

“Human, all too Human”

The Brutal Line compares drawings by Italian Old Masters and Modern and contemporary artists in which the subjects of mortality, inhumanity, and existence indicate ontological investigations. Although the pairings may seem culturally arbitrary, they are more a dialogue of divergences.

Questions about the nature of being are primary to each drawing in the exhibition; those posed by the Italian Old Masters are framed in theological precepts while those of the Modern are more existential in nature. They reveal historical ways in which death, being, and becoming are depicted, as well as Enlightenment and Modern concepts of fate, the vulnerability of the body, the abuse of dominant power, and our fragile comprehension of time and space. The selected works’ use and re-use of tragic tableaux, as well as the display of sensitive draftsmanship, offer important structural keys.

In *Leviathan* (1651), philosopher Thomas Hobbes describes humanity in its natural, ungoverned state, noting its potential to engage in a war in which “every man is against every man.” The worst fate is “the continual fear and danger of violent death, and the life of man is solitary, poore, nasty, brutish, and short.” To counteract this grim possibility, Enlightenment philosophers developed appeals to humanistic reason, erecting rational standards for both individual life and communal order. But by the 19th century, notions of free will, the social contract, and the desire to ascribe universal order had developed into anxious questions about the conditions of autonomy and society. Some Modern artists and philosophers regarded this phenomenon as a call to redress the nature of human knowledge by revisiting the question of being.

These historical sets of drawings reveal fundamentally different points of view about essence. The Enlightenment philosopher and mathematician Gottfried Leibniz typified a worldview that established God simultaneously in nature and off stage as its omnipotent designer: “God assuredly always chooses the best” places humankind’s essence before its existence, while forcing knowledge to assume a rational order. Contrary to this, Modern existentialist thought calls into question essence and its origin. Existential *being* is defined with an identity formed through actions; one *becomes* his or her essence from a series of choices. Existence in this scenario precedes essence. Predetermined fate and design are impossible, but with such unending autonomy comes the price of being “condemned to freedom.” **Andrea Boscoli’s** 16th-century drawing of bound hands and **Alberto Giacometti’s** 20th-century portrait head illuminate this philosophical rupture. Both artists were examining being from a state of resignation; in the former bounded-ness is accepted as conditional fate, in the latter the very condition of bounded-ness is examined for meaning.



Gian Paolo Panini, *Marcus Curtius Throwing Himself into the Gulf*, n.d., pen and brown ink and brush, grey wash over black chalk, Richard and Mary L. Gray Collection

The efficacious hand of an Italian School Old Master signals humanity through its objectivity. In the most brutal of subjects, from Christ’s Passion to depictions of war, Italian Old Masters used drawing techniques that display not only their facility of touch but also their position as witnesses to a world in violent tumult. Their drawings exhibit both urgency and a tactile gracefulness. In their Modern and contemporary counterparts, this grace of the hand in view of death is either rigorously re-attuned, as with **Arturo Herrera**, or subverted, as with **Peter Saul**.

These Italian drawings from the 16th to 18th century compile *a priori* tragic tableaux that have been repeated and attenuated in our time. For instance, **Mattia Preti’s** 17th-century depiction of *Saint Sebastian Tied to a Tree* is reformed in **Martin Kippenberger’s** self-effaced *Untitled (Hotel Restaurant Goldener Adler)*. Or, the investigation of becoming in **Salvator Rosa’s** *The Raising of Lazarus* moves from the metaphorical to the literal through **Willem de Kooning’s** process of drawing the body. The parallels of violence in each selected work are considerable. **H. C. Westermann’s** *Port of Shadows*, in which a supine and dying figure is about to be consumed by wharf rats, is a mordant embodiment of a flagellation scene drawn by **Ubaldo Gandolfi**.

Hobbes’s primal man, capable of atrocity, remains a specter for anyone concerned with humanism. The artists featured in *The Brutal Line* engaged this problem by observing consciousness at its borders and depicting a world of cause and effect. Such continual vigilance finds a fitting corollary in Friedrich Nietzsche’s aphorism from *Human, all too Human* (1878): “One is most in danger of being run over when one has just avoided a carriage.”

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