

DRAWING

from

LIVE TV

Sigmund Abeles has filled dozens of books with portraits of politicians, entertainers, and public figures, all of whom the artist races to draw before their talk-show segments end.

BY AUSTIN R. WILLIAMS

Sigmund Abeles has made many types of art during his 50-year career. He's made prints, sculptures, and paintings; he's drawn figures, animals, interiors, and landscapes. He's created tender images of his family, as well as harrowing political images decrying the horrors of war.

Over the decades, one constant for Abeles has been quick drawings. Most days, rather than use a sketchbook to warm up, Abeles uses it to cool down. He ends his nights sitting in front of the TV, watching *Charlie Rose* on PBS during the 11 o'clock hour. And he draws what he sees.

Abeles calls this process "drawing from live TV," and the results, which now occupy dozens of books, are fascinating. The artist only draws a person while he or she is on camera. He never knows how long that will be, so he has to hurry. The drawings are consequently rough, and they possess both the imperfections and the energizing sense of spontaneity that come with good fast

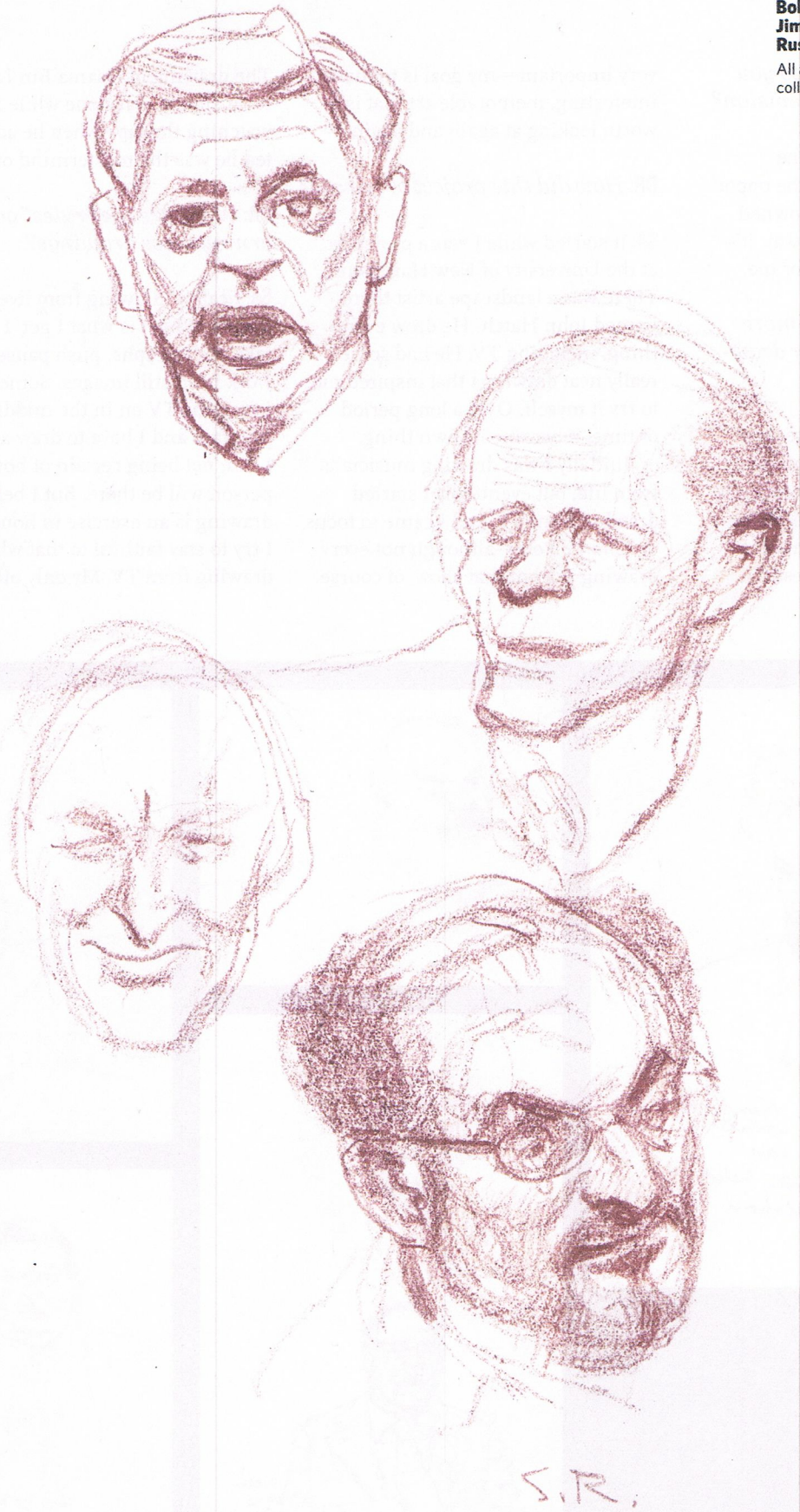
drawing. Some likenesses are better than others, some the artist abandons midway, others he manages to bring to a high degree of finish. On some pages, multiple portraits coalesce into a unified composition. Through it all, there is the ghostlike presence of Rose himself, occasionally drawn with just a few light lines. The camera rarely lingers on the host, so Abeles usually doesn't have time to finish Rose's portrait.

