



# PROFILE | Drew Gentle, the animator-turned-fine-artist, spent decades shaping the worlds of classic animations, and now he portrays the ‘Singular Humanity’ in every face he draws

February 14, 2026 by Dustin Staggs





When looking at Drew Gentle's work, the viewer will most certainly find faces.

They look back from the walls in clusters and masses — swirling, soft-edged, abstracted figures made of color and line. No two feel the same. Each face features its own gravitas, its own tale and quiet insistence on being seen.

Gentle notices the distinctions everywhere. In his 77 years, he's noticed what sticks out: the angle of a nose, the space between eyes, a crooked smile, a chin that juts forward with resolve or an expression that flashes across a face and departs just as swiftly.

He described himself as an empath — able to perceive people's mental or emotional state — and attributes that as a foundation of his work.

However, in "A Singular Humanity," an intimate solo exhibition up now through Feb. 26 at MIXD Gallery, Gentle, himself, is the subject.

The show brings together decades of work by an artist whose career spans more than half a century across animation and fine art.

“Drew Gentle’s work feels necessary right now because it speaks to our shared humanity at a moment when empathy feels both fragile and urgent,” said Allison Hobbs, director and curator of MIXD.

“His intuitive, line-led drawings reveal faces in flux — unfixed, emotional and deeply human — inviting viewers to slow down and engage with one another beyond surface narratives. The work leaves space for interpretation, reminding us that meaning is not prescribed but co-created, and that our individual perspectives are what ultimately connect us.”

## **GROWING UP IN ANIMATION**

Drew Gentle was born in Los Angeles in 1947 to parents with a long history in animation. His father, Robert Gentle, worked in the profession for decades, including as the primary background painter on the classic “Tom and Jerry” cartoons of the 1940s and 1950s. His mother, Virginia Gentle, worked in Disney’s ink-and-paint department, hand-coloring with what is known as a dry brush effect on the front of animation celluloids during the studio’s formative era.

Gentle grew up surrounded by art, books and ideas, he said, speaking in between bites of a salad at Mud Street Cafe in Eureka Springs.

He discussed the history and layout of the cafe, which is below street level and boasts old limestone walls and large wooden beams. He spoke about how he’s able to visualize the space in his head and map it out “pretty darn quickly.” It’s a quality that he shares with his dad, he explained.

When his father was drafted in World War II, he scored perfectly in spatial relationships, which is the ability to understand and relate objects within a three-dimensional space. So they assigned him the role of mapmaker, Gentle said.

Gentle only became aware of this passed-down trait later in his animation career, when computers became part of the work to map out an animated room. He didn't use the tool. He found it much easier to visualize the room in his head than through use of a computer.

"My folks were well-read intellectuals," he continued. "And I was the chosen one of the three boys that inherited that talent."

Before Gentle's father, Robert, passed away, he came to Gentle on a Friday evening in June 1965 — the day he graduated from high school — with an opportunity. His father asked him if he wanted to come work as his assistant at Hanna-Barbera Studios.

Gentle said yes.

"I came from a family of dreamers and not doers," he said. "So when I went out in the world when I was 18, I was very talented, very shy, very unsure of myself, and had no practical knowledge of how to deal with the world."

During his time as an assistant, he went on to get a bachelor's degree in painting from the Chouinard Art Institute, which later became the California Institute of the Arts, while avoiding being recruited into the Vietnam War.

Over the next five decades, Gentle worked for studios such as Disney and Hanna-Barbera on projects that included "The Smurfs," "Scooby-Doo,"

“Ghostbusters,” “The Flintstones,” “Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles” and “The Land Before Time.”

## A DISTINCTIVE VISION

Whereas some animators enter the profession to stay young at heart, Drew Gentle spoke as if he went into animation to grow up. However, it took him a long time to do so, he clarified.

At 22, he created his first truly serious painting — one he still remembers vividly.

The painting, currently hung in his daughter’s home in California, depicts a woman of two halves. Gentle described one as being sexualized and half-naked; the other half, dressed in a suit and in business formal.

He painted the composition intuitively. What it represented, he said, was how he was enamored with women’s control over his psyche.

“One of the things we don’t seem to have any control over is what we’re sexually attracted to,” he said.

He painted that internal conversation with himself in 1969. The signature on the back has been his signature ever since.

