

# TRUTH, NARRATIVE AND Life Itself

Through drawing, **Jerome Witkin** engages with questions of history, faith and human experience.

BY JOHN A. PARKS

**J**erome Witkin is a master fabulist, a maker of mythic tales that he often tells on a grand scale across multiple canvases. His themes are anything but trivial as he takes on such subjects as religious belief, sexual politics, the Holocaust, the loss of children, sickness, torture and human rights. The narrative power of his paintings is supported with bravura brushing, a fine sense of the dramatic possibilities of light and considerable compositional invention. Underlying the whole enterprise is a deeply held belief in the power of drawing as a means of engaging the world in a way that is immediate, charged and endlessly revealing.

All of Witkin's paintings grow out of drawings from life. "When I draw I tend not to use photos at all," the artist says. "I like and need to have a person in front of me so that I can react to them." He points out that to really feel a subject—the weight of hair and clothing, the shifting attitude and posture, the shimmer and shift of light, the very reality of the experience—you cannot rely on a photograph. "I see people looking at their cell phones all the time," he says. "If only they would look around them and realize what an extraordinary instrument they have in their own eyes. They are far more powerful and amazing than the little computer in their phones. I regard being able to see as the most precious thing that I have."

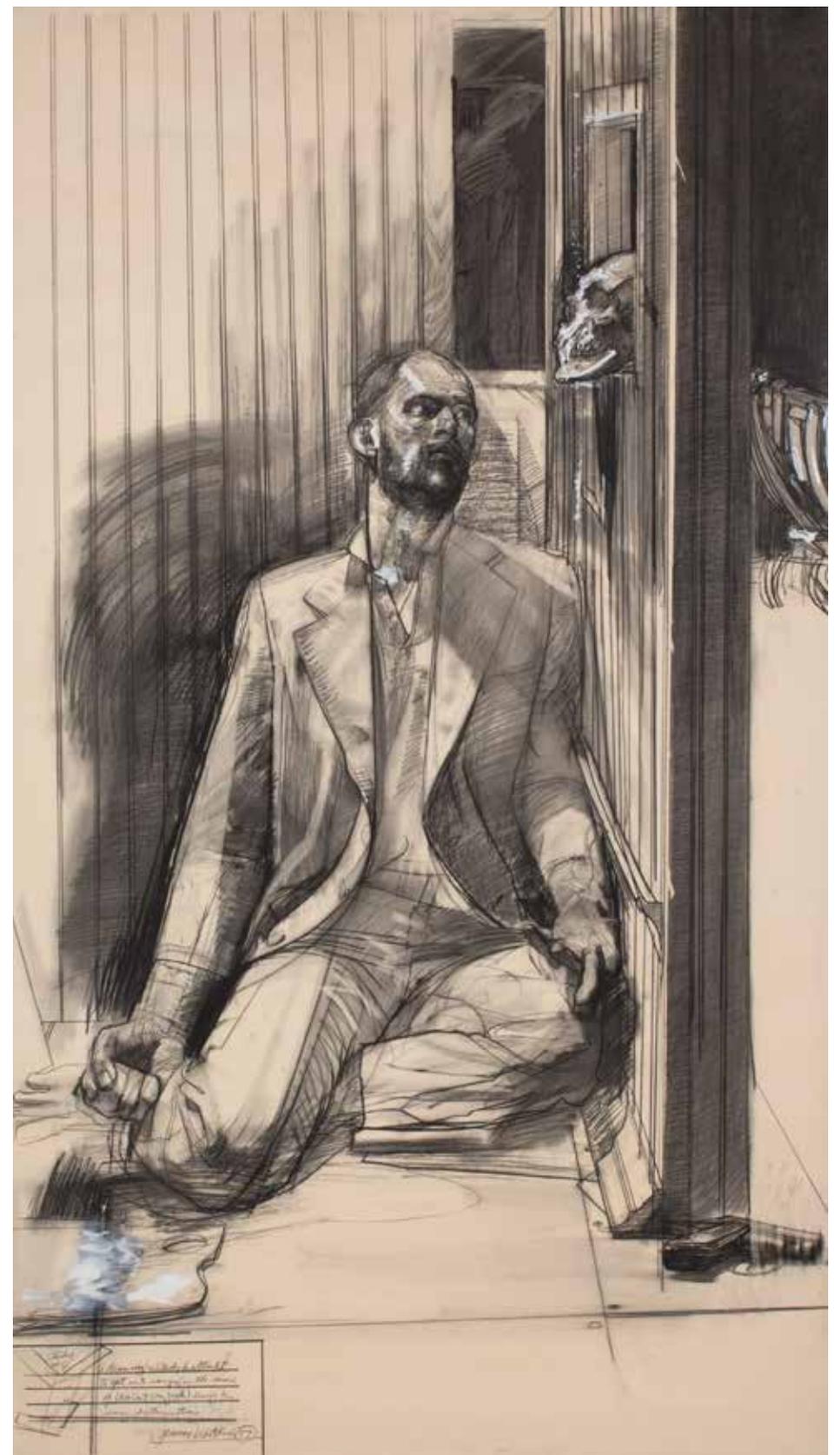
## Bride Noir

2011, graphite and charcoal, 80¾ x 45½. All artwork this article courtesy Jack Rutberg Fine Art, Los Angeles, California.



