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"I wasn't screaming about me. I was screaming for all of us" – Tracey Emin

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Power to the people,
one painting at a time

C'mon man
PATTI SMITH
mourns Pasolini

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The Begging and the Death of Erasmus

Tracey Emin 2003

SUNRISE
AND
SUNSET
with
Robert Gober



UNTITLED, 2021
Graphite and colored pencil on found drawing
17 × 21 cm



Asking us to be conscious of our freedom *and* imprisonment, **ROBERT GOBER** has been at the forefront of sculpture since the early 1980s. In this conversation with *Dan Nadel*, the artist contemplates his drawing practice, sharing new work and an old conundrum along the way

Robert Gober keeps an office in a wide sunlit space that reminds me of the back room of a particularly absorbing antiques emporium. He has some furniture up there; artworks, objects, files. It feels like home. Two desks occupy a corner: a computer sits on one; on the other is an array of colored pencils and pastels. Gober has worked in New York since 1976, and began widely exhibiting his finely observed, thoroughly touched, uncanny objects (“sinks,” a “bed,” a “window”) in the early 1980s. Throughout his work runs currents alternating between compassion and outrage, love and horror. He has also been a transformative curatorial presence for many, myself included, with installations at the Menil Collection and the Museum of Modern Art, and just this past summer at a small gallery in Maine, with an exhibition of paintings and ephemera by the painter Lois Dodd. He is, then, observing art as it moves through his life and ours.

UNTITLED, 2020, graphite on found drawing, 17 × 21 cm
 Following spread left: LAST ONE, 2021, graphite, colored pencil, pastel, and collaged paper on found drawing, 21 × 17 cm
 Following spread right: UNTITLED, 2021, graphite, colored pencil, and pastel on found drawing, 21 × 17 cm

Some years back, Gober purchased an anonymous anatomical sketchbook from 1885—feet, hands, mouths—rendered with dispassionate clarity, and every so often he’ll lean a leaf against a piece of archival white cardboard so he can glance at it and decide if he wants to draw with it. The criteria: “I’ll find a foot that seems good—they weren’t all good. I’ll prop it there on my work desk and it’ll live with me for days or weeks. I look at it while I’m on the phone or the computer, when I’m not working.” Gober observes the sheet both in the world—catching light at different times of day—and in himself, “seeing it in different moods.” The process can take a number of days. Eventually, he will start penciling into it. “I just keep rearranging and fiddling with it until it seems done. Then I’ll sign it, say goodbye.” Occasionally he hides his signature. Sometimes he’ll add a date, location, and perhaps the weather too.

Downstairs from that room is a sitting area and office, and still below that is the sculpture studio. The entire Chelsea building is warm, inviting, and peaceful. Gober and I sat around a table on the middle floor, between mediums, and talked about his current drawing activity, portions of which I’ve seen in his recent exhibitions at Matthew Marks Gallery, New York. They are slow-release artworks that, unusually for Gober, highlight his gesture and touch, lovingly imperfect in form but precise in concept. Having completed the most recent session late last year, the “academic” explorations comprise, along with a 2017 group, the only drawing series he’s undertaken since the early 1990s.

