



Integral to the success of the design duo M/M (Paris) are Mathias Augustyniak's drawings, which he and Michael Amzalag sometimes incorporate into their striking advertising campaigns, commercial catalogues, posters, and design work for over 20 years.

Mathias's position is to push the boundaries and to demarginalize the practice of drawing by integrating it into the context of contemporary art. He is discretely becoming an artist in his own right, following in the path of master artists like, let's say, Francis Picabia or Matthew Barney.

This is the first interview in which he speaks as an artist to explain his ideas about the medium of drawing.

interview by  
OLIVIER ZAHM

## MATHIAS AUGUSTYNIAK

### drawing and dreaming

portrait by JONAS UNGER

All artworks courtesy of MATHIAS AUGUSTYNIAK

OLIVIER ZAHM — Have you always drawn, or did you start in the course of your work at M/M (Paris)?

MATHIAS AUGUSTYNIAK — I always wanted to draw. I started very early, in high school. I recall drawing a portrait of the French singer Renaud when I was in ninth or 10th grade. Later, I went to an art school. But I couldn't find a program that would help me draw the way I envisioned doing it. It was too directed toward illustration. And I couldn't understand illustration as a craft. I couldn't understand how anyone could draw the same thing, in the same style, for his entire life.

OLIVIER ZAHM — Is it only recently that you've fully embraced drawing in the artistic sense?

friend Pierre Le-Tan, to be so lovely. They both have the same *sound*. There's an artistic language to it. When you're talking about illustration, what you expect straightaway is style, but not necessarily any thought about what drawing is, of how and what to draw. It's a bit mechanical.

OLIVIER ZAHM — It's just a transcription in drawn terms?

MATHIAS AUGUSTYNIAK — It's a drawn transcription, exactly! Nowadays, you can do it with computer programs that do a far better job than any illustrator.

OLIVIER ZAHM — Yes, and those programs can pull a drawing out of a photograph.

MATHIAS AUGUSTYNIAK — That's exactly right. I'm not saying it can't be beautiful, but that's what it is.

OLIVIER ZAHM — *Wallpaper* is full of stuff like that, full of that kind of gimmick.

MATHIAS AUGUSTYNIAK — Yes. It's little drawn animations.

OLIVIER ZAHM — It's like the bottom rung of illustration.

MATHIAS AUGUSTYNIAK — They're things that can be made only by a machine. I've got nothing against them. It's not a criticism. But an illustrator is a machine without an unconscious.

OLIVIER ZAHM — So for you, drawing is also a stroke of the unconscious.

MATHIAS AUGUSTYNIAK — Necessarily so. It's something that leads you down the paths and through the territories of the unconscious. It takes you on a stroll through profoundly human landscapes, where it gets a little slippery or dangerous. You're going to touch things that are not under your strict control. I think that's why it took me a long while to make an affirmation of drawing and find the right way to proceed.

OLIVIER ZAHM — On the one hand, the craft of drawing you've instilled in the M/M (Paris) universe has always been very visible. On the other, you've never wanted to acknowledge it as such. Or, at least, you've been very discreet about it, about your status as an artist.

MATHIAS AUGUSTYNIAK — You're right. I've indeed always been discreet about my artistic practice outside of its function at M/M (Paris).

OLIVIER ZAHM — Why all those years of reticence, aside from the fear of revealing too much of yourself?

MATHIAS AUGUSTYNIAK — It's also that I found the "squareness" of "artistic" drawing to be problematic, as an effusion from an "I," as an expression of the ego. Don't forget that we come out of the '90s

MATHIAS AUGUSTYNIAK — I've always drawn, in fact. I had the desire, but I didn't feel ready to do it in public, like an actor who's scared to get onstage.

OLIVIER ZAHM — What distinction do you make between drawing and illustration? You seem to be saying that illustration is finding a style and sticking with it to the end of time, doing the same thing on every job. Is that right?

MATHIAS AUGUSTYNIAK — It's hard to define the notion of an illustrator. Pierre Le-Tan, for instance, is for me an artist and not an illustrator.

OLIVIER ZAHM — Because he works at a remove from the commission?

