

THE NEW WAVE OLD WAVE

In an era obsessed with the Next Big Thing, or whatever happens to be this week's New Black, Varoom thought our readers would appreciate a longer-term view. Though the illustrators on the following pages would blush at being described as 'legendary', having produced canonical work, but they are still turning out Hot New Work! We wanted to find out *what early work proved significant in their art or career? What one piece captures something essential about their work? How has their point of view developed in new work?* Their responses showed just how they maintain the creative fire. We also wanted to know *which illustrators of a more recent generation they keep an eye on.* And of course there's always the wisdom of hindsight, as airbrush pioneer Robert Grossman reveals he wished he "invested heavily in a giant airbrush manufacturing corporation." Interviews by *Steven Heller, Derek Brazell and John O'Reilly*



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ROBERT GROSSMAN

An illustrator & caricaturist since the mid-1960s, Yale graduate, Robert Grossman re-introduced the airbrush as a satiric weapon with caricatures of all the U.S. Presidents and countless famous and infamous personalities. His comic strip ZooNooz appeared in New York magazine during the late 1970s and skewered the politicians with pen and air.

Interviewed by STEVEN HELLER

EARLY WORK

LBJ REFINERY: This appeared in *Ramparts* magazine, a hot book at the time, in 1967 (art directed by Dugald Stermer, page 10). It illustrated a story about how closely involved Lyndon Johnson, then the president, had been with a giant company that profited from America's wars. Two artists I know told me that this picture made them go out and buy the airbrushes that jetted them into the stratosphere. Someone else copied a part of it into their illustration of a Beatle song, presumably to flatter me. Had I been smart, I should immediately have invested heavily in a giant airbrush manufacturing corporation. Curiously, Brown, Root and Kellogg, the war profiteers, are still tightly connected to the government and still raking in the dough, notably in Afghanistan and Iraq. And I'm still squirting my little airbrush right here in New York.

1. *LBJ Refinery*, Robert Grossman
Ramparts, 1967



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RECENT WORK

3-D OBAMA: This was on the front page of *The New York Observer* upon the occasion of Obama's victory. I enjoy making three-dimensional models from time to time. Sculpture feels to me like the fulfillment of drawing and painting. Most things, clothes, buildings, bridges, rockets, etc. start out as drawings. I am grateful that I have been able to make pictures that people are able to regard as a desirable finished product. But, in theory at least, a picture represents something that could really exist. So to make a drawing and then build it up in clay and colour it in is delightful to me. Of course you are now looking at a photograph of a sculpture, but doesn't it look more real than any painting, or possibly even more real than the real Barack Obama?



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2. *3-D Obama*, Robert Grossman
New York Observer, 2008

3. *Condé Nast Mop-Up*, Robert Grossman
New York Observer, 2008

4. *An Attack on a Galleon*, Howard Pyle, 1905



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DEFINING ILLUSTRATION

CONDÉ NAST MOP-UP: What's my quintessential illustration? By now I am so thoroughly permeated with the quintessence that it emerges in whatever I do, as in this piece for *The New York Observer*, that I did this summer. It shows top editors at Condé Nast reduced to janitorial status by economy measures taken by the beaming publisher. (Illustrators will notice the extra head- and foot-room provided for art directors to mercilessly crop.) Quintessential elements are: It's obnoxious. The people are accurately depicted. It shows something you would never otherwise see. It has strong movement. Good execution of seldom-looked-at details like filthy mop water. Technical innovation: the "airbrushed" indirect overhead lighting done digitally. Meticulous research: I actually stuck my head in the Condé Nast lobby to have a look.

