

SKETCHY CHARACTERS

CHRISTOPHER BOLLEN ON COURTROOM DRAWINGS

MEDIA

DURING ABC'S coverage of the Martha Stewart securities-fraud trial, the network showed a court sketch of a woman, hands cupped over her face, with a shaded azure background behind her folded frame. The woman was Ann Armstrong, Stewart's assistant, pictured as she broke into tears on the witness stand while describing the plum pudding that her employer had sent her for Christmas. Armstrong's image, attributed to artist Christine Cornell, appeared to millions as the key visual signpost of Stewart's guilt. While photography and video have effectively supplanted draftsmanship as the preferred record of public events, court-sketch drawing remains a marketable strain of artistry that still performs its intended social function, given that the law restricts the use of cameras in courtrooms. These limits date back to the media frenzy that resulted from cameras at the 1935 Bruno Hauptmann trial for the Lindbergh baby kidnapping, although, more recently, the astonishing exception made for video cameras in O. J. Simpson's 1995 murder case (CNN covered it live "gavel to gavel") created a similar showbiz-circus blitz.

In the same way that no law prohibits a reporter from taking notes, no law blocks an artist from sketching court proceedings, leaving quick illustrations to stand as the sole visual documentation of the most infamous cases tracked by news organizations around the globe. As Mary Pflum, producer for ABC News/*Good Morning America*, explains, "Without cameras, we are relying on artists to be able to show the drama. We look for an artist that can capture key visual moments. But we also need for them to be editorially accurate." Pflum fixes on Armstrong's emotional breakdown as the crucial moment during the Stewart trial. "That was key," Pflum says. "She was a trusted assistant, and you could tell she was torn. You had this moment of real truth." But if, as members of the press, court artists pursue "truth," they are not bound by the same journalistic codes meant to ensure fair, "objective" reporting. In the preface to *My Days in Court: Unique Views of the Famous and Infamous by a Court Artist*, the 1990 memoir of veteran sketch artist Ida Libby Dengrove, reporter Frank W. Martin wrote that Dengrove "saw, felt, and portrayed the vast range of human emotions. . . . Hers was a prejudiced viewpoint. She interpreted rather than recorded events as they unfolded."

Courtroom drawing is a prejudiced art form standing in for a disinterested technological tool; it provides an emotional interpretation instead of a freeze-frame, "art" instead of "science." With more than thirty years in the business, Cornell is one of



THE SKETCHES, ULTIMATELY, ARE NOT PORTRAITS BUT DE FACTO NARRATIVES. THE DRAWINGS ARE MADE TO WORK LIKE TOTEMS OF INNOCENCE AND GUILT, GOOD AND EVIL, CELEBRITY AND DISGRACE.

New York's most artistically accomplished illustrators. She describes her approach to portraying a defendant: "I don't have to be completely impartial the way the journalists have to. You don't do portraits well unless you get under your subject's skin. You have to have a strong compassion for them, a benefit of the doubt. I look at them so long and intimately, I sort of fall in love. I can't demonize somebody. I try to cull out their beauty."

The aesthetics of court sketches have evolved almost imperceptibly over time, suggesting that, like every other detail in a trial proceeding, the sketches themselves stick to certain fixed tropes. Buff or beige paper is often used to give an instant institutional backdrop, with rich pastels supplying shadow and dimension, indications of clothing pattern, skin color, and age. Space in the courtroom is collapsed, with the judge, prosecutor, defendant, and witness often pressed into interlocking planes akin to allegorical bas-reliefs. Facial expressions are indistinct, as if the subjects are caught between states of emotion, either to present intervals of time or to prevent parody. Though court artists do

