

The Way We See It: The New Drawings of Ryan and Trevor Oakes

—Deenah Vollmer

“It’s easy to think that the world is out there, but in fact we’re in the pitch darkness,” said Ryan Oakes to me last June, gesturing toward our immediate surroundings. “The whole world exists right here,” he said, pointing to his head.

Ryan, along with his identical twin Trevor, are collaborating artists who have been investigating binocular vision for almost their entire lives. Though their work ranges wildly from abstract paintings to pipe-cleaner sculptures to astonishingly accurate figural drawings, the brothers are consciously concerned, regardless of medium, with what happens in your eyes and brain when you see.

Most recently they have been using colored markers to cover their concave canvases (concave because that’s the shape of our retinas and our field of vision) with interlacing spirals. Dissatisfied with conventional methods such as crosshatching, shading, and stippling, they have developed a technique they call “threading,” in which form and value are created by juxtaposing and layering coils of color in curlicues. Where colored marks intersect, areas like sky or ground are evoked. The result might be characterized as Pointillism meets Spirograph, and while we don’t see coiled color approximations, and the sky is hardly filled with bright red thread, such devices, as wielded by the Oakeses, feel perceptually accurate.

Born in Boulder, Colorado, in 1982, but raised in several other places (like Blacksburg, Virginia, and Morgantown, West Virginia) before landing in New York, the twins are boyish, friendly and energetically long-winded. As each brother speaks, the other brother listens attentively, agreeing with staccato flurries of “yeah” along the way. At first, it’s hard to tell them apart. Ryan has a mole on his cheek, and at times the brothers choose different hairstyles. When I met them, Trevor’s hair was long and tucked behind his ears, whereas Ryan’s was short and mussed. Both are extremely handsome I should mention and have long eyelashes, intense gazes, and dark lines under their eyes, probably from too much seeing.

They live in a compact basement apartment near Union Square, but a patron of theirs from Los Angeles loans them use of his Soho loft as their studio. I visited them there on a number of occasions in the spring of 2011. Those meetings with Trevor and Ryan were never less than three hours, and each ended only because I had to get somewhere and was already running late. I left exhausted, but Trevor and Ryan seemed unfazed, as if they could have carried on forever, almost saddened that we didn’t get to talk about everything on their minds.

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Though labor is separated for efficiency’s sake, all projects are jointly directed. “We discuss everything that we do,” Ryan told me. “It’s a collective mental pursuit, even though our hands are executing different aspects of each project.” For the duo’s

meditative abstract ink and vinyl acrylic paintings, Ryan rolls a bamboo brush he has constructed across rice paper he has distressed while Trevor adjusts the mixture of ink for each successive pass to achieve the desired gradation. All such paintings are a single shade of blue, made darker or lighter by the number of times the brush is dipped. The paintings are somewhat a tribute to Rothko, Ryan told me, and the repetitive interactions of positive and negative shapes left by the brush remind me of M. C. Escher's metamorphosing birds and fish.

For another type of work on a special easel the brothers invented in 2004, which allows them to create drawings on a concave surface, Trevor pens the details of a given scene while Ryan choreographs the placement of figures within the scene. Why the concave surface? "After recognizing that a flat picture plane had many slight inaccuracies, we were attempting to make the depiction of space more accurate, closer to how space appears to your eye," Trevor explained.

The easel, which is very large, but can be compacted into a box when they travel, is used for their "binocular splitting" technique. More practiced in the demanding pursuit, Trevor focuses his right eye on a sliver of the scene they intend to draw while his left sees a doubled translucent image on the easel. He then traces the landscape entirely freehand. He draws the scene in vertical two-inch sections that the brothers will later adhere together. The easel, a concave grid of welded metal atop a tripod, serves the dual purpose of 1) holding the two-inch curved strips of paper in place, and 2) through an attached plaster helmet, keeping Trevor's head perfectly still, which helps him preserve a fixed vantage point. All work created on the easel is of equal size, 21 inches wide by 20 inches tall and 10 inches deep.

From 2004 to 2010, the brothers meticulously rendered the world in black ink alone. Just as the Impressionists set up their easels outdoors, so did the twins, but instead of taking minutes or hours to complete a single work, they took weeks or months. They honed their craft to produce such accomplished drawings as those depicting the Great Hall of the Field Museum in Chicago (which took 21 days to complete, in 2009) and the Cooper Union's buildings on Third Avenue in Manhattan (which took nine months, in 2010-11). However, as they refined their technique, the requisite length of time for completing a drawing increased. They had begun rendering every twig on every branch on every tree, obsessive-compulsively, they admitted. Because they were depicting only the physical edges of every detail in view, they were left with a drawing that just felt too white, too architectural and too sterile. Most of all, their black and white depictions didn't incorporate color or value, integral components of light—and it was light they were after from the start. "To really address the volumes of light filling the space, we needed color," Ryan said.

