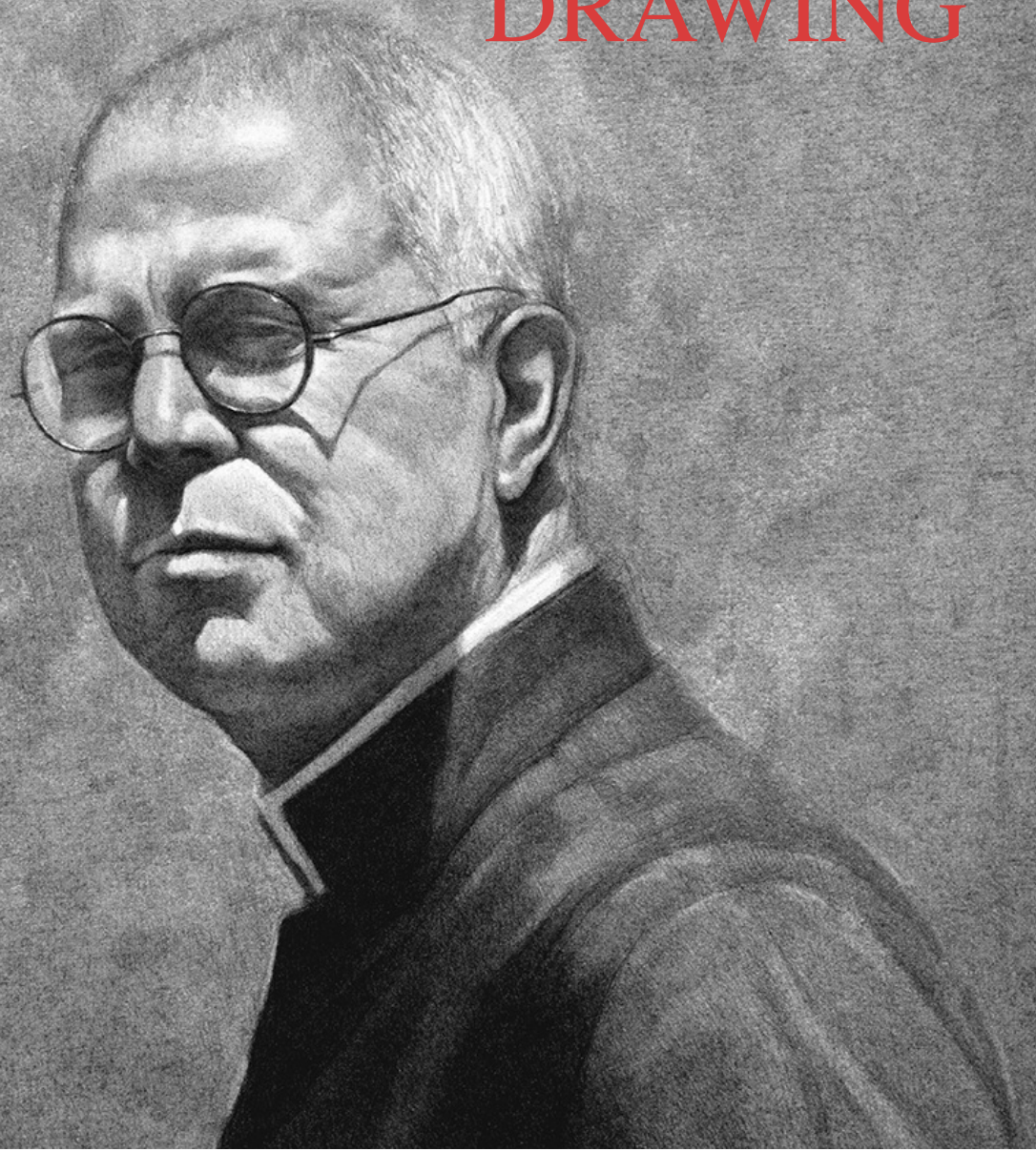


MICHAEL THOMPSON

DRAWING





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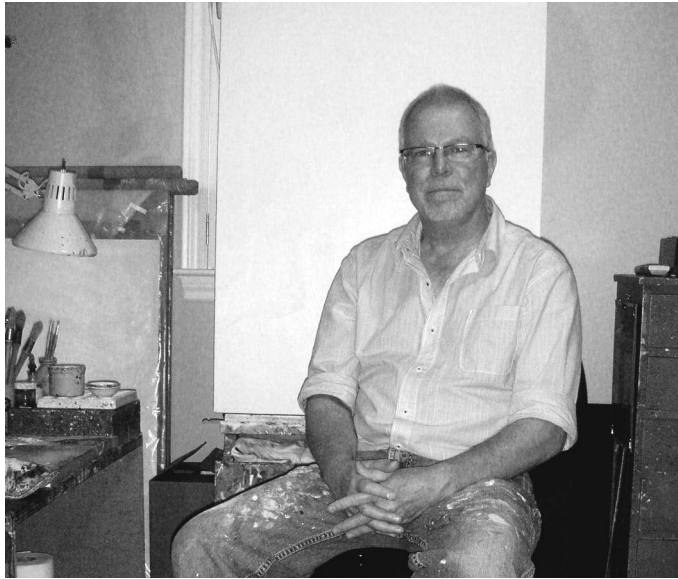
Cover image: **Priest (Autoportrait)** detail 2014 pencil on paper 14 x 11 inches

# MICHAEL THOMPSON

## *DRAWING*

Essay by Tom Smart

October 17 - November 7, 2015



**MICHAEL THOMPSON** was born in 1954 in Montreal, Quebec. He studied Fine Art at Concordia University, Montreal, graduating with a Bachelor of Fine Art in 1976, and a Graduate Degree in Fine Arts in 1978. He began exhibiting in 1978 and is now widely regarded as one of Canada's foremost realist painters.

Thompson's work has been exhibited widely in both private and public galleries in Canada and the United States including large survey exhibitions at the Art Gallery of Hamilton, the Kitchener-Waterloo Gallery and the Art Gallery of Peel.