Witkin's drawing language contains elements of classical rendering, as well as a more romantic attention to movement and drama. He uses a very personal mix of line and tone deployed in a variety of media that includes pencil, charcoal, pastel and watercolor. He generally begins a drawing with line, finding basic proportions by eye and laying in shapes and contours that provide a maximum of descriptive clarity. Generally the line quality is sure, even assertive, but he does vary the weight and thickness and often includes broken lines and passages of more tentative and delicate drawing. Once the line is underway Witkin begins to lay in tone. His preference for dramatic lighting allows him clearly distinguished passages of shadow, which he blocks in gently before building and modifying.

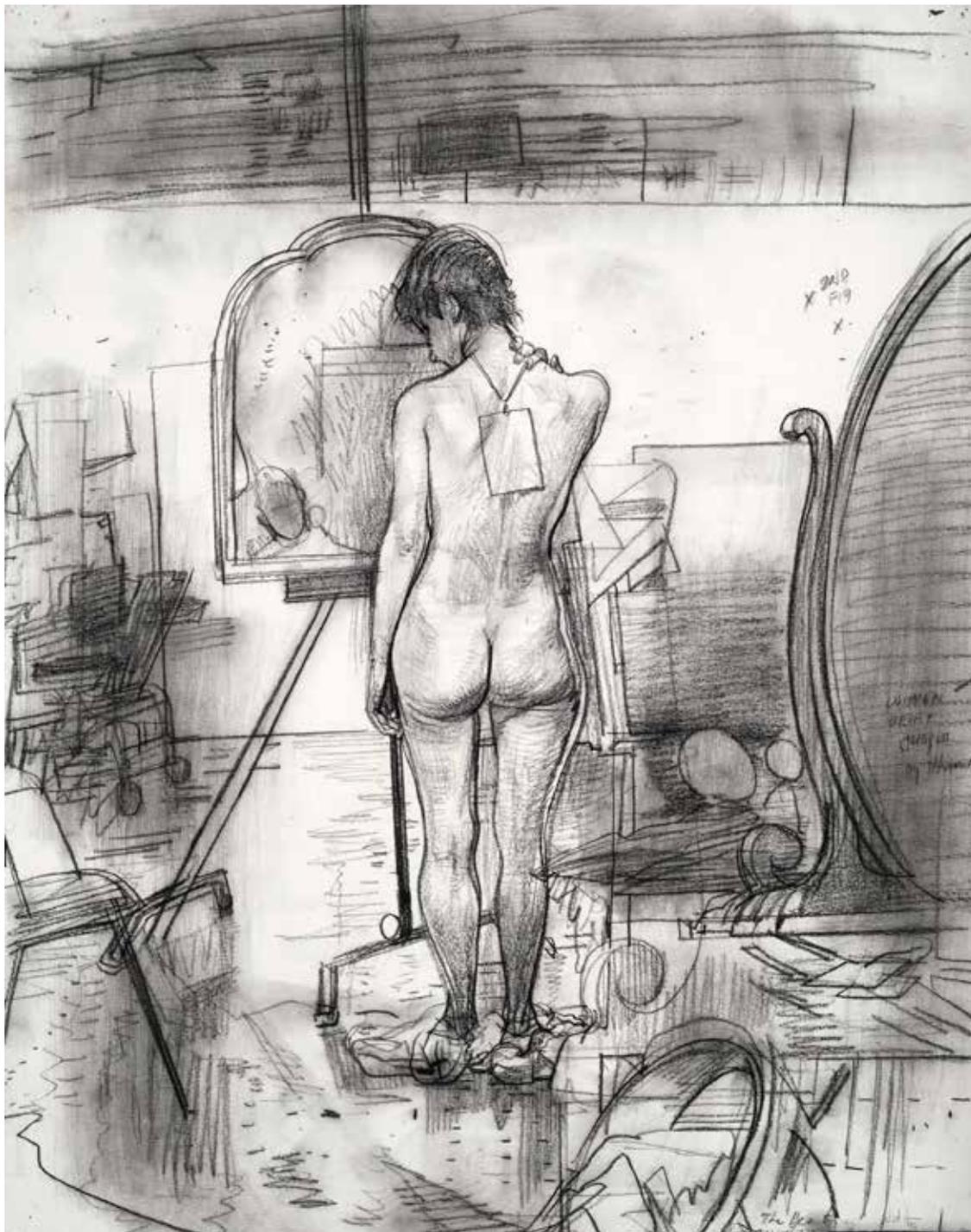
When he makes erasures or changes, the artist often leaves traces of his moves so that the drawing gradually incorporates the whole process and becomes a record of his actions. Sometimes he uses the eraser to lighten a dark area in a charcoal drawing, leaving soft scumbled marks that enliven the surface and give substance and weight to the object described. He will often add a small amount of color to a black-and-white drawing to guide the viewer's eye or aid distinctions between elements.



**Vincent van Gogh and Death**  
1987, mixed media, 84 x 48.

**The Beauty Contest**

1996, charcoal,  
23¼ x 18½.



