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Art People: Interview with German artist Ralf Tekaart

'50 Shades of Gray': Conquering the Pencil

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German artist Ralf Tekaart shows off one of his large-scale pencil works. Photo: Chris Phillips

Berlin-based artist Ralf Tekaart talks to BAPS about using the pencil as a medium to explore his roots. Get the inside scoop on this pencil-perfect gentleman!

The Darker Side of the Pencil

Ralf is currently producing large-scale, more abstract works with pencil. When he begins a piece, he does not have a concrete plan but instead lets the work guide him. After he draws a few lines, he sees more “precise formations emerge” and he then “reacts to what’s happening.”

“Luxury” seems to be [Ralf Tekaart](#)’s favorite word. During our hour-long discussion, the contemporary German artist used this unexpected word at least four times. Looking at his nondescript clothing and relaxed demeanor, you would be perplexed by his choice of wording. His sparse studio, nearly all black and white except for pops of blue in his sneakers, the flowered trash bin, and a large water bottle, also seems to be the antithesis of “luxury.” As it turns out, Ralf was not describing his lush lifestyle in Berlin. Rather, he was humbly referencing his tidbits of luck in the city, such as living five minutes from his studio and working in an environment untethered from digital distractions – his personal luxuries.

Modern Gentleman

The longer I spoke with Ralf, the more I realized that he is an atypical artist variety: without hubris or an inflated sense of self worth. I found such modesty, not to mention his constant grin, refreshing. Perhaps it was his lack of frustration when I got terribly lost searching for his studio or his frequent tinkering with the coal heater to ensure that I was warm, but something tells me Ralf is a modern gentleman. I am not sure if I caught him on a good day, but Ralf definitely seems to be a rare breed.

Cut the Wires

Ralf ensures that his sacred studio space is a technology-free zone except for his mobile phone, which he assured me was not a smart phone. However, I quickly noticed a stereo in the corner nestled between stacks of CDs. It turns out Ralf listens to audio books in the morning, currently Marcel Proust’s [“In Search of Lost Time,”](#) and music later in the day. To maintain stamina while working on such massive drawings, Ralf uses music to break through his low energy points. His current favorites: [Franz Ferdinand](#), [The Killers](#), and [DJ Shadow](#).



Ralf Tekaart works on one of his pencil works inside his studio. Photo: Chris Phillips

If Ralf had not already won me over with his personal charm, his intimacy with his medium of choice – pencil on paper – definitely would have done the trick. He spoke of the pencil like a loved one, waxing lyrical about how they met and its many positive attributes. He explained that although pencil is not the fastest medium to work with, his work necessitates that medium. Pencil allows Ralf to build the piece layer by layer, thereby creating a 3-D effect. Ralf uses a variety of nearly 20 different pencils, each with a different classification of darkness, to create this sculptural effect. Ralf drew my attention to the fact that with pencil, “even in the darkest parts, you can still see the layers. Visibility of hidden forms also depends on the light, so the works vary depending on the lighting conditions. Brighter light allows you to see something deeper.”

Giving Ralf's strong relationship with the pencil, I assumed he must have been an avid doodler in his youth. However, his infatuation with pencil work emerged later in life. After drawing comics as a youth, Ralf went on to study graphic design. During his studies, he was exposed to drawing and etching, out of which his affinity for the pencil developed. It was also at this time that he realized that he did not need to use color to express himself in his works.

Consequently, he began the "absurd task of creating huge pencil drawings." Ralf wanted to reinvent the purpose of a pencil, "not using it for light sketches but to show that the medium can be dark and heavy," thus turning the concept of ephemeral pencil on its head. In its potential to render heaviness, Ralf wanted to demonstrate that "pencil can have the same power as painting."



Ralf Tekaart relaxing in his cozy, nearly technology-free studio. Photo: Chris Philips

Artist as Seeker

In an online text Ralf referred to the "artist as seeker." When I asked him what he was seeking as an artist, he told me he was seeking to expose his "own roots" through storytelling. For example, one of his older works focused on the theme of German history evaluated through a personal investigation of his grandfather's military time in World War II. Growing up, his grandfather never shared any details of his involvement except that he was imprisoned in Russia. Meanwhile, as a boy Ralf "played war" with tiny World War II soldiers. Art served as a platform for him to explore this contrast and discover his personal roots, "that which made me."

Roots in Berlin

Ralf has lived and worked in Berlin for nearly four years, but in case you still haven't had the pleasure of meeting him or seeing his works, head over to the "[I Like It Raw](#)" exhibition running at [Epicentro Art Space](#) until November 10th. There, his huge pencil drawing (3 m x 2 m) accurately entitled "Massive" is on display. Luckily for Berlin, Ralf bought a flat here with his wife, so he assured me that he's not going anywhere anytime soon. He could not imagine leaving the rough and gritty parts of Berlin, "like here" he said motioning to his studio with a grin.

By the end of the interview, I had caught Ralf's contagious smile. Perhaps, indeed, I was smiling a little too widely as I was mocked by a passerby within five seconds of my exit from his artistic complex. Oh, the little luxuries of Berlin.

- [Epicentro Art Space](#) "I Like It Raw," Ralf Tekaart and 18 other RAW Tempel artists. October 19th-November 10th 2012: Tues-Sat: 12-6pm (Price of Ralf Tekaart's Artwork at "I Like It Raw": €9,000).