Michael Thompson's work can be found in major public, corporate and private collections throughout North America including the Art Gallery of Nova Scotia; Art Gallery of Ontario; Beaverbrook Art Gallery, New Brunswick; Edwin A. Ulrich Museum, Wichita, Kansas; McMaster Museum of Art, Hamilton; Musée d'art contemporain de Montréal; Museum London, Ontario; Vancouver Art Gallery; Davies Ward Phillips and Vineberg; Four Seasons Hotels and Resorts; Gluskin Sheff and Associates and Scotiabank.

Michael Thompson lives and works in Oakville, Ontario and is represented exclusively by Mira Godard Gallery.

## **Michael Thompson: Drawing**

Whenever the art world is accused of diminishing the importance of technical facility as it relates to drawing, a case for the defense is usually seen in an often-surprising appearance of drawings so exquisitely crafted that they seem to have been incarnated from vapors.

This characteristic describes the work of Michael Thompson, a painter and draughtsman who uses open-ended narrative subjects to point back to a misty, enigmatic past and to buried emotions. He humanizes the modern aesthetic conversation about matter-of-factness by inserting allusiveness into the equation, all the more to call into question the reliability of memory, his and ours.

Thompson first came to notice in the mid-1970s as an artist with a parallel practice comprising lusciously textured paintings that open onto vast imaginative spaces whose depths and intervals could be sculpted in soft media. In his drawing too, Thompson created painstaking renderings of building façades, streetscapes, automobiles and languorous figures. Taken as a whole, his paintings and drawings are quietly provocative and earthy, pointing to a kind of quizzical hermeticism that masks something unknown.

Thompson quickly declared himself as an artist whose work is fundamentally anthropomorphic, even when his subject matter is not by or about the human form. Certainly his paintings and drawings involving human models underline an obvious affection for figuration. Yet, in the way he composes a sequence of windows, makes a graded tone on the grillwork of a vintage automobile, or turns a line to define the edges of a down-filled comforter, Thompson demonstrates his high qualifications as a figurative artist of another order, able to re-cast brick, metal and stone into the appearance of soft-tissues imbued with spirit, consciousness and perhaps even neuroses of their own.

If there is a cadence to the development of his work, it resembles an arc shaped by the exploration of the symbolic potential of poetic indirection, an elastic literary and artistic device holding magical qualities that can turn one thing or another into something else right before our eyes. The viewer who is most rewarded by participating in Thompson's oblique routing to meaning must be able to intuit his real content. Although free to take his subject matter at face value, there is much more than meets the eye in a Thompson composition.

This exhibition of new drawings, created over the past two years, offers some twenty pieces that, while encapsulating his familiar subjects, shows how he is developing his personal iconographic portfolio in subtle, distinct ways – and advancing it through drawing. He considers draughtsmanship a unique and media-specific way to express himself by choreographing tonal values and graphite lines to describe recognizable imagery in ways that chromatic painting does not immediately allow. As this exhibition demonstrates, Thompson refuses to consider drawings as dress rehearsals for paintings, but rather as autonomous means of personal expression.

Born in Montreal in 1954, Thompson studied Fine Art at Concordia University where he graduated in 1976 with his BFA, and in 1978 with a graduate degree in Fine Arts. An exhibiting artist since then, Thompson was quickly folded into the discussion about contemporary realisms in Canadian art, and was seen as both an acolyte and heir to a tradition then being developed by Alex Colville, Jack Chambers and Mary Pratt.

He learned much from this triumvirate. Colville's work provided him with a vocabulary that blended technical precision with uncanny, mystifying subject matter. A Thompson composition, easily read and digested, betrays a Colvillian elusiveness, never entirely surrendering clearly legible meaning, but rather setting a stage for feelings of disquiet and uneasiness radiating from the compositions.

Chambers' complex theories of perceptualism, and his mode of realism that branched out from shared roots of modern Spanish painters Antonio López-García, María Moreno and Isabel Quintanilla, informed Thompson's practical painterly and drawing methods. In particular, the Spanish creative process filtered through the realism of Chambers offered Thompson much to emulate. He mirrored his personal style on their organic method for defining recognizable imagery that seems to grow from highly textured or tonally complex grounds. This particularly suited Thompson's graphic sensibility that preferred to have graded tones define space and form more than line alone. This lent his pictures their atmosphere and sensual auras because hard contour lines rarely differentiate forms, nor delineate exact edges. The imaginative spaces behind Thompson's picture planes have ambiances that are constructed almost entirely from dense accumulations of tones and subtle lights.

From Pratt, Thompson, perhaps intuitively, developed a way to imbue the commonplace and the human figure with unsettling allusiveness. An unmade bed, a table setting, or a bowl of cut fruit, are not matter-of-fact still life renderings in a Pratt painting. Rather they can be read as complex, indirect metaphors of human relationships, of personal confrontations and of sexual politics. Thompson developed his manner in a way to load an apparently simple, direct subject – a cup of coffee, for example – with layers of meaning that point away from the subject itself. Just as Pratt expanded the potential meanings of ordinary things, so too, Thompson allowed for expansiveness in the possible readings of his imagery.

The shadows of these modern realists are discernible in Thompson's new drawings. Ostensibly the subjects can be grouped into the three categories of details of variations involving a single female model, building exteriors, and still life drawings. In several, the categories overlap with the female model sharing the stage with an exquisitely rendered still life – an automobile or couch, for example. A building's brick and glass textures, serve as armatures for studies in the effects of light reflecting off the materials or illuminating the dense air around its corner or in one of its rooms seen through an opaque pane of glass. A matter-of-fact profile portrait of a dog; a simple yet formally complex study of a cup; the indented folds on an unmade bed, all point to what is there and what is absent in the composition to the extent that Thompson is revealed as an artist whose true intentions for the most part go unexplained. The viewer is left in a position to parse the signs and symbols for clues to the meaning of the drawings, and, in fact, to where the meaning even resides – in the subject matter, in the medium itself, or in a zone somewhere between the two.