Witkin also sometimes augments this repertoire with collaged elements, gluing blank areas of paper over passages he is unhappy with and building up the drawing on top of them.

Although an inveterate drawer in just about any situation, Witkin's principal focus is the human figure, and in his studio he has built small stages on which he can compose scenes and arrange models and props. A system of controlled lighting allows him to adjust illumination in all manner of ways, and his collection of costumes and chance acquisitions provides opportunities for storytelling and theatrical invention. At the root of the operation is his passionate conviction in the authority of looking, the way in which a direct encounter with the figure generates ideas and action. "I view drawing as a demonstration of feeling, a performance," he says. "I see it as do or die. It will work, or it won't work."

Witkin is not interested in a perfect rendering or a polished finish. Rather, he's committed to the living process of looking, in which all the marks, erasures, tries, failures and successes of the draftsman leave their traces on the page. "I was just looking at a reproduction of Dürer's drawing of his mother," he says, "and the thing that is wonderful is that you can see the way he is using the charcoal. You can tell the pressure of his hand and the weight of his mark. As I look at this drawing I can reconstruct how he touched the paper. You can see that he drew this in one shot and kept going until his mother probably said in German, 'You're making me look old,' or something. You are right there with the artist. You are in a performance. The drawing is a performance. You are inside a performance of feeling."

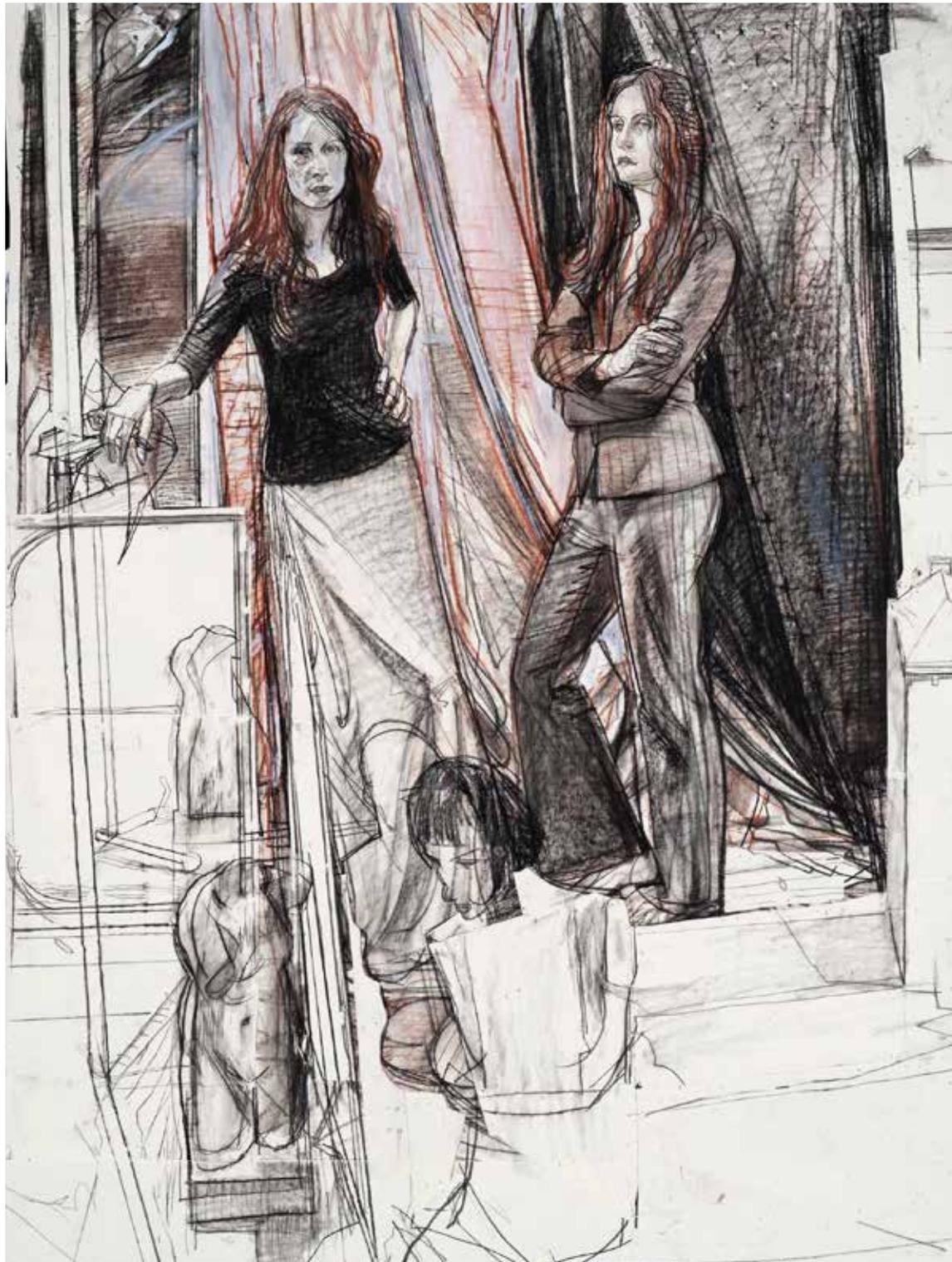
Given this credo it is hardly surprising that being drawn by Witkin is an intense experience, and he will often have a model come back many times. "It costs me a lot of money," the artist quips, but he has found that the time spent over multiple sessions can lead to rewarding departures. His drawing *The Beauty Contest*, for instance, came about when he gave a model a break one day. "She was walking around the studio looking at some of the things lying around, and she came across a big tag on a piece of luggage," Witkin recalls. "She put

