

Jeffrey Decoster

by Julie Prendiville Roux

Seated behind a Mac at his spacious work desk in his Pasadena, California, bungalow, illustrator Jeffrey Decoster is wondering what Picasso would have done if he'd had a computer.

Most artists working post-1980 have probably asked themselves the same thing. The difference is, Decoster's process provides a glimpse into what it really might have been like.

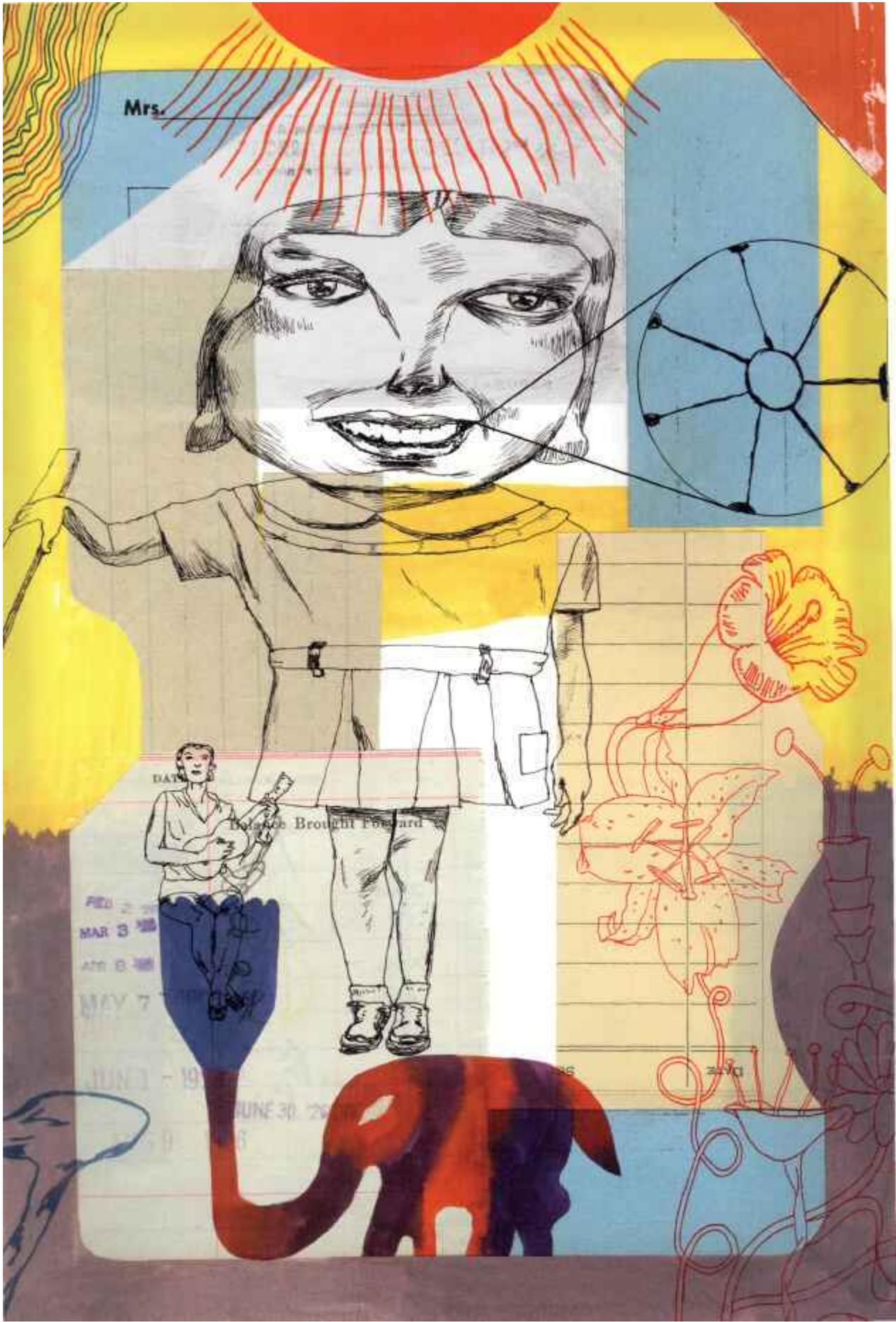
Besides paint brushes, acrylics, inks and lead, his tools are his scanner, Photoshop, Google. Starting with an original painting or drawing, Decoster may layer colors, textures, found images, scribbles, type or whatever else crosses his desk or mind. It's a high-tech path to collage, using low-tech, original source materials. At the stroke of a key, Decoster can deconstruct an illustration he's created, pulling it apart to show five, six or twenty images that have come together in a layered effect, each piece a work of art in itself.

