

If Fred Astaire Could Draw...

THE ELEGANT ARTWORKS OF

MICHAEL DUMONTIER

by Meeka Walsh

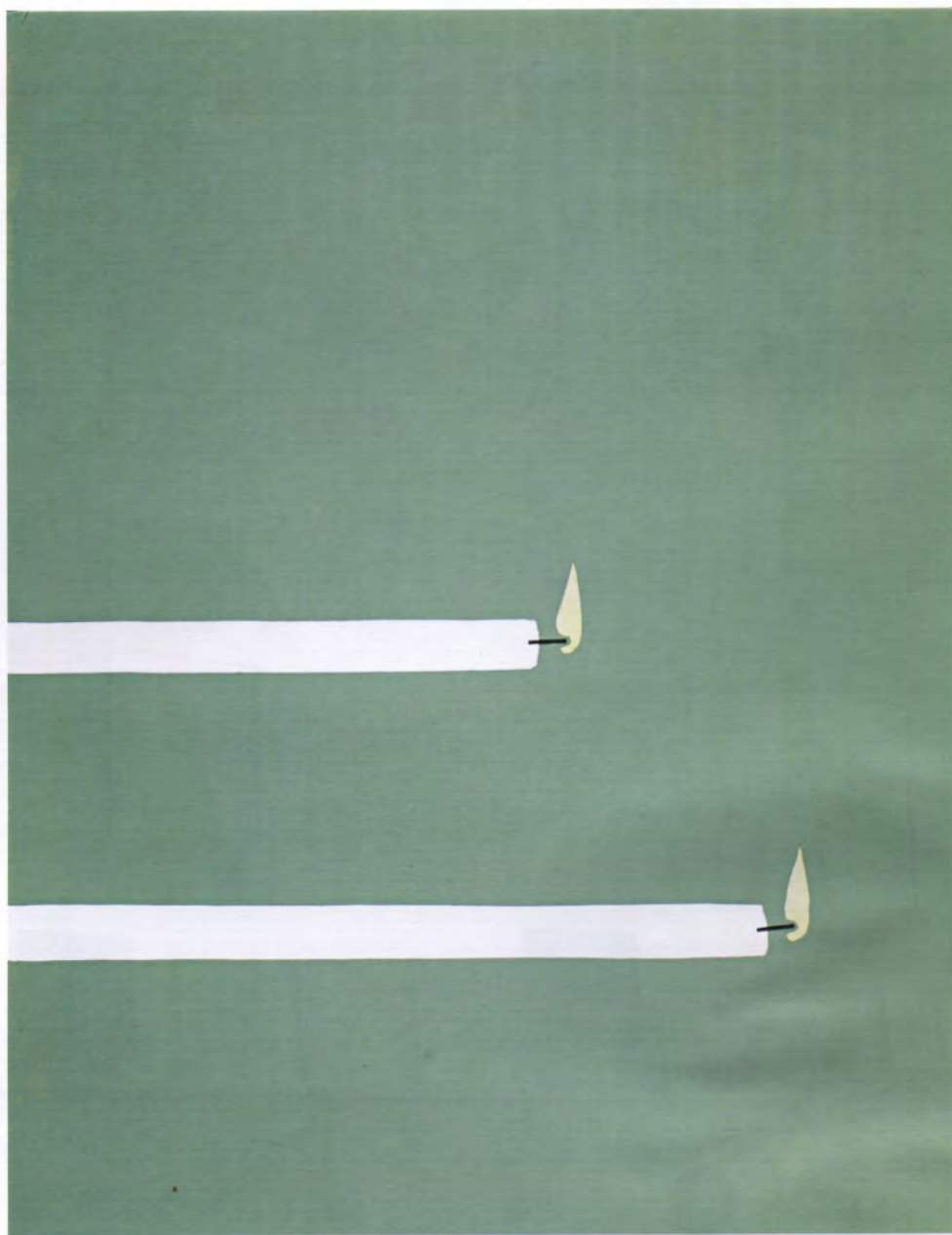
Looking at Michael Dumontier's work, listening to him talk about it, I'm aware of a fine, prevalent, dialectical swing, more a balance than a reflection of indecision. He works collaboratively: it's enriching, highly productive, pleasurable, social, an articulation of friendship; it's emboldening, creative, a wellspring. He works solo, pursuing areas that reflect influences and directions that are of special interest to him. The solitary studio work is gratifying and a unique and thoroughgoing expression of his particular sensibility. But he wouldn't, for a minute, forego the opportunity to collaborate. As he says, "You have the rest of your life to be alone in a room," and then thinks perhaps the development of the solo work might be slowed by having to leave it for periods of time.

