FORT GANSEVOORT

Film : Interview

December 14, 2015

Jason Harvey & Josh Safdie

"I draw bad guys for a living."

Jason Harvey. Installation view of *Fantasy Composites*. All images courtesy of Fort Gansevoort.

Thanks to the undercover work of Josh Safdie—one of our most trusted civilian independent filmmakers—and Jason Harvey—a stalwart of the NYPD's Forensic Investigation Division—so-called criminal minds can seriously collide. Josh, with his brother Ben, co-directed the must-be-seen *Heaven Knows What* (2014), a deliriously existential vision of lost NYC youth. And Jason Harvey is, of course, a police officer. He's also a visionary of a different stripe. His first solo gallery show, co-curated by Safdie and Adam Shopkorn, is up through January 10, 2016 at Fort Gansevoort. Shopkorn, as it happens, collaborated on the Safdie's 2013 film, *Lenny Cooke*. So it's either all in the family—or just circumstantial evidence.

— Chris Chang

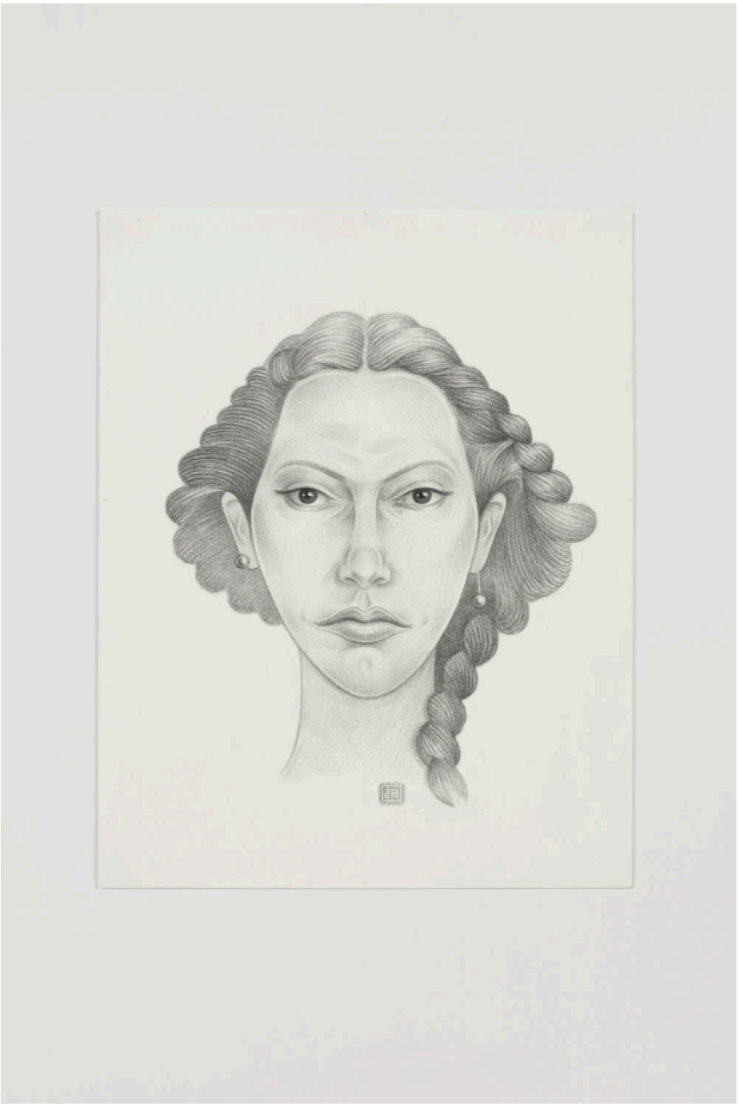
Josh Safdie You've seen a bit of my work and, as you know, when I start researching a subject I tend to put really strange, really long tentacles out to try to catch whatever I can. For example: I've always been into police activity. In the last two-or-so years I've been *heavily* into police activity. I started following certain Twitter handles, and any police agency that releases police sketches. There's one called, I think, "New York City Alerts," and they release your sketches. There was one in particular: the rotund, black man with the big scar down his cheek… with the hat?

Jason Harvey Yes. That's mine.

JS That was the image that introduced me to your work—and from that point on I was obsessed. I tried to get in touch with you a bunch of times. I wanted to do a documentary or a feature film about you. I had all these ideas. You were already a legend in my mind.

JH (*laughter*)

JS How did it feel when I finally got in touch? Have you ever looked at your work as anything more than that—just work?



Sketch #16, 2015, graphite on paper, 11 x 14 inches, 13 1/2 x 16 1/2 inches framed.

JH I never think of an audience. I think of it as my job. The fact that other people are going to see it now is very cool. I never considered that as a possibility. When you contacted me it was great to hear that other people were looking.

