



PHOTO BY CHRISTINA PETTERSSON

ART AND LITERATURE IN BLACK AND WHITE

Christina Pettersson's love for literature is expressed through her drawings

BY HOLLY STRAWBRIDGE

Once upon a time there was a little girl named Christina, who was born in Stockholm, Sweden. She was raised on fairy tales, which she loved as much as her grandmother's pastries. When she was 7, her family moved to South Florida, where Christina discovered that some of her favorite fairy tales existed in English. Later, she found they exist in many cultures and languages.

From an early age, Christina was destined to become an artist and pursued her path with dedication and enthusiasm. She also loved to read – devouring the works of Mark Twain, William Faulkner, Thomas Wolfe and other literary heavyweights. She gave her favorite writers and stories leading roles in her art – and lived happily ever after.

At first glance, it looks like a life-sized photo of a brick floating in the middle of an enormous piece of paper tacked to the wall. Upon

closer inspection, it turns out to be a drawing of a brick rendered in painstaking detail. A brick? Yes, but not just any brick: It's a brick from William Faulkner's house.

While this choice of subject matter seems unusual, the artist has an explanation. "The brick floating in the middle of this huge expanse of white paper becomes the writer's universe, becomes Faulkner, Faulkner's house, and the long and dense history of the Deep South," says Pettersson.

She has drawn bricks and pavers from multiple homes, including those of the Marquis de Sade, Thomas Wolfe and her own previous residences. "I go through a lot of sharpeners," she says with a laugh.

Portraits in pencil

Her drawings are as much an exercise in mental discipline as in ability. The intensity of the work, which must be done in natural light, calls for frequent breaks. Pettersson loves working in pencil because she is attracted to the sheen of graphite. She knows the level of astonishing detail she is able to achieve is not possible with paint.

“There’s a raw truth in drawing. I could lie with painting – make a mistake, paint over it and no one would know. But if you erase something, part of your mistake remains visible,” she says. “I also like the starkness of black and white, maybe because it reminds me of writing.”

More accessible than the bricks, perhaps, are her double self-portraits, which are also life-sized. Unlike static portraits, which capture a single moment, these double portraits have a cinematic quality that implies the passage of time. They are deeply romantic in the tradition of literary heroines.

“They are mythical scenarios of being rescued, but not needing to be rescued,” she says, pointing out that on *Double Self Portrait, Train Tracks* (2005), her feet are unbound and her hands are tied, but not to the tracks. In *Double Self Portrait, Incubus* (2005), the appearance of a dream lover is a clear reference to a modern-day *Sleeping Beauty*.

Little Red Riding Hood shows up in a series of wooden panels illustrating the contents of the famous basket taken to Grandma’s house as told in the German, Italian and French versions of the fairy tale: cake and butter, bread with oil, wine and ring-shaped cakes. To create these works, Pettersson drew directly onto the wood, sprayed it with a fixative to prevent the pencil from smearing and painted the edges red for reference to the famous hooded cape.

“I like to use meaningful media, and the woods are a potent character in fairy tales,” she says. Although

the work incorporates six separate panels, they are not meant to be viewed separately. “They represent the progression of changes in translations of the tale as it moved from country to country,” she explains.

The long road back home

Christina’s mother enrolled her in art class at age 6. It was clearly a good decision. By third grade, she was attending a magnet school for the arts. By middle school, she was working from nude models.

Following summer classes at the Rhode Island School of Design, Christina enrolled in the New World School of the Arts, graduating in 1994. She continued her education at the Maryland Institute College of Art, from which she graduated Magna Cum Laude in 1998 with a degree in painting. Her skills won her a Fulbright Scholarship, which she used to study sculpture at Sweden’s Valand School of Fine Arts. There, she worked in all media, including metal, wood, fabrics and found objects.

She returned to the States in 2000, moving first to New York and then to a farm in Vermont. At this point, a metamorphosis began. She started to move with the natural rhythm of life – shifting from night owl behavior to a more normal sleep-wake cycle. More importantly, her appreciation of her environment became an essential element in her work. The change meant purging noise and chaos and returning to basics.

“I stripped everything away in an effort to understand what I was about. It was like standing in a quiet room and listening,” she says. What she learned was that she longed to come home. After 10 years away, she picked up and moved back to South Florida, this time settling in Fort Lauderdale.

“It’s nice to be home again. Sense of place is important to me,” she says. “My timing was good, because the art scene in South Florida is burgeoning. My friends from the

New World School of the Arts are making a living here as artists.”

Her return has been inspirational. She purchased a video camera, learned how to use it and shot, edited and narrated her first and only video work to date. An homage to Anne Sexton’s poems, this stunning double-screen video, shot entirely in South Florida and entitled *273 Sounds for Anne Sexton* (for the number of poems Anne Sexton wrote in her lifetime), takes her interest in self-portraits and literature to new heights.

The riveting video is a tantalizing mix of fact and fiction, calm and elation, participation and observation, sound and silence. Unlike other videos that remain confined to the owners’ tape decks, this one was purchased by the Sagamore Hotel in South Beach for its video lounge and also by the Margulies Collection.

Life is good

Today, the young artist is just where she wants to be. Having exhibited throughout the United States as well as in Sweden and Italy, Pettersson is now represented by Miami’s Rocket Projects art gallery. She has sold enough works to quit her part-time restaurant job and concentrate on art. Nevertheless, money is tight, so her \$15,000 Visual and Media Artists Fellowship from the South Florida Cultural Consortium was a windfall.

“I was in a record store when I got the call, and I nearly passed out!” she says. She plans to use the money to visit Ernest Hemingway’s house in Key West and other writers’ residences.

Does that mean more bricks are in her future? “Yes, I plan to do more rocks and continue with double self-portraits. Actually, I plan to combine the two by drawing myself floating on the paper, like the bricks do,” she says. What is certain is that she will never run out of thematic material, so long as there are books to be read. ★

Holly Strawbridge is a writer in Fort Lauderdale.



William Faulkner's House (detail), graphite on paper, 55" x 132", 2005



Double Self Portrait, Train Tracks, graphite on paper, 42" x 132", 2005



Marquis de Sade, graphite on paper, 53" x 96", 2005

Christina Petersson