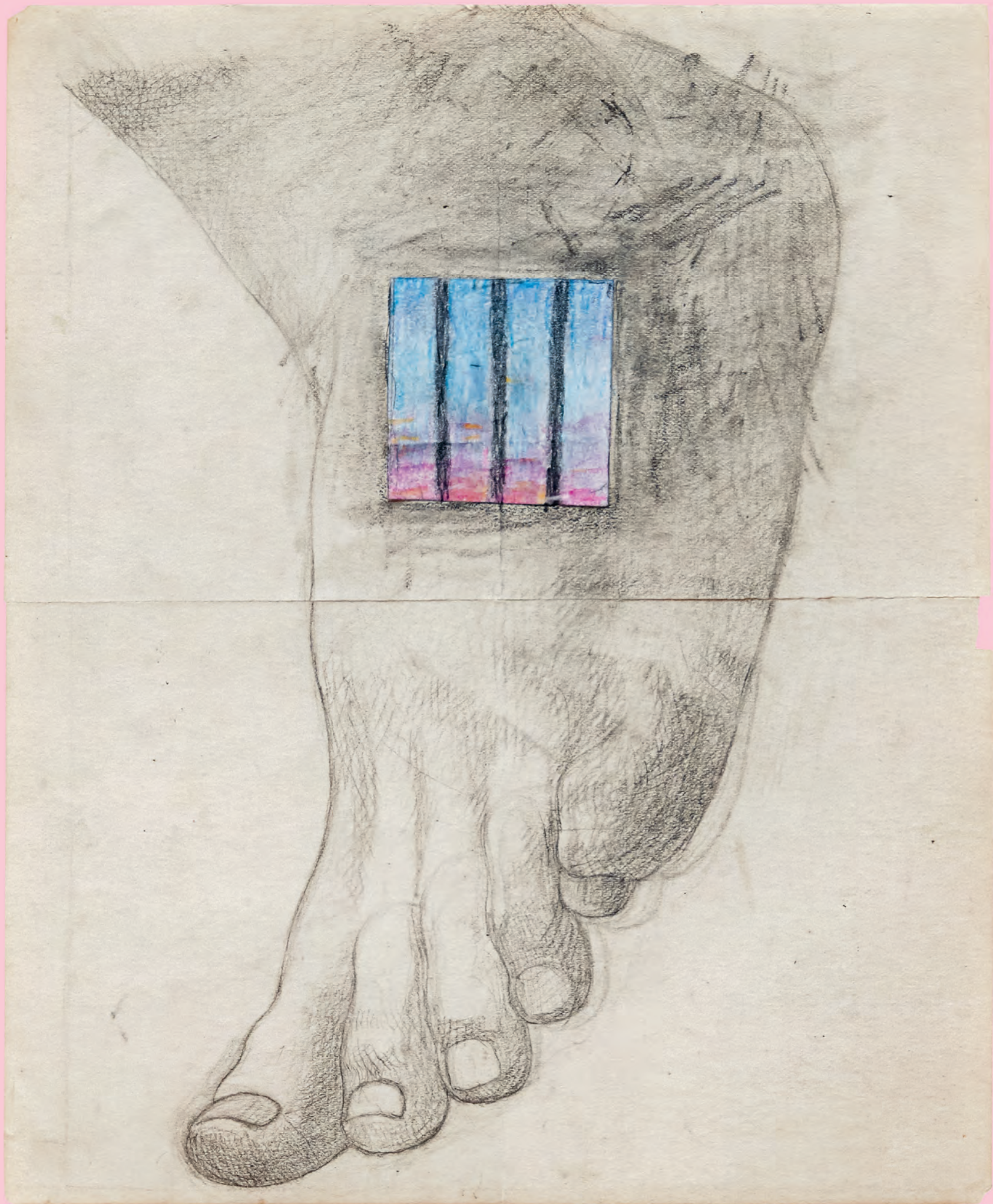
Alongside these intentional works, Gober has two further drawing modes. One he uses to communicate in the sculpture studio—scribbles on scraps and shorthand diagrams explaining or responding to a process or object. These are part of a chain of conversations that tracks artists working together to make a thing. The other mode is rather more elegant installation drawings that get a wider viewing: from registrar to preparator to curator. Here again, they form a community around a shared purpose. These artifacts, rarely exhibited but lovingly preserved, are a microcosm of the practical and political ways Gober operates in the world—nonhierarchical, open, treating everyone with dignity. “I rarely sit down to make drawings,” he told me. “And it’s too bad because I really enjoy doing it. But I very much need an occasion to do them, otherwise what would I be drawing?” Good question. He’s a sculptor after all, though one with a special yen for the medium and an approach not so dissimilar to his description of Charles Burchfield’s in the 2010 catalogue for an exhibition Gober curated, *Heat Waves in a Swamp: The Paintings of Charles Burchfield*: “[His doodles] inventory the artist’s mind at work and at rest. Nothing was insignificant; inspiration for a painting could come from any otherwise mundane thing.”

