

Self Portrait with Vango/Loss Is too Heavy to Bury, 1996, PrismaColor, watercolor and gouache drawing on paper, 19 x 25 inches.

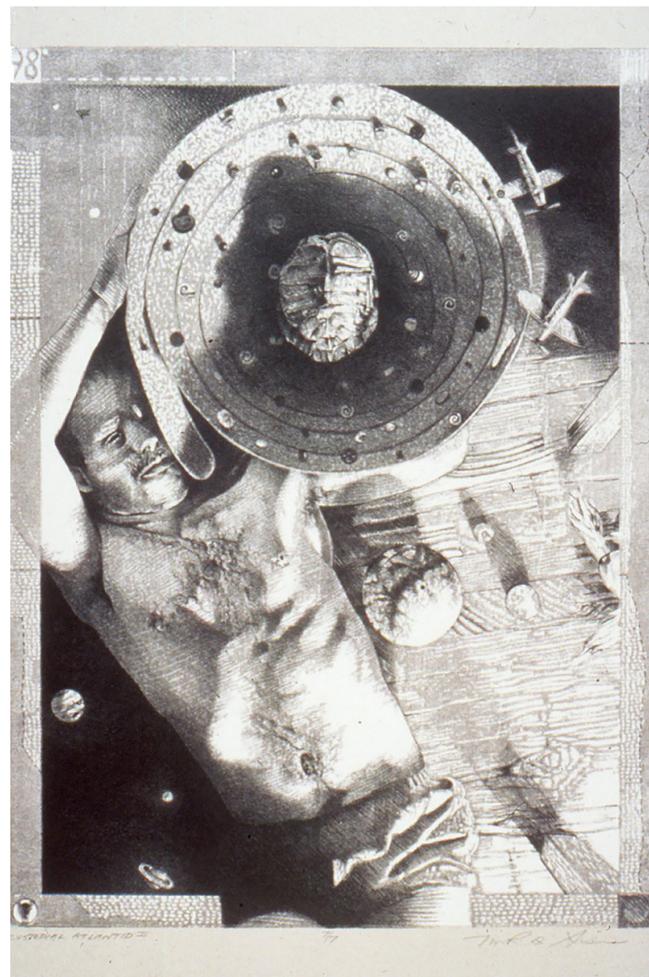
## About the Artist

Mark Sisson was born in Ann Arbor, Michigan in 1957. He attended Albion College briefly and ultimately earned a BFA from the University of Michigan. He later earned his MFA from the University of Wisconsin-Madison in 1984. Sisson was an instructor at University of Wisconsin but came to Oklahoma State University in 1989, where he found fertile (red) clay in which to sink his roots. He was promoted to Professor of Art in 2001. In 2017, he was named Regent's Distinguished Research Professor at Oklahoma State University.

Prints and drawings by Mark Sisson have been in over 300 juried and invitational national exhibitions where they have received more than 70 awards. His works are in many public and private collections including the Fogg Museum of Harvard University, The Nelson Atkins Museum in Kansas City, Missouri and the Butler Museum of American Art in Youngstown, Ohio. His work can be seen in the books: *The Best of Printmaking: An International Collection*, *The Georgia Review* and *An Engraver's Globe*, an international survey of wood engraving and woodcut by Simon Brett.

COVER: *Portrait of Cameron Richardson: Peace, No Piece (Color)*, 2017, charcoal and pastel drawing on paper, 40 x 30 inches.

