



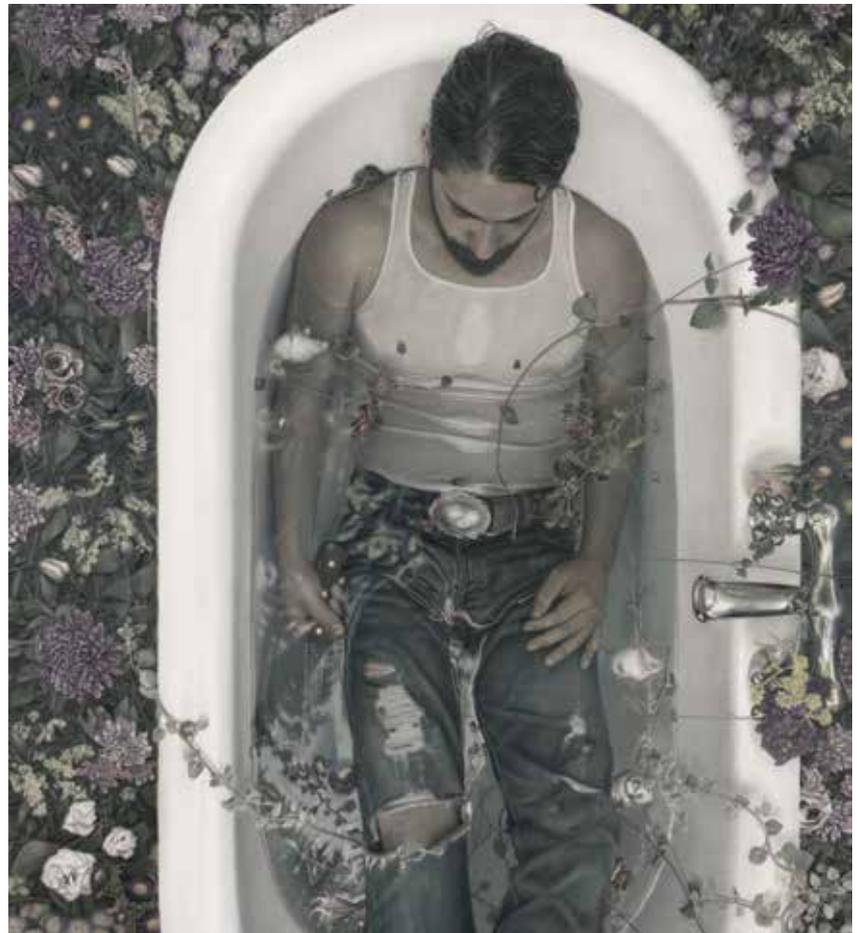
BEING REAL

The artworks of Sara Gallagher (b. 1990) sometimes come with an asterisk, actual fine print that defines what she does in case someone might be confused. When her San Francisco gallery, CK Contemporary, exhibits her works at *Art on Paper* in New York or the *San Francisco Art Fair*, it affixes the following two words: “Pencil drawing.”

As the gallery’s founder and director, Lauren Ellis, says of Gallagher’s work, which she has been showing since 2022, “At art fairs, where people are often walking past our booth and assume that many of our pieces are photographs, we find it helpful to put up that sign, especially for Sara. We make the type size large enough that people can read it from the aisle.”

So uncannily realistic are Gallagher’s drawings of people, rendered in graphite and PanPastel (a highly mixable dry pastel akin to what its manufacturer describes as “velvety paint”), that they are commonly mistaken for photographs. That confusion is about more than just the fact that she possesses the ability to render details with a keen verisimilitude, whether it’s the individual hairs on a head or the look that water assumes in a bathtub. Gallagher’s subjects wear expressions so real, poignant, complex, nuanced, true-to-life that anyone could easily make the mistake about the medium employed.

“From a technical standpoint, Sara’s skill is some of the best I’ve ever seen,” says Ellis, “but she’s able to



Without Sanctuary, 2023, graphite and PanPastel on paper, 34 1/2 x 31 1/4 in., CK Contemporary (San Francisco)



take that skill and create an emotionally rich beauty. Her figures tell intimate stories for us. While those stories are very specific, Sara captures emotions that are universal to humans.”

At her home studio in Nicasio, California (where Gallagher and her musician husband, Jacob Aranda, account for two of the town’s 98 residents), she can complete one drawing of a figure, imbued with a character and feelings we know to be accurate, in two to six weeks. “There is a little wiggle room, depending on the intricacy of the work,” she explains, “such as one of my recent pieces, *Without Sanctuary*, which is actually my husband posing in the tub. That took eight weeks to complete as the floral background was much more intricate than other, simpler backgrounds.” While that rendering of vines and flowers may have slowed the process, Gallagher was able to capture the mood of her sitter in less time, which is odd, given that the inner life should be the most labor-intensive and elusive to capture.

Surrounded by the towering redwood trees that grow an hour north of San Francisco, Gallagher draws every day, often beginning the morning with a walk through the mighty forest with her dog. “My actual pencil-to-paper time averages five to eight hours a day,” she says, “but I often end up working 12 hours, which includes thinking

(TOP) *Let Them Fall*, 2023, graphite and PanPastel on paper, 23 x 30 in., CK Contemporary (San Francisco) ■ (LEFT) *Retrospect*, 2023, graphite and PanPastel on paper, 28 x 28 in., private collection



(ABOVE) *Hold Your Grief Gently*, 2022, pencil on paper, 20 x 40 in., private collection ■ (RIGHT) *The Work*, 2022, graphite and PanPastel on paper, 22 x 20 in., private collection

as I take walks or stop to play the banjo and sing some songs, mostly country tunes.” An added asterisk to her career might mention that she and Jacob are performers. He makes guitars by hand and plays them, while she strums the banjo as they both sing. Their two-week honeymoon through northern Italy in October 2022 doubled as a multi-town performance gig. “We had the tour booked before we even decided to marry,” she recalls. “Once we got married, we suddenly thought, ‘Well, we’ll make it our honeymoon tour.’”