“And this painting scared the s\*\*t out of me,” he said. “I knew I had talent, but I realized just how much talent.”

In his early 30s, Gentle made the conscious decision to stay busy in the animation industry to provide for his only daughter, a product of his first marriage of three. He freelanced aggressively, sometimes working for four or

five studios at once, driving across Los Angeles to pick up and drop off assignments.

Even then, while he sat at his desk, Gentle continued to fill notebooks in between assignments, creating abstract figures and imagined personas for his own sanity and enjoyment.

Charles Grosvenor, who worked alongside Gentle at Hanna-Barbera and later hired him to work on “The Land Before Time” films at Universal Studios, saw Gentle’s devoted vision early on.

He first met Gentle in the late 1970s. The two were cubicle mates.

“I liked him immediately very much,” Grosvenor said. “He was very warm and accepting and had a great sense of humor and welcomed me in because he had already been there for a few years and was a seasoned veteran, if you will, and I was still kind of a rookie.”

They worked together in the layout department to define the perspective of the animation frames by drawing the backgrounds.

They had to produce 30 layouts a week, Grosvenor said. That was hard for him personally, but he said Gentle could do it without any problem and was fast at it too.

Gentle first showed Grosvenor his personal work pretty early into their 15 years of working together. When he did, Grosvenor was immediately impressed with the fine artwork, “which was primarily, if not exclusively, portraits or images of people.”

“He had such a novel approach to it that I was quite taken with it,” Grosvenor said. “To me, how loose he was and how interesting a vision he had of people was just a touch nightmarish to me,” he added with a laugh.

To this day Grosvenor teases Gentle about the look of his figures. Before the opening reception of “A Singular Humanity,” Grosvenor called to ask, “You got a show of nightmare people coming?”

Gentle referenced Francis Bacon, an Irish-British figurative painter who also created nightmarish personas.

“Someone asked him why he did the figures, why he didn’t do something else,” Gentle said. “His reaction was, ‘Why change the subject?’ And that’s been my thing too. Why change the subject? The human persona and our identities. My paintings are an attempt to find a deeper emotional level inside out.”

What struck Grosvenor the most then — and still now — was the individuality in Gentle’s work.

“It wasn’t just a cubist approach or a Picasso-esque approach to a portrait,” Grosvenor said. “Each one was different in its line or its values or its shapes, and they still had a unity to them because of his vision, but they’re all so different.

“He’s so versatile, except he was very confident in knowing what he wanted to pursue, and that was people.”

Gentle admitted to being fascinated by the human image in his art. He himself points to the notion of being raised with a “big lie.”

His family life was more complicated than he was fully aware of growing up.

Gentle learned that his father spent his entire life closeted as a gay man until he died in 1988 due to cancer. His mother told him casually, eight to 10 years after he passed, like it was a fact Gentle would have known.

This discovery, at age 40, reframed much of his childhood in retrospect.

“I just saw a bunch of dominoes,” he described the revelation. “Everything fell into place. I understood everything.”

He described his father as such a sweetheart, such a lover, such a giver, but not a role model.

“He didn’t go much deeper than that surface,” he said. “What we didn’t know was under that veneer. Dad was struggling to try to be a father to three boys at the same time.”

His father’s self-loathing was so much that he never came out to anyone, as Gentle described it. This newfound understanding was like a kaleidoscope of everything making sense to Gentle and meant a great deal of how he wanted to live his own life.

### **‘THE ARTIST IN HIS STUDIO’**

Gentle relocated to Eureka Springs in 2007 after retiring from animation.

It wasn’t his first time to the state. He visited one summer in his 20s and briefly lived on a commune on 400 acres near Winslow.

Aside from working on the 2016 “The Land Before Time XIV: Journey of the Brave,” he described putting Los Angeles and the animation business in the rearview mirror and becoming the artist he is today.

In Arkansas, he devoted himself entirely to fine art, including drawing, painting, printmaking and ceramics. His decades-old notes became the foundation for an expansive series that explores identity, memory and the human psyche.

Gentle’s faces are nearly malleable, as if formed from clay. Swirls of color from eyes, cheeks and mouths that appear to be somewhere between recognition and abstraction. The figures invite viewers’ own projection.

“I don’t feel like I should tell anybody else how to feel about it,” he said. “I even hesitate for a long time telling people my stories, I think.”