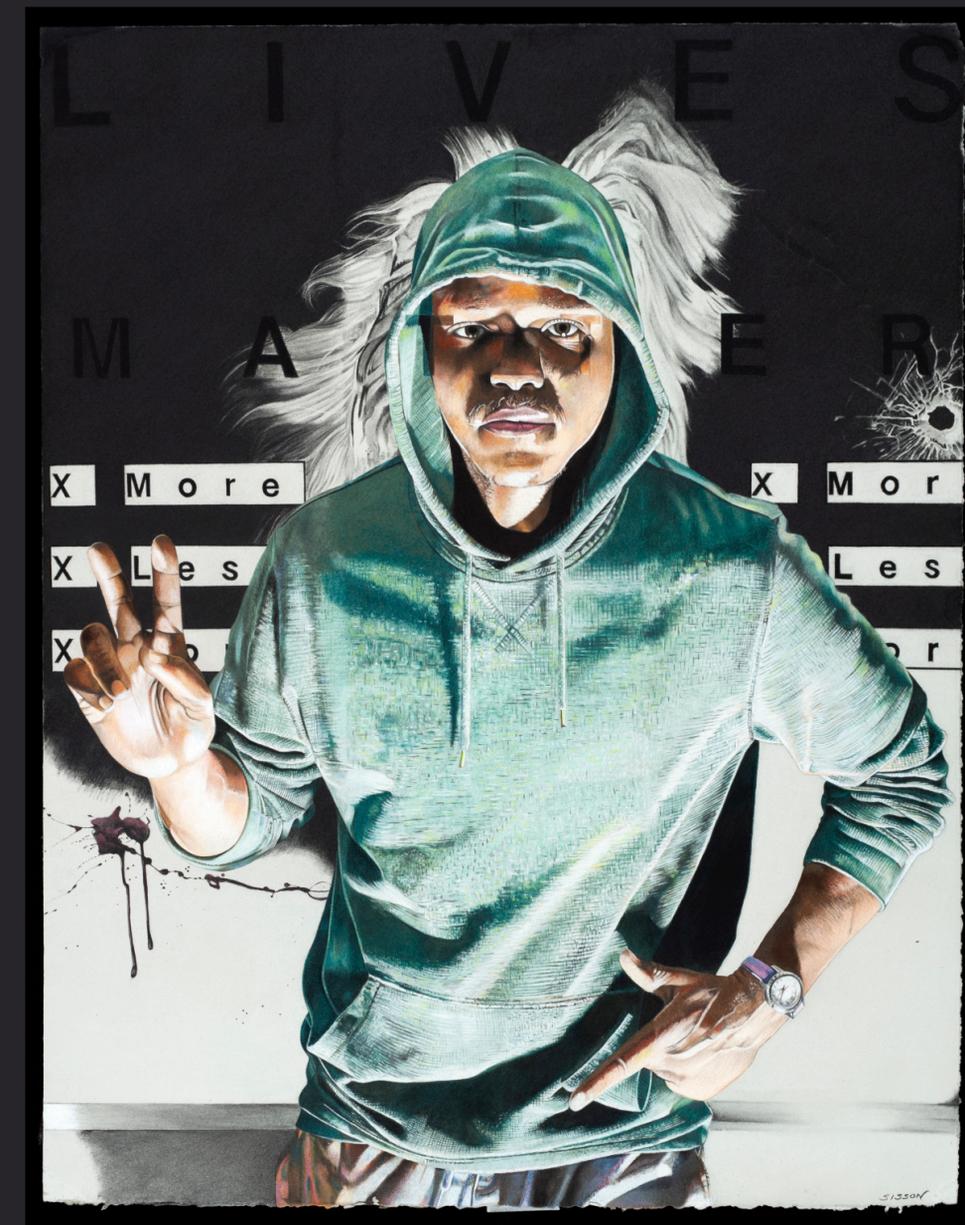
BACK: *Portrait of C. Ramsay/Custodial Atlantid II*, 1993, woodcut and lithograph on paper, 14 x 11 inches. Collection of Doris Sisson.



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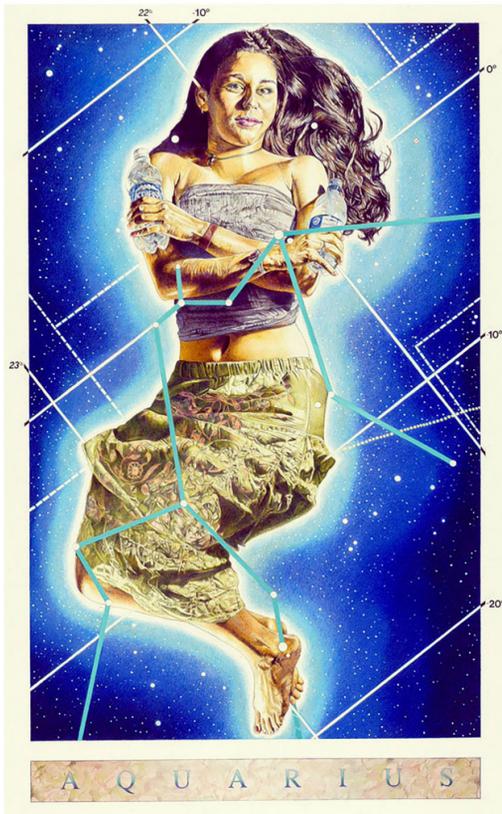
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*Themes on Being: A Mark Sisson Retrospective* and its programs at the OSU Museum of Art are supported in part by Malinda and Dick Fischer and the OSU Museum of Art Advocates.