Abeles' TV drawings exemplify many of the aspects of drawing that artists love most—its freshness, its immediacy, its playfulness, and the unexpected way that quick drawings can become worthy art. Flipping through the drawings also has a time-capsule effect, providing a sort of tour through the last 20 years of culture and current affairs.

We spoke with the artist about the origins of this project and his strategies for drawing portraits that move at the speed of live TV.

**Bob Graham, Ron Howard,
Jim Lovell, and Salman
Rushdie**

All artwork this article
collection the artist.



S.R.

DRAWING: *What appeals to you about drawing from television?*

SIGMUND ABELES: Partly it's the challenge. And partly it's the opportunity—here's a world-renowned figure in front of me. In a way, it's as if the person is sitting for me.

DR: *Is drawing from TV more like drawing from life or drawing from a photograph?*

SA: More like life. They're gesture drawings. And there's no guarantee of anything. With a photograph, things are always the same. When you draw from life, everything is open game. And the end result is

very important—my goal is to make interesting, memorable art that is worth looking at again and again.

DR: *How did this project originate?*

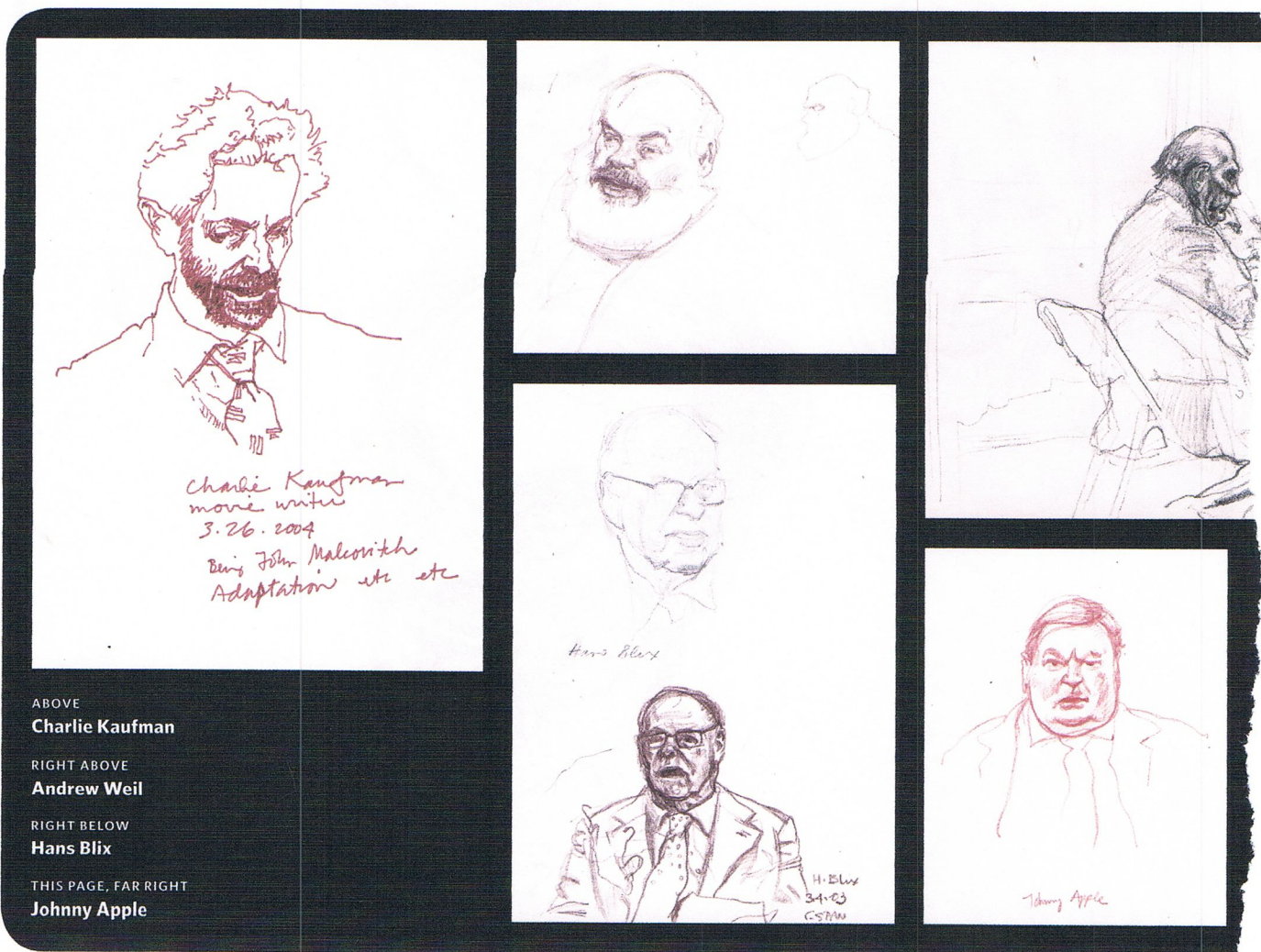