“I want them to project on what their life experience is,” he continued. “So they’ll come up with a different version of the subject’s story than I do.”

But on the back of each painting, he describes the character’s stories himself.

Gentle portrays “Laurent,” a young man he met briefly in Los Angeles over five decades ago — an 18-year-old potter of striking beauty and surprising humility, who Gentle said was “totally beautiful in a classical Greco-Roman way. He literally looked like a Greek god.”

On the back of his work “The Circus Twins,” he wrote about siblings reared in a traveling circus who are knowledgeable beyond their years and skilled at navigating the world.

It's hard to know which of his characters are truly made from reality or entirely of his own imagination. Only Gentle has the answer to that question.

“I think it's fair to say that my work is almost always a fabrication of my mind,” Gentle acknowledged.

He has to disconnect from his reality to work. The act of drawing is intuitive for him. The inclination towards stories comes from his time in animation.

“I'm used to stories. Narrative, it's called,” he said. “And so I'm quite at home with that. And the fact that my figures tend to move and show different dimensions also ties into animation.

“I just keep drawing, and pretty soon the image starts to come alive, and I'm totally controlled,” he continued. “And then I realize it's a person. Somebody coming alive right in front of me, and then I come up with a story, a narrative that fits my story better.”

The show is anchored by a monumental 12-foot painting titled “The Artist in His Studio.” It depicts the type of character Gentle most certainly knows the best. The piece is divided into three windows, each representing a different period of time: youth, the “murky middle,” and the reflecting present.

The piece was finished by Gentle in 2023 and serves as a metaphor for the passage of time. The piece reflects on a life already well-lived while also looking forward with anticipation to further creative explorations.

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## **Self-Portrait**

## Drew Gentle

**Born:** July 9, 1947, in Los Angeles, Calif.

**The first thing I notice when meeting a stranger:** The main thing I notice would be their energy, be it positive or negative.

**A habit from animation that's never left:** Mainly deadlines. Animation work is all about making deadlines no matter how difficult. Nowadays, I create my own deadlines as a way to help me work harder. It works, by the way.

**Soundtracking the studio:** I listen to jazz when I'm being creative and classical when I need to find peace. My music hops around a lot, so there's nothing I want to hear all the time. I have a huge CD library, and I use it.

**One word to describe this chapter in your life:** Grateful. I'm just so grateful for this life. I'm joyous about the whole thing.

**A small, ordinary thing that makes me happy:** That would be how much I love nature, from tiny bugs to soaring eagles, our resident groundhogs, and all the bird and squirrel doings outside. The lake view, the towering trees to the smallest flower.

**Something I'm still learning how to do well:** How to paint on a daily basis. Never stop learning.

**A fear I've made peace with:** I used to worry when younger about not having enough time to get all the work done that I want to do. Now what's happened is I realized that there was no way I was going to finish something when that something has spawned three new directions to go. And that's a good thing! It

will never end until they find me expired and have to pry the brush out of my hand.

**A perfect afternoon:** One, spending time with my wife, Mary, doing anything. We're all so busy, she with her things and I with mine, that when we take time off to be together, we remind ourselves of how much we enjoy each other's company. Two, when I get so involved with my artwork that I totally lose track of everything, including time. Lastly, doing nothing, slowing down, and getting philosophical, this restorative usually involves being with nature.

**Best advice I've received:** Your life is what you make it. If you wait around waiting for something magical to happen, I'm sorry, but nothing will.

