



# En Masse - Ensembles, Sets, and Variations: The Art of Howie Lee Weiss

By Stephen Wozniak, May 2023



*Installation view of En Masse - Ensembles, Sets, and Variations: The Art of Howie Lee Weiss  
at Goya Contemporary Gallery, Baltimore.*

*En Masse - Ensembles, Sets, and Variations: The Art of Howie Lee Weiss*  
Goya Contemporary Gallery  
May 13 through July 29, 2023  
Curated by Amy Eva Raehse

“If only the whole world could feel the power of harmony.”  
- Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart

“If you've only got one horn playing, I still want the sense of ensemble.”  
- Gerry Mulligan

“With one eye you are looking at the outside world, while with the other you are looking within yourself.”  
- Amedeo Modigliani

Howie Lee Weiss is a unique artist in many ways. He creates fertile, buoyant, deceptively ingenuous black and white charcoal drawings – one of the oldest art mediums of this Earth – amidst the excessive, tech-obsessed, visually saturated world that we live in and gaze upon. Despite the uplifting, halcyon subjects that often populate his works, his art is about the many profound, weighty moments we face individually and as a social group. It's important to have a Howie Lee Weiss around. He's an artist who gets right to the point without presenting a strict, blaring, biased narrative, which is something often dished out in nightly television newsfeeds, online social media and even on the job. He always manages to do it on a human scale, at a human speed, for a fundamental human need.

In his new solo exhibition, *En Masse - Ensembles, Sets, and Variations: The Art of Howie Lee Weiss* at Goya Contemporary Gallery, the artist explores a significant series of what curator Amy Eva Raehse calls “hybrid” human portraits that celebrate the evolutionary diversity among us. In a second series for the exhibition, Weiss develops middle-grounded, square-cropped variations of local landscapes. The rhythmically patterned units in this latter work act like composer-multiplied song notes – each, charming and seductive, but more meaningful as they interface into a vigorous, enchanting musical score. The towering, gridded, wall-pinned installation of both series form an almost symphony-like experience for gallery goers: a consort of fresh, forward voices and a choir of long-limbed trees – positioned opposite one another – which undulate and communicate an unwritten aggregate dialogue in the space. A third series of small, singular, framed portrait works, in between, punctuate and invite comparison with the bare groupings that reveal Weiss’s painstaking, labor-intensive studio process. These facile faces and forested lands somehow help us define our individual identity, and – ultimately – return us home to our collective humanity and true nature.

While there are dozens of walled portraits that ostensibly act as one piece in the show, a quad of high contrast faces caught my attention. One drawing features a black man, round-jawed, looking glumly to our left, lost in thought for a moment. Clockwise to him is a young, spruce European man, bright-eyed, and looking for something new over to his upper right. Next is an older woman: tanned, slightly tattered but open to dialogue, looking straight at us. Finally, a feminized human of unknown gender topped in short blonde hair looks to their left with suspicion, braced for the unknown. All of these drawings seem to catch at least one salient character expression, look or disposition – some telling clue as to who they are individually above their typecast identity. It could be a smirk, a raised eyebrow, a hairstyle even. But it is their *eye movement* that connects them both inward and outward to each other, which establishes the network and helps create community. Each piece is thickly outlined in dark black charcoal, every discrete facial component filled with varying tonal dustings, rubbed and reworked to just the right density. All are top and bottom-scored in beefy, horizontal, black, comic strip frame lines that somehow give each face equal footing as distinct people *and* integrated members of the gridded family.



*Howie Lee Weiss, Portrait 6, 2022, 11" x 14", vine charcoal on paper, framed*

Across the room lies the largess of loving landscapes, featuring greatly abstracted rolling hills, flowing rivers and many at-attention trees of several species. The landscapes show us not only unique players in

the field, but the overlapping life and extended reach of each component that make them up. The landscapes are largely boxed into squares, which make them feel packed with potential and kinetic energy. Like the portraits, Weiss employs a similar dense application *and* erasure of charcoal in these works, while also utilizing texture dots, dashes and other deliberate marks that indicate growth, depth and movement. This turns what could be matter-of-fact, woody, snapshot drawings into the surprise life of the party.

A wonderful piece among the framed portraits in the middle of the room grabbed my attention after looking through all of the works. It is a charcoal drawing, *Portrait #6*, which depicts a female face of indeterminate origins with elegant, canted, almond eyes, wide-parted long hair, and billowy-lips, looking to our left – perhaps to avert our gaze or maybe draw our attention through to others in the group. It has the formal feel of a not-quite-plaintive Modigliani portrait and features the stark, rich contours of Matisse’s classic Fauvist figurative works. But unlike the paintings of those artists, there are no deep, mysterious shadows in Weiss’ drawings, no glowing color flourishes, no slippery gradients. Instead, there is a purity of plan and structure, a place for direct contact between line and shade, object and subject, individual and ensemble, artist and viewer. This piece, along with most others in the show, offers this depth of relationships in the most straightforward package your eyes should see. But as Weiss says – and I agree – while the drawings cast a “fast visual release,” they also provide a slow, serious and timeless “narrative” that unfolds.



*Howie Lee Weiss, Landscape 2, 2022, 11" x 14", vine charcoal on paper, framed*

Weiss creates his drawings of faces, places and scenes using thick vine charcoal on heavy weight archival paper. While he works in small formats, like those presented in this exhibition, he often utilizes much larger, human-height media to draw on. He typically makes quick, loose sketches, then re-works the charcoal and refines the contours, edges and lines with precise geometric drafting tools until they are complete. It requires a lot of engagement and a lot of time. The work in this show took him nearly four years to complete between his other developing series.

In addition to his multi-decade career as an artist, Weiss has greatly influenced thousands of students that have passed through the studios of the Maryland Institute College of Art as a teacher. He thrives in this personality inhabited and aesthetically rich community and has experienced its campus, courses and student diversity growth over the years. Like the people and landscapes in his work, Weiss communicates both big and small lessons to his students and, in turn, learns from them, as time-honored and emerging

art, cultural and personal experience transforms and builds the life of each generation towards harmony in the community of the ensemble.

To see *En Masse - Ensembles, Sets, and Variations: The Art of Howie Lee Weiss*, a solo exhibition of new and recent charcoal works on paper by Howie Lee Weiss, go to Goya Contemporary Gallery in Baltimore, Maryland. This exhibition will be on view from May 13 through July 29, 2023 with an opening reception held at the gallery on Thursday, May 25th from 6:00 p.m. to 8:00 p.m.

### **About Howie Lee Weiss**

Raised in rural Pennsylvania, Howie Lee Weiss has lived and worked in Baltimore for over four decades, exhibiting work at major commercial art galleries in New York City, Boston, Baltimore, Philadelphia and globally in Italy and Japan. His art has been reviewed in *Art in America*, *The Philadelphia Inquirer* and *The Boston Globe*, among others. Weiss earned his Master of Fine Arts from Yale University and his Bachelor of Fine Arts from Maryland Institute College of Art. A longstanding professor, Weiss also served as faculty in MICA's Summer Abroad Program in Italy. Additionally, he has been a visiting professor, speaker, critic and lecturer at Princeton University, Vassar College, Minneapolis College of Art and Design, and the University of Pennsylvania, among others.