MATHIAS AUGUSTYNIAK — It's not just that. You can sense personal expression coming through in his work. The expression of his unconscious. Whereas with illustrators, though there's certainly a personal stamp on the handiwork, it's not necessarily true written expression. That's why I find the proximity between the writer Modiano and the covers of his novels, drawn by his



À L'Origine episode 11, metal nib and Chinese calligraphy black ink from the series À L'Origine, 2006

generation and the end of painting, the general refusal to be pigeon-holed in a genre.

OLIVIER ZAHM — Drawing is the minor component of painting or of a vaster artistic activity. It's often preparatory, or done as an exercise.

MATHIAS AUGUSTYNYIAK — Exactly. And when viewed from that angle, it wasn't for me. What I wanted to do was put drawing back in the center of artistic activity, in a contemporary sense, or at least in a way that was in phase with the artists of my generation, from Philippe Parreno to Matthew Barney.

OLIVIER ZAHM — Would it be fair to say, then, that your idea was to get drawing out of the academy and into a broader territory of signs — i.e., graphic design, fashion, magazines? And in this sense, give it a role to play in the sphere of contemporary art, with its very diverse practices?

MATHIAS AUGUSTYNYIAK — Yes, no doubt. What I've gotten out of contemporary art — or, rather, out of the practices linked to contemporary art — is a chance to raise drawing to the same level as the other genres: painting, video, fashion photography, etc.

OLIVIER ZAHM — Or to the same level as the preparation of Thai soup for an exhibition, or the construction of giant toboggans for a museum, for example.

MATHIAS AUGUSTYNYIAK — Right, exactly. That, too, is the beauty of contemporary art today.

OLIVIER ZAHM — There are no minor arts.

MATHIAS AUGUSTYNYIAK —

**There are no minor arts. So, indeed, I wondered how I could find a new place within this context for the somewhat old school art of drawing.**

OLIVIER ZAHM — And your idea was to situate it around the already more open and, we might say, more commercial activity of graphic design and art direction?

MATHIAS AUGUSTYNYIAK — Graphic design and art direction were precisely what allowed me to position drawing with respect to the real and say: "Okay. How do I contextualize it? How do I fit it into a context where at first blush it doesn't belong?"

OLIVIER ZAHM — Could you provide an example where drawing sort of veers off into foreign territory?

MATHIAS AUGUSTYNYIAK — The *Pradalphabet*, for example. At first, it was a simple commission from Miuccia to do a t-shirt. Instead of dashing off a graphic design and sending it right away, we proposed the creation of an alphabet for Prada, where each letter would be a drawing. The idea was that anyone who wanted a Prada M/M t-shirt could get his initials printed on it with the new *Pradalphabet*. We added a companion book containing all the drawn letters of the alphabet. We developed a complete project, with the idea that a drawing wasn't an illustration, but a way to reprogram the real. That's why I decided to do things that way. Because I could demonstrate the potential power of a drawing. What interests me is seeing how a drawing of mine that could find its way to a gallery wall or into a collection could instead circulate through the real in some other way.

OLIVIER ZAHM — Drawing serves you in return for the graphic design you do at M/M (Paris), right? What I mean is that it allows you to raise graphic design to an art. And it's doubtless a protection insofar as it's harder to take on a drawing than a mere graphic rendering.

MATHIAS AUGUSTYNYIAK — It exemplifies just how complicated the relationship is between graphic design and drawing — the question, in other words, of how a mark, a sign, can rise in value to reach for something more artistic. How can it have an added value linked to an expressive act, to speech? How can it encapsulate a statement? Because a graphical sign is very often thought of as a closed, authoritarian sign, unable to convey other statements.

OLIVIER ZAHM — Graphical signs are henceforth totally tied to the machine, the computer. Anyone can be at the commands, more or less meet the specifications of a commission, and the demand for forms of communication. It's all interchangeable. Whereas drawings remain the gesture of an author. There's a singularity behind them. A resistance that allows you to defy the commission. To do something else, as well.

MATHIAS AUGUSTYNYIAK — Yes, perhaps.

OLIVIER ZAHM — On the other hand, graphic design allows your drawing to get off the page, to circulate in other ways.