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## FAQ

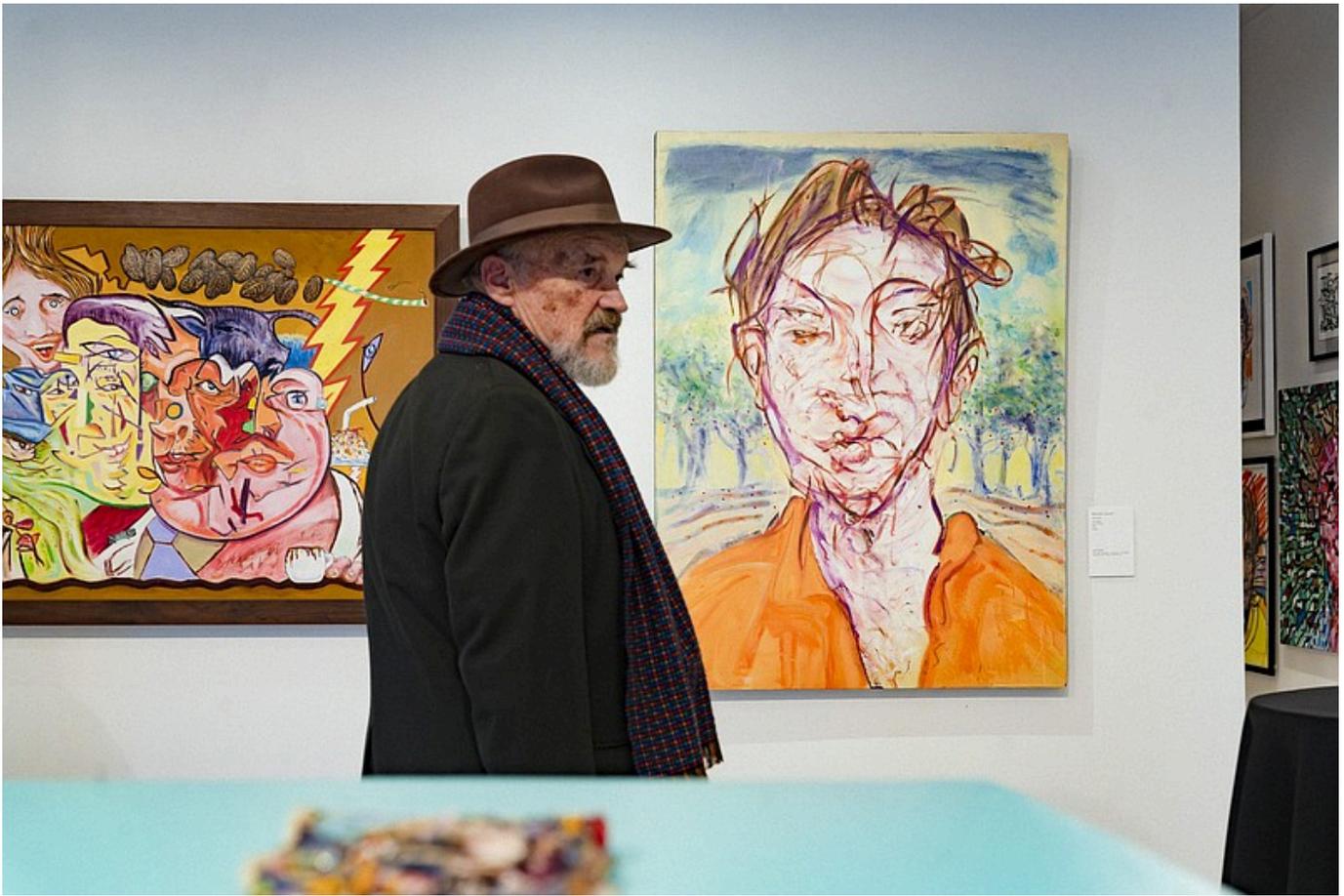
### 'A Singular Humanity'