it up behind her back, and I said 'Let me tie it around you,' and we laughed about it. And then it hit me, looking at this, that women think of themselves in that way. They feel that in some men's eyes they are merely available objects, like luggage. We talked about it, and she agreed with me that this was so, and I did the drawing. I've had a lot of women who love that drawing, and they tell me that it says what they feel."

A fruitful interaction between artist and model also led to *Bride Noir* (page 32), a life-size drawing in which a bride points a gun and stares out with an expression that makes us believe she is prepared to use it. "The model had been posing for me for a long time," says Witkin. "One day she told me that she owned her mother's bridal gown, and I asked her to bring it in. It so happened that I had been looking through a book on film noir, all those great black-and-white dramas from the 1950s and 1960s. When the model put on the dress she didn't seem to know what to do with her hands. I had this very life-like snub-nosed revolver in the studio, and I said to her, 'Don't hold flowers, hold this.' We were laughing about it, so really we were having fun. It's such a life-giving thing to react to a situation like that. I lit it with strong contrast and did the whole thing in one sitting. Really I was singing and laughing with the pencil. It took about three hours, and when it was done I thought, "My God, it worked."



**Lynn Simmer**  
1982, graphite, 24 x 19.



**Study for the Daughters of Peter Rounds (The Twins)**

ca. 2005, graphite, Conté crayon, PrismaColor crayon and collage, 45½ x 34.

Not all of Witkin's drawings are completed in such a direct rush. *Study for the Daughters of Peter Rounds (The Twins)*, for instance, is a large-scale double portrait in which the artist used a collage technique to erase sections and build up the drawing. "The girls are identical twins, something I feel close to because I'm also an identical twin," says Witkin, whose twin brother is the photographer

Joel-Peter Witkin. "I asked both of them to take a pose that felt natural. One didn't do much but folded her arms, a kind of distant pose. The other took a more open posture, resting her arm on an easel and leaning forward. I did the drawing on a very large piece of stretched paper. It's a process where you wet the paper and then staple it to a stretcher and it dries tight as a drum. When something didn't

work in the drawing I took another piece of paper and glued it on top of the drawing with Elmer's glue. Here there's a kind of linkage between the drawing and the painting process. In painting you can cover a section and repaint, and with this technique I can do the same thing in drawing."

As he proceeded with the drawing Witkin was not afraid to collage over the edges of his painting, creating an intriguing and organic border to the work. As usual he introduced various props, setting a pirate hat on the easel next to one model and including a mannequin at the bottom. He also explored some interesting compositional ideas in which diagonals in the figures are picked up in the background and other parts of the picture. Eventually he made a painting based on the drawing in which the two girls are presented as waiting to be photographed by a young woman with a large, old-fashioned plate camera. The natural poses of the models, developed in the drawing, now assume a narrative role, as precursors to more studied posing for the camera. In effect the painting becomes a meditation on the transformative nature and power of photography. "Photographic imagery has revolutionized people's understanding of when and how to see something," says Witkin.