SA: It started while I was a professor at the University of New Hampshire. There was a landscape artist there named John Hatch. He drew everything, including TV. He had some really neat drawings that inspired me to try it myself. Over a long period of time, it became its own thing.

Initially I was drawing musicians from life, but eventually I started drawing from TV, and I came to focus on *Charlie Rose*—although not every drawing is from that show, of course.

The drawing of Osama Bin Laden, for instance, was done while I was watching the tape when he admitted he was the mastermind of 9/11.

DR: *What are the "rules" governing these drawings?*

SA: I call it "drawing from live TV," and what I get is what I get. I don't take photographs, push pause, or work from still images. Sometimes I turn the TV on in the middle of a program and I have to draw as fast as I can, not being certain of how long a person will be there. But I believe that drawing is an exercise in honesty, and I try to stay faithful to that when I'm drawing from TV. My only other rule



ABOVE
Charlie Kaufman

RIGHT ABOVE
Andrew Weil

RIGHT BELOW
Hans Blix

THIS PAGE, FAR RIGHT
Johnny Apple

is that if an individual says something phenomenal, I will take the time to write down what they're saying. Sometimes I wish I could slow things down—I'd love to have more of a chance to draw Charlie, who's an interesting looking guy, and I'd like to have more time to draw hands, which tend to be shown very fast. But rules are rules.