MATHIAS AUGUSTYNYIAK — Yes, that's it! That's how we come full circle. It's not so much that I was afraid to draw; it's that I hadn't yet found those systems of circulation. I didn't know how I might amplify the resonance and expand the circulation that a drawing could have outside the sketchbook.

OLIVIER ZAHM — As if the sheet of paper or the sketchbook had become for you a little too square, a bit passé?

MATHIAS AUGUSTYNYIAK — Exactly! Yes. I most definitely come from a generation for whom sketchbooks were off-limits. When we started out, it was cheesy if you had a sketchbook. And if you dabbled in painting, you were beyond cheesy! And if, on top of that, you dared to frame your canvas or your drawing, well, that called for excommunication!

OLIVIER ZAHM — No sketchbook, but a desire to circulate your drawings?

MATHIAS AUGUSTYNYIAK — Absolutely. But it's more than the circulation of drawings, more than drawing meets the real. It was important to me to remove the fetishistic character from drawing and try to wrest the practice from the author — that is, from myself — so that it could become something more universal, existing in a broader context of signs.

OLIVIER ZAHM — So, on the one hand, you affirm that drawing is directly linked to the unconscious, but on the other, you don't want to keep it in its post-Surrealist, post-Lettriste, or Beaux-Arts frame — its academic frame, let's say.

MATHIAS AUGUSTYNYIAK — Right. In effect, I wanted to set it free from the academy. I wanted to say that drawing is in itself a true contemporary vehicle for expression.

OLIVIER ZAHM — Would you say that it's contemporary art?

MATHIAS AUGUSTYNYIAK —

**Drawing has its own, often-neglected power of expression, one that is, again, relegated to the area of illustration, which I reject.** [Laughs]



Top: Carsten Höller, from the series *Opéra Humain, les Personnages*, *Il Tempo del Postino*, 2009

Opposite page: *Naked Twice 008*, felt pen, from the series *Naked Twice*, 2012

OLIVIER ZAHM — Are you alone in thinking of drawing this way?  
MATHIAS AUGUSTYNIAK — In this area, yes. I don't know of any other artists who take the same approach.

OLIVIER ZAHM — Could you provide some examples of how you work? Do you, say, photograph your drawings?  
MATHIAS AUGUSTYNIAK — Yes, but there's nothing original in that. It's standard practice among graphic designers. The first to do that were the Bauhaus artists, who re-photographed their written mark. It was literally put in perspective. That's how a drawing, or a sketch, can become a space.

OLIVIER ZAHM — Yes. It's the angle given by the picture. It changes the impression that the drawing makes.  
MATHIAS AUGUSTYNIAK — It's an old procedure. To lend some weight to a sign, you photograph it. I do it often. Instead of reproducing it, I like to make a photo-reproduction of a drawing.

OLIVIER ZAHM — Another thing you do is draw on images. Or, rather, you mix photography and drawing with Michael [Amzalag].  
MATHIAS AUGUSTYNIAK — The drawing isn't simply reproduced. It exists within a context, belongs to a visual space. It becomes an identified object. This way of proceeding has allowed me to give space to a drawing. It's as if I'd opened the drawing's frame.

OLIVIER ZAHM — You've put your drawings into advertising images.  
MATHIAS AUGUSTYNIAK — I've actually learned a lot doing advertising images. I use the term propaganda. The images that communicate in an unscrambled way are graphic-design or art-direction images. In that framework, every millimeter counts, and everything is precisely machined to go in the same direction. With drawing, however, there comes a moment when the direction changes.

OLIVIER ZAHM — Drawing prompts a shift?  
MATHIAS AUGUSTYNIAK — Yes, as in our work with Inez and Vinoodh, for example, where I suddenly added drawings on top of their photos.

OLIVIER ZAHM — Or the advertisements for Balenciaga. You drew on those photos as well?  
MATHIAS AUGUSTYNIAK — On the margins, yes. It stemmed from a desire to say, "All right, what is a photograph?" Soon, everyone will be able to take pictures. The photo needs something else added to it, something that provides a contribution from the unconscious. What this means is that you suddenly give it an invisible space that only drawing can make visible. And, well, it was

copied left and right after that. I wasn't the first to do it, of course. Still, we did manage to invent a few things.