He likes William Wegman's work a lot. Wegman makes photographs, videos, paintings and many drawings. It seemed not unreasonable then to look at a book about Wegman's drawings. French curator Frédéric Paul wrote the text for the book *William Wegman's Drawings, 1973–1997*, which accompanied an exhibition of the drawings in Limoges. About Wegman's varied practice he wrote, "On the one hand, ostentatious minimalist rigour ... on the other hand improvisation. On the one hand ever more of the sublime and ever less to show ... On the one hand, a sense of moderation and measure, on the other a liking for repartee."

So it is with Michael Dumontier. In the drawings—subtle lines, minimal marks, a spare subject range, reduced palette, visual economy. In the collaborative works—most recently paintings—the frequent inclusion of text, handsome dexterous painting, an expansive and seemingly limitless presentation of subjects, colour and narrative, at once elliptical and direct.

Frédéric Paul adds, "Some artists struggle to find their way but Wegman strides off in at least three directions at once, without neglecting any of them." Then he focuses his





Untitled (candles), 2008, acrylic and paper on masonite, 11 x 14". Photograph: William Eakin.

preceding page: *Studio view*, 2008. Photograph: William Eakin. All photographs courtesy the artist.

facing page: *Untitled (bowls)*, 2004, acrylic and paper on paper, 8.5 x 11". Courtesy the artist.

focuses his attention on Wegman's drawings and lists the various materials in the order the artist engaged them: a 2B pencil on typing paper, India ink, felt-tipped pens and markers, later the addition of colour with gouache and watercolour paints, then collage using a craft knife or scissors to cut out ready-made images. I'm thinking—this could be an inventory of the contents of Michael Dumontier's studio.

Under the rubric of drawing, and maybe holding to the distinction Walter Benjamin made in identifying what is a drawing, and what isn't, in his essay "Painting, or Signs and Marks" (*Selected Writings Volume 1, 1913–1926*, Belknap Press / Harvard

University Press, 1996), I'm seeking an identifying distinction between Michael's various media. Tidy and succinct, Benjamin identifies the graphic line as defined by its being in contrast with area—the ground on which it sits and to which it is attached. He wrote, "The graphic line can exist only against this background, so that a drawing that completely covered its background would cease to be a drawing." It's a question then of line on ground and how the line or mark sits there on that ground or support, and looking at the work that Dumontier calls drawing needn't be a reading limited to a pencil line on a white sheet; it could be on a card carefully, completely covered in





gesso like an apprentice to Giotto would do in preparing a surface, and then, for Michael the line would go down, being a drawing of buttons, or pencils or electric cords or ribbon, or cut and collaged fragments, and still be a drawing by Michael Dumontier. That's the thing—looking and looking at the endless range of small works that he makes that are drawings, you know by your response—these are drawings, and are not often pencil or ink on paper.

Vitamin D: New Perspectives of Drawing (Phaidon, 2005) is a global survey, as the introduction describes, of drawing today. Here, in Emma Dexter's introductory essay were Benjamin's observations on the graphic line and references to an essay by Michael Newman where he writes that drawing, in only lightly touching the surface, is about withdrawal, departure and, therefore, loss.

Michael Dumontier spoke thoughtfully and with regard about the collaborations that have been shaping and fundamental to his work, about how they were formed, how they shifted over time and what they continue to be. These essential collaborations were various. He'd worked with Tom Elliott to produce what they called Sound Machines, instruments that made a music of their own. He and Drue Langlois made countless individual dolls in felt and mixed materials, each identified singly but under the collective label of Eyeball Hurt and the Medicine Present: *title*. There was the earliest first grouping of The Royal Art Lodge, with seven members at its largest assembly, that produced drawings, collages, mixed media works, videos, movies. Two members of the RAL—Adrian Williams and Jon Pylpynchuk—moved away, later Drue Langlois, then Tom Elliott and Marcel Dzama. Michael said to *Border Crossings*, "For me, things drop out of my practice as I lose collaborators. I kind of lose interest; there are things I don't want to do on my own. With Drue and the dolls—that was a specific thing for that relationship. When someone leaves," he said, "they take away something, some potential for work."

Every time someone leaves that's a loss, and that loss is a drawing of its own.

