aspect of Dzama's work have been inspirational to my creation of Boxhead. On the surface, the Boxhead drawings are friendly, or nice to glance at. When you really take a look at what the drawing is, you start to understand the bitter sadness behind the drawings, one that hits you over and over as you continue to look at the series.

Marcel Dzama

As mentioned before, *this is the worst* has something that my drawings have lacked in the past: an idea behind it. Not just any idea, but a concept I'm relaying to the viewer. I draw these images of Boxhead knowing that people are going to look at them, so I would like others to have some sort of investment in them as I have. Boxhead's personality all started as an alter ego, a very real alter ego. He shows a side of myself that is self-pitying, unlucky, lonesome, and feels like an outsider. Not only is he already feeling these things, but the world is also working against him. Boxhead is that moment where you feel like nothing worse could happen, but it does. It the piling up of annoying, petty things that make throw your head back and exclaim, "This is the worst!" Looking

at many of these drawings rather than just one is like seeing yourself at all those moments where you feel most sorry for yourself. It's sad, but you can't help but laugh at yourself. Boxhead gets caught up doing ordinary tasks we take for granted, making him look pathetic, like longing to wear a fedora, eating a sandwich, or feverishly trying to get his headphones on. As observed in the latest Coen Brothers film *A Serious Man*, there is the sense of life happening *to* you, and life kind of sucks. Larry Gopnik, the main character in the film, is thrown in and out of situations that he must make the best of. It shows a realistic character having to deal with realistic day-to-day problems that arise. Even though Boxhead is an unrealistic character, I had to create Boxhead's reality within our everyday.

Larry Gopnik of *A Serious Man*

My Integrative Project began without knowing it even started. All I meant to do was sketch one night and I ended up launching a year long project that doesn't really end after the semester is over. The year alerted me to process and opened up a whole new bag of projects and ways to think about drawing. I have never before been more aware of what I wanted to do post-graduation (draw, of course), while at the same time having no idea how to do it. At times it has been the worst, but thinking about all the projects and possibilities I have waiting for me on the other side of May 1st, it's also kind of the best.

Bibliography

A Serious Man. Dir. Joel and Ethan Coen. Perf. Michael Stuhlbarg. Focus Features, 2009.

"Marcel Dzama." *Richard Heller Gallery*. 2002. Web. <www.richardhellergallery.com>.

"Toba Khedoori." *David Zwirner*. Web. <www.davidzwirner.com>.