On a recent assignment for Herman Miller's *See* magazine, he created six spreads consisting of twelve panels, each with its own theme and color palette. Separated, the small paintings appear just that—separate. But when joined together as one long painting, a unifying line carries through, morphing to fit each image illustrated. The other unifying element is each panel's unique use of color. Decoster possesses a precise, hyper-aware sense of hue. "One of my first jobs was as an assistant to a master print-maker at a fine art publishing press," he explains. "I'd spend much of my day matching colors, which I had to do perfectly to create consistent editions." The experience has paid off to this day.

Decoster, who teaches drawing at Art Center College of Design in Pasadena, spends about 60% of his time on personal projects, which often inform editorial, advertising and design assignments. Stacks of leather-bound sketchbooks in his home and studio are brimming with page after page of "studies," shapes and representational art in arresting color palettes. Some of the works include scraps of paper, old photographs and obscure objects like order forms and train tickets from the fifties. "I go to the flea market and just buy up boxes of these things," he explains, rummaging through an oversized shoebox stuffed with someone's old family photos. He puts the disparate source pieces together and adds his own stamp in the form of broad paint strokes or a meticulous line drawing. Often, however, a page will consist of layers of paint, more a study in texture. The work lives in those books until Decoster liberates an image, scanning it into a digital piece of a puzzle-like illustration.

His personal work tends to lean toward abstract. Going through his body of completed assignments, a shape will jump out, seeming familiar, because it is—it's a sketchbook image. Although a subjective selection process goes into choosing an image to incorporate, it's important to Decoster to ultimately serve the purpose of an assignment. "Sometimes I wish I were a scientist so I could work on something that has a right and wrong answer. Something that you can test to see if it works. Something that a group of people in one room could agree upon. More than that, however, I am drawn to

Right: "This piece was made to promote my Web site when I launched it in 2004. I had been getting many assignments having to do with murder and mayhem, and I wanted to try and shift focus to the more cheerful side of my capabilities. It's called *Sing*, which is something I do a lot of when I am drawing, as long as no one is around to hear me. I drew the little girl from an old photo I found at a flea market. In the picture, her head looked big, but I made it bigger because that's what illustrators do. They put big heads on small bodies, and I wanted to try that."



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an object that can never truly be understood or known, a work of art. As soon as you understand something completely, it's dead."

Although he has employed the digital realm in his work, the result remains one-of-a-kind, completely unique to his eye and style. Part of it is the fact of the sketchbooks—he's drawing from his own pool of original art. But it's also because he's never been drawn to develop a particular style. "I value individuality and personality and originality way above technical skill. This drives my students crazy," he says with a laugh. "I value these things because they're what I'm trying to find in my own work, and I feel like I have just begun. I agree with Picasso's sentiment when he said he was trying to unlearn everything he learned in school. I was always at odds with the general assertion that one needs to have a trademark 'style' to make it as an illustrator. I'm interested in so many different ways pictures get made that I couldn't be happy if I were limited by a single approach. It throws me when art directors try to control a piece because they don't understand I don't even want that control over it. Good art gets made when the artist gets out of the way.

"Frogs and oranges," he continues. "Multiplicity and creative growth is a concept that is somewhat at odds with illustration, because you are asked to plagiarize yourself, sometimes with something you did years ago. The good art directors will hire you because they sense you will give them something with quality and sophistication, not because you are known for being the guy who draws frogs, or oranges, or fill-in-the-blank. I decided early on to just ignore that little rule and let the chips fall."

As a child, the illustrator lived in several places around the country, sometimes zig-zagging back to the same community after living states away for years. When asked about his early life, Decoster counters, "There are a lot more interesting things to talk about. Why would this readership care about where I went to college?" he asks. He's genuinely concerned about not boring you, the audience. However, true to his tools, he turns to his Mac to illustrate his beginnings. Using Google Earth, a satellite map feature, he simulates flying around the country to the salient places of upbringing for the sake of efficiency and clarity, but mostly to get that part of the interview over with as soon as possible. It's an entertaining visual essay that cuts a wide swatch across the nation. He in fact attended Kenyon College in Ohio, earning degrees in art and economics. From 1986 through 1989, he attended Art Center College of Design.