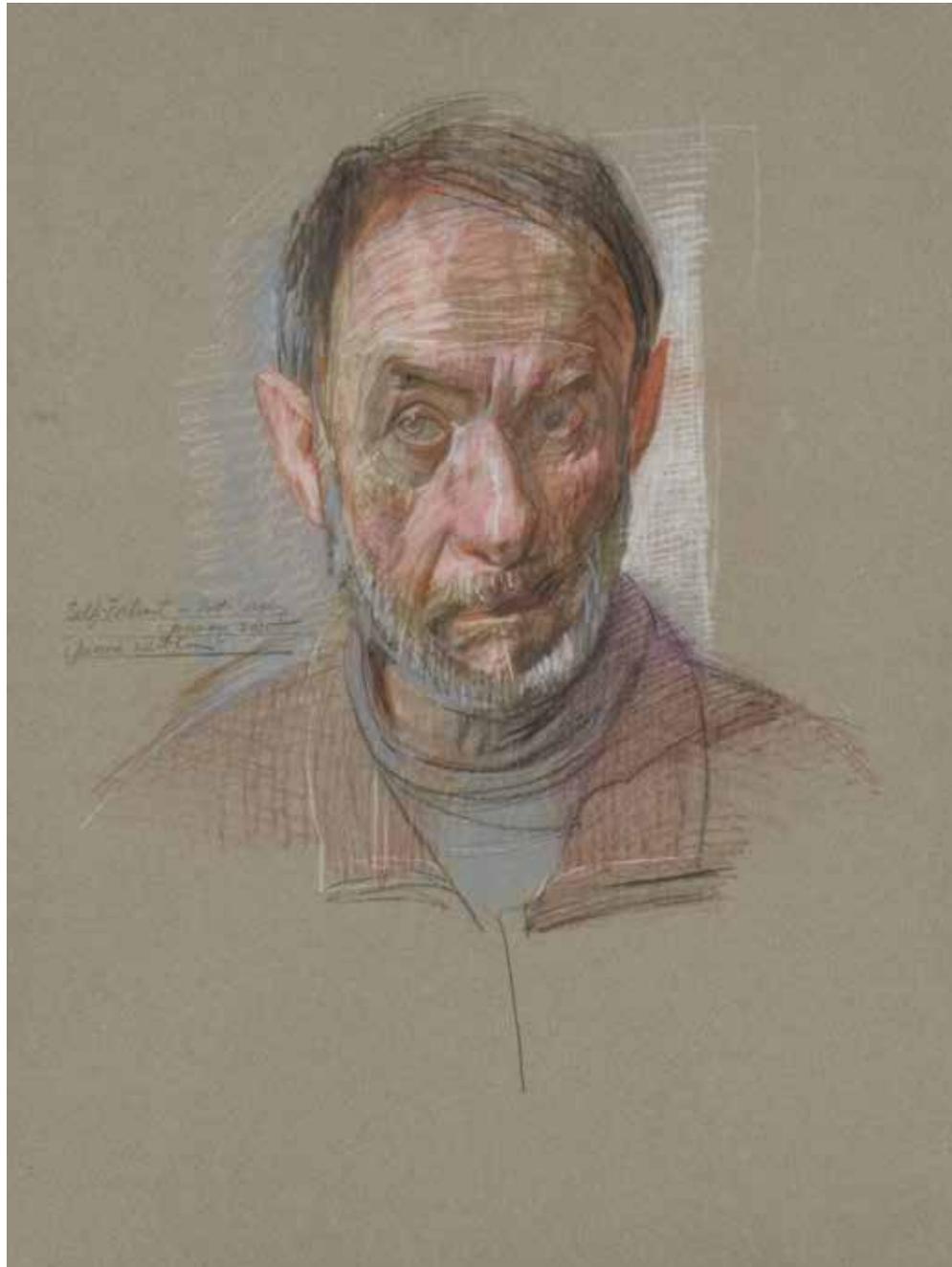
Sometimes Witkin builds on ideas developed in his drawings to explore his own past. For instance, in *The Presentation of Jimmy's White Suit* (page 39) the artist sets out to investigate his feelings about religion and the nature of his own beliefs. "At the time I was going through this whole thing of, 'What do I believe? Am I a Christian, a Jew or nothing?'" Witkin had a Jewish father and a Catholic mother. His father left the family when Witkin was young and he was raised Catholic, but this mixed background eventually



**Lisa Asleep and Cat**  
2000, ink, 22½ x 15.



**Hannah Posing**  
2003, charcoal, 24 x 18.



**Self-Portrait  
Post-Surgery**

2005, colored pencil and  
graphite on toned paper,  
25½ x 19½.

led Witkin to consider converting to Judaism as an adult. “I went and spoke to a rabbi. But I found that with going to Catholic schools, Jesus had been etched on me. I couldn’t erase him. So I’ve spent time going to synagogues where Jewish people believe that Jesus was the messiah. They don’t have to wait for one,

because they already have one.”

For the drawing, Witkin built a large tent in his studio, where he posed a 16-year-old model. “He’s a child who thinks he’s the second coming,” the artist says. “He’s sitting on this little bed and there’s a cross beside him and a saint’s statue. He’s being presented