NOTEWORTHY CONTEMPORARIES

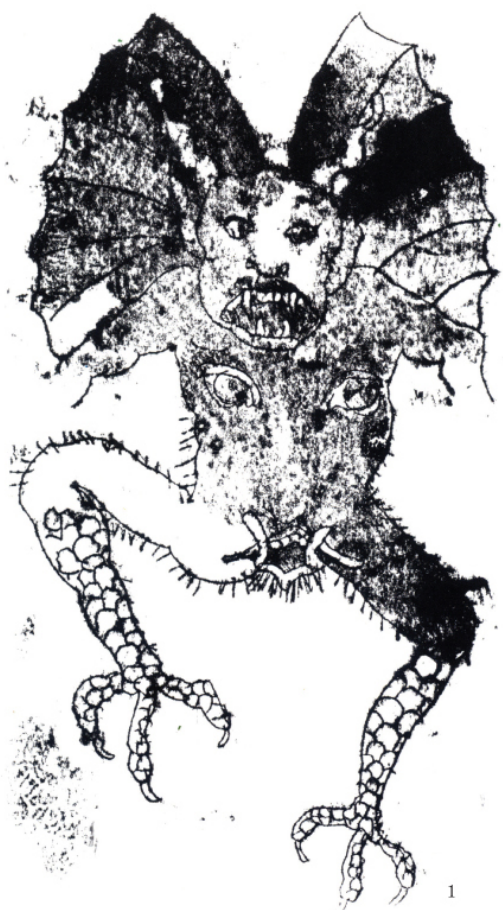
HOWARD PYLE: I have always felt so "new" myself that I may be oblivious as to what constitutes the contemporary crop. However, I am not so ignorant as to not have noticed the ubiquitous, rigid, photo-derived retrograde work of Shepard Fairey. So instead of anyone new, let me recommend, for those not familiar with it, the old work of Howard Pyle. Design, colour, feeling, action, detail – it has everything. In a letter to his brother, Vincent van Gogh wrote, "Drawings by an American named Howard Pyle, have left me dumbfounded with admiration." If you don't believe me, search the internet.

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SEYMOUR CHWAST

The co-founder with Milton Glaser of Push Pin Studio in the mid-1950s, Seymour Chwast brought passé art styles – Victorian, Art Nouveau, and Art Deco – together in a totally contemporary way. The consummate illustrator, he has authored/illustrated over 30 children's books and scores of adult volumes. He was the editor of The Push Pin Graphic and now the publisher/designer of The Nose.

Interviewed by STEVEN HELLER



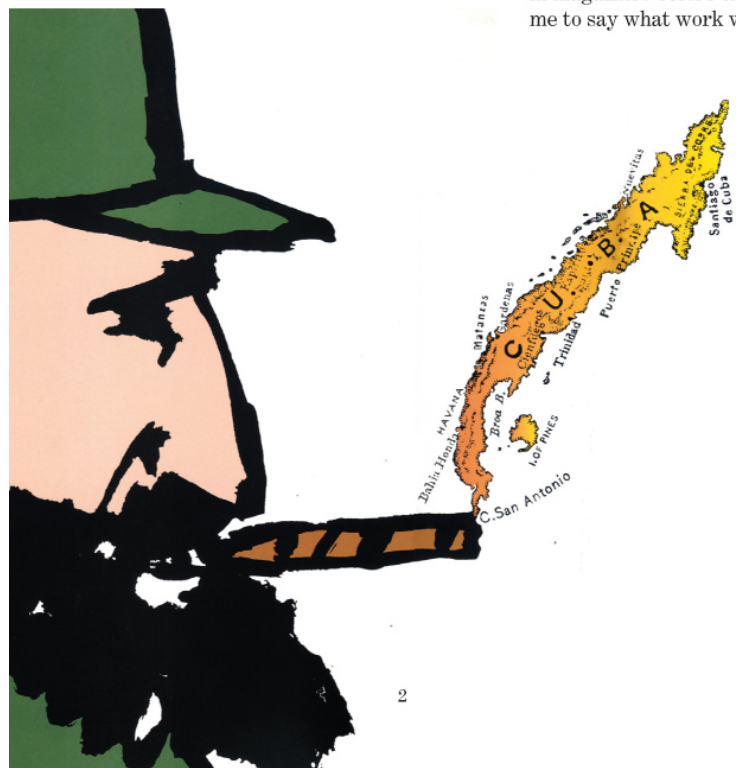
EARLY WORK

DEVIL: My first job after graduating from The Cooper Union School of Art was for the promotion department of *The New York Times*. I was in the fortunate position of being able to design (low budget) sales pieces and creating art to fit. The style of my art varied from Speedball pen technique to woodcut where my print became the finished art.

My work then and now uses the conceits of cartooning so that much of my illustration has humour. Since my mentors included Cassandre and Francisco Goya, my work can reflect a serious message. Much of my early work required decorative and/or cute renditions perhaps as part of the illustration revolution: reaction to the realistic and sentimental work in magazines before the 1950s. Since my early work was all over the place it's difficult for me to say what work was most important to my development.

DEFINING ILLUSTRATION

CASTRO: I found four pieces in my book, *Seymour*, one of which might answer your question. The first is the *Kama Sutra of Reading*, taking a familiar erotic theme and apply it to something totally asexual. It might be the Korean Calendar page for December. I drew a man wearing the attire of a business man. He was also wearing a colourful ski mask. Incongruity may be the word to describe a large portion of my work. Another piece was a portrait of Fidel Castro, not great work but it was a brush drawing, unusual for me. What is interesting is that he is smoking his famous Havana cigar while the smoke is a found map of Cuba in visual harmony. The last may make a stronger point. It is the cover of *The Push Pin Graphic* on the subject of couples. It is an example of combining ideas in one image. A cigar (man) and a cigarette with lipstick (woman) in an ashtray. The smoke (again) intertwines representing a relationship. Telling a story using concise symbols. A little like a poem.



