

**MELT WITH YOU**  
From the show "I Melt in Your Presence" at San Francisco's Modernism gallery in 2007, these paintings exemplify Gary Baseman's style: a combination of bright colors, cuddly characters and surreal scenes.



Equal parts huckster and hero, illustrator Gary Baseman has turned his unique vision of the world into a creative, not to mention profitable, multimedia enterprise.

# smearing the boundaries

BY INA SALTZ

The dunce, the skeleton, the mermaid, the devil, the living piñata and the "unattainable" woman. Illustrator Gary Baseman's multitude of characters are immediately recognizable, all rendered in a kind of Frieda-Kahlo-meets-Keith-Haring-meets-Day-of-the-Dead style. His images are simultaneously vibrant, garish, violent, childlike, naive and knowing, repellent yet oddly appealing.

I first met Gary Baseman almost 25 years ago while I was an art director at Time magazine, where Baseman was commissioned to do spot illustrations. His style was so cartoon-like and specific that it was a tough sell to convince the editors that his work would fly in a news magazine.

"Even then, Gary wouldn't change his style to please others," says Time art director Arthur Hochstein. He's one of many art directors who's had a lengthy relationship with Baseman. "When you commission Gary to do a piece of illustration, you are buying a Baseman, you are using him for his voice and humor. His work transcends the normal art director-illustrator-editor relationship."

## UNDERGROUND AND MAINSTREAM

"Gary gets away with a lot because of the style," says Hochstein. "It's like strangling someone with a smile on your face." Besides cute characters, Baseman's images are full of spilled guts, pulsating arteries, throbbing brains, entwined entrails, disembodied organs and puddles of organic liquids under slit torsos. "Don't be afraid of spilling your guts, of expressing yourself without discrimination," Baseman says.

When he's asked about the violence in his images, Baseman protests, "Don't take my work literally. Death celebrates mortality and life. A head being split open can be about stress in the workplace." What about images of beheaded women and women as piñatas? "There are a lot of women, including lesbians, who love what I do. My work

comes from a male perspective. It's about desire and longing for the female form. There's violence against dogs, too."

Moral objectives aside, it's hard not to be impressed with the sheer quantity and diversity of Baseman's work, all produced with vivid Technicolor exuberance, motion, subversive cheeriness and the cuddly quality he imparts to even the most disturbing of imagery. "Gary has an amazing color sense," Hochstein says. "The colors just zoom off the page."

And Baseman's weltanschauung has translated to a mass audience: Disney's animated film "Teacher's Pet"—based on Baseman's Emmy-award-winning television series for Nickelodeon—received rave reviews in *The New York Times*, *The Los Angeles Times* and *Time Magazine*.

Why does Baseman strive to appeal to both the underground and the mainstream? "It's a very small market when you just go after designers and illustrators," he says. "Now when people come to my book signings I get people who have nothing to do with that industry; they're just people who are fans of my paintings or collectors of my toys."

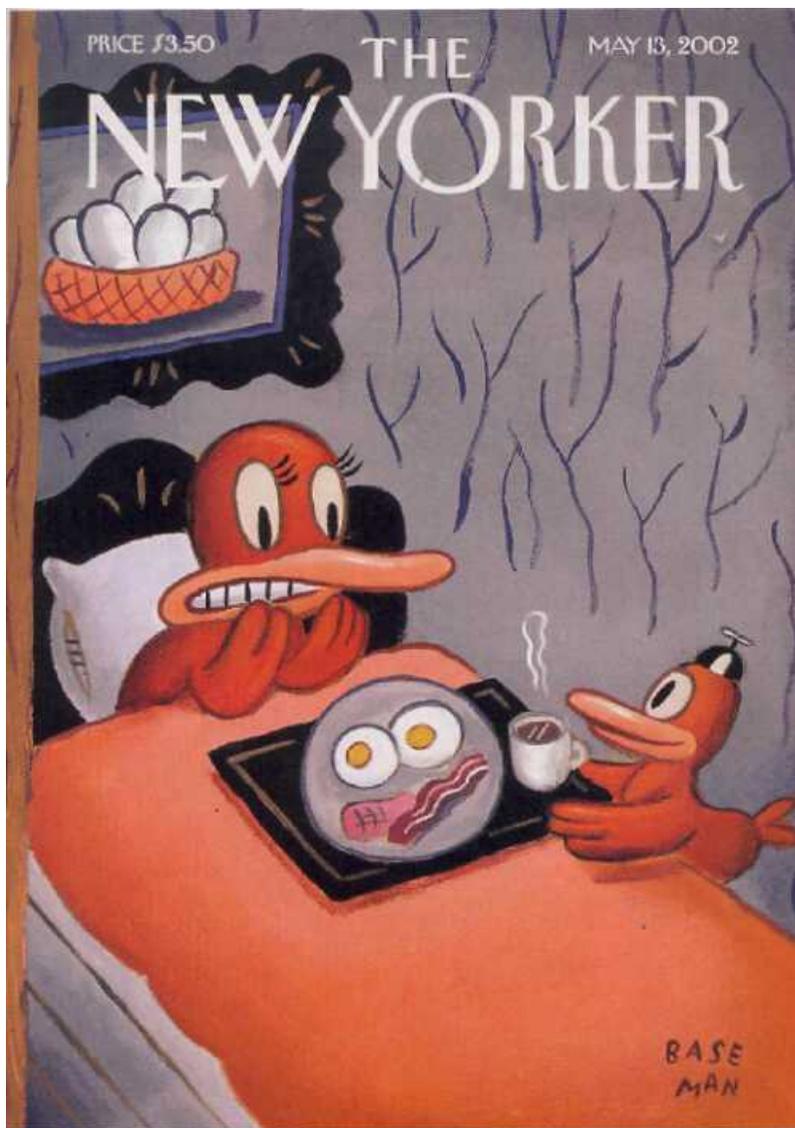
At a book signing at the Museum of Modern Art's bookstore in New York City, I witnessed a never-ending line of the faithful bringing their books and collectible toys for Baseman's personal touch. He patiently drew one of his many characters for each supplicant, combining it with a name and his signature, designing the surface carefully. "My work appeals to people who appreciate high and low art," he explains.