# Themes on Being

A MARK SISSON RETROSPECTIVE



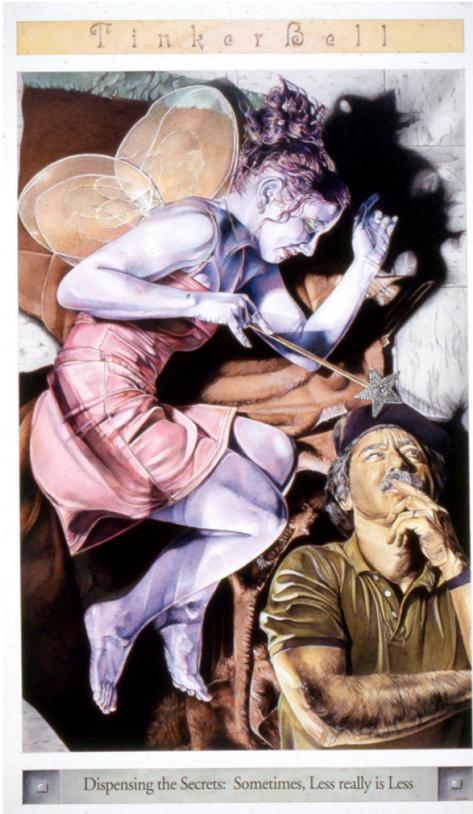
## Behind the Scenes

CHRIS RAMSAY

*Professor of Studio Art, Oklahoma State University*

“Hey, Chris, would you mind modeling for me...bring one of your pieces. You know one with spherical components—like planets, yeah that one—no need to wear anything different or special, just come as you are...could you just lay on the floor and kind of embrace the piece, a bit like Atlas, please? Ah yeah, like that. Perfect.” Click, click, click. “Hey, I’d like to create a strong contrast, let’s rake the light across your body to create strong shadows. Yeah, like that.” Click, click, click.

And so it begins, from an array of artist self-processed wet darkroom black and white photos revealing a variety of model angles in exaggerated lighting situations, Mark Sisson further develops his imagery, combining it with other personal conceptual elements. These images and ideas are developed through a wonderful array of hand-drawn colored pencil sketches (you should see his sketchbooks!), eventually creating one image that is increased in scale through a dizzying array of grids and



magnification on a large sheet of drawing paper. It is simply stunning to watch Mark’s methodical development of a drawing, point-by-point, over several weeks of manifestation.

Behind the scenes of Mark’s completed drawn and printed works are hours upon hours of labor-intensive preliminary processes and thoughtful conceptualization of messages that lie buried within the collective symbolic imagery of his compositions. Mark’s models are familiar to him (including his family pets) and often selected from a cast of characters that primarily exist within his academic circle including teaching colleagues, administrators, and students. Through some observed or perceived quality, Mark selects a model that serves as a platform to further develop his imaginative concepts and personal societal concerns. The model is given a general concept of the work that Mark will create prior to being photographed; however, the overall conceptual connections remain unknown until revealed by the artist himself in the final work.

## Curator’s Statement

KRYSTLE KAYE

*Executive Director, Oklahoma Visual Arts Coalition*

*Themes on Being: A Mark Sisson Retrospective* introduces a selection of prints and drawings from the past three decades of Mark Sisson’s career. Celebrating his final year of teaching before retirement in summer of 2022, this exhibition celebrates both Sisson’s successful career as an established artist and the lasting impact of his work as an educator in the studio art program at Oklahoma State University.

