

philip burke, drew friedman, robert grossman, and victor juhasz

EDITORIAL CARICATURISTS

By Steven Heller

In 1987, a peach-colored, broadsheet newspaper named *The New York Observer* appeared on newsstands throughout Manhattan. The paper's initial incarnation, funded by investment banker Arthur Carter, was pretty dull, but Graydon Carter became editor in 1991 and transformed it into a venue for savvy political coverage that also provided a generous helping of media and cultural dish. In the mid-'90s, editor Peter W. Kaplan, a veteran television and print journalist, began molding the *Observer's* sophisticated flair. Kaplan heightened the weekly's editorial panache by assigning four artists—Drew Friedman, Robert Grossman, Philip Burke, and Victor Juhasz—to create cover illustrations and caricatures. The quartet had distinguished roots: Friedman had illustrated a regular feature in *Spy* magazine, in which he lampooned the glitterati by depicting them in curiously embarrassing situations. Grossman, the grand master of airbrush, had produced some of the most emblematic political and social caricatures during the '60s and '70s for magazines including *New York* and *National Lampoon*. Burke created colorfully expressionistic caricature paintings that had become staples in *Vanity Fair* and *Rolling Stone* in the '80s. Juhasz was known for his elegant, 19th-century-inspired portraits, frequently seen in *The New York Times* and other publications. During a period when current-affairs caricature had



Philip Burke's portrayal of Ana Ivanovic and Novak Djokovic before the U.S. Open, August 21, 2007.

few outlets, the *Observer* was an oasis for these four as well as an inspiration for many others. Last February, the weekly altered its format from broadsheet to tabloid and shifted its editorial emphasis from longer political analyses to shorter pieces. Yet after all these years, the same quartet of artists continues to create some of the most acerbic—and funny—graphic commentary in publishing. To mark the *Observer's* 20th-anniversary year, *PRINT* rounded up the crew to discuss the challenges and delights of having such a prominent stage for their work.

HELLER: The *Observer* is one of the few publishing venues in the U.S. that encourages social and political caricature. Do you think there's a dearth of strident caricature today?

FRIEDMAN: There does seem to be, and I'm not quite sure why. Perhaps it's because of the current trend in most magazines toward running photos. And so many publications don't want to make waves. There are still great caricaturists—and some lousy ones—getting published, but it's not like the glory days of the '60s and '70s. **JUHASZ:** I'm not sure there is a dearth of "strident" caricature itself. The dearth is in publications that are not part of some huge corporate

complex; these publishing houses don't want to offend the powers that be. You see fierce caricaturing all over, but not in publications with sizable markets. **GROSSMAN:** With the advent of the internet, there's more caricature than ever. For me, "stridency" as I understand it is off-putting. Uglification is not my idea of caricature. Monstrous people who want to terrify us probably like being portrayed as monstrous and terrifying. To me, it's better to show the bully as the frightened baby he probably is. **HELLER:** What does the *Observer* enable you to do that you can't do for anyone else? **BURKE:** Being featured on the cover once a month is an awesome stage. And Peter Kaplan is continuing a practice I first experienced while working with Fred Woodward at *Rolling Stone*: He requires no preliminary sketch. He delights in really getting involved in each piece at the outset, and part of what I look forward to every month is our time on the phone, when we have a kind of back-and-forth free association until we have nothing more to say. **FRIEDMAN:** Working for the *Observer* is unique because Peter Kaplan trusts us to the point of letting us conceive the image following that brief conversation with him. That's a *dream* situation. **GROSSMAN:** For the *Observer*, I can be naughtier. And nuttier. I showed Hillary in a bikini recently; I doubt



Barack Obama and Hillary Clinton face off in Robert Grossman's March 26, 2007, drawing.

The New York Times or *The New Yorker* would have run it. **HELLER:** It appears that with the exception of "entertainment" caricature, in which the artist stretches a nose or curls a lip for the portrait, editors are nervous about caricature making too profound a statement. Do you believe this is true? **BURKE:** This is definitely true. Editors are under pressure from publishers not to alienate any potential consumers. **FRIEDMAN:** Usually, an editor or art director knows what to expect from me. Of course, I'm trying to capture something a photo can't, without going too far overboard. But occasionally the subject or situation just demands it, and we've all been scolded from time to time. **GROSSMAN:** If I'm not amusing someone at least a little, then why bother doing what I do at all? Brad Pitt may not be as morally reprehensible as Karl Rove, but that doesn't mean a drawing of either of them can't be equally perceptive and funny. It seems to me that editors are often nervous these days with anything that seems "difficult" or requires a bit of thought. It may be that some have trouble even reading any kind of drawing. They seem to accept uncritically the idea that a photograph is "real"—yet drawings can be real without being "realistic." **JUHASZ:** I can tell you from experience—and happily, this doesn't apply to the *Observer*—that I've had to drastically revise and tone down caricatures on orders from editors because the publication wanted to remain on good terms with their sources in the White House. The current administration absolutely takes the cake for intimidation. **HELLER:** Can caricature be neutral? **FRIEDMAN:** If you can pull off "neutral," you're successful. You want the work to be as honest as possible, and be true to yourself, whether it's a drawing of Dick Cheney or Mother Teresa. It's best not to take sides, although I certainly do have an opinion. An example of my work that I think succeeds because you can't tell who I prefer—or dislike the least—was an *Observer* cover depicting Bush as Dracula and John Kerry as the Frankenstein monster



Drew Friedman's depiction of Julia Roberts for an article on glamorous city bikers, September 4, 2007.