## SIGNATURE STYLE

Despite pressures to do otherwise, Baseman has managed to extend and translate his successful editorial illustration style to so many other areas without modifying the specificity of his imagery, his roster of recurring characters or his color sensibility. Hochstein



**HIDE AND SEEK**  
Baseman has made the transition from illustrator to fine artist with pieces like this one called "The Nature of ChouChou," which was part of a show called "Hide and Seek in the Forest of ChouChou" at Los Angeles' Billy Shire Fine Arts gallery.



**UNIQUE EDITORIAL**  
 Baseman keeps his uniquely identifiable style intact while solving editorial problems like in the illustration for *The New Yorker's* May 2002 issue (above) and this August 2005 cover for *Fast Company* (right).



seen Gary do was a portrait of Fiona Apple. ... I think it was for *Rolling Stone*. ... It was done in the Baseman style and yet he was able to achieve a likeness."

New York Times Book Review art director Steven Heller, who gave Baseman his first major illustration assignment in the mid '80s, writes in Baseman's monograph "Dumb Luck," "He has made a quantum leap from a mere illustrator to veritable 'auteur.' Indeed, he has **accomplished** what many of his peers only dream about. ... It is not easy to make art that has such mass appeal yet remains true to the artist's soul. Somehow Baseman has stayed loyal to both soul and fans without compromising the essence of his art."

"You have to maintain the integrity of your work," Baseman says. "Stay true to your message. Don't limit yourself to any media. You should be able to do anything." Everything Baseman does is filtered through his vision of the world, which he seems able to apply to any project. "I try to keep a balance between the comic world, the toy world, the book world, the illustration world, the fine-art world," Baseman says. "I have the world at my feet. Nowadays people are more open to other industries."

When asked about the current stagnant state of illustration, Baseman suggests that "instead of waiting for the phone to ring, people should be more proactive in getting their projects made. There are more and more artists and fewer opportunities for traditional illustration, so they must blur the boundaries." Baseman sees a growing movement of artists discovering alternative outlets: in stores, gift shops, galleries.

"I'm doing very little editorial now," he explains. "I'm mostly painting. I'm reprogramming myself, learning how not to censor myself. I always took risks, but I don't want to restrict my ego or my superego."

### IMMODERATE AMBITION

After becoming a successful player in the world of editorial illustration, Baseman has had success as a fine artist in gallery shows, mostly in Los Angeles. Just back from Italy (Baseman spoke at a comic festival in Lucca), he has shows this year in London, Sydney and Barcelona. Baseman says, "I wanted to reach collectors and the art community, among others. I don't see it as changing what I do. ... I see it as expanding, building on it like a foundation."

He's also created a little universe of limited-edition collectible toys. (At auction, his **20-inch-high** painted "Dunny" figure fetched \$4,500.) His board games in collaboration with Cranium, a Seattle-based game company, are almost as widely distributed as classics like *Scrabble* and *Monopoly*. Despite his decidedly-quirky style, his work has been used worldwide for packaging and advertising. Now Baseman is designing apparel and accessories "like Paul Frank," he says.