While Sisson’s portfolio as a whole utilizes portraiture as the dominant form, each individual work is a complex vignette that is part documentary, part theatre. Sisson reimagines the modern political cartoon genre through exquisite naturalistic precision and presents his forms with new clarity. Most of his artworks comment on critical contemporary topics such as lack of clean water and racial violence while other works capture life’s purest moments of joy and grief. An accomplished artist both in drawing and printmaking, Sisson replicates many of his original drawings in smaller print form, slightly altering details and hues. Where the drawings offer a luminous depth and a powerful life-size scale, the prints offer an intimacy in their small stature and subtlety in their details.

At the center of each work, he demonstrates his mastery of capturing human likeness. Though many of the faces in his work are familiar to anyone with proximity to the art department, the models he uses are portrayed as fictional characters within the narrative he has created. Each object in the composition utilizes nuanced, layered symbology to further convey the overarching theme of the individual work. The presented scene is then thrust into dramatic shadows, alluding to the grim nature of his message and heightening the theatricality of the arrangement. Though the theme of each story is unique, together they illustrate what it

means to be a human being. Throughout his career, while shifting and evolving through each body of work, the core of his practice has remained the same: reflecting our society’s struggles back to us through metaphor.

I invite the viewers of this exhibition to spend time with each work to explore the stratified, complex topics held within each composition to unpack and piece together each highly applicable, profound story. It has been my absolute pleasure to work alongside Mark on this exhibition over the last year and to have this dedicated time to delve into his collection. I know these works will stay with me as I hope they will also linger with you.

