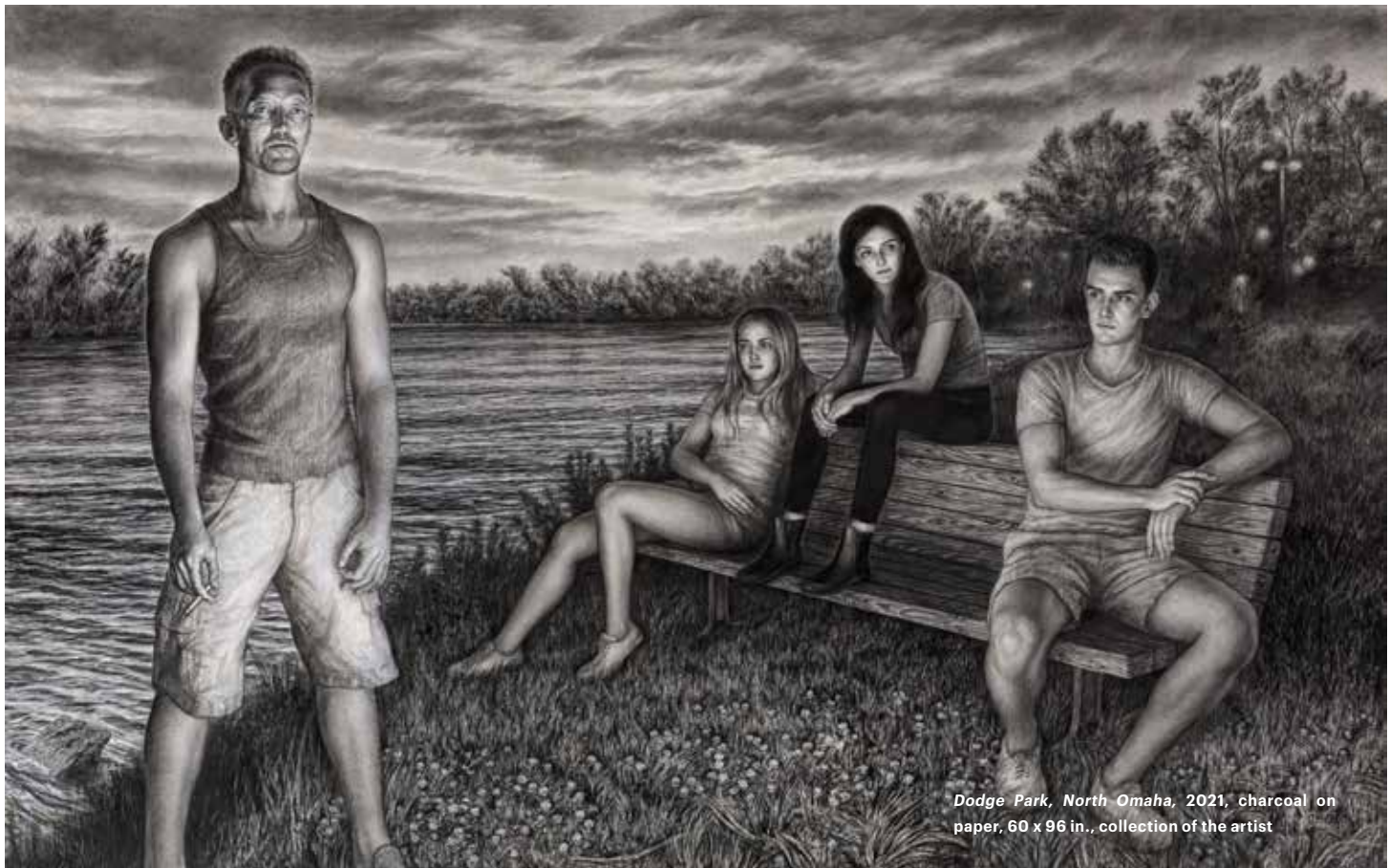




TODAY'S
MASTERS

ENDURING DARKNESS EDGAR JERINS'S LIFE IN CHARCOAL



Dodge Park, North Omaha, 2021, charcoal on paper, 60 x 96 in., collection of the artist

