

*On Tom Secrest*

—Michael Patrick Welch

To speak with 65-year-old Tom Secrest about his art, you must hunt him down on the marshy edge of America in Lafayette, Louisiana. There, Secrest lives and works in a tiny, dark student apartment, its every wall, countertop and floorboard layered in thousands of his etchings, drawings, paintings and various amalgams in between, each and every one framed. Each room's every corner harbors knee-high piles of leather-bound sketchbooks that stir up your sense of artistic wonder before the inside pages are even glimpsed. "I can't stand open spaces," says Secrest, slumped in his favorite small, low, leather chair like a white-bearded wizard. "And one of the great things art gives is that feeling of security, of making your own place for yourself."

Surrounded by so much of Secrest's art is to feel the gaze of a million eyes upon you—eyes most often set in soft, stylized but nonetheless confrontational faces. Though most are idealized women's faces, several hundred frames contain the artist's own severe visage. In recent years, Secrest says, many of these faces have become eyeless, sometimes reduced to human skulls or else jack-o-lanterns. It is not only his apartment's dim light that gives Secrest's newer images a feeling of recession into darkness: "My work has gotten a lot darker lately, physically and psychologically. The mortality issue, I guess," he laughs. "Plus, I just can't see well anymore."

Though he doesn't deny the idea that his female faces might reference the festive-yet-graceful masks of Mardi Gras, Secrest is quick to distance himself from New Orleans art, which he feels, "is largely decorative, nonthreatening work." The difference between Big Easy art and Secrest's could be as simple as the aggressive tilt he gives to almost all of his million faces. "[The tilt] denotes a fallen position," he says, "a position of deterioration." Like the tilt of a starving dog's head when she wants your scraps, Secrest's faces hunger, asking the viewer some silent, possibly mortal question.

Some of these works—the etchings in particular—date to before Secrest moved into this apartment 27-years ago, as University of Louisiana's new hire and a printmaking M.F.A. from Columbus, Ohio. "Lafayette was a good scene then," Secrest recalls, "the 60's drug culture mixed with the Cajun culture and New Orleans nearby. A very interesting time." Unable to create an ideal printshop at University of Louisiana, Secrest switched to drawing and painting rather than move from Lafayette. Like a human printing press, Secrest has since produced variation after variation on very similar images. His undergraduate etchings feature fantastic robots and impossible transportation contraptions that could have sprung from the mind of Monty Python illustrator and fantasy filmmaker Terry Gilliam. But nowadays, Secrest almost exclusively recreates the human face, the skull, or the jack-o-lantern in charcoal, ink and washed-out acrylics. Each face floats immersed in, and surrounded by, a different childlike milieu: the bulky bolted steel of Walt Disney's now-ironic "space-age," the frocks of medieval renaissance times, the pointy hats and capes of Halloween witches. "These are all fetishes from my childhood," explains Secrest, whose interest in his earliest fantasy life borders on obsession.

Not long into our interview, Secrest's longtime friend and supporter, Jane Noble—a smartly dressed woman with bobbed blonde hair who owns Galerie Eclaircuse—knocks at the door to check on her isolated friend. Before clearing a place to sit, Noble spends several minutes staring down at a card table arranged with hundreds of small frames and knickknacks: "It's a whole different world every time I come over here," she attests. Though Noble looks younger than Secrest, she expounds upon the decades of their mutual childhood, in an attempt to explain her friend's art: "In the 50's, things like television brought about a whole different vision as far as imagination," she says. "Tom mixes icons from that time with his knowledge of the classics, from Moby Dick to Lewis Carroll." Secrest's childhood forever filled his mind and his works with the handlebar moustaches of pirates and wizards and the bulky copper scuba helmets of the *Captain Nemo* series.

After living in Louisiana for 50 years, Secrest has come to think of himself as the consummate outsider-by-default, the Southern Artist. But having lived the academic life, Secrest can't technically be labeled an "outsider artist." "No," Noble shakes her head, "because the first thing you think when you see Tom's art is 'wow, this guy can really draw.'"

Still, Secrest himself gravitates toward the "outsider" label for other reasons. He may earn outsider status simply via his apartment-cum-installation, and his isolation within it. "I prefer to be alone," he says, drawing in his sketchbook even with company in the house. "I spend hours and hours alone. I work

constantly. I don't pay attention to what's going on in New York and I generally look at the work the greats produced late in their lives—Goya, Rembrandt—more than I would any of the hotshot superstars in the magazines." Though typically only bored, grasping academics go around claiming that this or that artistic medium is "dead." Secrest concedes that his methods and style are perhaps archaic. "I'm obsolete the way cowboys are obsolete," he says, conjuring another of his childhood icons, then proceeding to compare himself to the quixotic gnome Oskar Matzerath, refusing to grow and still beating his drum in Gunter Grass's *The Tin Drum*. "My sketchbooks are my tin drum," Secrest chuckles, still sketching.

Journalist, author and musician Michael Patrick Welch earned degrees in English and Fine Art (painting) from the University of South Florida in Tampa before serving three years as a staff writer and editorial assistant for *The St. Petersburg Times* in Tampa. His writing, mostly about music and art, has been published in *Newsweek*, *SPIN*, *McSweeney's*, *Houston Press*, *Miami New Times*, *Dallas Observer*, *Gambit Weekly* (New Orleans, LA), *New Orleans Review*, *SCAT*, *Kitchen Sink*, *Cleveland Scene*, *Weekly Planet*, *FEED*, *URB*, *Southern Woman Magazine*, *Paul Tough's Open Letters*, *Constance*, *Pindeldyboz*, *Ink19*, *BayDomain* and *BIGNews*, among others. He has lived the last seven years in New Orleans, where he published his novel, *The Donkey Show* (Equator Books, 2003), and for two years held a columnist position at *OffBeat*, the city's oldest music magazine. Welch was recently awarded a month long writer's residency at Can Serrat in El Bruc, Spain, to complete two books he'd begun the previous year at Djerassi Resident Artists Program's "Gulf Coast Artists Hurricane Relief Program". One of the books, *Transport Instinct*, details the evacuation of Welch and his pet goat, Chauncey, from Katrina, their quick return to live in the Ninth Ward, and Welch's participation in New Orleans' wild underground music and art scenes.

The mentor, Peter Plagens, is a painter who's shown with the Nancy Hoffman Gallery in New York City since 1974 and was also the staff art critic for *Newsweek* (1989-2003), where he is now Contributing Editor. He has received fellowships from the John Simon Guggenheim Memorial Foundation, the National Endowment for the Arts and the National Arts Journalism Program. His paintings were the subject of a retrospective first shown at the Fisher Gallery, University of Southern California in Los Angeles, CA then traveling to Columbia College of Art in Chicago, IL and the Butler Institute of American Art in Youngstown, Ohio. Plagens is the author of two books of art criticism—*Sunshine Muse: Art on the West Coast, 1945-70* (University of California Press, 2000) and *Moonlight Blues: An Artist's Art Criticism* (UMI Research Press, 1986)—as well as a novel, *Time for Robo* (Black Heron Press, 1999). He lives in New York City with his wife, the painter Laurie Fendrich.