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HYPERALLERGIC

An NYPD Sketch Artist Gets a Gallery Show

Carey Dunne – December 7, 2015



Jason Harvey, *Sketch #17*, Graphite on paper (2015)
(all images courtesy Fort Gansevoort Gallery)

If you live in New York City, you've probably seen Detective Jason Harvey's detailed graphite sketches, whether or not you know it. They're featured on "wanted" posters hung all over the five boroughs. For 10 years, Harvey has worked as one of the NYPD's three forensic sketch artists.

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“When I’m interviewing an eyewitness and drawing from their memory, I have to strictly adhere to what they’re telling me about the person’s face,” Harvey tells Hyperallergic. “It’s not creative at all.”

Still, when Adam Shopkorn, owner of Manhattan’s [Fort Gansevoort Gallery](#), came across Harvey’s work on the [NYCAAlerts Twitter](#), he saw real artistry in it, and wanted to put it on display. But the NYPD wouldn’t consent to showing precinct sketches, which count as evidence, in a gallery setting. So instead, Harvey created a series of what he calls “Fantasy Composites” — portraits of imaginary characters drawn in his detailed graphite forensic style. These sketches of bizarre dreamt-up criminals are now on view at Fort Gansevoort Gallery. They highlight the impeccable technique that goes into creating a portrait of person you’ve never seen based on descriptions from a witness’s memory.



Jason Harvey, *Sketch #2*, Graphite on paper (2015)

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“With these fantasy drawings, I could be creative and make interesting characters,” Harvey says. “Some are based on people I know; some are based on imaginary characters I draw in my sketchbook. The process and materials for making them are the same as for precinct drawings, but they’re not tied to any real stories of crimes.” If you tried, though, you could probably find plenty of real people in the city who fit the description of these fantasy criminals. There’s a toady-faced woman in hair curlers; a scowling, bespectacled man with a soul patch and a dragon neck tattoo; a pale, gaunt woman with a brown bun and a birthmark on her jutting cheekbone.

Originally from Miami, Harvey attended Ringling College of Art & Design in Sarasota, Florida. After graduating, he worked odd jobs in New York City, then became a cop in Harlem’s 32nd precinct. In his off hours, he always maintained his personal art practice. When he learned that the NYPD did their sketches in house and had an opening, he applied immediately. After an extensive process of interviewing and training, he landed one of three coveted spots.



Jason Harvey, *Sketch #24*, Graphite on Paper, (2015)

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The process of creating a composite illustration relies on a witness's descriptions of the suspect. At the precinct, the detective asks the witness simple, open-ended questions about the suspect's face, avoiding leading questions. Then, they have the witness look at photographs of people and pick out features that remind them of the suspect's. After drawing a composite illustration based on these descriptions, the sketch artist asks the witness to make adjustments as they see fit. "They'll say, 'oh, the eyes are bigger, the nose is wider, the lips are thinner, the shape of the head is wrong,'" Harvey explains. "We'll make those adjustments to get it as close as we possibly can."