He started tinkering with the Google satellite feature for an assignment he was giving his students in Documentary Drawing, which required them to visit destinations around the Los Angeles/Pasadena area. Rather than send an address or a



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map link, he sent his students a Google satellite shot. "The great thing about it is that I can add my own comments right on the shot," he says, demonstrating. The exercise reflects his unique view of the world and how he lives. Although passionate about constantly creating from scratch, he clearly has an advanced aptitude for the technical. When he realized years ago that he should learn Photoshop for his work, he bought a book, locked himself in his studio for a week, and came out knowing a lot about it.

As his influences, Decoster names painters David Hockney, Paul Klee, Calder, Matisse, Picasso and his mother, who passed away in April, 2001. "My mom was a ceramic artist who graduated with a masters and a Fulbright scholarship from Rhode Island School of Design," he says. "I came to see that her ceramic works were very sophisticated in their shapes, playfulness and the variety of glazing effects she achieved through a combination of intent and chance. I think I am attracted to the iconic, central object—the gestalt silhouette—because of her work, and also to a kind of color palette that has a sense of going through the fire."

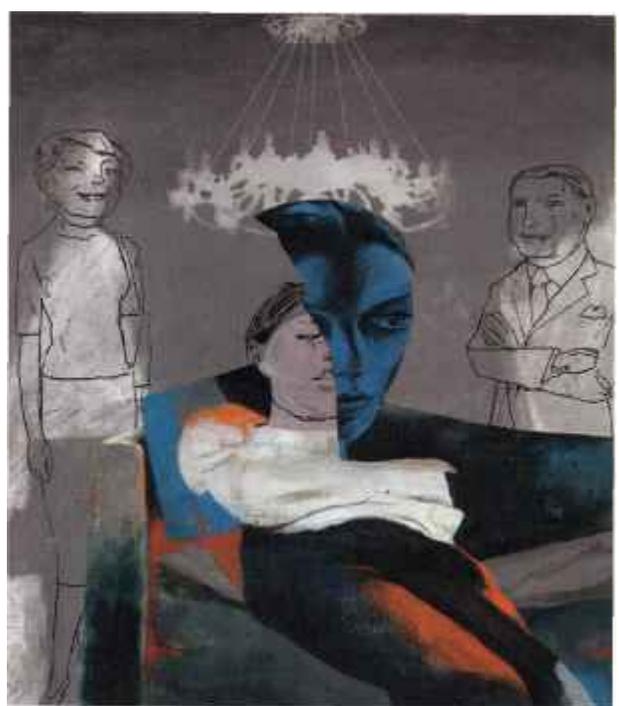
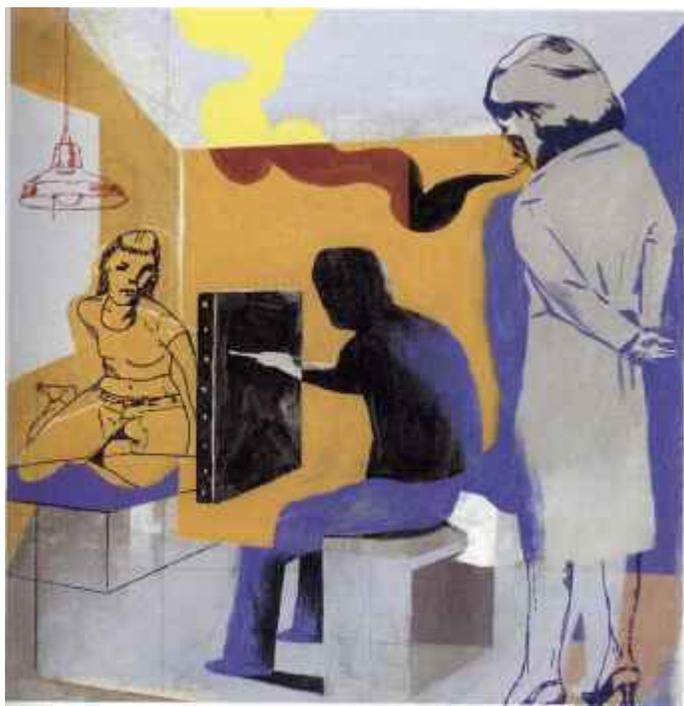
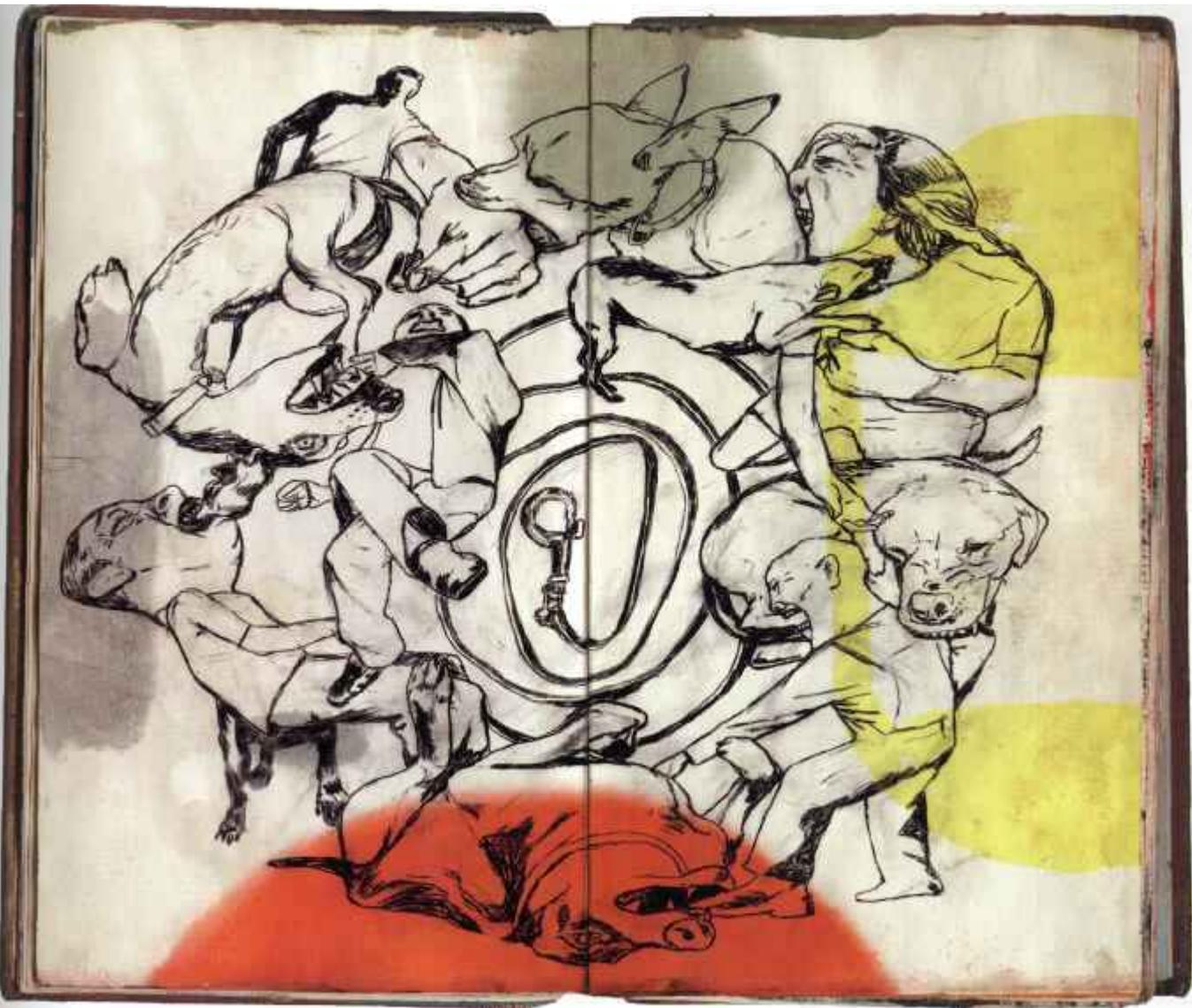
Fire is a metaphor he uses to describe his creative process. He explains, "I think of a grass fire. A ring of energy that moves out in multiple directions simultaneously, often according to the wind. Some parts die and some parts flame up. Sometimes, when the fire goes out, you have to walk across the burned field to pick up the other edge."

