

## **ARTIST RESEARCH: David Bailin**

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FIN110 Fall 2022

Dale Graham

### **Ocean Tide**

Charcoal and coffee on paper  
52.5" x 60"  
2022



### **Forgotten**

Charcoal, coloured pencil, charcoal,  
and coffee on prepared paper  
83" x 84.75"  
2017

(Source for all works pictured above: <https://www.bailinstudio.com/portfolio/>)

### **Old Country Road**

Pencil on drafting film  
over Acrylic and Gouache  
on paper  
13" x 19"



### **Double Exposure**

Charcoal and ink  
on paper  
48" x 55"  
2020

(Source for all works pictured above: <https://www.bailinstudio.com/portfolio/>)





### **Listening**

Charcoal and coffee on  
prepared paper  
52" x 54"  
2012



### **Fly**

Charcoal and coffee on  
prepared paper  
52" x 54"  
2012

(Source for all works pictured above: <https://www.bailinstudio.com/portfolio/>)

## **ARTIST BIO: DAVID BAILIN**

- American, born 1954 (current age 68). Grew up in Sioux Falls, South Dakota.
- BFA in 1976 at University of Colorado (Boulder, Colorado), involved in performance art and theatre in NYC late 1970s.
- MA in 1983 at Hunter College (New York City)
- 1986 – 2021 lived in Little Rock, Arkansas. 1986-1996 Director of Arkansas Art Centre Museum. 1996-2020 taught drawing and art history University of Central Arkansas. Moved to Wellfleet, Massachusetts 2021.
- Social history – Jewish heritage and addresses biblical themes in some of his artwork. Married, grown children. Most recent decade involved caring for aging parents including father with Alzheimer's (the motive for his series "The Erasing" 2015 – 2019). Engaged in outreach art projects with community / high schools / disadvantaged.
- FELLOWSHIPS in painting from National Endowment for the Arts (1988, 1989) and Arkansas Arts Council (1989). EXHIBITIONS: large solo exhibits yearly 2017 to present (NYC, Seattle, Little Rock) and exhaustive list of group exhibitions 2009 to 2023 (Texas, Arkansas, California, NYC, Washington).



Sources: <https://bailinstudio.com/>

<https://www.arkansasartscene.com/home/interview-with-artist-david-bailin>

## **TYPE OF WORK / DESCRIBE THEIR PRACTICE:**

- Bailin's art is primarily drawing. Most commonly, he works in charcoal, ink, or pencil, on large-format paper or prepared paper. He uses colour (pastels, acrylic, coloured pencil) very sparsely, or not at all.
- His work features people encountering challenges (often fearsome, sometimes comic) in landscapes or interiors that are chaotic or puzzling or catastrophic (floods, fire). Most works are crowded with details and texture, particularly his more recent works. In a 2015 interview he described his "narrative charcoals" as "Buster Keaton meets Kafka", or "goofy existentialism" (2015 interview <https://www.bailinstudio.com/documents/peacock15/> )
- His works are organized (on his website, and in exhibitions) into multi-year "Series", in which he explores and works through a theme that has "hooked" him. Artist statements accompany each series, developing his themes and questions. Some recent examples:
  - The Erasing (each work an exploration of memory, and memory loss, inspired by his father's Alzheimer's Disease, enacted by many iterations of drawing, erasing, drawing over, erasing, so the final work has ghostly traces behind and mixed in with the extant images)
  - Fire Cycle (inspired by a poem of the same name – atypical works for him, using colour and in much smaller format (13 x 19 compared to usual 50 x 60 range)

## ANALYSIS OF DAVID BAILIN'S WORK:



**PLUG (from "C-Series")** Charcoal and coffee on prepared paper, 52" x 52", 2012

Source: <https://www.bailinstudio.com/portfolio/c-series/>

### How is the work made?

- Prepared paper – in this case, with coffee! Bailin notes, "...charcoal has a cool tone to it and coffee provided a subtle coloration." Couldn't learn the specifics of how he applies the coffee, but in this drawing it appears either to be selectively applied in certain areas, or washed on then erased out of certain areas.
- "I sketch a lot of preparatory thumbnails..."
- Bailin staples the paper to the wall of his studio so he can "punch, stab, and slash at the image". "I like to work from my shoulders as much as my hands to create a work."
- The work is made with charcoal marks, erasures, blending and smudging. Bailin notes, "I erase more than I draw, it seems".