RECENT WORK

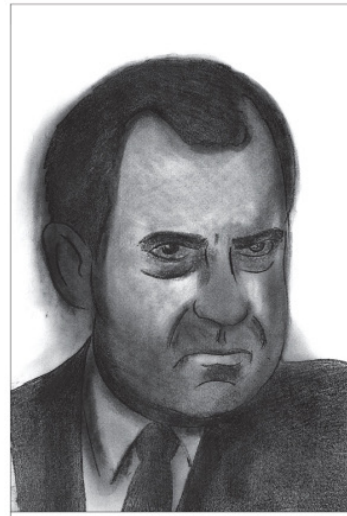
NIXON: I always thought that in my commercial work it was the art director, editor and publisher who had points of views. The illustrator is picked to reflect that. Recently I did a series of portraits of our most notorious president, Richard Nixon. Inside each head is a different part of his political life. Treating a subject from different aspects is typical for me. Often deadpan humour with a social message. I love to draw fat-cats and other types in position of power so I can mock them and have some fun.



Probe of Watergate burglary reveals crimes including those of the White House plumbers with the job of stopping leaks.



Tape reveals Nixon offered hush money to Watergate burglars E. Howard Hunt. "I am not a crook," he declares.



Faced with the humiliating impeachment, Nixon announces that he will resign on August 8, 1975.



Nixon's replacement, President Gerald R. Ford, pardons him for any nefarious acts he may have performed.

NOTEWORTHY CONTEMPORARIES

I can't say who is "significant", since I'm not an historian and I don't have oversight. I don't even know if illustration as we know it has a future. I do know that this period in visual history is a vast improvement over the past when we all had the same limited tools at our disposal. Currently the work is so eclectic that we can't name it, while I'm fairly secure in the notion that there is always the same proportion of good and bad work. Here is a partial list of accomplished illustrators whose work I admire: **YUKO SHIMIZU**, Vivian Flescher, Christoph Niemann, Steve Brodner, Philip Burke, Floc'h, Chris Ware, Brian Cronin, Gary Taxali (see also Aimee & The Illustrators page 22).



DUGALD STERMER

The former Art Director of the radical 1960s magazine Ramparts turned to illustration and immediately appeared on the cover of Time magazine. However, his decorative style was limited so he switched gears to a precisionist realism that allows him to capture the grit and guts of his subjects faces. He is the author of books on faces, flora and fauna. In the 1990s he had a major retrospective exhibition in his home town of San Francisco, and has been thought of as the "Mayor" of illustration ever since.

Interviewed by STEVEN HELLER

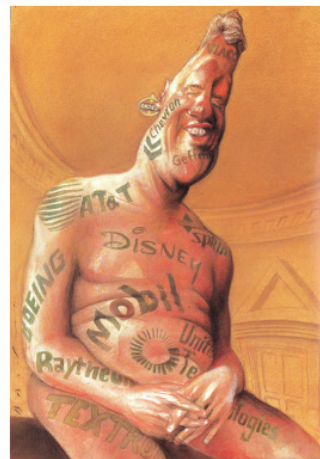


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DEFINING ILLUSTRATION

POMONA MAGAZINE: The skull/earth piece was done a few years ago, but it reflects pretty accurately my pessimism about humankind's inability to look beyond greed and self interest in the face of environmental destruction.

To pick a single illustration out of 30 years of work is a daunting task. However, I suppose this piece, originally commissioned by Mother Jones magazine but not published therein, works as well as any. The challenge was to envision the year 2020, not as what it is likely to be, but as I would like it to be. Unfortunately, we don't seem to be going in that direction.