Giving up the pen, they would attempt to demonstrate depth with color itself, truer to how the eye sees it. "Depth comes from the atmospheric color that light becomes

as it travels a distance through the air,” Trevor explained. The medium they chose for this experiment was watercolor.

In 2010, they brought their easel from New York to California. However, they didn’t go out West to capture Disneyland or the Golden Gate Bridge; they planned to paint the ocean—at night. Though it seems paradoxical, for their big color debut they chose the darkest, most monochromatic hours, when light is most stable, and when they can most easily render what they call “ambient light foam.” This is “the light you see coming off the surface that you’re looking at,” Trevor explained.

The twins know a lot about light and vision. They sometimes seem more like scientists than artists: theorizing, hypothesizing, testing. Being slightly dyslexic, they’re not too keen on reading, and they’ve had very little formal training in optical science. They figure things out by thinking aloud with each other, with the advantage of twice the brainpower. A few years ago, they speculated, “Wouldn’t it be great if we had a button we could switch on that could record our conversations?” It’s more complicated than a single switch, but they subsequently invested in some portable recording equipment and are now wired to do just that.

They also regularly make a point of meeting interesting thinkers. The twins are the kind of people you want to introduce to other people—Lawrence Weschler, curator of this exhibit, introduced them to Oliver Sacks and David Hockey, to name two whose work in perception is well known—and when the brothers set up their giant easel and begin drawing in their peculiar way, it’s a pretty good conversation starter. They encountered an eye doctor in this way, striking up a long chat about vision, and once Ryan met a NASA engineer specializing in binocular vision who looked like John Travolta (Ryan said), and who had the job of aligning the stereo cameras for the Mars Rover.

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Just before they were about to begin the first California night landscape in watercolor, Ryan and Trevor’s maternal grandmother died. She lived in the Apple Valley, a two-hour drive from L.A. Their work was delayed, but when they returned to their perch by the sea, they were confronted with the “psychological weight” they felt over their grandmother’s death, Trevor said. Poised for hours each night in solitude (though together), they stared out into the formless landscape, black and grainy with ever so slight touches of yellow. Standing at the edge of the ocean, perfectly still and cold from the coastal chill and wind, their hours of nightly painting became a meditation.

While working on a second watercolor, Trevor noticed a “loosely swirling black tornado shape” in his dreams. This inspired him to wonder: What is happening in your brain behind your eyes? “There’s a lot of subject matter and visual territory inside your mind,” Trevor told me. The coiled shape would prove to be the basis for their new work. A tornado brought them into a new realm, like Dorothy’s spiral into Oz.

Turning to color markers in 2010, they made their first drawings in threading spirals: “The Evergreen Cemetery in Late Winter,” based on a site in Ridgewood, Queens, and “Schulte Home in Early Spring Fog,” depicting the yard of a house on Martha’s Vineyard. Still grappling with their grandmother’s death, they spent much time in the Queens cemetery (not where their grandmother is buried but where many other grandmothers are), recognizing that they, too, were living a window of life.

The twins were now taking a new approach to value and color. Trevor likened these two new drawings to quantum physics and the wave-like mixture of matter and energy. He also believes their colors are connected to the kinds of things you see when your eyes are shut. “If you close your eyes and look at the dance of colors you see when they’re closed,” said Trevor, “for me, at least, it’s purples, fuchsia, orange, yellows, a little bit of green and a lot of dark purple.” He added, “We tried to take those colors and mix them together to become the more toned-down grays and browns of the outside world.”

In “Schulte Home in Early Spring Fog,” for instance, loops of red appear in the sky, but the time of day is not sunset or close to it. The house, cropped and diminished on the right hand side of the image, is depicted during midday, but what draws the eyes in is a stone path leading to a wooded horizon line and a sun-drenched sky that is clearly blue, even with red present. Though the rendering is very sharp and detailed, another, less distinct, quality is present as well: what the twins call “foam.” “When seeing an image,” Ryan explained, “your eye is giving you a crisp picture of where the light erupted from, but not really telling you anything about the crazy foam the light becomes in the air.”

The artwork of Ryan and Trevor Oakes tells us what our eyes do not, showing us how our brains might conjure a world from inside our own heads. Startlingly realistic yet somewhere over the rainbow, their new drawings achieve a new way of representing vision, depicting the world not just as we see it, but as we understand it.