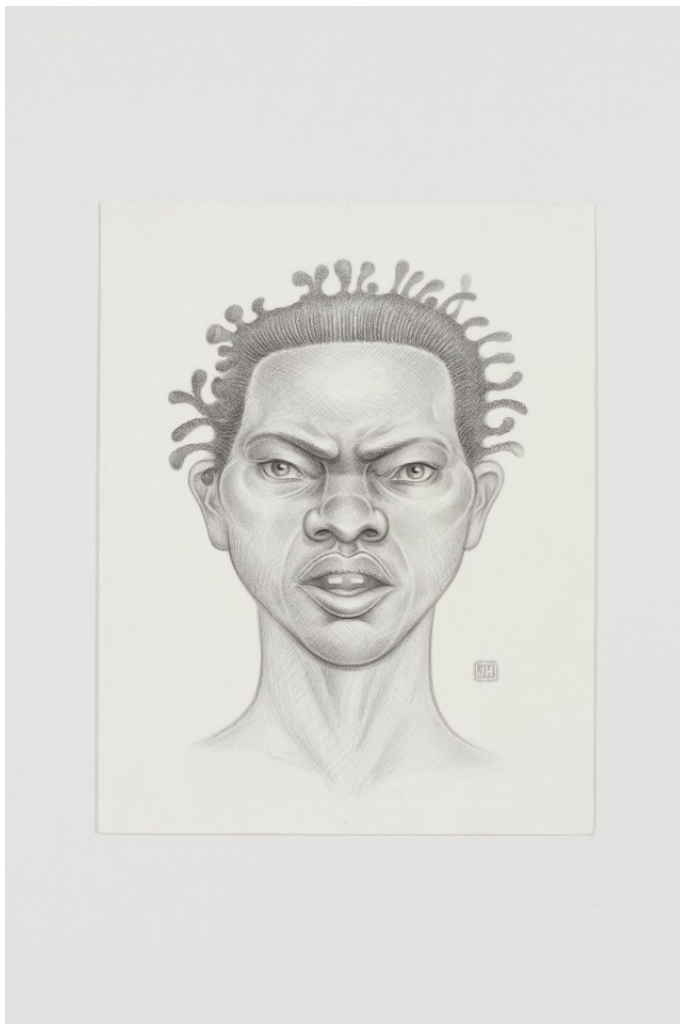
A Sketch for the NYPD by Jason Harvey of a Suspect in a 2015 hate crime in Williamsburg (image via NYPD)

In the past few decades, the facial composite creation method has been updated for the digital age — there are now computer programs for creating these images, including SketchCop FACETTE Face Design System Software, "Identi-Kit 2000," FACES, E-FIT, and PortraitPad. But in the US, the FBI prefers to stick to hand-drawing, maintaining that it's more accurate. Police departments that don't have competent sketch artists on hand will use software instead.

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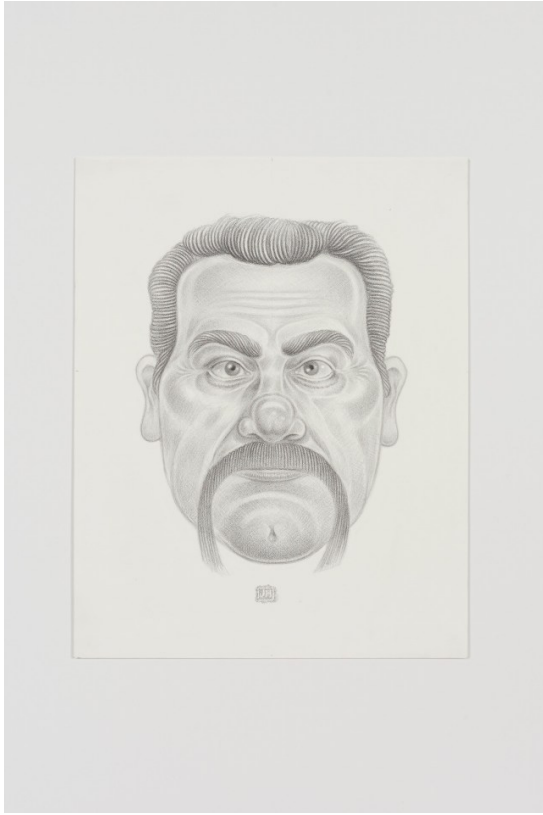
In the past ten years, Harvey has seen his drawings help solve quite a few cases. In 2014, a sketch Harvey made helped identify Daniel St. Hubert as the suspect in a stabbing attack of two young children in an East New York elevator that left one of them dead.

“Sometimes they’ll bring back a photo of the guy and we’ll put it side by side with the composite and I’ll see that the likeness is very close,” Harvey says. “It’s always good to see that it’s been successful. You’re never sure when you’re doing it, because memory’s not perfect.”



Jason Harvey, Sketch #7, graphite on paper (2015)

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Jason Harvey, Sketch #26, graphite on paper (2015)



"Fantasy Composites" at Fort Gansevoort Gallery

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