OLIVIER ZAHM — In the advertising world, at any rate, the principles were already operative with the Surrealists.  
MATHIAS AUGUSTYNIAK — You suddenly say: "There you have it. It's possible in advertising, too." We're in a space that's...

OLIVIER ZAHM — ... transgressive?  
MATHIAS AUGUSTYNIAK — Absolutely.

OLIVIER ZAHM — Which is not an easy space to be in. And you carried this over into magazine layouts.  
MATHIAS AUGUSTYNIAK — Yes. *Man About Town*, for example, was very interesting, especially since Michael was going to make a real magazine. I had to compose within a rigid format and bring another dimension to it.

OLIVIER ZAHM — You could fissure the graphic coherence that Michael was bestowing on the object?  
MATHIAS AUGUSTYNIAK — Fissure it, yes. It's what we started to do with *Interview* magazine before Glenn O'Brien was kicked off the masthead. Glenn O'Brien, Michael, and I had decided to produce a magazine that would have an unconscious part, an accursed part. [Laughs] And, indeed, in the two issues we actually turned out with Glenn, on a few of their pages, there's a drawn writing that serves as the magazine's voice-over narration.

OLIVIER ZAHM — A sort of free space.  
MATHIAS AUGUSTYNIAK — Exactly. And that's what drawing offers: a sudden breach.

OLIVIER ZAHM — A little drifting, a psycho-geographical drift into the space of communication.  
MATHIAS AUGUSTYNIAK — Yes.

OLIVIER ZAHM — A moment ago, you were saying that drawing was, for you, like an artistic language. Is that why you draw so many alphabets, among them the alphabet of *Purple's* own identity?  
MATHIAS AUGUSTYNIAK — Yes, yes indeed. Between us, Michael and I must have done 50-odd real alphabets. For me, making an abecedary, or an alphabet, is like playing scales for a musician. It's the ABCs of the draftsman's or the graphic designer's craft.

OLIVIER ZAHM — It's also the transition between writing and drawing, the spot where they meet. Because you think of drawing as a sort of literary writing, no?



Top: 1968, from the series *Jane & Serge Some Dates*, 2013

Bottom: 1970, from the series *Jane & Serge Some Dates*, 2013



MATHIAS AUGUSTYNIAK —

**In fact, I'm on the verge of being a writer. I've never felt like one, but I've always wanted to write. I've always wanted to be a poet. I've had to find a new way of drawing, so that I could sort of write without writing.**

I've often structured my series of drawings as the 26 letters of the alphabet. Or, as a half-alphabet.

OLIVIER ZAHM — So the alphabet structures your series?  
MATHIAS AUGUSTYNIAK — Yes, in certain cases. I might not do 26 drawings for a given series, but I often get close. As is *The Alphadicks*, where I did 26 portraits and 26 ejaculations. It's man and his pistol, so to speak. [Laughs]

OLIVIER ZAHM — Do you always work in series?  
MATHIAS AUGUSTYNIAK — Yes. For me, if I were a fiction writer, the series would amount to a novel or a story collection.

OLIVIER ZAHM — You exhaust a theme?  
MATHIAS AUGUSTYNIAK — Or an intuition. I run the emotional gamut with every series. In the first drawings, you can sense the joy of discovering an idea, just as much as the naïveté of a novice. Later in the series, there are often times when you can sense self-satisfaction. It's the moment when you're proud of yourself, and you say to yourself: "I'm too good. I'm masterful." It's pretty near disgusting. And then there are those moments in a series I'm still working on, when I look at my drawings and say, "I'd be incapable of redoing them." I like those moments when I say, "There we have it. I'm..."

OLIVIER ZAHM — I see. And then you just stop?  
MATHIAS AUGUSTYNIAK — Yes, that's generally what happens. But I do often go all the way to 26.