In Thompson's drawings there is a theory bound up in the marriage of subject and method: reconciling reality with desire. If there is a single principle in these tonal essays it is a dedication to craft as a means to fathom the depth of mystery. Reading a Thompson drawing is a complicated act of negotiating the way the art object itself is made, the materials of its making, and the implications of the way media is put down on paper as a first step to decoding the imagery. If all goes well, there is a satisfying sense of completeness; the reading itself reveals the congruency between method and meaning, and the nature of the desire.

Take for example, *Woman Across the Room* 2015 (page 11), a symmetrically composed essay involving a model seated cross-legged on a couch, smoking a cigarette. As conventional as the subject matter is, its simplicity, its mundane nature, are both elevated by the remarkable attention Thompson pays to establishing the narrative drama through the abstract relationships of the tones to one another. In the first place the gradations of light to dark give the impression that the entire picture has bloomed from the soft dust of the graphite media. The richness of the illusory atmosphere that the spectrum of tones describes is a quality of his pushing and pulling forms from the mid-tones until the composition organizes itself into so many rectangles and squares, and the space behind the picture plane resolves itself into this shallow, empty room. The picture is not so much set down by the artist as it emanates, or issues forth from the creative process.

From this abstract, process-based beginning, Thompson overlays this compositional architecture with this female figure whose insouciant, distracted gaze challenges and rebuffs the viewer at the same time. Thompson coaxes into visibility what we see as a trace encounter between artist and model, and between the conscious manipulation of media and the unconscious liaison with his creative muse. It is as if in the process of incarnation, this woman

is both an actual presence and a manifestation of a memory coaxed into the light by the artist. In other words, the automatic process that began the artistic activity is overlaid with deliberateness giving the drawing a frisson of tension between an impulse to mimesis and a trust in the creative process that is abstract at its core. The drawing is the reconciliation of reality with desire, with the actual and the imagined, and with the public gaze and the private challenge expertly expressed in the open and closed attitude of the model conjured from the tones on this piece of paper.

Variations on this trope of model as a radiant and rebuffing muse are seen in other drawings in the exhibition. *Girl with a Cigarette* 2014 (page 25) presents a cool, anonymous interpretation of the model in a costume of desire and an attitude of rejection. *Junction Girl* 2014 (page 15) confronts the viewer in two different ways. The unwelcome gaze spurns our attentive eye, while the presence of the automobile nearly filling the entire composition, amplifies the sense of threat that oozes from the model's attitude. *Anna in the Select Bistro* 2014 (page 27) softens the edges on the rebarbative nature of the muse as a challenging dominator, and gives way to several sensual nude and semi-nude treatments of the same model lying on a bed. In all these drawings, Thompson shows his expert control of tonal variations in order to heighten his subjects' innate sensuality. The intelligence with which he constructs – sculpts in graphite – the negative spaces around and across the models, and the spaces in which she is posed, serves his purpose of showing that reality and desire can coexist in a complicated way in a single image. We can be drawn in by the charm and allure of the subject matter, and we can stand mesmerized in front of the drawing admiring the mystifying manner in which the grey scale and the build up of media can create spaces that seem believable and true.

The same qualities and sensibility are seen in Thompson's architecturally inspired drawings as well. *King Street Café* 2015 (page 23), showing a debt to the American Edward Hopper, and perhaps even to the Victorian atmospheric painter John Atkinson Grimshaw, fairly dissolves into an abstract pattern of superbly rendered tonal values that barely resolve themselves into this mist-cloaked street corner with its dimly lit café interior. In the manner of its making, the subject appears to pulsate and glow, and to radiate from the sheet on which the graphite is laid. And yet, even though an inanimate building, Thompson is able to endow it with a human vitality. The lights illuminate and regard, the columns and pilasters support and gesture, and the windowpane appears and vanishes, as would a whispered phrase, an overheard comment in a crowded, late-night restaurant.

Thompson's is a melancholy vision. Despite a capacity for subtlety, a world born from black-and-white tones and soft, grey-scale descriptions speaks in a minor key. He mines these scales to fine advantage in what is a



circular, indirect artistic project of capturing loss the underside of longing and desire. *Black Dog* 2014 (page 34) registers the sensations of attraction and caution. In the dark, tenebrous shadows of the animal's profile, Thompson explores a dark muse with a mixture of technical panache and emotional fearlessness. The dog as a metaphor of unease, the shadow as anxiety, the gradation of greys as a stand-in for the shadings of memory itself, Thompson orchestrates these elements as would a skilled alchemist. In his drawings he brings into being objects to be looked at, marveled over, remembered and respected. These drawings might symbolize daily, personal confrontations with metaphorical demons or sirens, but on this Thompson stays silent. His drawings are mysterious but not coy, comprising qualities rare in modern art and in daily life: character and integrity.

Tom Smart, 2015



**Tom Smart** is a curator, author, essayist and consultant to art galleries and museums. He is especially noted for his award-winning, critical biographies, catalogues and books on Canadian artists, including painters Christopher Pratt, Jack Chambers, Alex Colville, Mary Pratt, Tom Forrestall, Miller Brittain and Fred Ross, graphic novelist George Walker, and many other contemporary and historical artists.