JS You don't think about your work as having an audience, but its probably some of the most looked at art in the NYC area. Everybody I know who walks by a police sketch or a wanted poster—we are like flies to shit—we have to go toward it. We need to know what the person did—what crime was committed. And the fact that it's a drawing lends it a dreamlike quality. This is somebody—a criminal—that has been imagined by an artist—based on eyewitness testimony. It's a very powerful utilitarian art. Purposeful. Which is, a lot of the time, the very best type of art. I'm very curious. I can't imagine building a face out of a word. How does the process begin?

JH A caseworker will make an appointment, and they'll bring a witness or victim down. Then we start with an interview. We try to keep things open-ended. The witness starts to describe the person's face. We listen. We don't ask a lot of questions or create information that isn't there. But we do need to draw a face. So at some point we do start to ask a few questions—open-ended—because we don't want to lock the witness down into anything. After that, we work with photographs that deal with recall memory. Features: eyes, ears, noses, mouths—anything that reminds them of the person.

JS Where do the photos come from?

JH They're what we have in our office, mug shots, broken down by gender, age, and race. The witness looks for things that remind them of the person, and then we put it together, create a drawing, and then we show the witness the image. From there we move things around and say, "the eyes are bigger" or "the nose is smaller" and "this looks good and that looks wrong." We push the image forward together.

JS Crazy. It's a collaborative process with the memory of the person who witnessed.

JH We develop an image from their memory.

JS What's the timeframe? How long does it usually take to do a sketch?

JH The first session takes about three hours. We deliberately set it up within that timeframe. A lot of our victims are sexual assaults so, by the time they get to our office, they are already in their twelfth hour.

JS Oh god…

JH Memory is only good for a certain amount of time. After a while it starts to get muddled.

JS Yes.

JH And that's not good, so…

JS What about that crazy case, the one Detective Dorto told me about—from the late '90s or early 2000? It was a murder on the Lower East Side. You guys went down to Texas to talk to a witness, a long time after the fact, to do a sketch… What was that like?

JH In that case, there was a prior sketch done, but the witness was never happy with it. There were other difficulties that I can't really talk about. Dorto, with his cold case, decided to reopen it. He wanted another sketch. He kept talking to the Texas witness who told him, "Listen, I can still remember that guy's face."

JS Wow.

JH In general, we need to do the sketch as quickly as possible.

JS Of course…

JH The fresher the better—but in some instances some faces are so ingrained—especially in a case where someone is shot right in front of you. That's an image that can still be there after any amount of time.

JS I know faces like that. There are people who haunt my childhood…

JH (*laughter*)

JS They're two guys in particular. Benny [Josh's brother] and I call one of them "The Archer." He was an alcoholic who haunted Queens Boulevard. And then there was "The Man with the Cart." He was a dreadlocked guy who always had thousands of dollars of cash on him. He was always counting it openly at Walgreens.

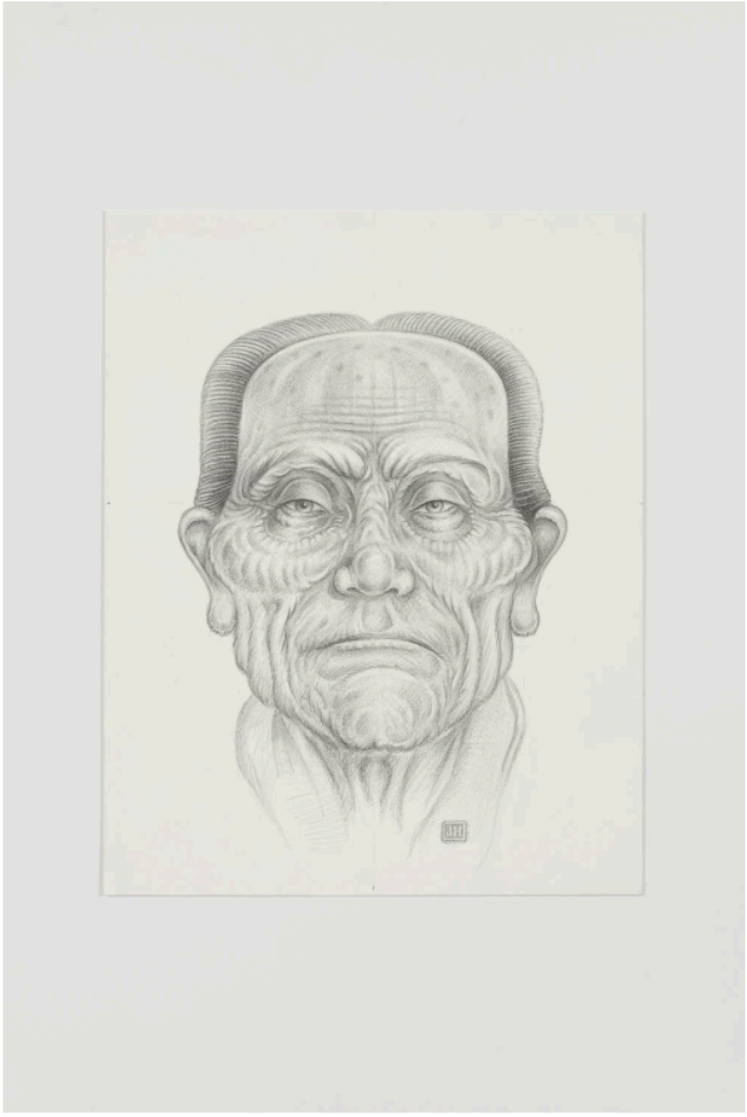
(pause)