A new book about Edgar Jerins (b. 1958) titled *Life in Charcoal* has three goals. It collects the major works of two decades of Jerins's practice as an important realist artist, it provides a searing memoir explaining the intense darkness of his imagery, and it is a memorial to his Job-like endurance. "I had total control of the book," Jerins explains. "I wanted it to be

different from an art book that you open up and it's just about the work." Recognizing the importance of Jerins's art, Robert Cozzolino, curator at the Minneapolis Institute of Art, has written the book's foreword and helped acquire a major drawing for his museum's permanent collection.

Jerins has achieved his goal. This book is not for the faint-hearted. It is not a book of pretty pictures, although readers will immediately



appreciate Jerins's exceptional skill. It is not a book of romantic or superficial pleasure, though readers will doubtlessly be touched by his fearlessly honest self-exposure and love for his erased family. *Life in Charcoal* is an unforgettably potent and extraordinary record of some of the wrecked and abandoned lives left scattered like jetsam in the wake of the American Dream, an epic of drugs and death drawn with personal insight and clarity.

DECADES OF HEARTBREAK

This is a record of multi-generational tragedy, beginning with his parents' childhood in Soviet-occupied Latvia under conditions of political

Christmas Day, Yutan, Nebraska, 2004, charcoal on paper, 60 x 103 in., collection of the artist

persecution, mass deportations, and oppression so appalling that when the Nazis forced Stalin's stooges out, the German occupation was seen as an improvement — despite the slaughter of Jews, gypsies, and other ethnicities. After the Nazi defeat, many Latvians fled from the Soviet reconquest, and for several years survived in Red Cross camps for displaced people in the ruins of post-war Germany. Jerins's mother, Rita, painted the camps with the eyes of a child, and some of her pictures are featured in the book. Sponsored by a generous Lutheran family inspired by Christian charity, her family immigrated in 1950 to the idyllic opportunities of Lincoln, Nebraska.

Jerins's father, Gunars, had a harsher opening act to the drama of his American Dream, which only became possible after a year of servitude as a cotton-picker to pay off the cost of his immigration. Ultimately he found work as an accountant in the suburban landscape of 1950s Omaha. He met and married Rita in 1952, and within eight years, four boys were born into the promise of the New World.

But the family's dream became a nightmare as the demonic horrors of addiction, schizophrenia, and self-destruction



Francie in Her Father's Bedroom, 2006, charcoal on paper, 60 x 96 in., collection of the artist



Anita's Afternoon, 2017, charcoal on paper, 60 x 96 in., collection of the artist

possessed and destroyed them. Two of Jerins's three brothers shot themselves to death in the haze and misery of auditory and visual hallucinations and medications that incapacitated them from productive lives. The third, once a handsome and prosperous man, became a homeless alcoholic and addict living on the streets, eroded by beatings and abuse. He died wretchedly after his leg was smashed in a fall outside a hospital.

Jerins drew them all, remembering them so he could tell his own story of enduring the darkness of these deaths. He drew his tormented friends and family members as they were oppressed by the personal and pervasive horrors that can haunt the Midwest. The shocking stories he tells in his huge pictures are not cheerful tales of intrepid success and

glory in the face of overwhelming odds, but astonishing revelations of suffering and stoicism. "I know what I want out of my work," he says. "To tell these narratives of the difficult side of life, the harder things people are going through... I was able to tell my story by telling other people's stories. It's once removed, but it's universal."

Using charcoal (appropriately born of purifying fire) to create impressive images of generations erased by relentless tragedy, he has created a powerful record of life in the forgotten country of the flyover states, especially Nebraska and Kansas. Jerins's drawings are superb, and his bleak and searing images deserve to be engraved onto the collective memory of our times. Nevertheless, there is little redemption here — the deep tones of endurance are the only uplifting notes in the melancholy requiem of his people's lives.