**The Presentation of  
Jimmy’s White Suit**

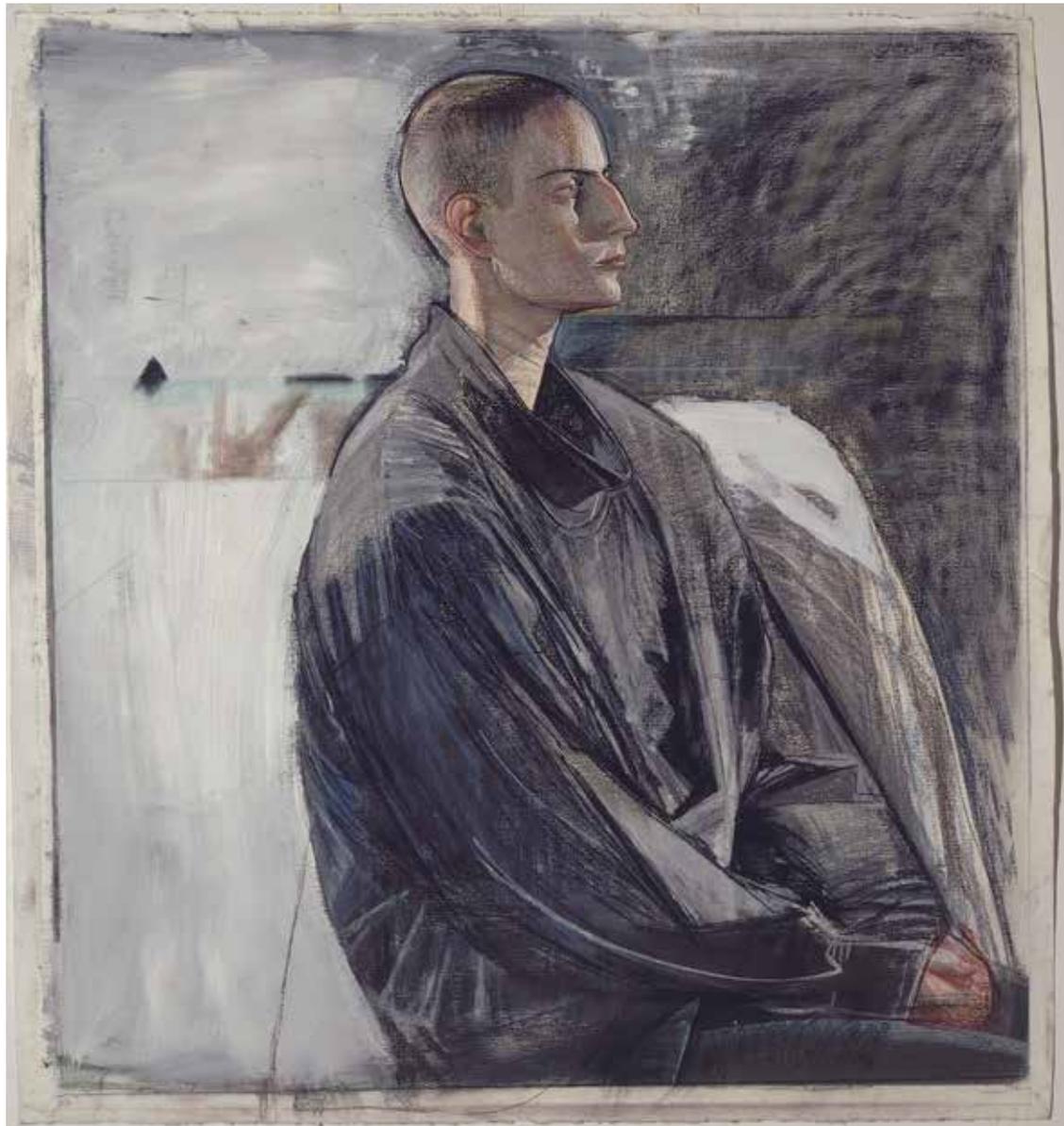
1987, charcoal and mixed  
media, 48 x 84.

with this white suit, and he’s going to change the world.” Witkin admits that he identifies with the young teenager imagining himself as a messiah. He went on to paint a cycle of paintings following the progress of the boy. “It doesn’t work out well,” he says. “Over five panels he sees death and destruction, explosions and disasters. In the last panel he’s back in the same position, only now there’s a Ouija board and a bar, a kind of nihilistic situation.”

Witkin may be best-known for his large-scale and highly ambitious narratives, but he can be equally powerful in direct portraiture. Like Rembrandt and Van Gogh he has made numerous self-portraits, which often reflect or dramatize moments in his life. In *Self-Portrait Post-Surgery* he shows himself with a curiously twisted expression

that suggests stress and pain in ways both dramatic and subtle. Completed after a painful and unnerving round with the doctors, the artist explores his own reactions and his new condition. “I felt as though I aged 10 years,” he says.

On occasion Witkin’s drawings come at the end, rather than the beginning, of a major narrative painting. His portrait *Rebecca Stronger* (page 40) is a commemoration of a young student who volunteered to model for the artist when he was making a series of paintings about the Holocaust. Jewish herself, the girl willingly shaved her head so that she could be drawn as an inmate of a death camp. Witkin’s portrait is a tribute to the girl’s strength and beauty as well as an act of gratitude for her generosity. Here a little pastel color has been