Michael Newman's likening drawing to an expression of loss finds its parallel in the spare and elegantly reductive work Dumontier does, and I think here of TS Eliot's assertion that poetry is "an escape from personality." This seems applicable, substituting art for poetry. In his noted essay, "Tradition and the Individual

Talent," Eliot wrote, "The business of the poet is not to find new emotions, but to use the ordinary ones and, in working them up into poetry, to express feelings which are not in actual emotions at all." This would be pulling back from grand and effusive gestures or conjuring theatrics that finally distract the viewer, or



reader, from apprehending the emotional simile—the event or response that would be equivalent to the artist's intention.

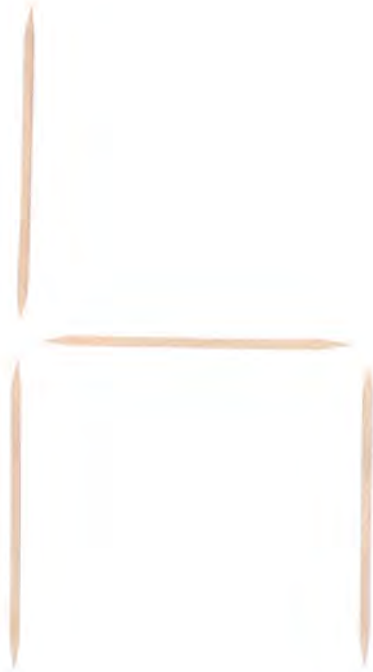
It's Dumontier's withholding his ego but not his self, the deference and care with which he regards the endeavours of others, that seems equal to Eliot's poetry being an escape from personality.

The authorial, heavy hand is absent, the work as far from monumental in scale as it is possible to be, evidenced in a group of drawings similar to one another in their Twombly-like tangle of lines, lines made

Untitled (stack), 2007, acrylic and paper on masonite, 24 x 18".
Photograph: William Eakin.

facing page: *Untitled (rats)*, 2007, acrylic and paper on masonite, 6.25 x 8".
Photograph: William Eakin.





hurriedly, over and over, perhaps in anger or impatience or, in some cases, just lack of technical agility. (Among much else, Twombly's early sources were graffiti and children's art. The similarities between Cy Twombly and Dumontier end with this, but in the things mentioned there were intersections.)

Michael's drawings are, almost incredibly, cut lines laid down on paper. The sourcebooks from which he worked and continues to extract interest were written by Joseph H Di Leo, MD: *Young Children and Their Drawings*, *Children's Drawings as Diagnostic Aids*, and *Interpreting Children's Drawings*, published in 1970, 1973 and 1983. One of Michael's drawings in this group has a tobacco pipe resting lengthwise on its stem so that it is identifiable in silhouette. Dumontier has cut this from a sheet of paper painted black and collaged to a white sheet. From the bowl of the pipe, lines of smoke drift upward in tendrils and ascensions,

as smoke would. Then the lines become hasty, more active and are less traces of smoke than they are expressive marks, then loops, and finally heavy, agitated declarations as though they were closing off any further discussion. All the lines that emanate from the pipe—if we read the image in a narrative and linear manner—have been cut from one of the sourcebooks mentioned. Being no more substantial than smoke itself, their placement on the page is an act of prestidigitation. Nothing less. With the others in this group of work—a totem of faces that diminish in size as the stack climbs the page, for example, or a line that has the drag and skip of a crayon drawing whose trajectory is an exclamation mark cut from a black painted sheet and applied—this drawing shares a certain stringent, direct authorial reduction where it would be difficult for the artist's personal tools to be more distant from the page.

left: *Untitled (toothpicks)*, 2007, acrylic and paper on masonite, 8.5 x 11". Courtesy the artist.

right: *Untitled (Q-tip and toothpicks)*, 2007, acrylic and paper on masonite, 6.25 x 8". Courtesy the artist.

facing page: *Untitled (pipe)*, 2007, acrylic and paper on masonite, 18 x 23". Photograph William Eakin.



left and right: *Untitled (matchsticks)*, 2006, from Matchsticks portfolio, produced with Martha Street Studio, Winnipeg. Edition of 15. Screenprint, 18 x 24". Courtesy Martha Street Studio, Winnipeg.

facing page, top: The Royal Art Lodge: Michael Dumontier, Marcel Dzama, Neil Farber, *in the blink of an eye, it was out of the mouth and into the nose*, 2007, from "Women and Children" series, acrylic on masonite, 3 x 3.5" each. Courtesy the artists

below: The Royal Art Lodge, *Baby to Baby*, 2007, from "Women and Children" series.