DR: *How do you go about capturing a likeness so quickly?*

SA: I try not to have an absolutely rigid pattern to how I work, but I'm basically looking for shapes, and I generally start with the overall shape of the head. After you

get that initial shape, everything needs revising, although sometimes you just hit on your first try.

In a sense, I learned this type of drawing from George Demetrios, an artist I studied with midway through my career. George taught his students to see the whole, not to just accumulate detail. George would give us 120 sheets a day and have us do 120 30-second drawings. It was about finding the equivalent shapes of what you were looking at very fast. George's studio had a huge fireplace, and at the end of every session, he would sweep all the drawings into it. Eventually I started sneaking out my best drawings because I didn't want them burned.

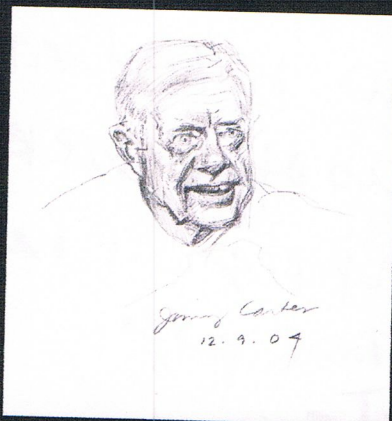
This influenced my own teaching. At the beginning of workshops I have students do 20 minutes of quick drawings. In that time, everything needs to get on the paper—what I call the “constellation” of the pose, the salient points. And in a way this is the same process I use when drawing from the television.

DR: *What materials do you use?*

SA: I really love Prismacolor pencils because of their waxy quality. There's something about the way they slide. Drawing with them is like sliding down a polished hallway in your socks. Another tool I use a lot is a Paper Mate Sharpwriter No. 2 mechanical pencil. It