When I first discovered Stallone in *Rocky*, as a little kid, he spoke loudly to me. I think it's about the fact that I'm always drawn to the underdog. My problem is that I'm too forgiving a person—I always want to understand peoples' perspectives. I've always been inherently attracted to, in a curious way, the life of the marginalized. A criminal, or a perp—as the NYPD would say. I'm not sure how to say this: There's no such thing as time in a lot of these lives. They're living day-to-day doing what they can. I sense in all my friendships, and research, that there's a certain type of guy, a certain type of scumbag, but there's a certain beauty, almost, to him.

JH Yes.

JS A throughline. In the sketches in your show I think you see that, too. You definitely understand it. In the mug shots that you see—it's as if all these people are cut from a larger cloth. Right? Do you feel that there's a definite type? Not something necessarily physical—but more like a vibe?

JH Certain people will definitely gravitate toward certain crimes. But I'm not sure how much that relates to facial features. For instance, we do know, in the NYPD, that burglaries and sexual offenses often go hand in hand. There's something about that connection and the nature to the crimes. The sneakiness committed by people who often want to be caught. It does attract a certain type of person.



Sketch #13, 2015, graphite on paper, 11 x 14 inches, 13 1/2 x 16 1/2 inches framed.

JS I don't think it's an actual physical trait that they all share. It's a vibe that I relate to. I was picked on as a kid for not looking like everybody else. When you're individualized, when you have an inherent quality that is, let's say, somewhat off, you tend to become marginalized. It also happens from a subconscious way from an early age—and then it brews and brews—and it manifests in certain people in certain ways. Some turn to crime. They are outsiders to begin with—with an outsider vibe. I see this in your working sketches—your real sketches. I see it also in your "fantasy comps" as well. They all tell a story. In a lot of police sketches—there is no art at all to them. They are almost a joke. There are a lot of memes that play on that joke. But your work has a lived-in quality. When you see it, you really feel as if you're seeing these people. It's not *photo-realistic* but *realistic* in the sense of *realism*. Not *actuality*—the images have a narrative quality. You look at them and immediately ask: What did they do? Even in the "fantasy comps." You look at them, catch the vibe, construct the narrative.

When you go home at night, where do all the leftover descriptions end up in your head? All those people—some are imaginary, and some, some of the real ones, do not get caught. But when they do! You must have the satisfaction: Oh! They actually do look like this! But the ones that don't get caught—where do those people go?

JH That's interesting. I always see them through my own eyes—and my work has always had a dark edge. I don't know, per se, where that edge comes from. But I know I have the right skills. I draw bad guys for a living.

JS Yes. That's good!

JH I still don't know where it comes from. What I'm trying to do is catch a person's character—so that they can be identified. I have a fine arts background. But my work is probably more involved than most police sketches. I'm not sure where the darkness comes from.

JS It's as if that there's a door closed in most peoples' brains. But you can open yours up and access it—and then draw and work and express yourself.

I'm curious, when you saw my film, *Heaven Knows What*, did you feel as if you recognized those types of faces? As if any of them could be described to you on a Monday morning?

Film still from *Heaven Knows What* (2014), directed by Benny and Josh Safdie.

JH Your faces are amazing. The characters are also great. It's a very powerful movie. It stuck with me for days. It's still with me. That's the test of good art. It makes me wonder about you and how inquisitive you must be. I have an understanding of that world, because I worked in Harlem for five years, I'm really familiar with that type of lifestyle. How did you get in touch with it?

JS First, let me ask, what did you do in Harlem? Working at the 125th precinct?

JH The 32nd.

JS You were a beat cop?

JH I did everything. Everything.

JS Undercover?

JH We did wear plainclothes, yes.

JS If I saw you on the street I wouldn't think that you're the type of guy looking to cop some drugs. Definitely not!

