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NEW YORK

## Recording Life To Hold Onto Time

Fifty years worth of journal entries, courtesy of a local artist/diarist.

05/26/15 Sandee Brawarsky Culture Editor

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Current events like the 9/11 attacks figure in Brin's journal entries. Courtesy of Derfner Museum

Over the course of more than 50 years, five careers and more than 30 jobs, Doug Brin has been keeping his own watch on the world. Almost every day, he writes and illuminates his observations, covering current events that touch him and uncovering aspects of his inner life. With tiny lettering and swirls of color, his work has a wild meticulousness, filling many books.

"Doug Brin: Journals," a sampling of his life work, is now on exhibit at the Derfner Museum in Riverdale. Viewers can see several covers of the journals, several volumes open (behind glass) displaying two-page spreads and also blow-ups of additional pages and spreads, all from 1987 to 2013.

"I have a feeling that if you record life, it doesn't slip away as easily," Brin says in an interview at the museum.

For him, writing is like breathing. Now 68, he began keeping a journal when he was 16 and began doing something more involved, in the format he still uses, at age 22. In his annual books, he has more than 2,000 layouts, thousands of illustrations and collage elements and more than a million words.

Brin has the patience of a medieval scribe. With great care, he writes his lines of micrographic text, mixing his own musings and opinions with lines that move him from a chorus of noted writers and thinkers. His letters are as likely to appear inside amorphous forms (or in the shape of a butterfly in a page he titles "Madame Butterfly") as in columns with fixed margins. He writes and draws with colored pencils, adding faded newspaper and magazine clippings.

"I try to make each page look like a work of art," Brin says.

What makes these pages interesting to view is, in addition to the eye-catching detail and composition, Brin's seeming incapacity for boredom. "I'm interested in everything, except football and the space program," he says, adding, "I'm even a little interested in the space program."

He writes deliberately, without the self-consciousness that many diarists exhibit; he has a sense that his thoughts and opinions matter, and he hopes "to provoke contemplation through reference and imagery."

The tiny letters often shout about politics. His spread on A? 9/11 drawing, with “It Can Happen Here” in outlined letters, includes descriptions of the terror that followed “as beautiful a morning as ever dawns in early September” and images of the twin towers underlined with the word “gone.”

On other pages, he references Ginger Rodgers, Tyrone Power, Andy Warhol, Osip Mandelstam, Al Gore, George Bush, George Burns, Fred Astaire, Elizabeth Taylor, Belmont Race Track, Gulf oil spills, the death of a cousin, red and blue states, Israel, his grandson Primo and the words of Tennessee Williams and Mary McCarthy.

Brin describes the daily, sometimes every-other-day work as a compulsion, not a burden. Once, on a trip to Sicily, he packed his journal with three months of entries into his luggage for the first time ever, and the bag was lost. Very upset, he worried that this would mean the end of his long streak. But he quickly resumed his work when the bag showed up five days later, and caught up in eight hours of work.

When he was 49, he discovered that he had a brain tumor. After difficult surgery, he was concerned about keeping up the journals, and for a few days his mother and his then wife took down notes. “It was a great struggle for me to resume this and I did.” His handwriting is no longer as controlled as in the early journals.

Through his years in fine arts, advertising, journalism (as a feature writer for The Daily News), public relations and teaching, as well as raising his children, the common thread has been his journal. More recently, he worked as a volunteer guide at the Central Park Zoo, and his mastery of his subject led to invitations to teach and lead discussion groups around the city. He now leads seniors in discussions of current events at Riverwalk at the Hebrew Home in Riverdale, the 92nd Street Y and other places.

The grandson of an Orthodox rabbi and the son of parents who turned away from Orthodoxy (his other grandfather was a cousin of David Ben-Gurion), he considers himself a cardiac Jew. “I relate very strongly to the emotional aspects.”

Brin is an avid writer of letters to the editor of The New York Times, and usually has one published at least once a year. Using found objects, he also creates other larger-scale collages, which have been shown in galleries in New York City. Of his art, he says, “I try to compose with random pieces of material to make sense of what I visualize between the cracks and puzzlements.”

When a shop was being demolished in his Upper East Side neighborhood, he found two copies of the Daily News from 1950 between the walls, and he has included clippings, type styles and illustrations from them in his work. More recently he found a 1946 copy of Vogue.

This small and vivid exhibit inspires thoughts of other Jewish diarists, such as the 12th-century traveler Benjamin of Tudela; the 17th-century German Gluckel of Hameln, a widow and mother of 14; and, of course, Anne Frank. It is never clear whether these writers intended for their pages to have outside readers, or how they would feel about their words being so well known.

While some journal keepers seek privacy, Brin writes for more than an audience of one — he wants his pages to be seen. “This is my legacy,” he says. “A unique legacy.”

His resourcefulness reminds me a bit of my grandmother, who also kept a kind of journal. Hers was on the pages of my uncle’s old accounting textbook, its columns of numbers and instructions covered over with family photos alongside newspaper clippings about people she admired, like the Kennedys and Perry Como. Born in Minsk, this was her journal of America, her own unique legacy. Like Brin’s, her irrepressible spirit comes through these pages.

“Doug Brin: Journals” is on view in the lobby gallery of the William Goldfine Pavilion at the Derfner Judaica Museum + The Art Collection at Hebrew Home at Riverdale, 5901 Palisade Avenue, Riverdale through July 31.