The Brutal Line compares drawings by Italian Old Masters and Modern and contemporary artists in which the subjects of mortality, inhumanity, and existence indicate ontological investigations. Although the pairings may seem culturally arbitrary, they are more a dialogue of divergences. Questions about the nature of being are primary to each drawing in the exhibition; those posed by the Italian Old Masters are framed in theological precepts while those of the Modern are more existential in nature. They reveal historical ways in which death, being, and becoming are depicted, as well as Enlightenment and Modern concepts of fate, the vulnerability of the body, the abuse of dominant power, and our fragile comprehension of time and space. The selected works’ use and re-use of tragic tableaux, as well as the display of sensitive draftsmanship, offer important structural keys.

In Leviathan (1651), philosopher Thomas Hobbes describes humanity in its natural, ungoverned state, noting its potential to engage in a war in which “every man is against every man.” The worst fate is “the continual fear and danger of violent death, and the life of man is solitary, poore, nasty, brutish, and short.” To counteract this grim possibility, Enlightenment philosophers developed appeals to humanistic reason, erecting rational standards for both individual life and communal order. But by the 19th century, notions of free will, the social contract, and the desire to ascribe universal order had developed into anxious questions about the conditions of autonomy and society. Some Modern artists and philosophers regarded this phenomenon as a call to redress the nature of human knowledge by revisiting the question of being.

These historical sets of drawings reveal fundamentally different points of view about essence. The Enlightenment philosopher and mathematician Gottfried Leibniz typified a worldview that established God simultaneously in nature and off stage as its omnipotent designer: “God assuredly always chooses the best” places humankind’s essence before its existence, while forcing knowledge to assume a rational order. Contrary to this, Modern existentialist thought calls into question essence and its origin. Existential being is defined with an identity formed through actions; one becomes his or her essence from a series of choices. Existence in this scenario precedes essence. Predetermined fate and design are impossible, but with such unending autonomy comes the price of being “condemned to freedom.” Andrea Boscoli’s 16th-century drawing of bound hands and Alberto Giacometti’s 20th-century portrait head illuminate this philosophical rupture. Both artists were examining being from a state of resignation; in the former bounded-ness is accepted as conditional fate, in the latter the very condition of bounded-ness is examined for meaning.

The efficacious hand of an Italian School Old Master signals humanity through its objectivity. In the most brutal of subjects, from Christ’s Passion to depictions of war, Italian Old Masters used drawing techniques that display not only their facility of touch but also their position as witnesses to a world in violent tumult. Their drawings exhibit both urgency and a tactile gracefulness. In their Modern and contemporary counterparts, this grace of the hand in view of death is either rigorously re-attuned, as with Arturo Herrera, or subverted, as with Peter Saul.

These Italian drawings from the 16th to 18th century compile a priori tragic tableaux that have been repeated and attenuated in our time. For instance, Mattia Preti’s 17th-century depiction of Saint Sebastian Tied to a Tree is reformed in Martin Kippenberger’s self-effaced Untitled (Hotel Restaurant Goldener Adler). Or, the investigation of becoming in Salvator Rosa’s The Raising of Lazarus moves from the metaphorical to the literal through Willem de Kooning’s process of drawing the body. The parallels of violence in each selected work are considerable.

H. C. Westermann’s Port of Shadows, in which a supine and dying figure is about to be consumed by wharf rats, is a mordant embodiment of a flagellation scene drawn by Ubaldo Gandolfi. Hobbes’s primal man, capable of atrocity, remains a specter for anyone concerned with humanism. The artists featured in The Brutal Line engaged this problem by observing consciousness at its borders and depicting a world of cause and effect. Such continual vigilance finds a fitting corollary in Friedrich Nietzsche’s aphorism from Human, all too Human (1878): “One is most in danger of being run over when one has just avoided a carriage.”

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The Brutal Line
Drawing Death, Being, and Becoming


Through focused comparisons between Italian masters and their modern and contemporary counterparts, The Brutal Line examines ways that artists have used drawn marks to express extreme physical or existential states. This intimate selection combines exceptional drawings from the collections of Richard and Mary L. Gray and the Smart Museum of Art. We hope you will enjoy this rare opportunity for close looking at classic works of the past and present, side by side.

Curated by David Schutter, Assistant Professor, Department of Visual Arts, University of Chicago, in consultation with Stephanie Smith, Smart Museum curator.

Checklist of Works (counter-clockwise)

1. Peter Saul, American, b. 1934
   *Murder in the Kitchen*, 1960
   Crayon and collage on wove paper
   Smart Museum of Art, Gift of Mr. and Mrs. B. C. Holland, 1991.16

2. Andrea Boscoli, Italian, 1550–1606
   *Study of Bound Hands*, n.d.
   Red chalk (sanguine) on laid paper
   Smart Museum of Art, Gift of the Collection of Edward A. and Inge Maser, 2008.30

3. Alberto Giacometti, Swiss, 1901–1966
   *Caroline*, c. 1958-1965
   Blue ball-point pen on gridded spiral notebook paper
   Smart Museum of Art, The Joel Starrels, Jr. Memorial Collection, 1974.234

4. Salvator Rosa, Italian, 1615–1673
   *The Raising of Lazarus*, n.d.
   Black and red chalk, pen and brown ink, brown wash
   Richard and Mary L. Gray Collection

5. Willem de Kooning, American, 1904–1997
   *Figure*, 1980
   Charcoal and pencil on paper
   Richard and Mary L. Gray Collection

   *Untitled (Hotel Restaurant Goldener Adler)*, 1991
   Colored pencil, crayon, graphite, and vinyl letters on hotel stationery
   Smart Museum of Art, Purchase, Gift of Carl Rungius, by exchange, 2001.32

7. Mattia Preti (II Calabrese), Italian, 1613–1699
   *Saint Sebastian Tied to a Tree*, n.d.
   Red chalk with brown wash
   Richard and Mary L. Gray Collection

8. Gian Paolo Panini
   *Marcus Curtius Throwing Himself into the Gulf*, n.d.
   Pen and brown ink and brush, grey wash over black chalk
   Richard and Mary L. Gray Collection

9. Arturo Herrera, Venezuelan, b. 1959
   Smart Museum of Art, Gift of Susan and Lewis Manilow, 2008.96.1

    *Study for Port of Shadows*, 1967
    Pen and ink on wove paper
    Smart Museum of Art, Purchase, Paul and Miriam Kirkley Fund for Acquisitions, 2001.33

11. Ubaldo Gandolfi, Italian, 1728–1781
    *Flagellation*, c. early 1770s
    Pen and brown ink with wash over black chalk
    Richard and Mary L. Gray Collection

    *Mad Motorists*, 1961
    Pen and ink on paper
    Smart Museum of Art, Gift of Leon and Marian Despres, 2008.8

    *Soldiers on Horseback Pursued by Foot-Soldiers*, n.d.
    Black chalk, pen and brown ink, brown wash on grey-blue paper
    Richard and Mary L. Gray Collection