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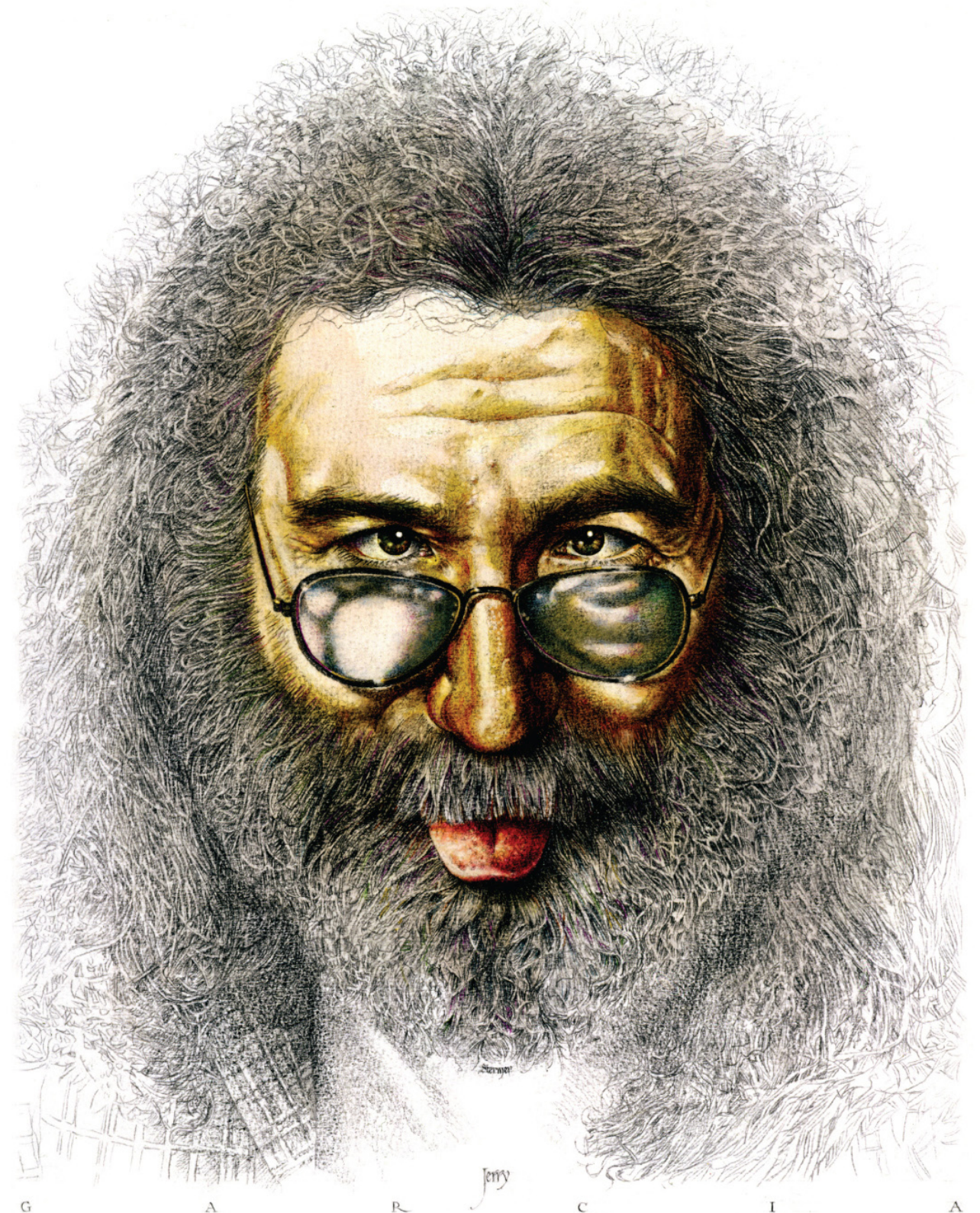
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RECENT WORK

SAVANNAH MUSIC FESTIVAL: I hope most of my recent work demonstrates my development. However, the poster for the Savannah Music Festival is a decent recent example. The client's designer wanted an atmospheric piece that was representative of Savannah; "old south" architecture, dripping willows, etc. Someone else could do a fine job of that, but not me. The festival included all kinds of music, from classical to jazz. So a violin and jazz guitar, split by a magnolia, satisfied my desire for simplicity as well as communication. It didn't satisfy the designer on the job, but fortunately the festival's director felt differently, and he was the boss.

NOTEWORTHY CONTEMPORARIES

STEVE BRODNER, no question. He's a brilliant and tireless commentator on our broken society and politics.



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EARLY WORK

WEST MAGAZINE: It was probably when I abandoned painting and concentrated on drawing. Even back in school I preferred drawings and prints to fully realised paintings. Also, as a former magazine art director, writer and designer, I wanted my work to say something beyond the surface image, to make a comment about the theme of the article in question. Thus, the late Jerry Garcia as the mischievous kid he was, even as an adult. (The hair and beard was fun to draw.)

R.O. BLECHMAN

This master of the squiggly nervous line burst upon the national scene with a talking stomach. It was a commercial for Alka-Seltzer featuring the talkative organ. He is the author of many books, including the most recent *Talking Lines: Fifty Years Of Graphic Narratives*. He is the founder of the *Ink Tank* and director of many animated films, including the feature length *The Soldier's Tale*. His line is still squiggly but always on the mark.