Smart has worked in art galleries and museums across Canada and the United States among them the Beaverbrook Art Gallery, the Winnipeg Art Gallery, The Frick in Pittsburgh, and the McMichael Canadian Art Collection, where he was its Executive Director from 2006 – 2010. Smart was a Distinguished Visiting Scholar at Pittsburgh's Carnegie Mellon University. He is currently Supervisor and Curator of the Art Gallery and Educational Services at the Peel Art Gallery, Museum and Archives in Brampton, Ontario



## Images

**Woman Across the Room**

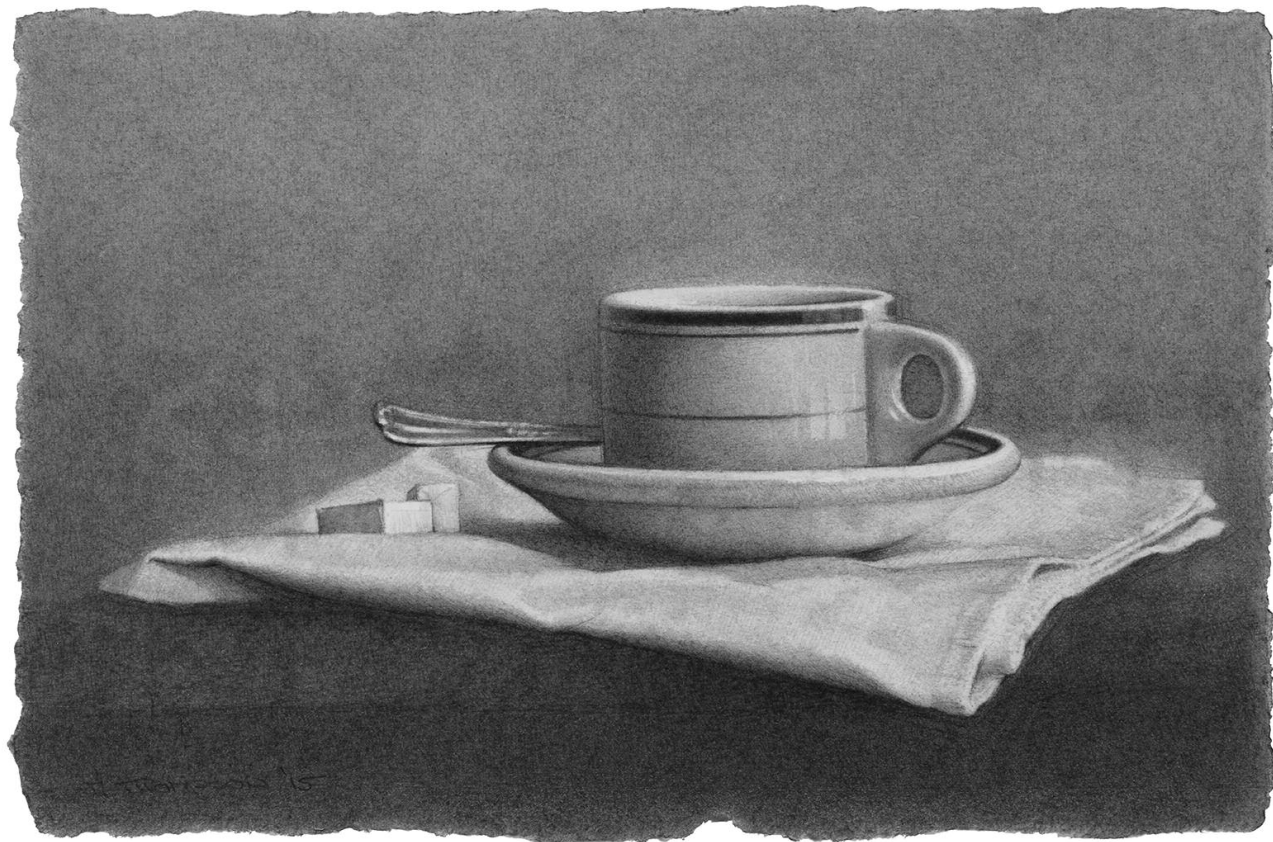
2015

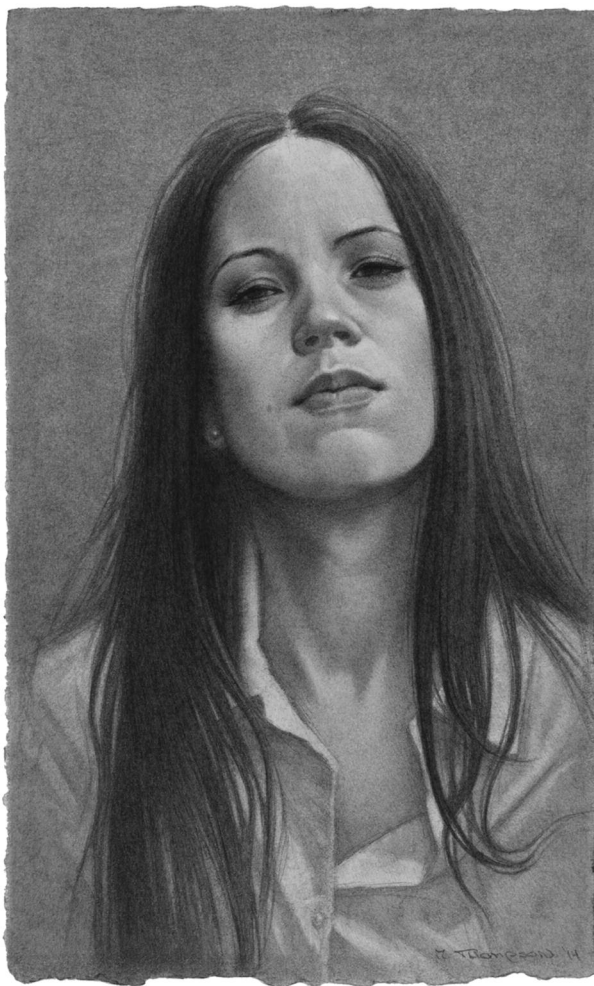
pencil on paper

22 1/2 x 30 inches



**Café Still Life**  
2015  
pencil on paper  
6 1/2 x 10 inches





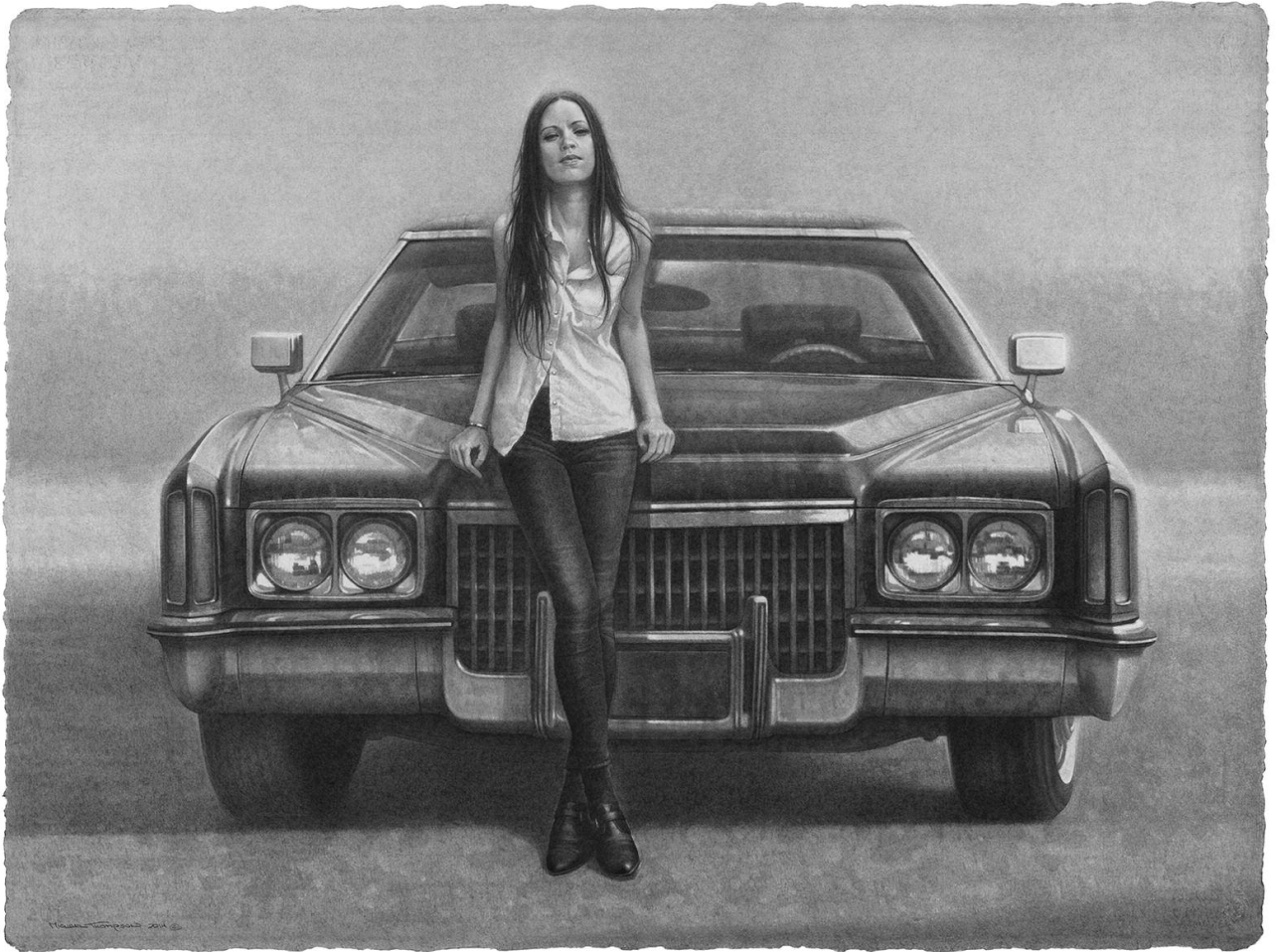
**Anna (Study for Junction Girl)**

2014

pencil on paper

10 1/2 x 6 5/8 inches





**Junction Girl**  
2014  
pencil on paper  
22 1/2 x 30 inches

**Light in a Small Room**

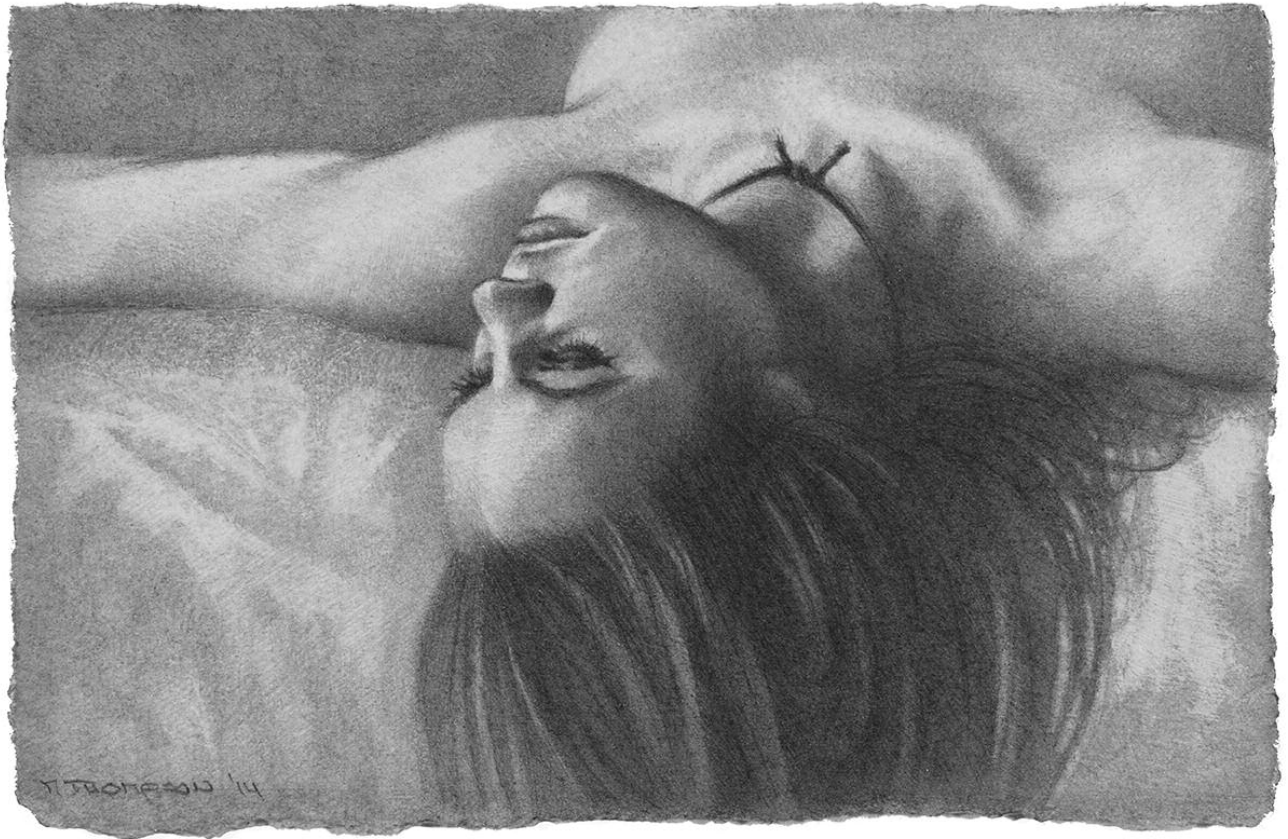
2014

pencil on paper

22 1/2 x 30 inches