A child does a drawing at the request of an analyst who examines the made piece as a diagnostic aid. In pursuit of the advancement of understanding, the drawing is reproduced in a textbook. Approaches to research change over time and the book is "remained," that is, discounted, and maybe jumbled in a bin where Michael Dumontier, who has an interest in, among much else, material that carries a mantle of abjection, picks it out and looks at it with tender interest. Production values in textbook printing vary. The lines can be heavy and over-inked or fading and vague. They are the microgram depth of a piece of thin paper. These are the lines, one breath apart from each other, cut with an exacto blade and affixed to the drawing sheet, seamlessly, that make up this work. The swing—in this case the hand present or not present—permeates the work. No pencil, pen or brush has brought a line to these pages.

This way of making drawings predates the discovery of Dr. Di Leo's books. Michael said, "I was doing some drawings around 1995, where I would use collage elements, and sometimes I would collect the Pictionary drawings my family had made—really crude, fast drawings—and I would cut them out just to use other people's lines. The drawings I'm doing now, using lines from the books, is returning to that. I'm making drawings out of someone else's lines maybe because I don't trust my line or maybe I'm not that excited by my own line."

These drawings, which leave no identifiable, matched-to-source fingerprint are, nonetheless, distinctly the work of Michael Dumontier. One additional example: the Swiss publisher, Nieves, produces a limited edition series of zines, or small books, by a range of artists, including Jockum Nordström, Laura Owens and Daniel Johnston and, recently, Michael

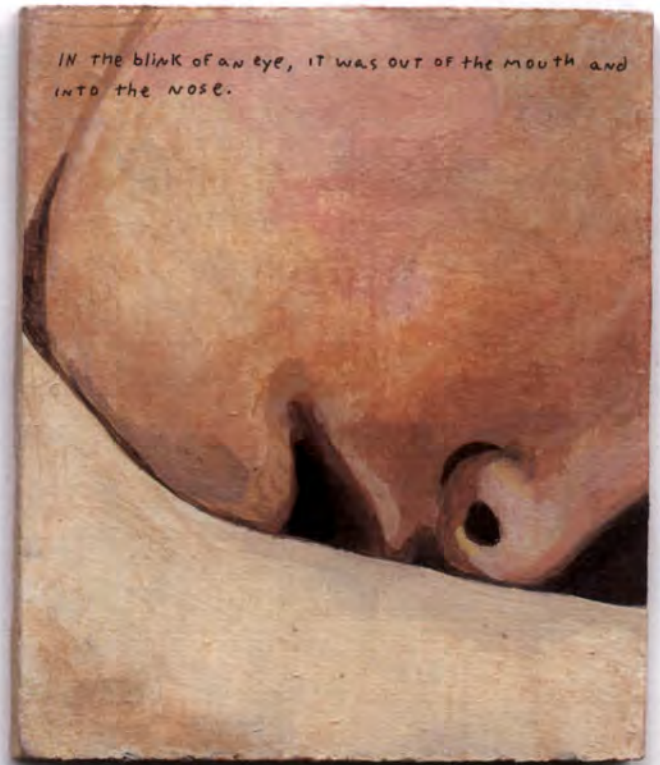
Dumontier. His little zine *Sigh* has one drawing identified as *stairs*. It sits angled, an inch from the gutter, rising two-thirds of the way up the page. It is an unbroken line from one of the sourcebooks. Set diagonally, it can be seen as a difficult-to-navigate stairway. About the practice of drawing in this way Michael says, "Sometimes I'm making a new image using the lines, and just by naming someone else's line, like the *stairs* piece, I'm giving it a new life, I think."

Akin to this work are drawings where the subject is rendered in matchsticks, pencils, or toothpicks, but those materials are the artist's own manufacture. In the case of the matchsticks, for instance, a sheet of paper is painted beige with a red stripe across, and the matches are cut from this, one by one. Dumontier says he makes a pile of them, stacks them on a tabletop and pushes them around until he sees something he likes. As random and subject to chance as that process sounds, the finished drawings are formal, and elegant. Matchstick people, ladders, spheres, trees, language.