Gallagher knows how to read people’s emotions and states of mind, then translate them through graphite and pastel. “My drawings are not a portrait of a person,” she emphasizes, “but, rather, portraits of an emotion or an emotional experience.” Indeed, to look at a recent work such as *Let Them Fall* is to see a contemplative woman in a bathtub who is metaphorically bathing away what Gallagher describes as her “mental clutter, which can become so prevalent that it seeps deep into our subconscious.” In *Retrospect*, a woman appears to literally be looking back, but in Gallagher’s view the figure is examining her past, “reminiscing on something that may have gone a different way.” And in *No Longer Mine*, another woman in a bathtub has, the artist explains, reached a point where hard work, an actual “hustle,” has resulted in the reaching of a goal. “When we work hard and succeed, the fruits of our labor separate from us, birthing something brand new into the world — and it’s beautiful.”



AN EMOTIONAL RESPONSE

While most artists seek out imagery to fill their blank sheets of paper, Gallagher searches for emotions. “Every single person has concerns about their physical health, but there is also mental health to consider,” she notes. “I work with individuals from the general public who reach out to me,” some indicating that they have experienced anxiety or fears, a pervasive sorrow, existential perplexity, or other emotional



Now with You, 2022, graphite on paper, 6 x 13 in., CK Contemporary (San Francisco)

depths they want to explore. When she finds them (and they are everywhere, since that is the human condition), Gallagher converses with them, winning their trust and confidence. Most of them, though not all, agree for her to photograph them, and she uses the resulting photographs to create her drawings. “I make sure they’re very comfortable when they agree to be photographed. I feed them, always give them a free print after the work is done, as well as a healthy friends-and-family discount!” Most important, she listens to their stories.

Despite the skill that artists may reveal, it’s not uncommon for many of them to continue searching for their ultimate medium and subject matter. Although Gallagher had worked as a thoroughly seasoned oil painter for years after graduating from San Francisco State University with an emphasis on painting, drawing, and photography, she felt something was missing. “I just wasn’t satisfied with my paintings,” she confesses, “and so I ended up seeking another medium. I wanted to push my skills somewhere else.” In 2019, she went to Germany to attend a rigorous graphite workshop led by Dirk Dzimirsky, the hyper-famous hyper-realist artist of our time. “Graphite clicked for me,” Gallagher recalls. “With this medium, I was finally able to translate what was in my head and the messages I wanted to convey.”

But while graphite allowed her to draw in a truly realistic manner, something was still missing: color. “I longed to have color, but I wasn’t willing to give up the medium of graphite,” a material noted, of course, for its monochromatic gray tones. “I kept asking myself, ‘What would work with graphite and that I would be happy to include?’” She found that PanPastels, as dry in consistency as graphite, were a way to introduce color. “When the pastels are mixed with graphite, which has a natural shimmer to it, I am able to bring in muted hues over everything.” The softness of the colors and the softness of the appearance of the pastels on paper reflect Gallagher’s desire to depict emotions in powerful yet gentle ways.

Because her materials are so fragile, Gallagher must frame the works behind glass. “It’s a bit of a bummer to have to do that,” she says, “but it’s museum-quality glass” with comparatively little

reflectiveness. To further protect the works, she uses a “workable fixative” throughout the drawing process, a sprayed concoction that keeps everything firmly in place on the paper.

Now, just two years into this new technical phase, Gallagher has emerged as a master of the form. Apart from her representation by CK Contemporary, she has received numerous awards and has been included in various exhibitions and collections, including the Bennett Collection of Women Figurative Realists, *The Lunar Codex* (through which some of her works will reach space in a time capsule), and the Art Renewal Center’s 16th International ARC Salon.

She has emerged from all of this with a new designation for her work: Emotional Realism. This aptly descriptive term was coined, in fact, by Scott Schryver, a sales consultant at CK Contemporary, who used it to describe what he saw. Now Ellis says, “‘Emotional Realism’ is often the term we use when describing Sara’s work to clients who walk in.”

Gallagher readily admits to why she has embraced depicting the “taboos that surround emotional and mental health.” She says, “To be honest, I had experienced a great deal of anxiety myself, so much so that I worked hard with a therapist to find the emotional tools to deal with it, to battle it, to fight and conquer the anxiety.” Through these sessions, Gallagher had what she considers an epiphany, in that once she understood her anxiety, she was able to shift the negativity into something “emotionally beautiful.”

Because she is, by nature, an empathetic person, she started thinking that by drawing others suffering from mental issues, she could help them. “My personal experience translated into curiosity about others and how to bring about a community of people, to let them know there are others suffering. The mission of my work that makes me feel so good is the hope that I am helping other people, connecting them and fostering a healing experience. I always want to include others in my process of making art. It’s about making it about them.” ●

DAVID MASELLO is executive editor of *MILIEU* magazine, and a writer about art and culture. He writes one-act plays, poetry, personal essays, and monologues, which he often performs.