**Dancer at Rest**  
2014  
pencil on paper  
4 7/8 x 7 5/8 inches



**Caitlin's Hand**

2014

pencil on paper

7 1/4 x 8 inches



**King Street Café**

2015

pencil on paper

20 1/2 x 15 inches



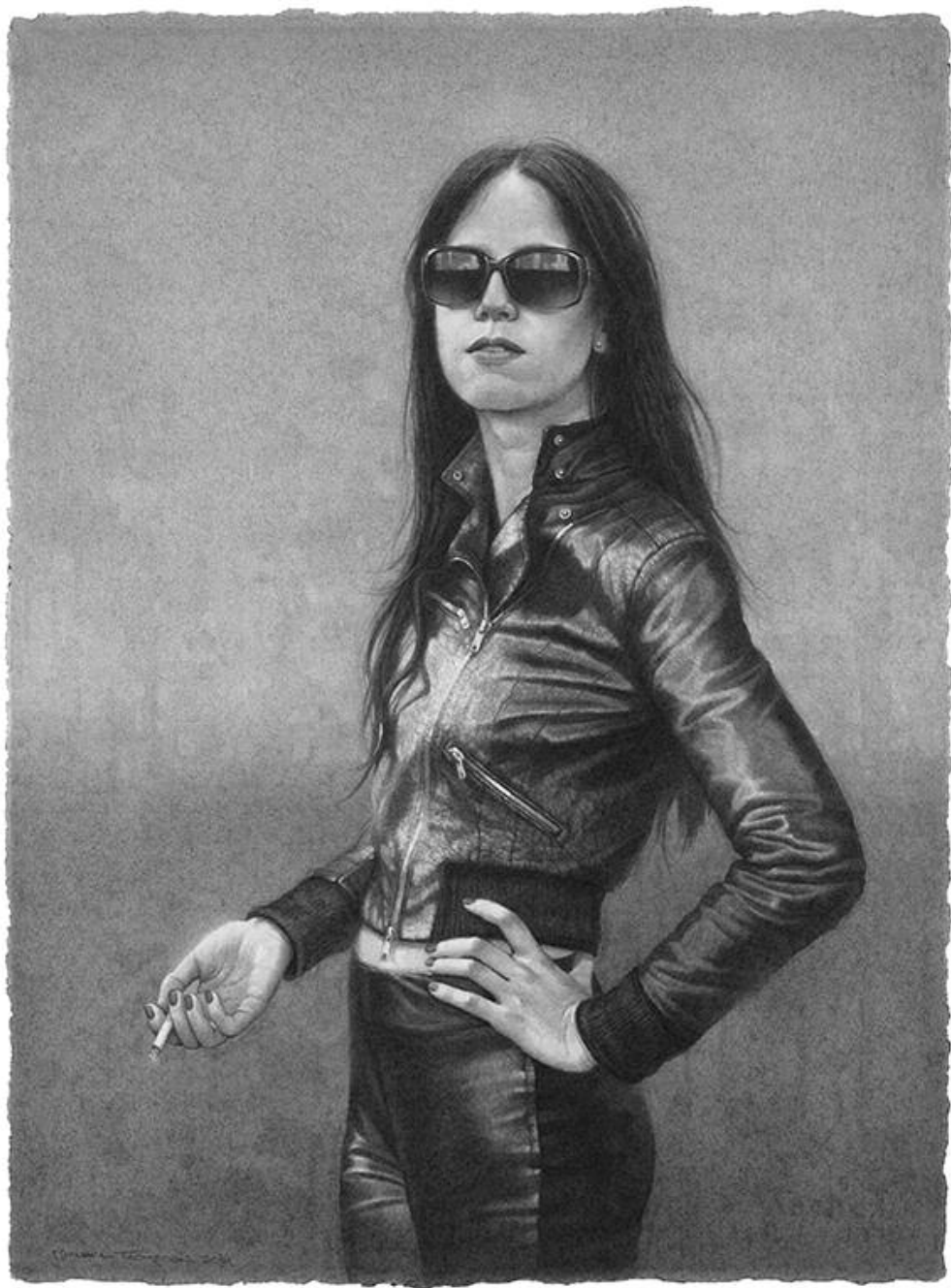


**Girl with a Cigarette**

2014

pencil on paper

22 1/2 x 16 1/2 inches

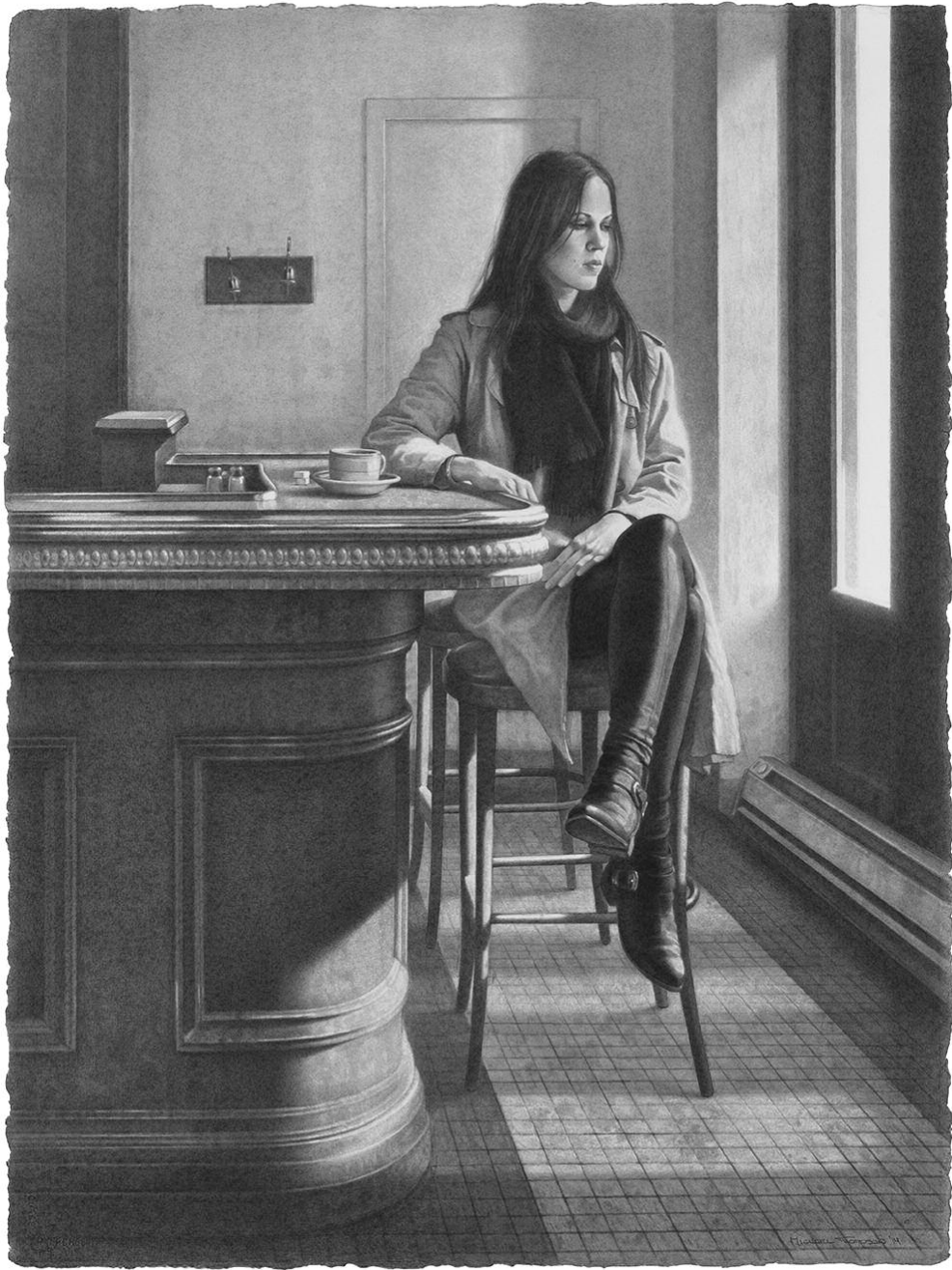


**Anna in the Select Bistro**

2014

pencil on paper

30 x 22 1/2 inches



**Rain in Saint James Park**

2014

pencil on paper

30 x 22 1/2 inches



**Queen Street Sunrise**

2015

