

INTERVIEW BY STEVEN HELLER

Ralph Steadman hates being pigeonholed as a cartoonist. Although comic and acerbic picture-making is his first vocation, he has also been a journalist, biographer, autobiographer, and various other “ists” and “ers” during a career that now spans four decades. Having written and illustrated numerous books for children and adults, including the pictobiographies of Sigmund Freud and Leonardo da Vinci, he is currently represented by a work he calls a “triography,” something between an autobiography and a biography, titled DOODAAA: The Balletic Art of Gavin Twinge (Bloomsbury). This roman à clef resides in a limbo between fact and fiction as it follows the doings of its hero, the leading proponent of the Doodaaa art movement, as he flits through all the other great 20th-century art movements. It is a linguistic delight and a flight of real passionate fantasy. Yet the most engaging aspect of the book

is that Steadman’s satiric words and images are so seamlessly woven together in this, his first epic tome. The book is not a reinvention, but rather, just one more milestone in the life of this consummate artist, cartoonist, and author. Recently, we contacted Steadman in his Kent, England studio, emerging from the throes of a literary post-partum depression and revving up for his next opus. Here, he talks about his undying frustration with politics, never-ending obsession with art, and continuing compulsion to make things in all media.

HELLER: In your book *Between the Eyes* (1986), you wrote: “Ideologies are the work of upstarts. They are essentially reactionary creeds which are designed to work like a violent laxative on society or group of people whose bowels they wish to move or at least disturb.” That passage illustrates that you write just the way you draw, and you draw without mercy, perhaps without remorse. Much of your work has been political/social, suffering no fools. Indeed some of your landmark satire skewered American politics and politicians, and I can still see the scabrous depiction of Richard Nixon blowing air out of buttocks that resemble his shifty face. Thirty years later, and on the occasion of publishing your latest book, *DOODAAA: The Balletic Art of Gavin Twinge*, are you still exercised by political folly? And is your work as political as it ever was?

STEADMAN: My work never changed, but was always in flux. Frustrated, flawed, flippant, furious, and fast. I realized a while ago that political invective does not change politics. Those at the helm love it and thrive on opposition. I wanted them [American politicians] to hate what I did and try to have me banned from ever coming back to America. If your drawings are not assassins’ bullets, then they remain impotent, puerile, and dumb.

It was great to be involved [politically], and at the time I really thought I was part of something vital. Then I saw it come around all over again, and then again, and I realized my true commitment was to art. I wasn’t very comfortable with the rest of humanity, and humanity didn’t give a toss for art. So I became obscure, obtuse, obstructive, self-indulgent, restive, and belligerent. I still am, and more so, as I see what seemed reasonable and a real part of my life sink below the damp horizon. I have neutralized in me what is likely to upset my equilibrium. I watch shit happen and say, it will happen again, and again and again, and worse and worse and worse. Because we have learned through global contact to manipulate more than we ever thought possible. We have been able to construct evil to suit our ways and we have learned to absorb all these things and make them acceptable. Evil now makes money and drives the wheels of government. Greed and ambitious aggression are admirable qualities. We must learn to love them or die. We don’t belong in

a world of crumbling twin towers. If your ideals didn't crumble amidst that pile of dust, then you weren't watching. It was all edited to look majestic, heroic even, and gave assholes like Bush something to sound heroic about. You know in your heart that something else beyond your imagination won on that day and there is nothing you can do about it.

HELLER: When you and I first met almost three decades ago, you were a wild man. Your art in *Scanlan's* (a short-lived magazine that paired you for the first time with gonzo journalist Hunter S. Thompson) and *Rolling Stone* (where you published many of your most unforgettable socio-political essays) was more frenetic and kinetic than any I'd ever seen. You didn't know the meaning of taboo and yet because of your relentless sarcasm your work captured the attention of my generation. What of that youthful sacrilegiousness remains? What, if anything, has been lost with growing wisdom, sagacity, and maturity?