Baseman actually sees himself as the Ralph Lauren of art; he envisions a world in which everything even remotely visual will have the unmistakable look and feel of Gary Baseman. "I've always wanted to play in the fashion world," he says. "My overall goal is to create what [Ralph Lauren] has done; his couture is more

theoretical, but he keeps everything high quality, even that which is created for the mass market."

Baseman's immoderate ambitions are not as wacky as they seem, though wackiness is certainly at the core of much of his art. His self-professed megalomania is in fact not at all astonishing in light of his considerable accomplishments to date. Baseman's aesthetic/creative philosophy revolves around what he calls "the pervasive art movement."

"I am always trying to smear the boundaries," he says of the many forms his art has taken. "I am a professional message-maker, one of the best in the business. If I'm creating an image to spoon-feed a message, to titillate, to skewer, to suggest a whiff of something in order to stimulate the viewer's senses, I know how to do it."

### NONSTOP SELF-PROMOTION

Baseman's incessant self-promotion has been viewed with a jaundiced eye by some of his contemporaries. As designer and artist Mirko Illic says, "I get more junk mail from Gar] Baseman than from Viagra." Baseman's calendar is so full of public appearances that it's a wonder he has time to work on his art.

Art director Michael Grossman says that Baseman "is a serious huckster. I can imagine what it must be like when he's in a meeting with a Hollywood producer." While Baseman often professes idealism, he makes no apologies for his expansive visions of all kinds of art for all kinds of people, which is conveniently quite profitable.

Hochstein confirms that Baseman sees himself as a brand in terms of art. Perhaps this kind of ceaseless effort is a prerequisite in today's competitive media world; it's largely through his own self-confidence and persistence that Baseman finds himself "taking meetings" with the head of animation at Disney.

"I've been very fortunate as an illustrator," Baseman admits. "I got spoiled by the money from the editorial work. But after a long time it just wasn't as satisfying, I wanted to make a different kind of statement, though I'm proud of being an illustrator. I wanted to work on my own particular messages; rather than being a visual problem solver for others, I specifically had certain themes I was developing on my own.

"In the early '90s I had some work in an illustration gallery, and in 1999 I had my first solo show of fine art at the Mendenhall Gallery in L.A.," Baseman continues. "It was great to be able to put together a body of work, to see my theme all in one place, to set up an environment in which people could really be affected by my work." The show was called "Dumb Luck and Other Paintings About Lack of Control."

### DOGGED DETERMINATION

Meanwhile in the mid-'90s, Baseman got a call from Nickelodeon asking about ideas for an animated TV show. He spent a week and a half coming up with ideas. "The first pilot that was made for Nickelodeon was called 'Louie Louie,'" he says. "I was there even day: I wrote it and did the voice for it. On the second

pilot I worked with the animation team from 'Ren & Stimpy' and Ron Hauge, who used to be an illustrator from 'The Simpsons.' Meanwhile, I was developing new ideas and pitching them all over town. I was determined to do a TV show."

Even though neither pilot was picked up, Baseman took them to the studios, trying to sell his ideas. Disney liked the one about a dog who wants to become a boy- 'The series debuted in 2000, and Baseman won three Emmys during its three seasons. Low ratings caused it to be dropped, but Baseman convinced Disney to do "Teacher's Pet" as an animated film.

"I discovered that after working in solitary as an illustrator, I liked collaborating with people who are more talented than you," he says. "For Teacher's Pet, I worked with a crew of 50 writers, artists, background painters, prop artists, character designers, composers, actors, editors and studio executives, I wanted to be very involved.' Complete with edgy performances, original musical numbers and sly references to Disney characters, Baseman's off-kilter comic version of a Disney animated feature is very un-Disneylike indeed.

Michael O'Sullivan of The Washington Post called "Teacher's Pet" "like the love child of Snow White and Tex Avery. It's part sugar, part spice (cayenne, not nutmeg) and all-around brilliant."

Elvis Mitchell, The New York Times film critic, wrote, "This marvelously quick-witted and gloriously goofy hand-drawn feature shows there's still more than 21 grams of life left in the form. It helps when the drawn stuff has a touch of individuality, and the artist Gary Baseman—creator of both the Saturday morning cartoon show 'Teacher's Pet' and the sure-footed, blessedly swift movie that was derived from it—couldn't be more idiosyncratic."

Like the overachieving governor of his native state of California (who claims he knew at 16 that he was destined for greatness), Baseman's supreme self-confidence has paid off. Inspired by Warner Brothers cartoons of the '30s and '40s, the Marx Brothers, Mad magazine, Surrealism, Pop Art and Bed Grooms, among others, Baseman's art is now an inspiration for a generation of younger artists and illustrators. They might do worse than to learn another lesson from the man who calls himself the "Master Visual Message Maker"; "You should be able to do anything." And it doesn't hurt to be a bit full of yourself. ■■■

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