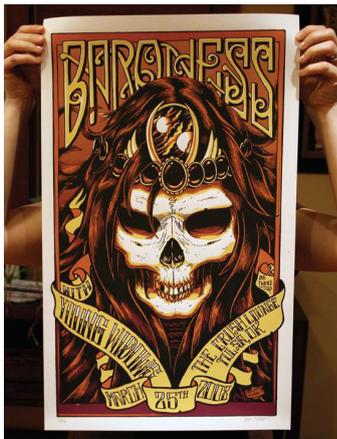




Clockwise from above: Busts by Brian Morris; "Safe in the Light" drawing on maple; bust for the Vader Project at the Andy Warhol Museum in Pittsburgh; Baroness concert poster print.



PERMANENT MARKER

Brian Morris has just gotten his first haircut in two years, going from metal-head to skate punk in one shearing. He's also contemplating the death of the leader of his art collective. "I've been in several collectives but they all failed," he says. "This is the one that has not failed because nobody cares. The expectations are so low, there's no choice but to succeed." He stares at a beer in front of him as if contemplating the irony. "Today's been a weird, weird day."

Ironies entwine Brian Morris like the snakes that slither among the skulls in his drawings. Employed by a big-name advertising agency, where he works on a computer, he spends his personal hours painstakingly making drawings by hand with nothing but a black Sharpie. He insists that each of his drawings be as clean and perfect as possible—yet he likes his own tattoos to be a little shitty.

"That's their intrinsic beauty," he says. "In my drawings I search for absolute clarity and perfection, but that's just me being neurotic. When I look at the stuff on my arm and I see a little misstep in the shading or a blown-out line, that's what draws me to it. I hate perfect tattoos. This sounds really slanderous, but all these perfectly executed shadings and a million color blends and all this gradation ... in my eyes, that's something other than tattooing. It takes the edge and the honesty out of it a little bit. It's so well-crafted and so well-hewn that it's too pretty."

Morris has created artwork for everyone from La Coka Nostra to Pelican. And though his black-and-white drawings of skulls, ships, and antique keys seem like icons tailor-made for tattooing, he despises seeing his artwork inked on people.

"I'm dismissive to say the least," he says. "They don't capture the original vision and that pisses me off. It was meant to be a piece of art, not to appear on somebody's fucking neck. Do not get one of my pieces tattooed on you. Seriously."

He's also made several tattoo machines but would never consider tattooing someone else. "The final drawing has to be perfect, no mistakes," he said. "It doesn't get any more final than a tattoo. And I can't fix it. You know what I mean? It's the Fear"—he says it with a capital *F*.

Since he despises having his art adapted for permanent bodily application, perhaps the greatest irony of all is that his workmanlike approach mirrors the process of drawing tattoos. He draws and redraws his images until the lines are as much a product of muscle memory as they are of his fastidious eye for detail. "My process came out of taking technical drawing classes in junior college," he says. "My instructor was this old Caterpillar illustrator who used to do engine blowups before computers, and the process was to get a loose sketch, get some tracing paper, and then do a refined sketch. You keep retracing and building up from what you've already done to get to the point of perfection."

Morris's work is currently showing with the likes of Frank Kozik and Tim Biskup through May 3 at the Andy Warhol Museum in Pittsburgh as part of the Vader Project, a collection of customized Darth Vader helmets. From May 22 to June 7, he'll be doing a show at Chicago's Rotofugi with Mitch O'Connell. —*Chauncey Hollingsworth*