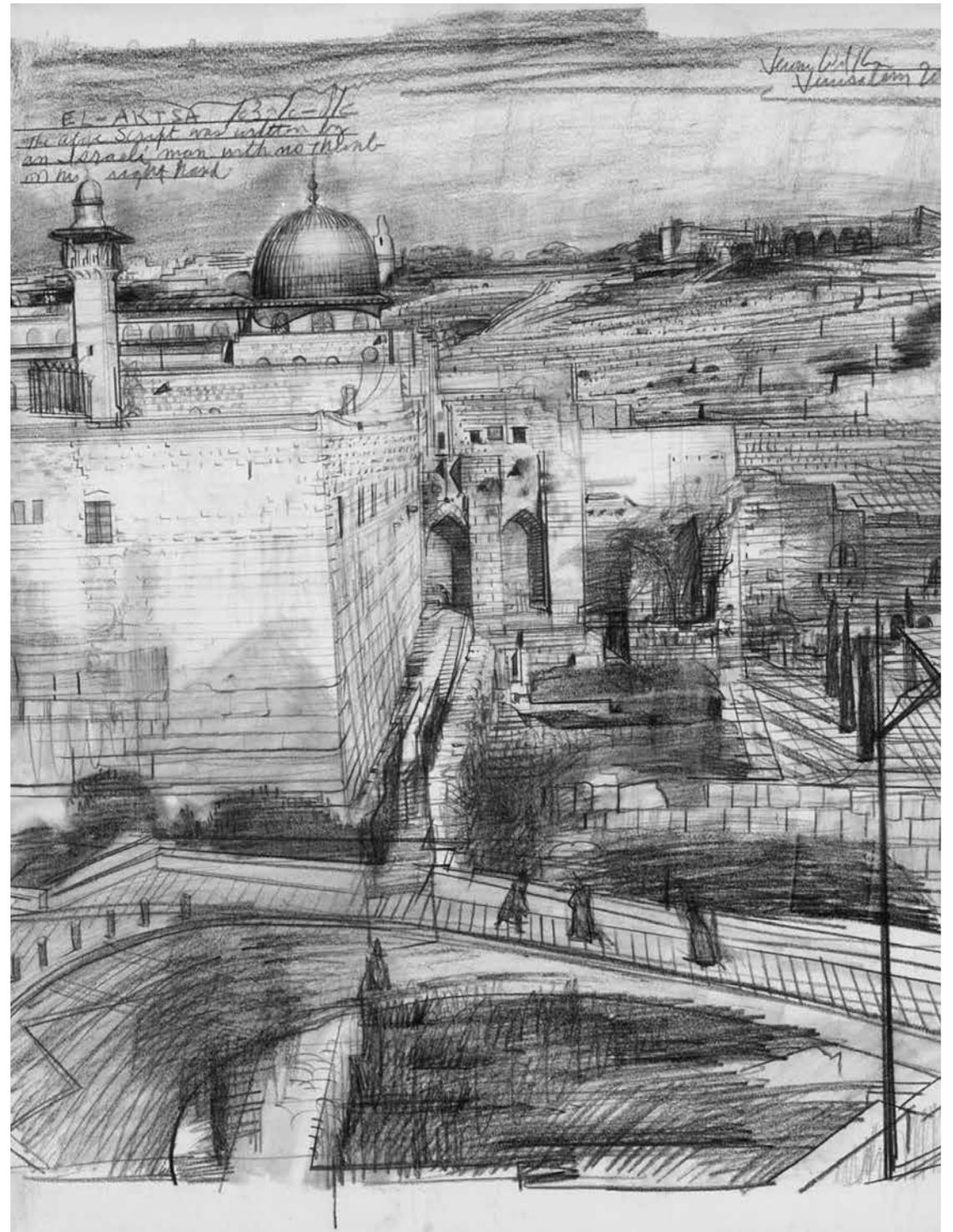
**Rebecca Stronger**  
1995, mixed media,  
50 x 47.

brought into the drawing, and the background mixes both paint and charcoal.

Although much of Witkin's work is developed in the studio he does sometimes draw outside, especially when he is traveling. His drawing of the al-Aqsa Mosque in Jerusalem was done on-site over two days, with the artist using a large piece of Homasote to support the paper. "I had quite a crowd watching me," says Witkin, who admits that he sometimes enjoys the attention, the feeling once again that he is involved in a performance. "I remember when I was finishing the drawing there was a man watching, very interested, and I asked him if he knew anything about the history of the mosque. He said yes, he was an architect and knew all about it. I asked him if he could write in Arabic, and he said he could, so I asked him to write something on my drawing. And when I gave him the

charcoal I saw that both of his thumbs were missing. He had to hold the stick between his fingers to write. I often wonder what happened to him that he lost his thumbs. It's one of the things that make the drawing very precious for me."

Witkin's process of building narratives that arise through drawing the model has several immediate precursors in 20<sup>th</sup>-century English art, starting with Stanley Spencer (1891–1959) and evident particularly in the works of Lucien Freud (1922–2011) and the English-Portuguese artist Paula Rego (1935–). Witkin spent a couple of years in England early in his career and is very familiar with their work. "Lucien Freud is truly a heroic figure," he says. "He seemed to start with very little ability. But he really watched things. He never used photos. And then he became the most painterly painter." Witkin also