STEADMAN: If I had come along now, I wouldn't be so damn cocksure that I had some answers. I was pure then. Of course I didn't know the meaning of taboo. We hadn't reached the outer parameters of such a notion, so why stop where we were? The adventure had just begun and all of us, you included, sensed a great new surge of optimistic energy, and we were at the center. We were part of the "why not?" generation. The atrocities of World War II were fast receding as we embraced a world that had cleaned out the crap. We were impossibly hopeful and ready to simply press on in love with our own ideals.

HELLER: You once wrote, "I actually thought I was going to bring down the culprits and surge forward with a whole new and better world, but it wasn't to be." I hear the following complaint from the few artists who once had that "optimistic energy" of which you speak: There are no longer any viable venues to make the bold *j'acuse* statement. Is this true or just a cop-out for being impotent? Was there ever a time when art like yours could bring the culprits down?

STEADMAN: Naturally it was a cop-out answer—a cry of abject misery and downright wretchedness, because if you bring one lot down, there's an army of them right behind [you], all prepared to sell their souls. Who am I anyway to presume to reform a perfectly wonderful world full of perversion, corruption, deceit, disease, ingenuity, good and evil, adventure, promise, lack of it, poverty, torture, oppression, willful manipulation, stupidity, kindness, acts of courage, beautiful sunsets, miracles, exhaust fumes, oil slicks, Islam, Christianity, Buddhism, born-again banality, suicide bombers, dear friends who have just died, Internet confidence trickery and spam, penis enlargement three times a day, eternal youth, stocks and shares, and a whole rich tapestry of screaming lifestyles to dwell on. I accept it all now as a wonderful melting-pot of opportunity, hard luck, and surface scum that you always get when

you boil something long enough. What on earth am I imagining that I could put in its place that could be the slightest bit more fascinating? Pathetic creatures—artists and idealists!

HELLER: I know that this next question is like asking what pencil you use, but indulge me. Your very early work is in a more conventional cartoon style, but as if overnight, you erupted into a kind of graphic violence in which ink was sprayed and color was shot onto the paper, and your caricatures, characterizations, and even landscapes were explosively rendered, sometimes to the point of total abstraction. Why do you draw and paint and sculpt and play with photographs with such abandon? Or is abandon the wrong word?

STEADMAN: Frustration was always at the heart of my work. I needed to be the best and I needed to break down that inscrutable white surface in front of me. The most complex white void in life, the white sheet of paper, stared back at me. What was I supposed to do? Bend and wilt to its will? I

attacked it, still do. Something happens when you do something above and beyond your gentle disposition. Something unexpected happens and *boom!* You have broken through to another layer. It is all waiting there for someone to break through, and what's very important, the result can be *anything*, and usually something you would never otherwise have thought of. Your impulses differ from day to day, so you're on an eternal quest for the unobtainable. Surprise yourself, and if possible *shock* yourself. It is there somewhere, infinite too, and lurking. You need to grab it by the gizzard, tear it limb from limb, then put it together again.

HELLER: There's a quote on the jacket flap of *DOODAAA* from your buddy Hunter S. Thompson that reads, "Don't write, Ralph—you'll bring shame on your family." I gather you didn't take this sage

advice. Indeed, your legacy of writing/illustrating is legend, with autobiographical biographies of Sigmund Freud, Lewis Carroll, and Leonardo. In marrying writing and drawing, why have you chosen the themes and characters that you've covered? For that matter, how do their respective lives intersect with your own?

STEADMAN: All of them I recognized as earlier versions of me. Each new character I fell upon, I had to devour its brain and then reincarnate the parts as manifestations of myself. It was also a process of self-aggrandizement—it brought me closer to greatness and in that sense I thought I was bettering myself. Not having had much of an education, [I found that] each new subject was another attempt to gain another Ph.D. degree. As you may know, I am now an Honorary D.Litt. with star points for good behavior, and a free gown.