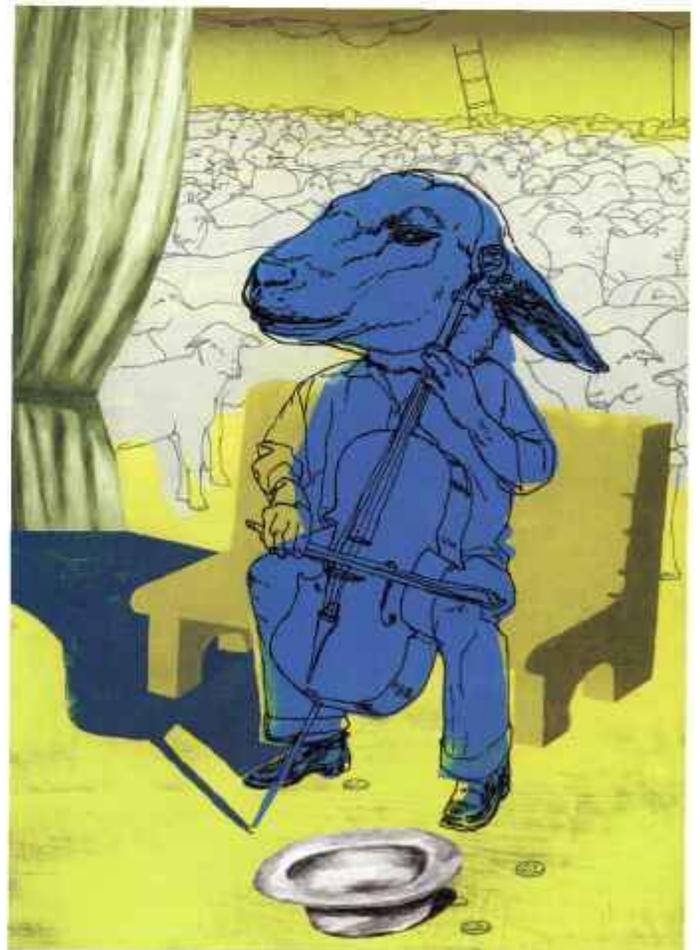
For all his musings and eclectic styles, at the end of the day, Decoster is a realist. "Illustration is art with a clock," he says, simply. "You've done when the FedEx guy comes." -A

Right: **Dog Circle.** "This image was for a *New York Times* Op-Ed piece about the 'Dog Whisperer' César Milan. Some people don't approve of his heavy-handed tactics with the dogs. They believe that aggression eventually breeds more aggression, like a cycle of violence, only with dogs and owners, instead of Israelis and Palestinians. If I were asked to do a picture about the Middle East, I might draw the exact same picture, only with flags pasted somewhere." Brian Rea, art director.

Paint it Black "This was for a review of *Paint It Black* by Janet Fitch. It's a psychologically dark narrative about an artist who commits suicide, I was glad to get this assignment because it would certainly cheer me up after the previous one about a guy who enjoyed mutilating sheep before he killed his neighbors in a heroin-induced stupor." Carol Kaufman, art director; The Los Angeles Times, client.

Paradox "This is another image for a book review about suicide and depression, *The Price of Privilege* by Madeline Levine Ph.D. If it weren't for books, suicide and depression, I would not have a career. The book was written by a family psychologist whose aim is to help a specific parental demographic, namely, those extremely wealthy parents whose teenage children are chronically unhappy, angry and apathetic despite their great privilege and affluence. Having empathy for your subject is what makes good pictures and that was the struggle for me here." Dorothy Yule, art director; The San Francisco Chronicle, client.