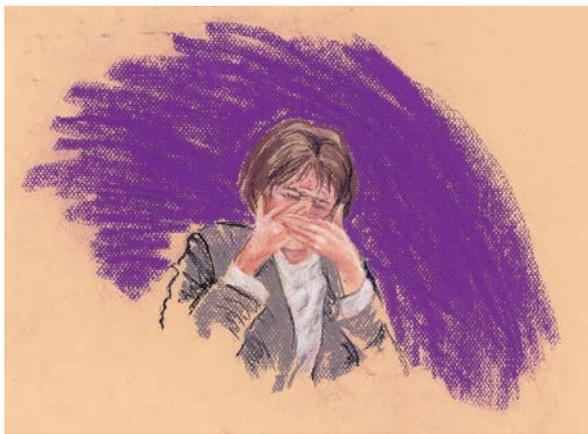
subscribe to a formula, close examination of their work reveals extreme stylistic variances. Cornell's drawings are substantive, rendered in an amazing array of pastel hues, while famous mother-daughter team Shirley and Andrea Shepard, cultish figures on the New York City court circuit, have a fluid rapidity to their line.

The sketches, ultimately, are not portraits but de facto narratives. Allegory is an accurate term here, and in the staid, archetypal genre of the "courtroom drama," the drawings are made to work like totems of innocence and guilt, good and evil, celebrity and disgrace. While court artists work against sentimentalizing their subjects to type, the media has long reduced trial participants to stock courtroom personalities in order to create effortless, quick-read entertainment out of high-profile trials. In other words, witnesses and defendants are flattened to genre characters, so they can be read along familiar story lines.

Certainly, cameras induce a media flurry that sketched documentation does not. But even with courtroom drawings, there are ways to stage-manage information. Cameras often *continued on page 66*

Christine Cornell,
Cross-examination of Douglas Faneuil in US v. Martha Stewart and Peter Bocanovic, 2004,
charcoal and pastel
on paper, 19 x 26".

continued from page 63 zoom in on drawings' details (Martha's lavish Hermès Birkin bag, or the rolling eyes of star prosecution witness Douglas Faneuil) and bookend these half-formed elements with footage of the cynosure outside of trial. Showbiz does inform at least part of the business. The Shepards' court-art exhibition on view this past winter at John

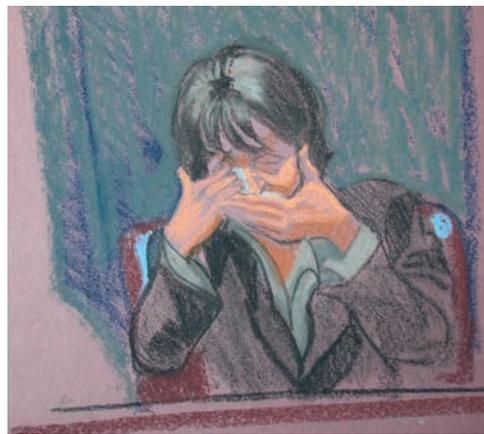


Jay College of Criminal Justice in New York consisted of exhaustive, drama-infused studies of famous defendants. The exhibition was titled "Celebrity Has Its Price," emphasizing the blur between information and exploitation.

Media exploitation is what led filmmaker T. J. Wilcox to attend the Stewart hearings as both artist and interested observer. "It started with my total empathy for Martha," Wilcox explains. "Martha had become an icon for women and gay men. Of course, the person who occupies this place in culture has to be taken down." In federal court, Wilcox had to follow the same restrictions that the media faced, bringing a sketch pad and pencils into the trial instead of a camera. "As a filmmaker, I'm attracted to archetypes, and I've never made a courthouse drama. I wanted to do a real potboiler." What Wilcox found was a roster of characters in perhaps the biggest drama to unfold in New York City in 2004—characters that, as he puts it, wanted to "conform to the conventions of the courtroom drama though the roles felt slightly inappropriate to all of them."

Intriguingly, the drama that presented itself had subverted traditional casting: Stewart as the cold "male" capitalist, Faneuil enlisted to play the naive, attractive whistleblower, a typically feminine role. "The subcurrents were so hidden and interesting and weird," Wilcox remembers. In preparation for a film he has yet to make, Wilcox initially went about sketching the characters using the court-art style but with a pointed difference: "I wanted to use the conventions to tell stories I wish had played out. I wanted to add more heroics and beauty. I was going to draw Faneuil as he appeared modeling on the cover of the *New York Post*. I was going to draw the judge rising up and throwing out the charges as baseless. In the end, I liked the court artist's drawings better. Truth is stranger than fiction. I didn't

need to transform it at all." Wilcox also points out a distinction between court art and its pop-culture variant—cartoon drawings of Stewart decorating cells or baking cookies in prison. "There is something weird about a drawing style that constitutes a voice of authority, standing in for reality," Wilcox observes, "while another style is reserved for the



realm of the farcical. Somehow pastels are truth, and black-and-white lines are not."