HELLER: *DOODAAA* may not be your most ambitious work, but it is decidedly the most unusual narrative. Okay, it *is* the most ambitious. To put it in context, this is a *Continued on page 166*



Ralph Steadman

Continued from page 37

fictional semi-nonfictional “triography”—the intersection of three biographical narratives—that introduces Gavin Twinge, your presumed artistic alter ego, who is the leader of the art/wine movement called Doodaaism. You are what you call the third voice in the book that is narrated by Ralphael Steed, whom you (Ralph Steadman) have engaged to write Twinge’s biography. In the preface, Steed blathers: “Being exposed to Twinge’s work for the first time jerked my glossopharyngeal, pneumogastric pinal accessory nerves into an emotional G force—a torn-back flesh flap of raw recognition—as his work plunged its perceptive prong into the bread pudding of my brain. The shock of life entered my body as an alien and I was born again.” Where is this going?

STEADMAN: The book is really a serious attempt to float through art, its artists, and all the parts of the art world from which I have been excluded. I do feel excluded, and I think my resentment shows. I am dismissed as a “cartoonist,” a derogatory word that has the effect of pigeonholing me. I resent that bitterly, even though I love the art of cartooning at its best. I was asked by Bloomsbury [the publisher] if I had ever considered writing a “proper” book, so I said to myself, why not? I set about it like a writer, doing so much work each day, laying out a plan for the book, and adding visuals as I went. The idea was to kind of rub myself out, side-step and be someone else—a very disconcerting experience. I nearly succeeded!

HELLER: I understand how the feeling of exclusion would induce rage and resentment, but you must admit you’ve received quite a lot of acclaim. Certainly you are not only a cartoonist. Moreover, the original Dadaists didn’t care about the world’s view of their art. Duchamp, whom you celebrate in *DOODAAA*, made objects that he knew would be mercilessly attacked. He looked forward to being vilified. Don’t you take some enjoyment in being on the outside? And doesn’t that mitigate the resentment?

STEADMAN: Yes! I prefer to be misunderstood. I prefer that people miss the point—miss the irony—miss my own personal discoveries and ignore them. They have misunderstandings of their own to come to terms with. Artists are self-centered, selfish pigs who have no reason to expect anyone to pay the slightest attention to them. I say that out loud often and I bless each day that allows me to do exactly what I choose to do. Why should I expect another’s interest? It is *my* indulgence—that should be its own reward. I esteem Dada for the very reasons that you state, and for the powerful intellectual underpinning that it has supplied to sustain the profuse fountain of invention that came in its wake.

HELLER: Tell me more about the odd and demented Mr. Twinge. How much of this character is, in fact, you? Or how much is simply an agent for getting your ideas across? Does the reader really know your demons from reading about Gavin’s? Is he the embodiment of the proverbial mad artist, or the madness that has tyrannized you all these decades, which has come through in your art?

STEADMAN: Gavin is totally me. He is not an invention. He is the outward manifestation of my inner spirit that lays dormant much of the time. Madness is right in there—my batteries—energy to use to create artifacts that our world can well do without. Gavin justifies my urge to make mud pies. Gavin gives point to my pointlessness. Gavin was there waiting to emerge—a prophet with nothing much to prophesize, but with an unstoppable optimism to do it anyway. I needed his company, but I had to create him externally to have a kindred spirit to converse with. He really understands me and I am in complete agreement with anything he wants to express and wishes to express in whatever form that takes.

HELLER: Years ago, I watched you drawing in your studio in Kent. I was entranced. I noticed that your artistic energy had no bounds. What was appearing on the paper seemed, to my eye, like automatic writing—often you also included brief pronouncements or narratives on your pictures as if a particular inspiration struck after finishing the art and you realized that there was still more to say. Yet *DOODAAA* is more structured. Despite its surreal flights of absurdity, you have meticulously wed art and historical fact with raucous fantasy. You’ve tapped a part of your passion, your language, and your vision that brilliantly carries through the entire volume, down to the bibliography of Twinge’s writings, which is remarkably convincing. What was your process? How did you construct and research this multifaceted narrative?