**The Al-Aqsa Mosque, Jerusalem**  
2007, graphite, 24 x 18.

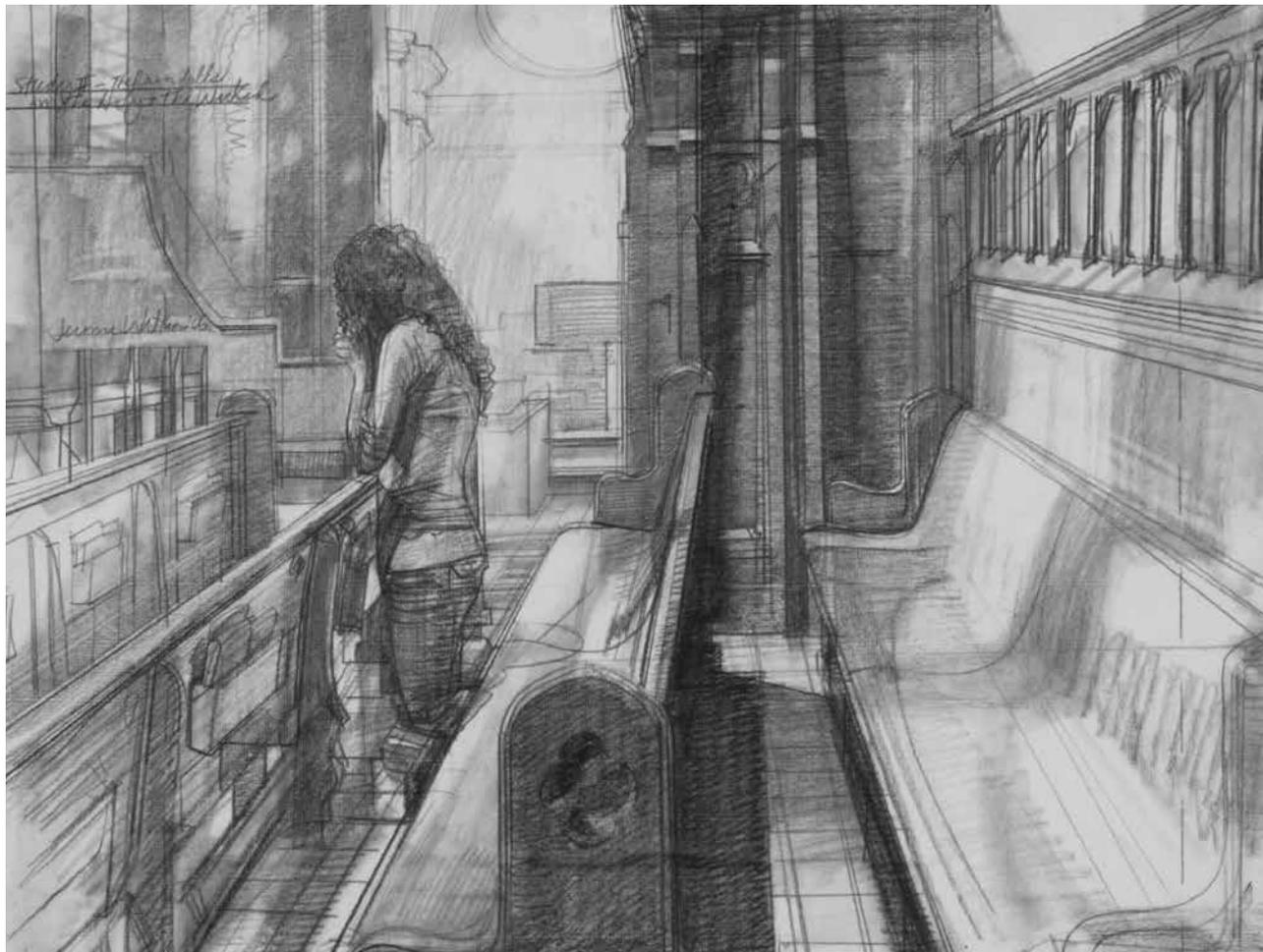
**RIGHT**  
**Cara**  
2000, graphite,  
23 x 22¼.

**BELOW**  
**Study II, The Rain Falls on  
the Holy and the Wicked**  
2006, graphite, 18 x 24.



admires Rego's etchings of themes from fairy tales. "She has a kind of Portuguese magical imagery," he says. "Her etching of Pinocchio being washed is truly poetic. Both Rego and Freud are looking all the time, and they're viciously willing to go the distance, the whole 15 rounds."

These artists fearlessly incorporated their passions and their responses to the events and people in their lives into dramatic and challenging work. It's the kind of art that Witkin champions. "The way contemporary critics work, there's a revulsion at the possibility of making something meaningful," he says. "And the result is a lot of art



**LEFT ABOVE**  
**Hands as Actors in  
Our Twentieth Century—  
Jung, Hitler, Gandhi**  
1998, lithograph, 15¼ x 18.

**LEFT MIDDLE**  
**Left Hand Steadily Employed**  
1997, lithograph, 13 x 18½.

**LEFT BELOW**  
**Left Hand as Actor**  
1998, lithograph, 16 x 19½.



that people don't really engage with. But show them a Velázquez or a good Alice Neel, and they will remember it. When you present your vision and energy and deepest feelings, then it's got to be something special. I think of Rembrandt painting his wife in bed—it was a precious moment. God was standing behind him when he did that." For Witkin the best art addresses the human condition and tackles the great questions of meaning and life. "If that's old fashioned," he says, "then call me old fashioned." ❖

## ABOUT THE ARTIST

**Jerome Witkin** was born in New York City. He studied art at The Cooper Union, in New York, and at the University of Pennsylvania, in Philadelphia. Throughout his career he has held dozens of solo exhibitions, and his work can be found in the collections of museums including The Metropolitan Museum of Art, in New York City; the Smithsonian's Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, in Washington, DC; and the Uffizi Gallery, in Florence, Italy. Since 1971 Witkin has been an instructor at Syracuse University's College of Visual and Performing Arts. He is represented by Jack Rutberg Fine Arts, in Los Angeles. For more information, visit [jeromewitkin.com](http://jeromewitkin.com) or [jackrutbergfinearts.com](http://jackrutbergfinearts.com).