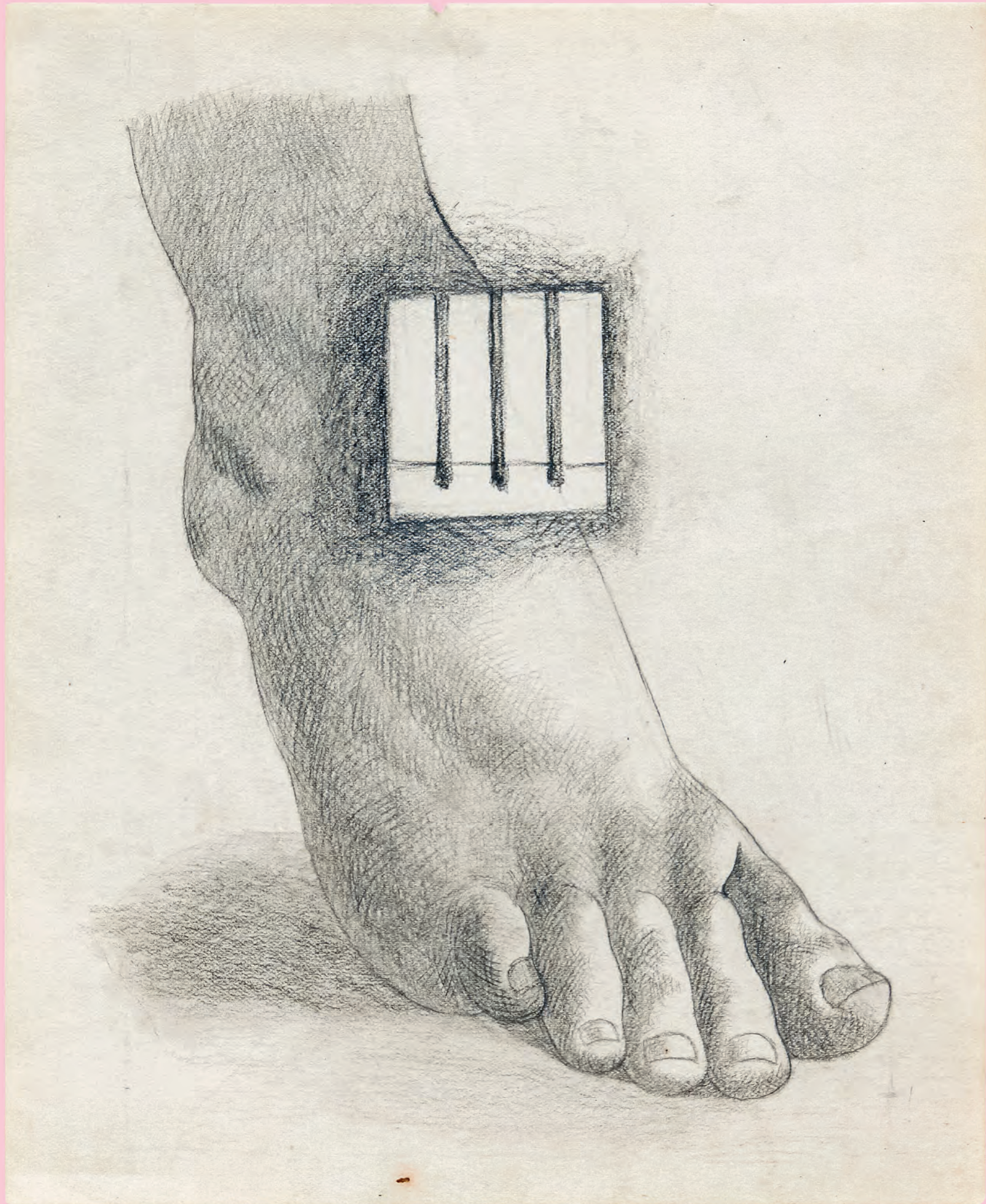
As a child and a student, he was good with pencil and paper: “I could have gone that way—traditional draftsmanship.