pencil on paper

16 1/4 x 17 1/2 inches



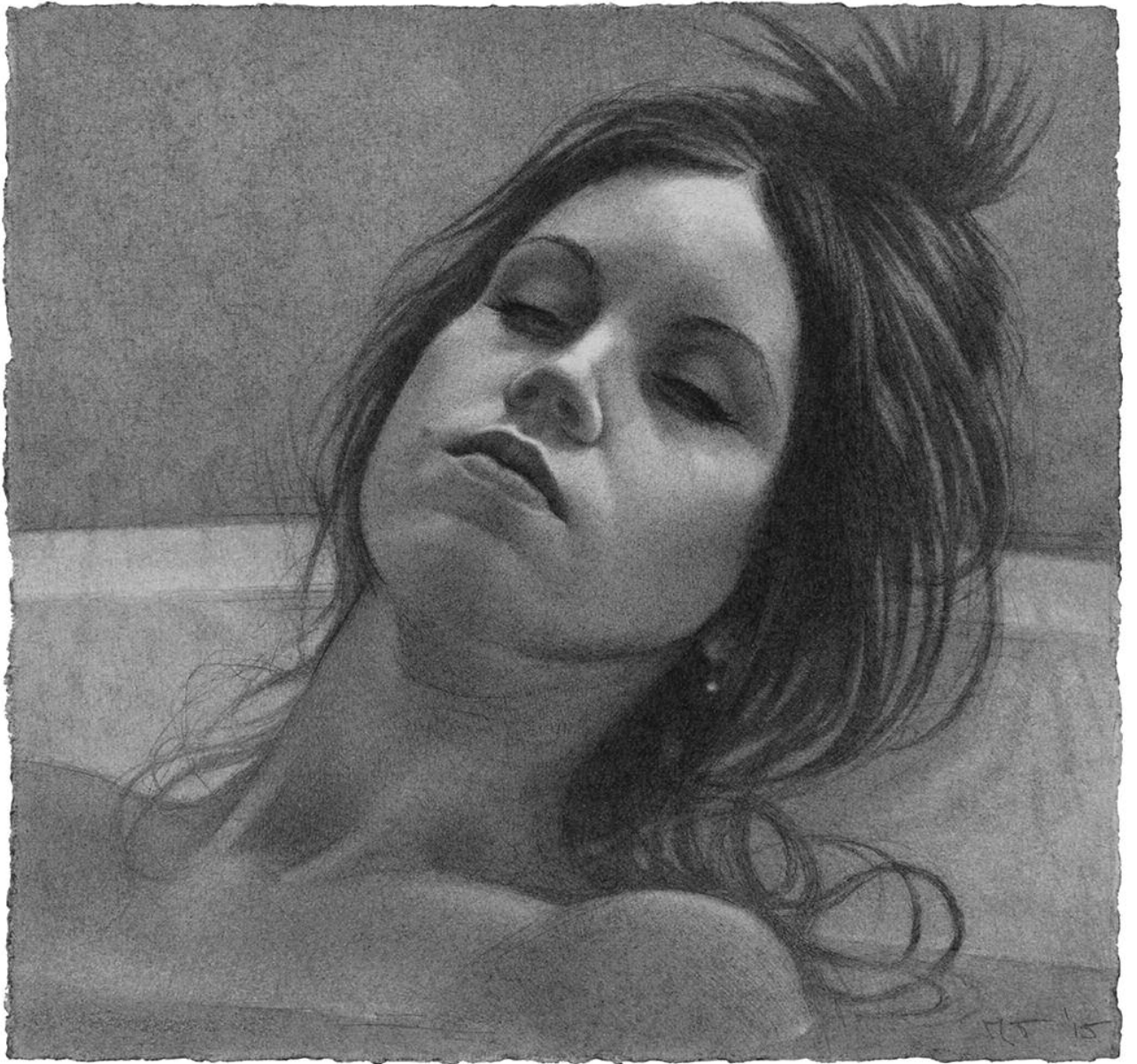


**Study for Woman Under a Skylight**

2015

pencil on paper

6 3/4 x 7 inches





**Black Dog**

2014

pencil on paper

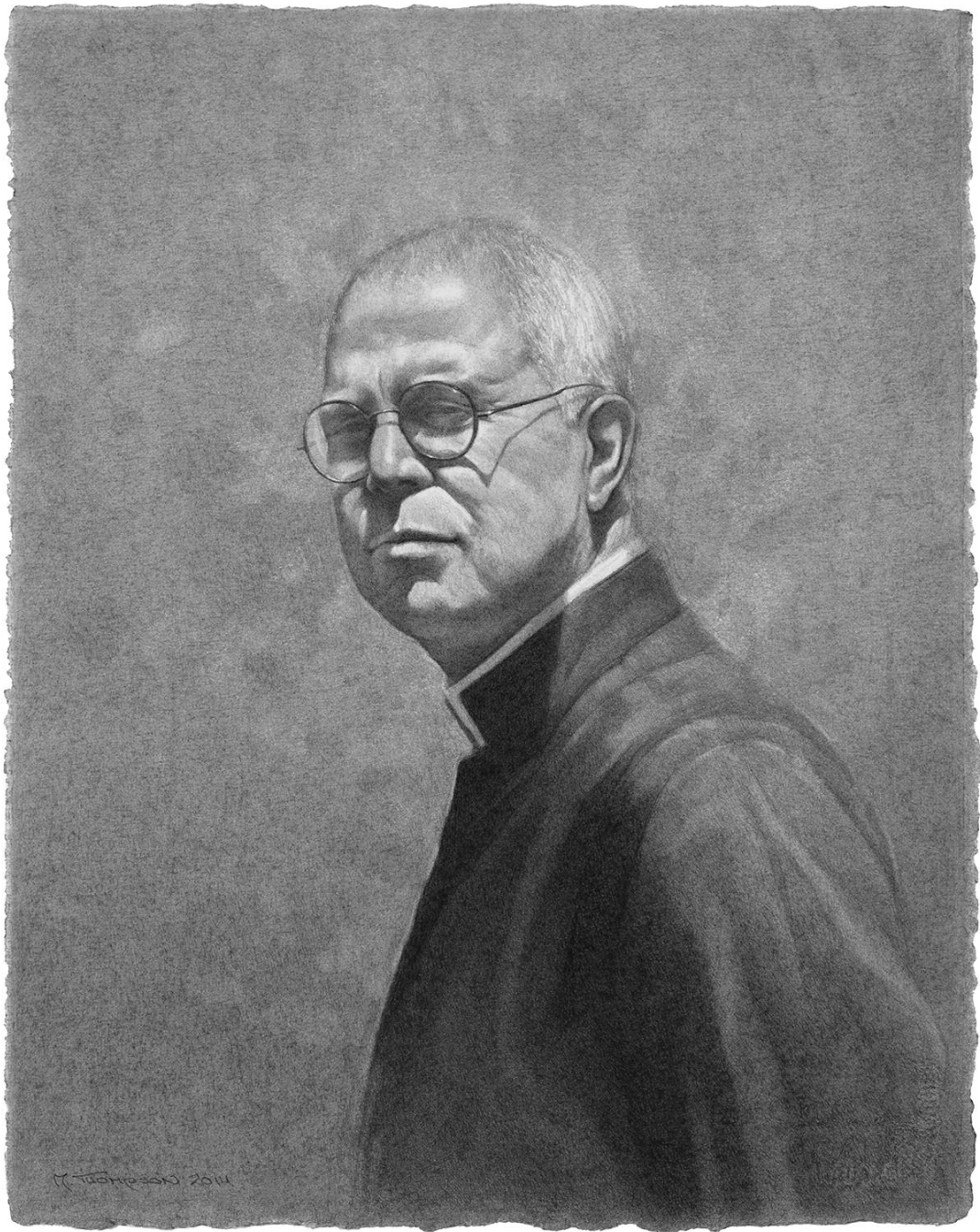
8 x 8 inches

**Priest (Autoportrait)**

2014

pencil on paper

14 x 11 inches



# List of works

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30 x 22 1/2 inches

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pencil on paper  
10 1/2 x 6 5/8 inches

Page 14

Black Dog  
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8 x 8 inches

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Caitlin's Hand  
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7 1/4 x 8 inches

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Michael Thompson: Drawing, Tom Smart

Printing: Springfield Graphics, Toronto, Ontario

Artwork photography: Joseph Hartman

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ISBN# 978-0-9691144-5-1







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