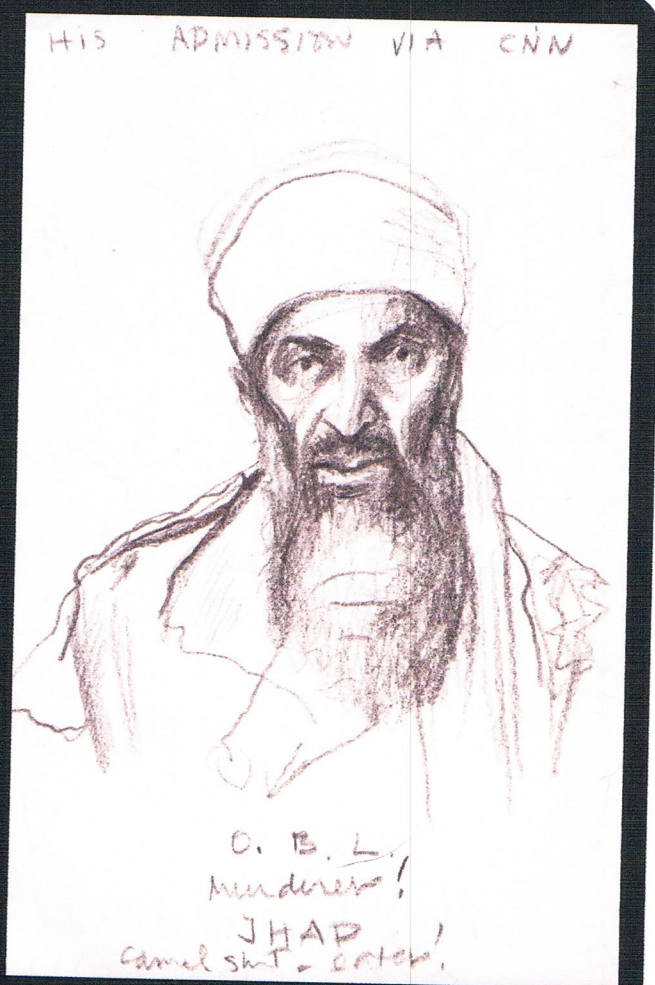


ABOVE
Life Drawing of
Musicians



RIGHT
Jimmy Carter

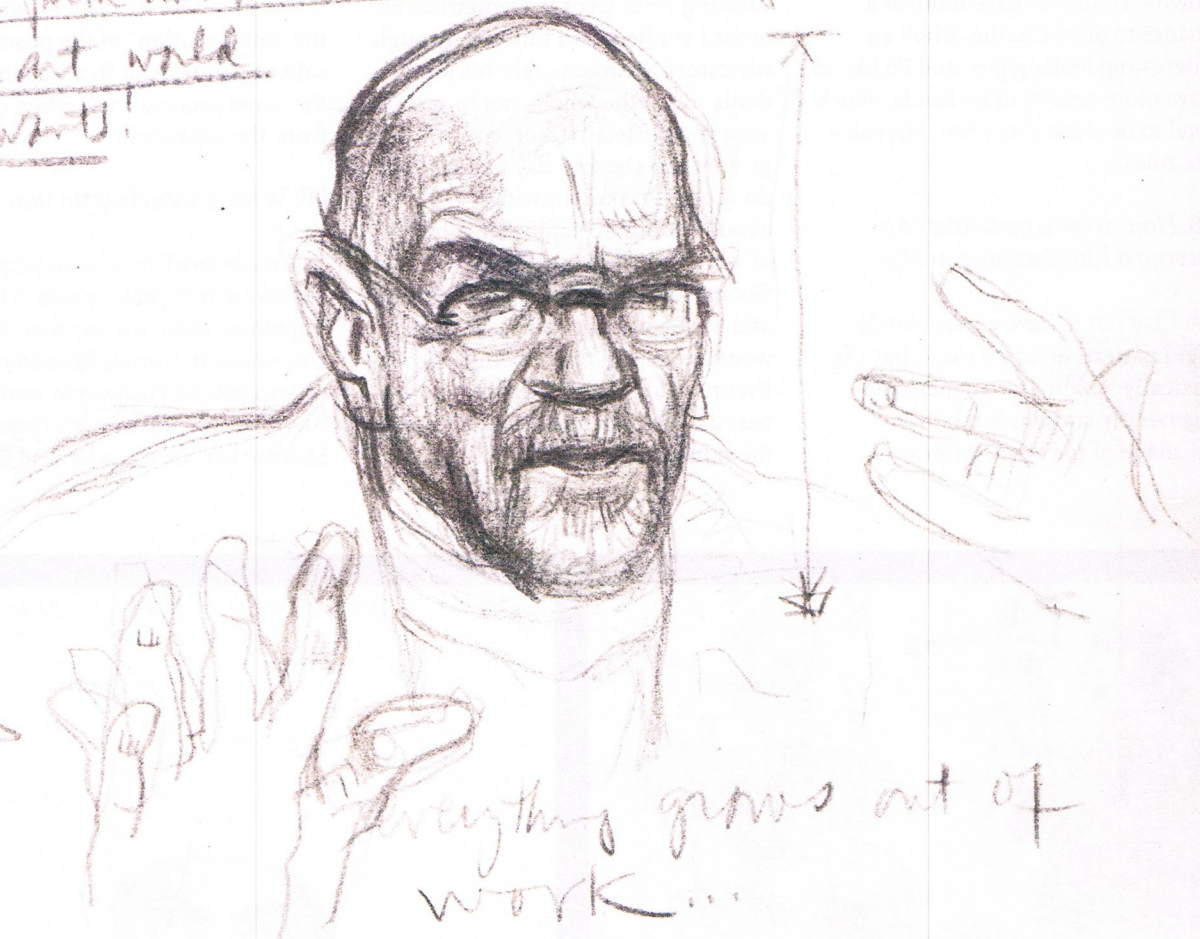
FAR RIGHT
Osama Bin Laden



Painting is a very special activity; you get so much pleasure from it.

your path has to cross what the art world wants!