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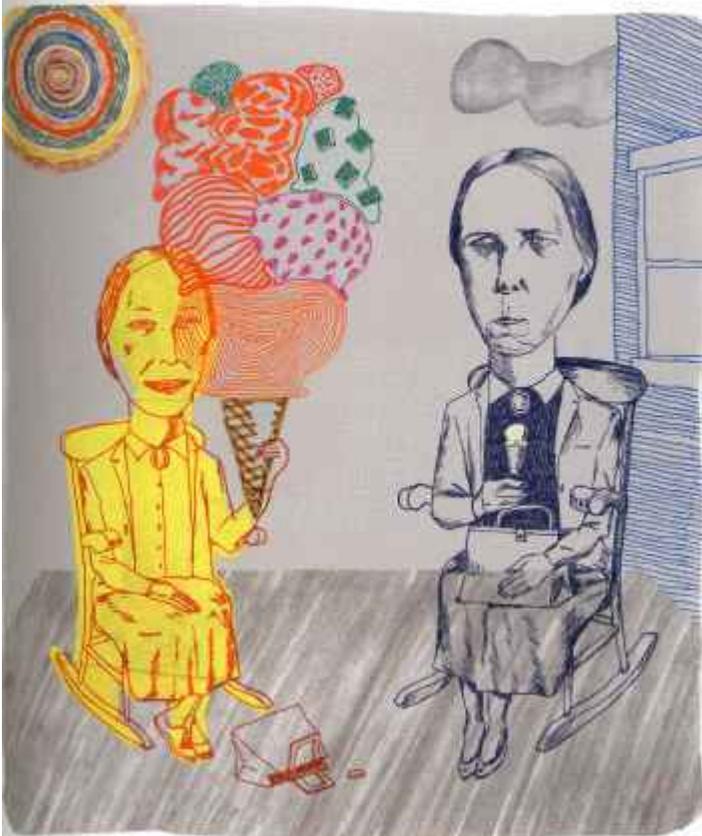


Left: **Shanghai 6.** "This is one spread out of six, to illustrate a story on modern day Shanghai. The development of the city is described as a collision between ancient Chinese tradition and modern commercial interests, happening in fast-forward motion, without a plan. I thought it would be appropriate to build the images the same way the city was being built, and necessary, because I had two weeks to complete the project. I decided to make all of the images connect so that they would make one continuous landscape/cityscape when placed end to end. That way I would have only one painting to do instead of twelve." Todd Richards, designer; Cahan & Associates, design firm; Herman Miller, client.

Letter Box. "I go back and forth between making images that bring awareness to the actual flat surface of the artwork, and images that are like windows into an illusion of real space. It depends on what is most appropriate for the assignment. I'm beginning to play with the idea that a drawing surface can also be an actual object that contains its own associations. A bundle of letters might suggest a relationship or communication. A picture of a boxing match might symbolize controversy or acrimony, or something else. It's up to the viewer. In any case, the idea is to create some kind of alchemy. What do the strings make you think of?"

Sea "This is an example of a stream of consciousness drawing I like to make in my sketchbooks, when I am not making illustrations. I usually start with some sort of horizon line, which instantly creates a space, and then I just start populating the space with whatever images come into my mind. I try not to let my intellect get in the way and let it unfold. In the end, it's as much a surprise to me as if I had been watching someone else do it. I've noticed that I like to make things float, and have them touch each other, so there is lightness and interconnectedness, *ideas* that I aspire to. I credit my teacher Dwight Harmon for his inspiration."

Sheep to Slaughter. "This image is about the over-supply of music school students compared to the miniscule number of full-time jobs available to them upon graduation. That sheep could just as well be sitting there with a paint brush as with a cello. Norman Rockwell, who found a nice job with the *Saturday Evening Post*, said if a picture isn't going well, add a puppy. I've discovered the trick of switching out a person's head for an animal's head, or vice versa. Choose an animal that is a metaphor for your subject, and you're done. If it still isn't working, try making it a puppy's head. In this picture, to make the herd, I drew one sheep named Dolly and then used the clone tool." Peter Metzger, art director; The Los Angeles Times, client.



This page: **Mother** "I did this drawing at a time when I had been listening to the song 'Motherland' by Natalie Merchant and thinking about the unique quality of feminine nurture. I saw this young mother near my coffee shop and she agreed to let me take her photograph. I was interested in the sling because it's like a marsupial's pouch, an ultimate place of warmth and safety. The hands are in the same shape as the sling, so it's really the *double* holding of the child that makes the point about the depth of caring. The mother's face became more severe than intended, but I hope it saves the picture from over-sentimentality. The bird flying off the page is to say that these moments are fleeting."

Spending Habits. "When I get a call from a financial magazine, I know I'm about to be tested. I really admire illustrators who can solve assignments about bond futures and investment strategies without drawing a staircase, a dollar sign or a target with an arrow in it. *Forbes* asked me to do an illustration about spending habits. In thinking about consumption, I naturally thought about ice cream, my favorite form. I don't know how many artists have done a take-off on *American Gothic*, but I justified it with figuring it was either that or draw a target with an arrow in it. When I look at Grant Wood's painting now, I imagine the pitchfork is to ward off all illustrators thinking of taking liberties with the wife." Charles Brucaliere, art director; Forbes Inc., client.