The toothpick chair is a tribute to economy and understatement. Four toothpicks, none touching the other. And while a being is a complex entity, four toothpicks as limbs and a Q-tip between for head and torso is obliquely, but fully, complete. About this spare work Dumontier said, "I wanted something that could be represented in the simplest way possible. A toothpick only requires that colour, and to be cut that way. There are no details needed to define it more than that so my hand is increasingly taken out of it." The playful hand, however, is still there even in the artist's seeking after the most minimal representation. "Sometimes it's the simplest things that are really satisfying to me," Michael said. "I keep coming back to the face, which seems like the most obvious thing I could do; it's like making a face on your plate with eggs and bacon. That's completely satisfying."

With this, French writer and artist Henri Michaux would be in accord. Seeking escape and disengagement from language, which he felt was codified and hierarchical, where, he said, written things are never sufficiently impoverished, he pursued drawing. In 1972, in *Emergence/Resurgence*, a book containing his writing and drawing, he wrote, "In all unfinished things I discover heads. Heads, the gathering point of moments ... where everything combines and appreciates ... including drawing I recognize all imprecise forms as heads."

Recent paintings, the work of the past few years, have been collaborations, The Royal Art Lodge working in concert—now Michael Dumontier, Neil Farber and Marcel Dzama. They are small often multi-panel pieces, each being no more





than 3 x 3.5 inches, but a series could be as numerous as 164 small works. In the paintings, most often acrylic and marker on 1/4 inch masonite, the characteristics or qualities associated with drawings are still in evidence: a certain leanness, provisionality or mutability, a sense of autobiography, intimacy, vulnerability, a modest scale, a fleeting or transitory reading of time, an emphasis on process in their holding to a certain transparency, poignancy and an elliptical and oftentimes acerbic wit. Following a recent exhibition in Spain, Michael seemed a little bemused by the response the paintings provoked. Text, in English on each panel, is usual, so the reading or reception of the work would have been somewhat occluded. He was surprised, he said, that so many viewers commented on the quality of the painting, the technique. "We never get that here," he said, "because it's so dependent—at least for me—on the ideas of each panel that the painting seems secondary." And virtuosity isn't an accomplishment they pursue, the goal being just what the paintings require. That aside, many are beautifully adept, full of care and knowledge.

Other than stopping your heart at the possibility of what might happen next, a piece like *At the Cliff's Edge, the Elephant Kneels on His Front Legs* shows evident painterly skill in its rendering of the way the man's slender body curls, conforming to the shape of the elephant's back, his transparent skin showing his ribs through; or in another painting, this one from the series "Women and Children," *in the blink of an eye it was out of the mouth and into the nose* showing the same deftness Marlene Dumas applies to her work, with much attention paid to skin tones and texture. In the same series, *Baby to Baby* has all the downy, dewy, pastillated treatment of surface and colour you attribute to a baby's skin, and *Is that You God? I Can Barely See You* is an obscured, vague and at the same time alarming wash of a painting in black



top: The Royal Art Lodge, *At the cliff's edge, the elephant kneels on his front legs*, 2008, from "Learned Helplessness" series, acrylic on masonite, 2 x 2" each. Courtesy the artists.

below: The Royal Art Lodge, *Miniature Birth Pumpkins*, 2007, from "Women and Children" series.



and white with the subject seeming to squint into a harsh, white light.

Working collaboratively gives Michael freedom, an anonymity that allows him to try certain things, and a great pleasure in exhibiting that he says he doesn't derive from showing his solo works. The size of the paintings requires that you move in close; when you do, you're rewarded by the evident skill and rare sensibility of three close friends and artists working variously on each piece over a sustained time.

There's a machine in Michael's studio. I think about it often. Each time I visit, like a kid, I say, show it to me again. Turn on the *quiet machine*, please. It's a plain aluminium pot, maybe nine inches across. Its wire handle is absent. It sits on a couple of small cans. One, the label

says, contains Varathane. The pot is filled with fine, white sand and a small-bore cylinder runs through the centre. A black plastic pocket comb is inserted into the cylinder at the top and, when wires are conjoined or a switch pressed, the comb draws its teeth through the sand leaving perfectly spaced concentric circles in its wake. Certain teeth have been broken off to achieve the exactly scored circuit. It makes a small hum. I think it's the drag of the comb through the sand. More reasonably, it's the little motor that powers the machine. It is entire and perfect, serene and transporting, a minimalist artwork profound in its achievement.

It is, at the same time, an elegant connection to the favoured Sound Machines that have fallen away from his practice, into the realm of loss, and drawing. ■

Studio view, *Untitled (quiet machine)*, 1999, tin pot, motor, plastic comb, silica sand, felt marker casing, ballpoint pen casing, cotter pins. Photograph: William Eakin.