Source: <https://www.arkansasartscene.com/home/interview-with-artist-david-bailin>

### What are the formal elements of the artwork?

- Bailin uses value to define form (large shapes like desk, chair, walls, blinds). The interplay of marks and erasures is used in varying ways to give unique textures to surfaces like the rug and walls, to smooth fabric like the chair, or to wrinkled fabric like the man's clothing.
- The definition of the office space and its furniture has a cartoonish quality (reminiscent of New Yorker magazine cartoons), thanks to the simplification of the blocks of dark and light values in some areas (e.g. back wall, floorboard trim, desk outline). It brings a playful or comedic quality to the scene, as well as defining the "cubicle".
- The composition is asymmetrical. The key principle is emphasis and scale: the titular subject of the drawing ("Plug") is not even in the frame – instead we see a puzzled man, small in size relative to his desk and other office features, down on hands and knees, stymied in his attempt to drag the electrical cord across the floor to plug it in.
- The value gradient runs generally dark to light from bottom to top. A dark floor takes the lower half of the background, light walls and blinds take the upper half of the background. There are few "objects" in the upper half of the frame, just walls with one painting and vertical blinds (can't see out of them, somewhat like prison bars) and those walls and blinds carry on out of the top of the frame, seemingly unlimited
- Most of the "objects" in the image are in the lower half, and have darker values, tethering them to the ground. There is a diagonal track of darker objects from lower left (chair) across the desk and desk chair, to the kneeling man (his electrical cord also a diagonal line)

### What is the context of the work?

- Bailin produced this work in 2012, as part of his "C-series" (2011-2012). He was living in Arkansas and teaching Art and Art History.
- "C" stands for "cubicle", "carbon" and "c"ing (seeing), per the artist's interview by Arkansas Art Scene blog (<https://www.arkansasartscene.com/home/interview-with-artist-david-bailin>). See below, artist's statement that fleshes out his context for the series...

### Describe the content/subject of the work (What the artist says about the work)

The artist's statement on the C-Series from his website:

*"After a number of years wiping out drawings I've become adept at erasure. At points there were no real differences between the erasure and the drawing. I spent many hours moving charcoal from one point to another – tracking and tracing ghosts. More charcoal accumulated on my studio floor than on the drawing. In this cubicle seeing traces of my footprints provided significant evidence that some kind of life had taken place.*

*The cubicle and the small office contain many stories. While the technology has changed, the cubicle has not and our movements and interactions within them haven't either. I spent long hours in each doing work that at the time had importance but remain for me now only as activities – invoicing and reconciling, sorting, filing, trashing. Within those activities whole beings appear – clear, crisp, and complete – evidence of our occupation like the charcoal dust left on my studio floor.*

*This series was inspired by my experience as a part-time, full-charge bookkeeper in New York City circa early 80s. I handled the books of two small midtown businesses... All day I entered numbers into the ledger, reconciled the bank statements, paid the bills, wrote out*



*deposits for the bank, and prepared a summary of the accounts. As a job for an artist it was great. Everything was in past tense and everything balanced to zero. And zero was what I brought into the studio from my day's work. That is, unless the ledger didn't balance. Then the gentle dull routine of my day turned into a snarled and agitated scuffle as I poured over the bills, receipts and columns of numbers to find the missing pennies. That was the cubicle – a mindless routine interrupted by the crisis of minutiae. Our true nature was revealed in those moments and that was my hook.” (source <https://www.bailinstudio.com/portfolio/c-series/> )*

#### What is the mood of the work? (What do I feel about it?)

- I feel an immediate common humanity with the man, brought down to his hands and knees in the face of an apparently trivial barrier in his workplace cubicle – plugging something in. It is banal and part of me/him is laughing at myself/himself for getting worked up over such a little thing. But another part acknowledges the toll the workplace takes, many little indignities over months and years chipping away at one's self-worth or agency.
- The work has clearly drawn an accompanying “story” out of me – and, I suspect, out of most viewers. Bailin's strength is to make it both generic (allowing each person their take on the scene) and particular (so it rings true, even though presented as something a little comic). His style of mark-making supports this, too: the man and his electrical cord are somewhat blurry, allowing him to be everyman, while the edges of the cubicle and the furniture are quite crisply rendered, so the strictures of the cubicle are visible to all.
- One reviewer (Peter Frank in Huffington Post Haiku Reviews 2012 -- cited on Bailin's website but I was unable to pull up the original article in full) nicely describes the frustration, and also the hope, of the characters in Bailin's C-series: “*men in crisis—that is, men who seem to have grasped that their crises have overcome them and require resistance or escape.*” (<https://www.bailinstudio.com/portfolio/c-series/>)
- In summary – it was good to come away feeling hopeful that the character can rise above the banality – maybe the comic treatment, the laughter, is part of the solution!

#### How might the work inspire / influence my studio practice

- As with my last artist review (Mary Borgman), I am inspired to work more with charcoal, and with figures/people. After exploring Bailin's work, I am fascinated by how effectively a single image can position that figure in a narrative, prompt the viewer to imagine a story.
- Whereas Borgman made detailed, larger-than-life renderings of a person gazing directly at the viewer from neutral background, Bailin's work draws a detailed context for the person, and that person's attention is fully centred on their problem and circumstances, not the viewer. I engaged with Bailin's work by identifying with the circumstances and telling stories of what had happened, what might happen next. I engaged with Borgman's portraits by curiosity about someone intensely individualistic, clearly “other” than myself. Both are exercises in empathy, but I feel more resonance with Bailin's approach than Borgman's.