OLIVIER ZAHM — Knowing that, with each drawing you forbid yourself from going back.  
MATHIAS AUGUSTYNIAK — Yes. I'm close to automatic writing. I have a scenario, an intuition, and I set out. In addition, I give myself constraints that leave me no margin for error. I've always drawn in that spirit of performance. That's why I've always loved Matthew Barney's *Drawing Restraint* series, where he ties himself up, wraps himself up, or climbs onto a stool or a trampoline to draw in some select corner of the paper. He gives himself physical constraints, but I think giving yourself constraints of any kind is something that comes up often in the practice of drawing.

OLIVIER ZAHM — And the constraint forces you to find a creative breakthrough?  
MATHIAS AUGUSTYNIAK — A breakthrough, yes. It's also a way to check your intuition and see if isn't just a trick. As a result, it's almost carnal when you take action; you give yourself over entirely. For me, it goes back to the idea of performance.

OLIVIER ZAHM — One of the rules in your scheme of constraints is not to go back.  
MATHIAS AUGUSTYNIAK — Never. I keep going, even if I end up getting lost midway.

OLIVIER ZAHM — Do you tear things up or throw things out?  
MATHIAS AUGUSTYNIAK — No. I throw nothing away. I keep it all! And that's another source of pride. Who's going to check afterward? Nobody. [Laughs]

OLIVIER ZAHM — Of course not. You don't have any trash.  
MATHIAS AUGUSTYNIAK — Nope. No trash.

OLIVIER ZAHM — And no regrets.  
MATHIAS AUGUSTYNIAK — No, never. You must never waver. It's like the series of gouache drawings I'm doing for Liam Gillick on his favorite pieces, or his greatest hits. I think there are 26; I can't remember. They're done without any preparation. It's something like the idea of the masterstroke. It's very romantic, too.

OLIVIER ZAHM — For that project, you have something in mind, and you just go for it?  
MATHIAS AUGUSTYNIAK — It's akin to Japanese drawing or haiku. I have a Japanese graphic designer friend who's much older than I am, around 70, and that's how he works.

Bottom: *Naked Twice 002*, felt pen, from the series *Naked Twice*, 2012

Opposite page: *Q-TheAlphadick*, rollerball pen on eroded photocopy of photographs by Willy Vanderperre, from the series *The Alphadicks*, 2010



It’s very ceremonial. It’s very important to him that it be a gesture, a single gesture. And that’s what makes the quality of the drawing.

OLIVIER ZAHM — People can feel it. You feel it. The vibration of the emotion, the intensity of the gesture.  
MATHIAS AUGUSTYNIAK — The intensity. Spot on!

OLIVIER ZAHM — Does concentration also count?  
MATHIAS AUGUSTYNIAK — Yes. You’re like a seismograph.

OLIVIER ZAHM — How long does it take you to execute a drawing?  
MATHIAS AUGUSTYNIAK — I’m fast in the sense that it ripens ahead of time. The cycles often last a month or a night, but things come out all at once. Now, there’s a certain mental preparation, of course, and afterwards it’s done in one go.

OLIVIER ZAHM — Does the instrument figure in your constraints? Say, Stabilos or colored markers for erotic drawings?  
MATHIAS AUGUSTYNIAK — It’s enough for me to see a tool or walk past an art shop. It’s as simple and naive as that, really. I suddenly say to myself: “Wow! I’ll blow ’em away with that!” I’m like a hit man with the pistol or dagger from hell. There’s a fetish for the drawing tool.

OLIVIER ZAHM — But do you explore all the possibilities?  
MATHIAS AUGUSTYNIAK — Afterward, yes. Like a musical instrument that I try to get the best possible sound out of.

OLIVIER ZAHM — Nonetheless, your preferred material, your preferred tool, is pen and ink, no?  
MATHIAS AUGUSTYNIAK — It’s my signature, as they say. I’ve now started working with oil paint. I’ve been trying to think through the idea of it. “What is oil paint?” I ask myself. What interests me about it is working with the knife, with the spatula. I think it’s the relationship with the material that interests me. The layer of paint, scraping the paint...

OLIVIER ZAHM — Are there series of drawings that you couldn’t complete?  
MATHIAS AUGUSTYNIAK — There’s a small series of drawings of my father that I started and never finished. It was too personal. My father died about 10 years ago, and I wanted to remember him without a picture. And I wanted to do as many portraits of him as there were years in my life. I’m 48 years old now, so to complete that project I ought to have done 48 portraits. And then I would’ve, say, exhibited them — because to stop the thing, I have to hand them over — but this time I didn’t make it.