New York-based artist Brian DeGraw manipulated court-art conventions in a series of drawings completed last year. While his palette was far from the "truth-telling" pastels typical of court art (he used lead pencil on white paper), he shared much with its process. DeGraw took as his prime subject then-eighteen-year-old sniper suspect Lee Boyd Malvo, on trial for one of ten murders that had terrorized the eastern seaboard in 2002. DeGraw's single source was a close-up photo of the detained defendant looking straight ahead while en route to the courthouse, an image that proliferated on the news as one of the two human faces behind the rampage. Long before Malvo appeared to plead not guilty by reason of insanity, his cold expression had been identified with guilt, with evil, with all that was wrong with detached American youth.

Like professional court artists, DeGraw drew the assailant over and over, each time on a fresh sheet of paper, until he eventually accumulated more than sixty sniper drawings. In his obsessive sketching of a single subject, DeGraw began to feel "super sympathetic to him. By the end of those drawings, I felt I really knew him." Each drawing in the series captures the same impassive stare recorded by court-art studies. But where the original photograph allows a coldness

and calculation to leak into Malvo's expression, DeGraw's intensely shaded portraits pointedly fail to assign an expected sentiment or deliver a definitive reading. While mainstream media used images of Malvo to portray him as a cold-blooded killer, DeGraw's Malvos blur easy analysis. (In a poignant irony, Malvo's own jailhouse sketches, filled with references to *The Matrix* and accusations of media mind control, were used as evidence of his insanity by the defense.)

Over time, DeGraw methodically began to morph the sniper figure, sometimes drawing two faces on one plane, further undermining legibility. He blended features until, like two kings merging on the central axis of a playing card, the Malvo portraits could be read both upside down and right side up. Eventually, DeGraw even used this optical ploy to add the half-formed face of Osama bin Laden, compressing the very environment of American "terror" that these two loathed and loaded figures collectively embody. Psychologically, repetition works to create a sense of control, the ability to grasp an element more firmly each time—in a sense "to own" the image. For the media, repetition makes the dramatic story lines more concrete; that is, easier to follow on successive news days. DeGraw's series induces the opposite effect. The pencil drawings resist all of the preconceived judgments of Malvo until invectives like "guilt," "evil," and "violent black youth" no longer apply. The subject's eyes maintain their detailed, defiant look and, even as Malvo's identity shifts wildly around them, they are uncomfortably human.



"An artist knows what the television wants," Cornell says. "I try to show the whole picture, to crystallize the real human drama." Courtroom sketches, in their very acknowledgment of a human hand weighing psychology and hard evidence, prevent the sensationalized over-readings that footage of suspects remanded into custody does not. In a bizarre development, E! Entertainment is using a different artistic medium in its coverage of the camera-banned Michael Jackson trial. The cable network is telecasting daily reenactments of the proceedings,

using actors who resemble the major players. Though broadcast networks will always try new ways of delivering a spectacle to the public, one thing unlikely to change is the unique relationship between the court artists and their unwilling sitters. As Shirley Shepard reminds us: "People always tell us to get their good side. . . . The answer is, you don't have one." □

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Top, left: T. J. Wilcox, *Martha Stewart's long-time personal assistant Ann Armstrong broke down in tears while describing the plum pudding Stewart had sent her for Christmas. When she was unable to regain her composure court was adjourned, 2004*, pastel on paper, 15½ x 19¾". Right: Christine Cornell, *Testimony of Ann Armstrong in US v. Martha Stewart and Peter Bocanovic (detail), 2004*, charcoal and pastel on paper, 19 x 26". Bottom: Brian DeGraw, *Untitled, 2004*, pencil on paper, 14 x 12". From the series "John Lee Malvo," 2004.