L. Freud, who I visited a time ago, CR



more work in pencil you'll see

Everything grows out of work...

C.C.
3.13.07

Everything Kicks Open a Door

I am an orchestrator of experiences of viewer

Vermeer - I have no idea how he made that pff.
Girl is Red Hat.

Chuck Close

BELOW

Rod Stewart

RIGHT ABOVE

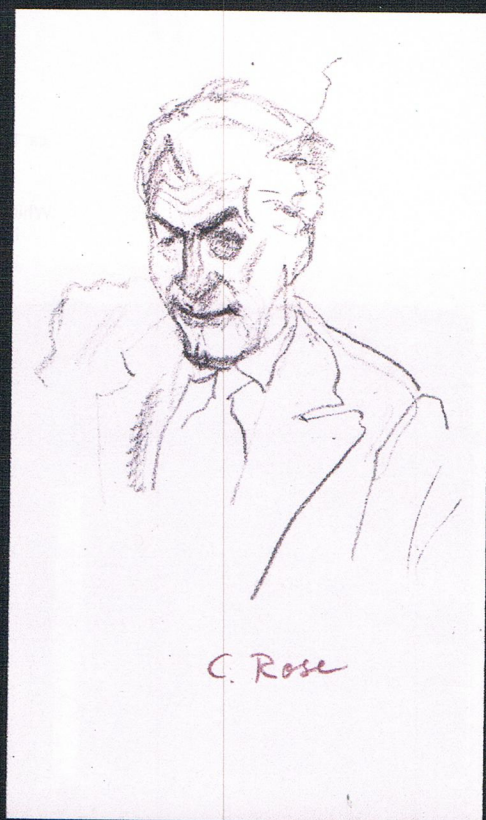
Catherine Deneuve

RIGHT BELOW

Salma Hayek

FAR RIGHT

Charlie Rose



has a sharp point, a decent eraser, and it doesn't push back in if you put pressure on it. I always have one in my pocket. I also have some pen brushes that I use sometimes, and other times it's plain old pen. But mostly I use pencil.

DR: *Why Charlie Rose?*

SA: Mostly because I'm a night owl. By 11 p.m. or 12 a.m., everyone else would be in bed. But I would be up, and Charlie's show would be on. I also

feel that *Charlie Rose*, to give it credit, works on a pretty high intellectual level. I call it my graduate school.

As the years have passed, though, I'm sometimes too tired to draw. A few nights ago Jimmy Connors, the tennis player, was on. He looked so interesting—he has a kind of beat-up quality now, a little like old Francis Bacon. But I was too tired and didn't draw him.

DR: *Are any people particularly challenging to draw?*

SA: Beautiful is hard to draw, so the beautiful actresses tend to be the hardest. Craggy faces, big noses, sunken eyes—all those things make it easier.

DR: *As you work on these quick drawings, are you able to give much thought to composition?*

SA: I do think some about the position of the figures, and I try to pay attention to the composition of the whole. Composition is so important—it's what draws you to look at a work on the wall at a show; it's what takes you over there from across the room. When you look at a Goya drawing, it makes sense from all the way across the gallery.

In these drawings, as in all my work, I don't pay attention to everything there. There are hot spots and cool spots, things that attract me and that I'm trying to capture and things that do not. I think my work has a slight expressionist bent. I want these things to bristle with life. ❖

ABOUT THE ARTIST

Sigmund Abeles has held dozens of solo exhibitions, and he is one of three artists featured in the 2012 documentary film *Art Is...The Permanent Revolution*. His artwork can be found in the collections of, among many others, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, The Museum of Modern Art, and the Whitney Museum of American Art, all in New York City; the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston; the Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco; the Art Institute of Chicago; the Philadelphia Museum of Art; and the British Museum. He is a professor emeritus at the University of New Hampshire, and he teaches guest classes at the Art Students League of New York and the National Academy School, both in New York City. For more information, visit www.sigmundabeles.net.