JH (*laughter*) Harlem is a unique community. If I walked down the street today everyone would know… everything… everybody.

JS When my car was stolen [in Harlem] I decided to do my own investigation. I looked up my plates on the web and found out my car was getting tickets on 137th street. I didn't understand why. Why don't the boroughs or departments overlap? Why didn't Traffic know that my car was stolen?

JH (*laughter*)

JS So I called the precinct. I said, "My car is on 137th street. Please send a squad car over, and tell me if it's there. It's a burgundy Volvo." They said, "Listen, we don't have all day or all the time in the world to check on a stupid stolen vehicle." Two weeks later, I checked, and saw that my car was still getting tickets! I called the cops. They were so annoyed at me, I went to look by myself. After ten minutes walking around the neighborhood I found my car. Someone was living in it. There was tons of stuff inside.

JH I was going to guess that… *(laughter)*

JS The back seat was a living room, the front, an office. I kept a journal in front—which the thief used! He wrote at least five entries; about losing his son, about how his wife was going to get what's coming to her, etc. His name was Curtis. His son was Curtis Jr. I remember sitting in the car, and I remember telling the cops: "I found my car!" They were so angry at me, it was embarrassing. They wouldn't look for it; I found it myself; so they came by; and it was this whole ordeal. I couldn't move the car because they had to process it. So, while I'm waiting, I'm 90% sure the guy who was living in my car, Curtis, kept walking back and forth past us. I'm thinking, I actually feel bad for him, so I ask the cops, "Can I leave all of the stuff on the sidewalk for him?" They were like, "NO, this is all evidence, and you can't touch any of it." And I said, "Evidence? Are you really going to pursue this and catch the person who stole the car?" And they said, "If we turn around, you can do whatever you want." So I remember going back to the scene with all of the stuff, and walking past where I saw Curtis standing, and I said, "I don't know if you took the car, but I put all your stuff right over there."

That's just my way, Jason. I have a heart like that. I couldn't be angry with Curtis. I didn't care —in the end I got the story.

When I got involved in *Heaven Knows What*, I met the girl who would star in our film, who I thought was *totally* not in that world. I thought she worked in the Diamond District. She dressed nicely—I was attracted to her energy and her look—and then we became very good friends. And then her stories turned out to be just so insane. That's what I do; I just get deep within it. That's the sort of thing I think is a testament to you—and all the crazy shit you hear all the time—the stuff that's still stuck in your brain. Like Illiah, the character in my film. He could be described to you, while you work, as a real-life burglary case.

JH The characters in your films are like the people that a witness would describe to me. The people I draw.

Sketch #17, 2015, graphite on paper, 11 x 14 inches, 13 1/2 x 16 1/2 inches framed.

JS Exactly.

JH When I saw your film, I really felt like I was hanging out with the characters.

JS I hope I can convince you to have a small part in the next film that we're making.

JH I'd love to.

JS It's a cool role that we would collaborate on. With of course some concepts of sketching.

JH I'm up for anything.

JS One last question. In this day and age, with CCTV so prevalent, and the fact that everyone has a camera, the concept of an eyewitness has become rarer and rarer—but actually more important. Are you seeing a difference in the amount of times you are called in to do a sketch? Versus, for instance, ten years ago?

JH Absolutely. When I first joined the unit the original volume of work has been cut back significantly. There's video everywhere. Video is a *harder* form of evidence than a sketch—obviously. But there are other things that we do—post-mortem reconstruction—age progression—a whole slew of work.

JS Post-mortem?

JH Skull reconstructions... working with forensic anthropologists.

JS Why would that have to be done?

JH A forensic anthropologist will respond to a crime scene with human remains. Maybe they're not getting anything back in terms of DNA—or anything like that—so they'll call me in and say, "Jason, we want you to do a reconstruction with a skull we just found." The anthropologist has a three-dimensional printer. I take a look at the actual skull. Then he prints it out for me. I do the reconstruction, give it back, and then he'll try to identify the person. A lot of human remains in the city are found in trash bags or suitcases. Unidentified.

JS A lot?

JH Frequently. Not every day. Once-in-a while.

JS I once saw a body floating in a river. But that's a whole body—which is much more identifiable.

So, like next Tuesday, you could have a skull on your desk.

JH Yes. That happens. But our bread and butter is still the composite drawings. It's still the most effective thing that we do. What people need to know is that sketches do work. We don't really keep track of efficiency ratings. But, if you give me a witness that actually saw the person, and got a good look, and if they can give me anything unique about the face—yeah—we have a very high success rate.

JS Oddly, and morbidly, I can't wait to see more of your work—and, of course, your personal artwork. And I can't wait to collaborate as well.

JH Same here.

Josh Safdie is an independent filmmaker based in New York.