strangling each other. **JUHASZ:** Not everyone is famous and loathsome. There's a big difference between Dick Cheney and some stock analyst you've never heard of. There are plenty of those assignments where you have no personal or emotional stake in the person you're caricaturing. In those instances, it becomes a matter of being professional and doing the best drawing possible. **GROSSMAN:** "Caricature" has a root related to "carry," meaning that the portrait is *supposed* to be "loaded." If it's neutral, then it's something else entirely. **HELLER:** What can a caricature do that no other art form can achieve? **BURKE:** With the intense elasticity of *caricatura*, we can amplify those physical facets that reveal the inner life of a character. I think that in great caricature, you can see not only the subject but also something of yourself and every human. **FRIEDMAN:** Hopefully, it can make you laugh—better yet, scream with laughter. And it should expose something about the subject that a photo just can't: what's inherently and uniquely repugnant, or even wonderful, about that person. **GROSSMAN:** Caricature to me is

the essence of irony, in which a statement is glaringly right and wrong at the same time.

HELLER: How have your victims reacted to your satiric images? **FRIEDMAN:** Over the years, I've gotten mainly positive feedback from the subjects, and many have bought the originals. The movie producer Harvey Weinstein, whom I've drawn a number of times and occasionally wondered if I had gone too far, has ended up purchasing several pieces. One exception was Woody Allen. He penned a piece for the *Observer* about his lifelong love of the New York Knicks. I drew him courtside as an old-fashioned, fedora-wearing sportswriter, clacking away at his Underwood typewriter. Pretty benign, I thought, but I must have gone a tad overboard with the freckles, because he promised never to write for the paper again. **GROSSMAN:** Occasionally, the subject will have a flunky inquire about owning the original. Even more occasionally, they will be willing to pay for it. They seem to think that since it's a picture of them, they already own it. Daniel Libeskind did order a bunch of prints of a cartoon I did that showed him beating up another architect with his model of the World Trade Center replacement. **HELLER:** When you get an assignment from the *Observer*, what are the first two or three things you do? **BURKE:** Stretch and gesso my canvas, download many very recent high-res pictures of the subject, and try to find my target on YouTube or in a recent movie. If it's a new subject for me, I learn the facial dimensions and posture by doing a straight study or two in pencil on paper. **FRIEDMAN:** The first thing is to try to come up with a solid, funny concept, which I hash out with my wife, who's been writing with me for years. I'm very particular about having the right expressions on the subject that I can then tweak to fit the concept. There's nothing worse than having to work from a photo of the subject with a bland smile, staring into the camera. Is it any wonder why I love drawing old Jewish comedians? They're



Victor Juhasz's caricature of Rupert Murdoch for a piece on the media baron's *Wall Street Journal* acquisition, July 30, 2007.

always on! **JUHASZ:** First, get good reference, and second, get *really* good reference. More often than not, my images aren't situational. In this sense, I have more in common with Drew. We are usually setting up scenes with punch lines and gags, and that kind of illustration is so dependent on good visual reference for the right expression. It's not easy creating expressions when you've got nothing to work with. Bob is the most "cartoony" of the group here, and is the master of getting to the heart of the portrayal with the most brilliant shorthand—and I assume that means he doesn't depend on visual reference. **GROSSMAN:** If you mean, do I think, "How the hell am I going to make this look like so-and-so?" The answer is, I never do. **HELLER:** Can a caricature go too far? In other words, should a caricature offend the individual being caricatured? **FRIEDMAN:** Yes and no, depending on the individual. When I drew Osama bin Laden after 9/11, I had flies buzzing around him. I was actually asked by the art director to remove them! I was never quite sure who the editors were afraid of offending. The flies? **JUHASZ:** I would hope the portrait would offend, if your desire is to make a point. Again, this falls into the political category and where your particular opinions lie. You could be utterly cruel, I suppose, toward celebrities, especially the abundance of celebrity

train wrecks populating the gossip pages. That's shooting fish in a barrel. Or, if you're portraying Saddam Hussein, that's like dropping a grenade in a barrel. But the real potential fun is in the political. **BURKE:** If the individual is offensive, then I think a true caricature will be quite offensive—but hopefully funny at the same time.

GROSSMAN: I'd encourage artists to go as far as they like; editors and art directors will put on the brakes as they see fit. If the subjects are offended, so be it. Surely, the worst of them knows that a doodle is less painful than a bullet. **HELLER:** Other than doing work that makes you happy, what satisfactions do you get from caricature? **GROSSMAN:** After many years of doing it, I still find it magical that a few lines on paper can evoke a particular person, make people laugh, or make someone believe for even an instant a ridiculous lie. Exactly how it works remains intriguingly unknowable. **BURKE:** I've come to realize that the action of caricature is one of my prime addictions. During the first few hours of painting—or the first half-hour of a drawing—I find myself in a delightfully lyrical, slightly sarcastic, extremely open state of being. The dance, the flow, the humor. Later, when I'm able to see things in the painting that I wasn't aware of during the actual process, such as form and color interactions, I'm thrilled. **FRIEDMAN:** One of the truly satisfying aspects is doing revolving covers with Philip, Victor, and Bob, three of my heroes. For me, the competition level is incredibly high, because their covers are so great—so I'm inspired to try to do my best work. **JUHASZ:** It's rarely a breeze. There are those occasions where I find myself laughing along with the work, very satisfied with what I see in front of me. Four out of five times, that means it's going to get revised. I'm just grateful at 53 to still be able to do something I have a talent for. I don't know what else I'm qualified to do. 📍

Steven Heller's forthcoming book is *Iron Fists: Branding the Totalitarian State* (Phaidon Press).