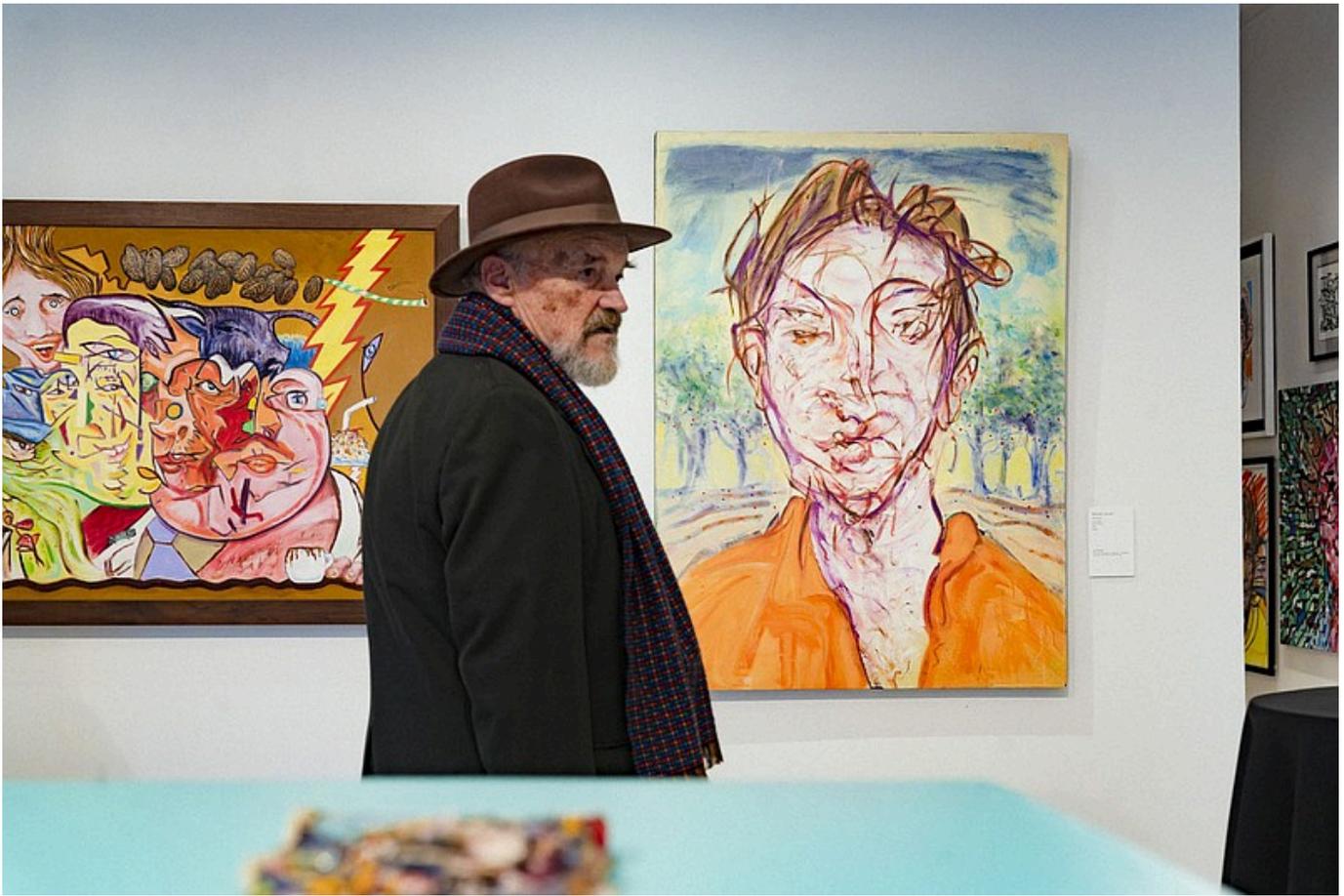
**WHEN** — On display until Feb. 26

**WHERE** — MIXD Gallery, 5100 W. Park Ave., No. 126 in Rogers.

**COST** — Free admission; works available for purchase

**INFO** — [mixd.gallery/event/solo-show-drew-gentle](https://mixd.gallery/event/solo-show-drew-gentle)







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## Dustin Staggs

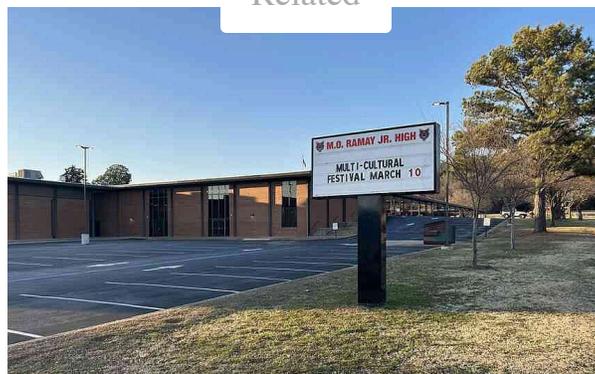
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Dustin Staggs is a features writer for the Northwest Arkansas Democrat-Gazette, where he covers arts, entertainment and community stories that showcase the vibrant culture of Northwest Arkansas. Dustin, a University of Arkansas graduate, joined the Democrat-Gazette features team in July 2024. During

his time at the university, Dustin's magazine story was named a Story of the Year finalist in the "In-Depth News Story" category by the Associated Collegiate Press, making him the only Arkansas college student to earn this recognition that year. At the Democrat-Gazette, Dustin has cultivated strong connections within the local arts and entertainment community and finds joy in spotlighting the creative talents and inspiring stories of the region.

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