STEADMAN: My editor, Bill Swainson, is the meticulous one who guided me through

my self-imposed wilderness. He stayed with it and saw me come out the other side with incredible sensitivity. We lost a lot on the way, sure—who doesn't? But such a lot of the original was preserved, which owes a lot to Bill.

HELLER: I presume the audience/reader is always somewhere in your mind. What do you want the reader to take away from *DOODAAA*? Is there a lesson or moral?

STEADMAN: The moral of my tale is that anything is possible and all movements can be realized. "Why not!" is a better epitaph than "Why?" Life is full of possibilities. We digest a bit of our times and something comes out. Some things are obnoxious, and some things are the product of a human heart trying to fill a vacuum. You read the book, dear reader—did it fill any[thing] for you? As Nietzsche said, and Gavin always agreed with Nietzsche, "It is only as an esthetic phenomenon that existence and the world are permanently justified." The world is not only for human beings. Voles are human, too.

HELLER: Your good friend Terry Gilliam began as an illustrator, segued into animation (for *Monty Python*), and ended up as a film director. This is not unlike your own trajectory insofar as your books are akin to motion pictures, so full of frenetic energy. Why haven't you moved into filmmaking?

STEADMAN: There is a print on my wall here which has written on it: "From Terry: For Ralph who has influenced me far more than he would ever want to know." He didn't want my "fucking drawings" in his *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas* film, as he said with a smile, but somehow he had

snuck them in somewhere. I have a hunch that his is really a film wanting to be a strip cartoon. It perhaps always should have been—but then it would have eventually been a film, so which comes first—or how many interpretations can you have?

HELLER: So in your quest to transcend the pigeonholes of cartoonist/artist, will you be moving on to film?

STEADMAN: Without a doubt. There would be no point to anything if pigeons ruled the roost. I like pigeons but I'm damned if I'm gonna let one steal my goddamn hole. My Hollywood blockbuster will be all about pigeons. For God's sake, pigeons starred with Marlon Brando in *On the Waterfront*! Can you imagine a world where everyone kept pigeons to symbolize a philosophic frame of mind? What is it with these pigeons? They are only flying rats who will eat anything. Perhaps that is where the roots of my philosophy lie. Rats, human beings, and cockroaches survive, no matter what! That is my message of hope.

HELLER: You are mad, aren't you? And I presume that completing a work of this book's magnitude would wipe you out. I know you're probably onto the next "event," but how did you feel once this was finished and published? And what is now receiving the Steadman passion?

STEADMAN: I was wiped out. I became depressed. I needed medication that my body rejected. It made me tremble and worry about the destiny of the world. Human beings will have to go, or we learn animal behaviorism. We make a deal with the animal kingdom. They teach us and we teach them something, too. We teach them how to smoke

and drink and they teach us how to survive on slops. We teach them how to wear clothes and they show us how to walk about naked. They teach us how to hunt, and we show them how to prop up the bar. I already have about 30 Animal Behaviorists [drawings]. *The New Yorker* wants to publish them, because using animal codes will make us smarter and more in touch with our instincts. We lost that along the way somewhere. It will be a better world and free of criticism. If you don't like someone, you eat them. No lawyers need be involved.

HELLER: You've been producing a lot of drawings of late on this theme of Animal Behaviorists.

STEADMAN: What I began drawing were, for want of a better phrase, weird creatures—anthropomorphic, I guess—in a desperate attempt

to draw anything but guys in suits. I am through with guys in suits. It also frees me up to let that automatic writing out that you mentioned earlier. So I categorized them as half human, half animal and let them speak for themselves. Chris Curry [*New Yorker* art director] has said *yes!* to them, so I await her pleasure to run them as an occasional series. It's time I had a series.