I had that talent, to copy or draw from life. Copying things is one thing, but drawing from life is not easy, and that’s what I was doing when I came to New York.” Gober has kept evocative examples from that era—a favorite of mine, *Untitled* (1976), calls to mind the casual mid-century scrawl of Larry Rivers and the precise elegance of Ellsworth Kelly’s plant drawings. An ashtray sits on the cover of *Diane Arbus: An Aperture Monograph* (published not long before the drawing), obscuring the now-iconic twin faces. On one side is a pack of cigarettes, on the other a pair of sunglasses and loose change. The picture has the Magrittean doubling from which Gober has drawn much artistic sustenance—one pair obscured, another revealed. One vision foreclosed, another opened.

Gober’s most generative outpouring of imagery came with his 1982–83 project *Slides of a Changing Painting*, 89 images of a Masonite board that he painted and photographed before wiping it to make a new picture. The drains, torsos, pipes, trees, limbs, and combines he conjured there are a still-vital base for his work. Rather extraordinarily, and in keeping with the ephemeral process of *Slides*, Gober’s thematic language remains present in 2023. There are practical reasons for this—site-specific works, for example—but there is foremost a hovering sense of replenishing inspiration and the value of history. He’ll bring in something new/old every so often, like an eros/angst teenage drawing of Icarus he uncovered while cleaning out his mother’s home some years back, and he’ll give it a different resonance by, say, placing *Icarus* (1967) at the very front of his 2018 exhibition, *Tick Tock*. He now reads it as a warning to himself and the viewer: “A real metaphor of flying too high and hubris. Which is a lesson to keep fresh in your mind, I think.” Time is not a luxury for Gober; it’s a reality that affords opportunities for discovery and respectful meditation, both of which he gives to all of his work. He keeps his drawings in flat files for possible retrieval in 10 days, 10 months, or 10 years, in case he wishes to add something to one, or to leave it as is, sign it, and give it an external identity.

Along with *Icarus*, *Tick Tock* also contained a group of drawings that placed prison windows into human torsos. And as with Gober’s installations, while the container—in this case, a body—is carefully delineated, focusing on the luminous opening itself is unavoidable. This combination of subjects began with *Slides of a Changing Painting* and can stand independently from, or resonate with, Gober’s explanation: “There’s a forest in you, there’s a prison in you, they’re inseparable in some way—the unresolvable heart of the matter. That’s not really an explanation, just a conundrum.” Letting a conundrum exist, and finding inspiration and understanding in it, is the thread that connects Gober’s last six years of drawing.





The imagery and touch of the 2017 works led to the 2020–22 project of working with the academic sheets. Making these to-be-exhibited drawings depends on privacy either at Gober’s desk or elsewhere. Privacy is underrated in art. It’s achieved sometimes through careful coding, other times simply by toiling in secret—and often it happens out of necessity. The light and flesh of these drawings remind me of a work addressed to secrecy and completed in private: Marcel Duchamp’s *Étant Donnés* (1946–66; also recalled in Gober’s 2015–16 sculpture, *Waterfall*). Gober told me a story: “My sister is two years older, and when I was young and she was just starting to date, I was dazzled by the guy that she invited to the prom. I remember I did a drawing imagining his genitals and left it on the couch by accident, and I was totally panicked about it. So yes, there’s a privacy aspect to drawing for yourself.” When she was a kid, Elizabeth Murray, who employed Gober as a studio assistant and offered a model for how to be an artist, did a bit of business drawing sexy pictures to sell to her classmates. And Robert Crumb, until he was nearly 18, would draw naked women, crumple them up, and flush them, for fear of being caught. (Who knows how much art courses through the sewers of the world?) An advantage of a top-floor room of your own is the lengthy silence that allows for the kind of looking Gober described. Making something there feels different: “I like a soft dark lead. I like sharp pencils. I like the containment of it, the privacy of it. I can make a world that I like looking at, right on my desk, and I can do it all myself. Making sculptures is so collaborative and public, in a way. Even though they’re made within my studio, I’m constantly sharing half-baked ideas with the folks who help me make things.”