Interviewed by STEVEN HELLER



1

RECENT WORK

STYLE: There are so many illustrations I could choose which demonstrate how my point of view has developed. But rather arbitrarily, I'll select this painting, which was never commissioned, but which I did for an exhibition of my work. I realise that it's not typical of my work (mostly linear with spots of colour), but occasionally I like to depart from my usual style.

I'm a strong believer in the need to make a statement. Here I join forces with one of my idols, Steinberg, who wrote that drawing is "a way of reasoning on paper." My painting combined watercolour and gouache (although as I view it now, I wish my gouache was more flatly rendered, especially in the word "Style". But no matter. It succeeds in other ways, and as Paul Valery said about poetry – but it could apply to art as well – "One never finishes a poem. One only abandons it.")

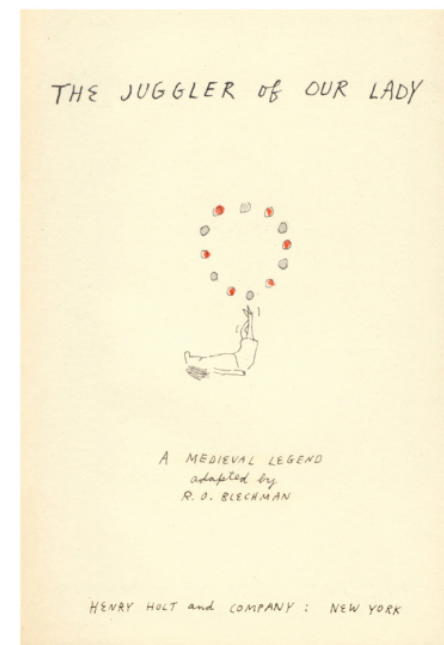
One of the things I like about this piece is my use of abstract decorative motifs. If they don't quite make sense, no matter. They look good, and that is justification enough. They also punch the idea of "style," so they're not entirely arbitrary.

EARLY WORK

THE JUGGLER OF OUR LADY: Let me preface this by saying that I am not a 'natural' artist. By a 'natural' artist I mean somebody who has an innate ability to draw; who has a skill in draughtsmanship that is almost inborn. I am a visual person I realise now (I didn't know it when I was starting out), but I have to work very hard to realise my sense of how things should look. I have the vision, but to paraphrase an old saw, "my grasp does not (often) exceed my reach."

I remember being with Milton Glaser at his studio sometime in the 1970s, and there was Milton chatting with me, taking a telephone call, listening to his radio – and here's the kicker – drawing all the time (and what a drawing it was!). There's a motto emblazoned at his studio entrance, "Art is Work." But what may be work to him is hard labor to an illustrator like myself (and maybe that very inability to draw easily accounts for my signature shaky line, but that's another story).

My breakthrough work (which is how I define 'most significant') was probably something I did when I was a 22-year-old. It was a book I drew and wrote, *The Juggler of Our Lady*, basing it on an old French fable I had come across. As a work of art, forget it! The drawing, as drawing, was wretched. But as an ensemble – as writing and text – the book succeeded, and attracted a lot of critical praise. This encouraged me to continue doing picture stories, combining my talents as a writer and an illustrator – and did as much as anything to launch my career.



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DEFINING ILLUSTRATION

MEMORIAL LIGHTS: Here's where I get to show another piece I was considering for the previous question. This was done as a submission for *The New Yorker* (but fat chance! I haven't had anything accepted in years! But, that again, is another story).

The piece illustrates the memorial lights which for several years illuminated the site of the stricken World Trade Center. I'm in love with New York architecture, especially the older buildings, so I loved rendering them – and was delighted that I could do so employing an odd perspective. The trick was to make the structures recognisable, yet not betray my sketchy (nervous, squiggly, whatever) style, and I think I succeeded. By the way, happy ending. The drawing was turned into a poster by New York's Municipal Art Society.

NOTEWORTHY CONTEMPORARIES

Every time I see something by **CHRISTOPH NIEMANN**... well, I'll quote Gore Vidal. "Every time a colleague succeeds, I die a little." Well, Christoph's work is to die for. It's not only bright – he always captures the essence of what he portrays – but it has supreme gusto and flair. And he works with what appears to be the greatest of ease. He's a brilliant draughtsman, and he's brilliant employing any number of techniques and media.

He's going to drive the rest of us out of business. But that's good (I don't mean going out of business, that's not good. But I do mean that he pushes us – challenges us – to do better. And that's not a bad thing).



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