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TOM WOLFE’S DRAWING AND WRITING

Donald Friedman

Donald Friedman interviewed Tom Wolfe in 2002. An edited excerpt of that interview may be viewed at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Fqs6rExCGL>. Below are an introduction to the interview and a full transcript of the excerpt.

Introduction

Tom Wolfe’s determination “to be a writer or an artist when I grew up” came, he says in this 2002 interview with me, by the age of six or seven, from watching his agronomist father write a regular column for industry and from what he admits was a “desire for the attention.” Journalist, novelist, essayist, artist and in all mediums a scathing social critic, Wolfe not only garnered the world’s attention for his vivid, accessible writing and drawings, but for his sartorial elegance—creating a legendary image for himself in his bespoke cream or white (or, as for this interview, black and white houndstooth) suits.

Acknowledging that he was a better artist than a writer in his early years—he didn’t publish his first book until he was 35—he started publishing drawings when he was still a reporter for the *Springfield* (Mass.) *Union*, the first ones being courtroom drawings when he was assigned to cover a murder trial. It was in that context when he learned that drawing and listening could not be done simultaneously. When drawing he heard nothing of what was transpiring in the courtroom and if he paid attention to what was said he couldn’t draw. Subsequently Wolfe’s drawings began to appear in *The Washington Post* and the *New York Herald Tribune*, and for four years, in *Harper’s* magazine. Eventually they were collected and published under the title *In Our Time* (1980).

Wolfe famously used the techniques of fiction to dramatize his New Journalism, and used journalistic truths to create realistic fiction. And we find the same effort for real life accuracy in his drawings as well as his writings. He learned anatomy from studying the boxers in *Ring* magazine, but unable to see their gloved hands he “became a fiend about hands,” working hard to get them right in every sort of complicated position, and declares that he’s never respected an artist who can’t do hands.

Unsurprisingly, the artists he held in the highest regard were the classically trained contributors to *Simplicissimus*, the German magazine of social satire.

Echoing dozens of the other subjects in my book, *The Writer's Brush, Paintings, Drawings, and Sculpture by Writers*, Wolfe contrasts the pleasures of drawing with the struggle of writing, which he describes as “artificial—taking sounds and converting them to symbols on a page and hoping they’ll resonate with an unknown reader.” Yet, it’s criticism of his art that stings the most. Untroubled by critiques of his writing, if someone found a drawing “awful” it would be “crushing.” That said, the quality of a drawing or painting is, Wolfe observes, quickly apparent and “you don’t fool yourself.” It is very different with writing and many is the night, he admits, when he’s gone to bed thinking he’s produced something of value, only to read it on awaking and wonder “what was I thinking?”

A cum laude graduate of Washington and Lee, Wolfe got a Ph.D. in American Studies from Yale. His life was filled with awards and honors for his reportage, his fiction, and his art, including Washington Newspaper Guild and Columbia Journalism Awards, the National Book Critics Circle Award and the American Institute of Arts and Letters award for excellence in literature. He received D.F.A. degrees from the Minneapolis College of Art (1971) and the School of Visual Arts (1987) and honorary doctorates from Johns Hopkins and Washington and Lee, among others.

Transcript of Tom Wolfe’s Interview, 2002

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Fqs6rExCGLI>

Writing versus Drawing

I find writing so hard, I really do. I can’t imagine anything more difficult. Drawing is a lot more fun because you see the results quickly and you usually don’t fool yourself when you’re drawing or painting whereas in writing...writing is very artificial. You’re taking sounds and converting them to symbols on a page and hoping that this combination of visual symbols which is really auditory in origin, are going to resonate with some unknown reader. As a result it’s easy to fool yourself, and many is the time I’ve gone to bed at night in high spirits thinking I’ve written just...just fabulous stuff during the day, and I wake up in the morning and look at it thinking oh my God what was I thinking?

I don’t feel any terrific vanity about what I write. I think I can take criticism much more easily in what I write but if, you know, if somebody tells me that a drawing is awful – few people will tell

you that – it'd be much more crushing. When I was very young – five, six, seven years old – I decided that I wanted to be either a writer or an artist and my mother encouraged me a lot in art. My father was a scientist, was editing a magazine called *The Southern Planter*, and every week he would write an editorial or something for the magazine, and I thought that was quite magical. I'd see him at home writing on these yellow legal pads. And so these two things were sort of going back and forth.

I learned anatomy by drawing boxers in *Ring* magazine – you get pretty good except with the hands. Pretty good anatomical drawings, and then I became a fiend about hands, and to this day, I cannot respect an artist who can't do hands. I keep noticing [what] people do, and so I love to have complicated hands in my drawings – hands that are like this – or like this – or the hand is turned. I just think of it as a test, and oh you should see the number of artists who avoid showing hands – I mean good artists, terrific artists – because they just can't deal with them.

The Greatest Caricaturists

The greatest artists who ever lived and the greatest caricaturists, are the artists who worked for *Simplicissimus* magazine in Germany. *Simplicissimus* was a satirical magazine that dwelt very little on politics – almost all of it was social. It would have drawings of the nobility and the military, styles of sexual approach. It was all... it was all social, and when I first came upon their work, which was in a library, just by accident, in Springfield, Massachusetts, I was electrified. I had never seen any caricature of that much skill. At that time, in the late nineteenth century, all caricaturists came out of fine art, and to make a living they would do caricature. They were trained in anatomy, they were trained in perspective, in doing interiors of rooms, doing landscapes. They had all these great technical skills which so many caricaturists today don't have.

First Published Drawings

My first published drawings came when I was a newspaper reporter and was sent to cover a murder trial in Springfield, Massachusetts, and I decided that I would also do the courtroom drawings. So I did, and it nearly drove me out of my mind because when I was drawing I could not listen to anything – I could not absorb anything that was being said, and by the same token, if I was listening I couldn't I couldn't do any drawing.

Fiction and non-fiction

There has been a bit of journalism, and most of it, and...and most of it has been done for...to be printed. For four years I did drawings for *Harper's Magazine* each month. They were all to make a point. For example I noticed how sanctimonious joggers were becoming – joggers felt like they were a sort of super species of humans who didn't fall for junk food, the decadent life of everybody else, and so, out of that idea, I did a thing called *The Joggers' Prayer*. I've really never done a drawing to go after anybody. It just comes out, it just comes out the way it comes out. When I was in my twenties, I think for the most part I was a better artist than I was a writer – I was just starting to write and I was – I was thirty-five before my first book was published. By then I think I wasn't bad as a writer.

It has turned out that the process has been very similar in both the fiction and the non-fiction. I've done two novels and working on a third. They've all been based on a lot of reporting – about things that I didn't know about. Wall Street was just an abstraction to me – *Bonfire of the Vanities* – or real estate development in *A Man In Full* – I knew nothing about it. I suppose I'd say in my case, a certain way of looking at people or the world might end up in both what I write and what I draw. But I don't think of any cross-fertilization, in other words, it's...it's the tree of evolution. One branch goes this way and one goes the other.

The scene today is just wonderful. 86th street and Lexington Avenue in New York is one of the great crossroads of the world. At that intersection, I mean, you see every type of human there is. I would love to do a complex picture in the way that Bruegel was complex, of just people at that intersection.