

Stepping Out

THE VANGUARD ARTS

Sum of the Parts

Bill Ramage Explores His Face

By Susan Wheeler

For two years William Ramage has been working on detailed, large-scale drawings in graphite on rolls of rag paper five feet wide. The Sudbury sculptor's latest drawing, a self-portrait still in progress, will measure five feet by nine when completed. The enormity and magnification of the drawings are both seductive and unsettling.

Thirty-six, Ramage currently teaches sculpture and drawing at Castleton State College, and his work is represented by the Allen Stone Gallery in New York City. His current drawings have strained the scope of his concerns.

"I had always drawn because it is expedient, but I also took it very seriously. When I began to explore perception and to want to process that information quickly, I found that sculpture doesn't lend itself well to that, it's easier to eliminate and add on with a pencil.

And I had to draw faces: they are the most complex things that are accessible. With the same components, 200 million American faces can still be different, and I can get three or four inches away from them."

He began using models, some of whom sat for hundreds of hours while Ramage drew. The drawings began to grow in scale and detail, and the sitting hours tripled. Ramage finally settled with self-portraits. "I am always available, and I don't have to be sociable."

The size stuns. Because the portraits are so large, and in black and white, they draw an immediate comparison with Chuck Close's work. Yet although Ramage admires Close, the work is dissimilar in many ways. Ramage does not use photos or graphing, and his concerns diverge as well. Whereas Close blows up a reduced, generalized image, and in the process, extracts the parts from the whole, Ramage begins with the parts and builds the portrait from its details.

"I'm afraid to be written off as an uneven Chuck Close. In the end I am as much like Ivan Albright as I am like Close. The size simply facilitates the details. There is a delicate balance between the parts and the whole. If I enlarge the whole, with the separation of its components it makes these details smaller; the space subordinates them."

The enormity also gives the drawings temporal duration. It is impossible to see the "image" quickly and turn away. The viewer wants to back up to a spot where the entire portrait will suddenly fuse; that spot is elusive. At nearer proximity, the viewer is drawn from one lone detail to another; one cannot, for instance, see a pupil and its eyelash together, although they are perhaps only an inch apart.

Ramage's renderings do not have any of Albright's baroque excesses; they rest on the precise selection of what Ramage calls the "information."



How did Ramage find a mirror this big?

culled from rigorous study of his model. A mirror stands on an easel near an unfinished self-portrait. Ramage has spent hundreds of hours studying its reflection.

"I am convinced that I see at the most half the information that's there. I use perhaps half of that. The image will only carry so much information or it will become unbalanced. This one," he gestures toward the uncompleted self-portrait, "is in danger of too much. Some pieces of information I'm less anxious to give up than others; then there are some that I know I'm indulging myself by keeping."

This drawing has gone further than his others toward "hyper-realism," and Ramage believes that it will be the most extreme drawing he'll do. He begins each by scrutinous study of his subject; then he lightly maps in the bare forms of the image. This often takes a month or so. Finally, he works methodically from the upper left corner down and to the right.

In this particular self-portrait, Ramage has substituted a linear

treatment for the mottling of earlier drawings. His head, wearing earphones, tilts to one side; it is complete through the upper lip.

"I have a lot of anxiety about it at this stage of the drawing; I could still lose it. I don't know until the image is completed just what the roles are; I have no idea just how much of the face's information the comparative blocks of neck and shirt will support. But I can't rush it.

"I use the earphones because they make the head round, which I wanted, and they also, through meeting the edges of the paper on either side, break up the background—the large white space that in earlier drawings was so prominent."

An earlier self-portrait is a marked contrast. Depicting Ramage in a baseball cap and open shirt, it measures 5' by 9' and took 700 working hours, or about five months, to complete. It is softer and subtler. Chiaroscuro plays a larger role, and entire areas of "information" are lightly suggested, without sacrificing any of Ramage's exceptional perceptual accuracy.

Ramage can change the size of his pupils by willing it. One of his eyes can watch the other move; he can literally turn off one eye while seeing solely through the other. Yet these are visual tricks besides his ability to see his subject.

"When I finished the last drawing, I had a hard time holding a focus. The muscles in my eyes were so overworked that if I sat across a table from someone, they were constantly drifting in and out of focus.

"Your brain maintains an order and prevents you often from really seeing something; it forces you to see it in generalized terms. It knows approximately how long noses and eyes are, and you see through this prescription. Perception must override this function of the brain."

Ramage has spent a long time looking a photo-realists, and although he feels most of them became more involved in selecting a photo than anything else, he finds one contribution important: some, and especially Estes and Close, have developed a perceptual "specificity."

"As we hear many isolated noises as a single sound—in other words, our ear doesn't break an orchestral moment into bass, soprano—in the same way we have learned to see general images rather than the polyphony of the units. I want to get past these habits of organization, but it's a little like trying to sing a fugue all by yourself."

Ramage sees at least three more drawings ahead, each of which might easily take him five or six months. Already he has begun to apply some of the concerns the drawings have aroused to a sculptural piece in progress.

"In a way, all of the things I think about feed this drawing; the drawing, and its terms, has its own concerns. It's an honest exchange. If I were totally dominant, the drawing couldn't be any more consequential than I am, and in the end I think people are fairly inconsequential. So I'm the mediator for the drawing, in a sense. I didn't come up with a notion and then impose it on the drawing; in giving such close attention to perception the drawing then made its demands first."

Hugh Moffitt



Tommy Egan

"Your brain forces you to see things in generalized terms."

The drawings are beginning to win attention, as Ramage's sculpture has for many years. One hopes they will find a local showing eventually.

"Still, I can talk about all these things—polyphony, separation, the tension between the units and the image, sorting out information—but it's really all a product of looking at a face really intensely and drawing what I see. In the most basic terms, that's what it is."