Although his drawings focus on the everyday suffering of working-class Americans like his brothers, Jerins avoids the self-righteous sanctimony of social realists exploiting the



Anita and David Visiting Daina, 2010, charcoal on paper, 56 x 96 in., Minneapolis Institute of Art



Daina and Doyle at Home with Anita's Children, 2007, charcoal on paper, 60 x 96 in..
collection of Kathy and Mark LeBaron

misery of the proletariat as a means of promoting their political cause. He is pragmatic about the litany of catastrophe, and sympathetic to sorrow. His portraits of American life are intensely personal records of individuals caught in a web of circumstances conspiring to destroy them. “No one’s going to have identical tragedies, but a lot of people have some of that,” he says. “Most families have alcoholics and drug addicts somewhere. Most families have mental illness. And a fair amount of families have suicides. I happen to have had a trifecta of it.”

Aware of the dangers of exploiting the tragedies of others, he avoids the temptation to draw the actual moments of drug and alcohol abuse, being more interested in people failing to live with the consequences of their choices than the tools of their destruction. Such tools are present — abundant guns, booze, and cigarettes are the props handled by his subjects — but their stories of resignation and fatalism present themselves in their faces, not in their actions.

Jerins is a master of flawlessly balanced compositions of value, using lights positioned on the floor to create a sinister mood of up-lit doom looming in the cast shadows and inverted values shaping his models. His first sketches are made in the crumbly grays of burned willow; then, after he is satisfied with his drawing’s accuracy, he contours the dark light of life in the rich, velvet blacks and deep caverns of pressed charcoal, forming faces in the contrasts of horror.

Preternaturally gifted, he refined his skill at the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts — enrolling only five months after his eldest brother Ron’s suicide. At the academy, Jerins became a virtuoso draftsman and portraitist. With his friend John Thornton, he lived the life of a starving artist. Thornton remembers Jerins working as if he were a professional artist while he was a student, already understanding the

importance of using the best quality materials, as well as the dedication necessary to become a master of his media. For three years the two men painted every day, all day.

TROUBLED PLACES

The people populating Jerins’s drawings are waiting for disaster to arrive, for the tsunamis of catastrophe to sweep them into oblivion. It is a sublime wave of gradually building tension, mounting as the pages turn, as the reader learns more of the complex tragedy. Jerins knows the feelings his subjects are experiencing. The drawing titled *Dodge Park*, on the book’s cover, is set on the bank of a river in an anonymous park in North Omaha. Jerins’s cousin Shane modeled as the man at left during a short period of sobriety, briefly rescued from a life wrecked by drugs and alcohol. Jerins chose this location because it was where he and his brothers once spent their time fishing. But it’s also where his brother Alex first heard voices telling him to kill his girlfriend. Alex killed himself instead in the Jerins family home, two days before the anniversary of the suicide of his older brother in the bedroom opposite.

Guns recur frequently as tragic symbols in the eclipsed light of Jerins’s work. Although he is restrained, never going for the obvious opportunities of illustrative imagery of the graphic moments of suicide and violence, the context of his story ensures that the weapons always appear as harbingers of doom. This symbolism is most evident in *Christmas Day*, *Yutan*, *Nebraska*, where two boys play soldiers with gift replica firearms in a re-enactment of shooting, prefiguring the destinies of Jerins’s brothers. Their father stands grimly at the door, the embodiment of resignation.

Middle-aged failure is a recurring theme. It is a theme of people whose lives seem meaningless, but Jerins is keen to explain that these are real lives of heartbreak and pathos, as timeless as any Shakespearean tragedy. “I love people,” he says, in a light and open voice that belies the harsh experiences of his own life and the shipwrecked souls he chooses as his subjects. “All my life I’ve been a portraitist... I’m endlessly



Edgar Jerins's large drawings on view at Omaha's Gallery 1516 earlier this year

fascinated by people and their stories, and these stories are your average people.”