Each of the *Untitled* feet/mouth/hands compositions holds as a seamless work—the found imagery is always present, but the entire object is unified by Gober’s hand. They are, as he says, a world, but of past and present simultaneously. The given body part is a structure, and the rest is up to the artist. It’s a world of marks, of gentle caresses, with subtle touches of color and shade to a limb, or a shock of graphite blotting out the empty tone of the paper. *Untitled* (2022) began as a sheet of lips and is now also a wooded grove, strewn with a beer can, detritus, and a smoldering log, a site so evocative that the moon could replace the prison window. The dark graphite describes an atmosphere, its line weight heavier than most, kissing the top edge and then dissipating. It calls back to Gober’s woods/chest motif, but expands it, makes it stranger, less legible than before.

The majority of these drawings use the feet sketches as a departure. *Untitled* (2022) is a foot ablaze with soft and hard scribbles and hatching, telegraphing alarm; the window, sitting nearly center, reveals a pink and blue sunrise redolent of a J.M.W. Turner. There is always in these works a

palimpsest of marks forming an unnamable subject: Gober is making the marks his hand makes—the hand of a draftsman gone abstract—a controlled chaos that is inimitably his, and capable of many moods.

Another drawing, also named *Untitled* (2022), has a dry ecstasy about it—the arch of the foot is delicately reinforced, and gentler pencil marks flair up around a perfectly luminous window, more pink than blue: radiant. To get that brightness on an otherwise dark sheet, Gober might cut out a section of the toned paper and replace it with a white patch so that the sky comes through even brighter.

These works promise the warmth of the sun outside the prison of ourselves, and reward close observation. In a conversation about the drawings, Gober referenced a moment in John Cheever’s 1977 novel *Falconer*, which trails Ezekiel Farragut, imprisoned, for killing his brother, in Falconer State Prison, a building that is as much a character in the book as the ostensible protagonist. Explaining his focus on the feet, Gober paraphrased the following passage, as finely observed as his drawings. It’s told from Farragut’s point of view as he watched visitors exit the prison:

“They were free and yet they moved so casually through this precious element that it seemed wasted on them. There was no appreciation of freedom in the way they moved. A man stooped to pull up his socks. A woman rooted through her handbag to make sure she had the keys. A younger woman, glancing at the overcast sky, put up a green umbrella. An old and very ugly woman dried her tears with a scrap of paper. These were their constraints, the signs of their confinement, but there was some naturalness, some unselfconsciousness about their imprisonment that he, watching them between bars, cruelly lacked.”

Gober’s project, in many ways, asks us to be conscious of both our imprisonment and our freedom—spiritually, chronologically, and spatially. All the more reason to embrace our chosen communities with dignity and respect. In another passage, Farragut is taken to a secluded spot with his lover, who will soon, with all irony intended, escape courtesy of a Catholic dignitary’s visit to the prison. Now: “Farragut saw, over the roofs of the old cellblocks and the walls, a two-mile stretch of river with cliffs and mountains on the western shore. He had seen or glimpsed the view before at the foot of the prison street, but this was the most commanding sight he had been given of the world beyond the wall and he was deeply moved.” If the other works are infused with miniature nuance, now we’ve zoomed out, and here is a god’s foot alighting on a verdant landscape. The prison bars frame a clear blue sky. A quiet patch of emerald holds a shadow as if Gober is siting a graphite sculpture. It’s at once surprising, funny, gentle, and it exemplifies what these drawings do. Taken together, they offer that rarest substance in art: wise and complicated optimism.

UNTITLED, 2021, graphite, colored pencil, and pastel on found drawing, 22 × 17 cm
 Previous spread left: UNTITLED, 2020, graphite on found drawing, 21 × 17 cm
 Previous spread right: UNTITLED, 2021, graphite, colored pencil, and pastel on found drawing, 21 × 17 cm