OLIVIER ZAHM — Portraits are part of your work. How do you approach them?  
MATHIAS AUGUSTYNIAK — For Philippe Parreno’s opera *Il Tempo del Postino*, in Manchester, I approached things in a very traditional, first-degree way. I told myself that the artists invited to compose for it were the “actors in the opera.” They were proposing pieces. They were the ones performing. So, I came up with the idea of making drawings of those actors in the manner in which principal actors were drawn in the 19th century.

OLIVIER ZAHM — For Givenchy’s invitations, you often use a portrait of Laure, your wife, and the mother of your youngest child.  
MATHIAS AUGUSTYNIAK — A bit like Picasso would paint the women who entered his life.

**It’s not always explicit in my drawings, but for me Laure is the image of Woman. Because she’s the one I’m in love with.** We’re like a painter and his model. At some point, you have to bring that vision to life in the flesh. She can’t be a mere point of departure.

OLIVIER ZAHM — And you’ve taken on one of the most difficult and ambitious things in drawing: the erotic drawing.  
MATHIAS AUGUSTYNIAK — Yes.

OLIVIER ZAHM — It’s difficult because Picasso, Matisse, Balthus, Bellmer were already there. How do you translate desire, or sexuality, into a drawing? It’s the great difficulty.  
MATHIAS AUGUSTYNIAK — It’s a challenge. Matthew Barney also has some very lovely erotic drawings, which are very Bellmerian. He’s also resolved a number of problems. And, yes, I told myself, “I can give it a try, too.”

OLIVIER ZAHM — The bar is set high, though.  
MATHIAS AUGUSTYNIAK — Indeed. But I say it’s important. With drawing, you don’t fool around. If you really want to be heard, there comes a time when you just go. And erotic drawing is something you can’t avoid. One of the nicest compliments I’ve received came from Matthew Barney, who said to me,

when my first book of erotic drawing came out, “Yeah, not bad what you’ve done there.”

OLIVIER ZAHM — How do you approach it?  
MATHIAS AUGUSTYNIAK — First of all, you can’t do it all the time. It’s too intimate and very complicated, and you need desires — desires and time.

OLIVIER ZAHM — What about frustration? Doesn’t it also come out of that?  
MATHIAS AUGUSTYNIAK — There might be a little of that...

OLIVIER ZAHM — In any case, it took a certain audacity to depict erect penises. Not an easy thing to do. It’s still taboo.  
MATHIAS AUGUSTYNIAK — It was a very complicated exercise.

OLIVIER ZAHM — Because you can get away with female genitalia. It’s pretty and fluttery. It’s a bit like petals or little flowers. The erect penis is something else.  
MATHIAS AUGUSTYNIAK — Precisely! The series of erect penises was, for my part, a sort of provocation. It was a feat to depict those erect penises. It’s often the prerogative of the homosexual milieu, as in Tom of Finland. Whereas I call myself heterosexual, or am in any case pegged as such on the sociological grid of the art and fashion worlds. Later, the question becomes how to draw penises that can be looked at by men and women alike, and how to have the same charm we attribute to female genitalia.

OLIVIER ZAHM — But I’m not sure that the power of a successful erotic drawing comes from its charm. I think it comes from desire. You have to inspire that. It’s not necessarily porn, but it should have a certain tension, no?  
MATHIAS AUGUSTYNIAK — Erotic drawing should prompt a circulation of desire. So should any drawing, in fact ... and not just erotic desire. The success of a good drawing, like that of an exhibition or film or novel, comes to light when you can look at it and say: “Hey, I could do that, too! I could draw, make a film, or write a novel.” It makes you want to try for yourself. And then you quickly stop and say, “No. It really is more complicated.” The quality of a good drawing goes beyond the satisfaction you might get from looking at it. You should be able to say: “Hmm. It’s bucked me up. It’s given me a new taste for existence.”

END



Opposite page: *Laure, Body by Baby* Paul Lubin, from the series *Laure La Muse*