Francie in Her Father's Bedroom freezes a moment with a man and a girl set in a dark, airless basement. She stares at him with apprehension as he gazes into the vacant space between the atoms of reality like a creature of the walking dead. Jerins describes the event. “It’s a father and a daughter. He’s a functioning alcoholic. Pat was damaged. He’d been in prison for dealing meth, too, this damaged guy, a real nice guy. If you met him, you’d like him. I wanted Francie looking at him, thinking, ‘I don’t want his life, I hope I don’t have his life.’ Her mom was a crystal meth addict who didn’t have much to do with her daughter. I try to tell the story of that broken father. But he went to work every day, you know, and he was the parent... and he’s doing his best to raise his daughter.”

Like other venues in Jerins’s tragic charcoal world, that underground room is also the scene of personal meaning. It was once his alcoholic brother Tom’s temporary home. “He was there at the time when I started that drawing,” explains Jerins. “He was living in the basement. Pat’s mom would take in these broken men, and my brother was living there for a while until he drank himself out of the house. I don’t know if he put his fist through the wall. He went over to my mom’s house, four blocks away, and my mom said, ‘Well, what can I do?’ She called the hospital, and he went in with alcohol poisoning.”

Jerins’s nights were frequently interrupted by calls about Tom, who had wrecked another car, had the bones of his once handsome face smashed by thugs, wound up in an emergency room after drinking boiling water. Unable to help his brother in his internal battle with self-destruction, Jerins bore witness to his long struggle through his drawings.

Jerins’s first cousin Anita is another favorite subject. In *Anita’s Afternoon*, she appears sprawled akimbo and self-abandoned, as if washed up by an opiated high tide onto a wrinkled couch, her vacant face staring at the ceiling in a fog. We also see her sitting on a table on the porch in *Anita and David Visiting Daina*, sharing the smoke of her cigarette with a calico companion, feral and forlorn.

Anita died last summer. “They didn’t find her for a month,” Jerins tells me. “They don’t know if it was a drug overdose, or suicide, or just her health, because of the time element. She struggled with mental illness, and she had three kids, and the kids were taken away from her. She married another alcoholic. Anita was probably more drugs than

alcohol. The kids were in and out of foster care — absolutely horrible childhoods.”

These drawings are memorials to the forgotten. Even the children are victims of the dark curse, as we can see in *Daina & Doyle at Home with Anita’s Children*. Jerins continues, “When I go into these drawings, they’re pretty rough. The youngest girl looking out in the image killed herself at 11. She hanged herself.”

THE ONE WHO GOT AWAY

Jerins has dodged the bullets of addiction and self-destruction. He says he is most like his mother, whose story opens the book. Like her, he is a survivor. “It overwhelmed me, of course,” he says. “They’re all dead... Back when I was drinking, I’d just sit on the porch drinking boxed wine and smoking Marlboros... I grew up with them... It’s not like I have to reach far to find this.” Jerins survived the misery thanks to old friends like Thornton, who helped him talk through the biblical scale of the Job-like tragedy that cursed his family. He quit drinking and found pleasure in not suffering daily hangovers: “I got married, I had kids, and I didn’t let it take me down.”

Jerins says that people who see his drawings are often moved, and he takes pleasure in their interpreting and understanding the narratives and constructing their own stories about the imagery. For an instant, Jerins’s voice briefly cracks from his good-natured, humble tone: “It was a relief when Tom died. It was so tortured. It was so horrible. Then it was just me and my Mom, and that was good. I was there for her all the way through to the end... It was a reprieve.” Jerins’s mother passed away after seven good years.

Faithful Job believed God gave life, and it was his to take away — naked born, naked to die. Jerins has been stripped by the experience of what has happened. Bared by it, he simply says, “I like the clarity I have now.” ●

Information: Edgar Jerins: *Life in Charcoal* (Goff Books, 2023, 116 pages) is available through Amazon and select bookstores in the U.S. and U.K.

MICHAEL J. PEARCE, PHD is the author of *Kitsch, Propaganda, and the American Avant-Garde* (Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2023), and professor of art at California Lutheran University.