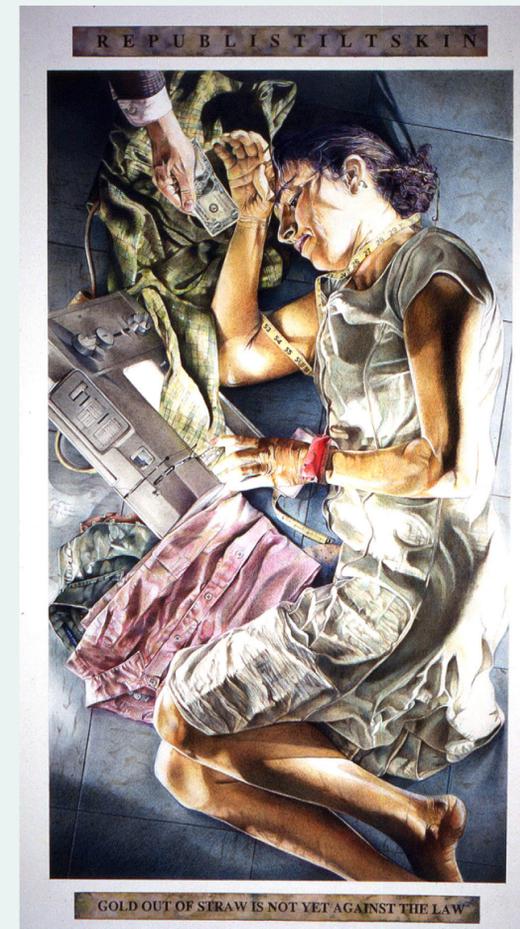


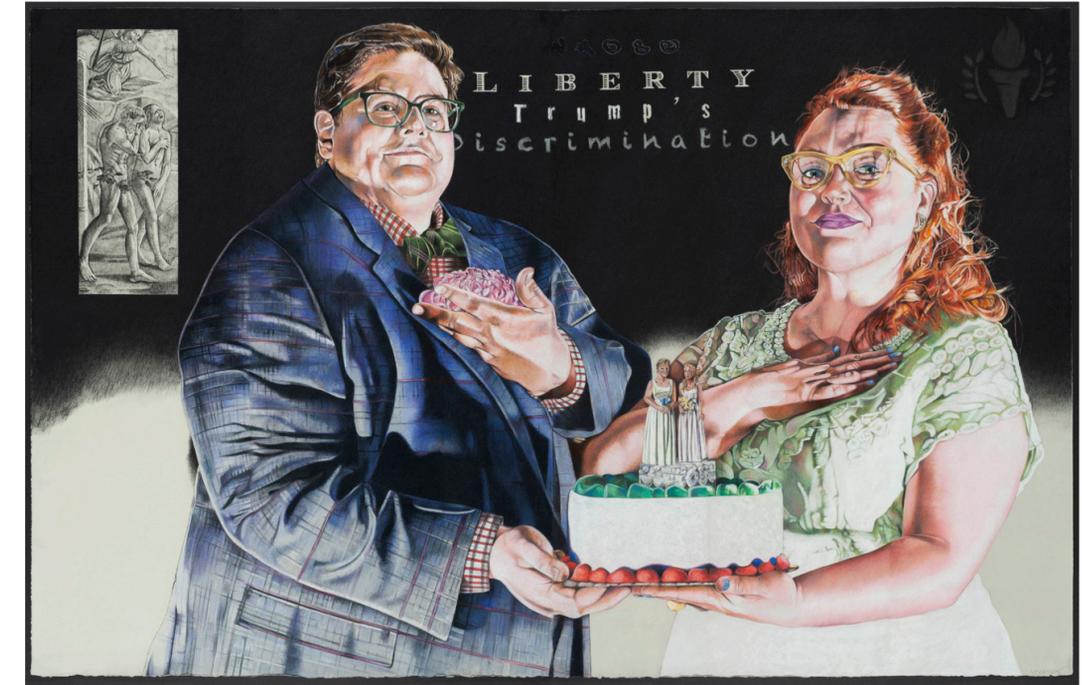
IMAGE CAPTIONS, FROM LEFT TO RIGHT:

*Portrait of Jill Bethany/Aquarius*, 2004, watercolor, Prismacolor, gouache and press type drawing on paper, 19 x 12 inches.

*Portrait of Sasha Fiser & Jack Titus/Tinkerbell*, 1999, watercolor, Prismacolor and gouache drawing on paper, 23 x 12 inches.

*Portrait of Leslie Cochran/Republilstitskin*, 1996, watercolor, Prismacolor and gouache drawing on paper, 19 x 11 inches. Collection of Jack and Nancy Titus.

*Portrait of Angie Piehl and Carrie Kim: Let them Eat Cake (diptych)*, 2018-2019, charcoal and pastel drawing on paper, each panel 38 x 30 inches.



## Dispensing the [Actual] Secrets

JACK TITUS

*Emeritus Professor of Studio Art, Oklahoma State University*

The topical narrative mode employed by Mark Sisson in his body of work enjoys a rich history within the visual arts but has become a rare commodity for today’s contemporary art practitioners. In responding to specific issues, sometimes gleaned directly from media headlines, Sisson’s biting social and political commentary feels more familiar to most viewers as the fodder of comedic satirists rather than that which one would expect to encounter in an art gallery. But Sisson’s work never feels transitory and one remains confident it will be timeless. This accomplishment is the result of three factors. First, the work is beautiful to behold as it is the product of a true master craftsman. Secondly, the work represents a complex layering of common cultural experiences derived from fairy tales, zodiac symbolism, or other such shared metaphorical content. And lastly, by incorporating portraits of individuals that Sisson feels embody the qualities of his artistic intent, he manages to make his chosen topic relatable and intimate.

When Mark asked me, a fellow artist with similar working habits, if I would be a willing subject of one of his projects, I knew that in actuality he was asking me to serve as a living

metaphor. The work in question, *Tinker Bell*, is atypical for Mark in that it addresses a topic directly concerning the artist’s working process. Here Mark is mocking the commonly held misconception that artworks are somehow magically born fully developed in an instant of inspiration as if the artist had been sprinkled with artistic fairy dust capable of “Dispensing the Secrets.” This tongue-in-cheek mockery is in fact Mark’s assertion that meritorious works of art are the result of hard-work, diligence and intellectual rigor, and that even in moments of artistic improvisation artists are drawing upon their training and experience. And by stating that the secret may in fact be that “Sometimes Less is Less,” Mark is questioning the merit of what has become an almost sacred axiom, “Less is More,” a phrase that was embraced by a vast swath of artists during the modernist movement. By contrast, Mark has throughout his career produced post-modern works that are teeming with ideological complexity and intricate detail. Although it was an honor to have been selected by Mark as an artist that he felt embodied these concepts, in reality he could have as easily chosen to make this particular work a self-portrait.