



## Coining a Career

How Gary Taxali has helped usher in the era of the illustrator-entrepreneur.

By Steven Heller

**G**ary Taxali does not like the label retro. Despite his obvious debt to 20th-century comics artists like George Herriman and Ernie Bushmiller, there is much more to his work than a halcyon past. “Film is huge for me,” he says. “The lighting, the composition, the escape into wonderful stories by brilliant filmmakers—Jarmusch, Polanski, Kurosawa, Hitchcock, Leigh—are a big influence. It can be subtle, like a great framed shot that sparks an idea, or bigger, deeper concepts about humanity.” Perhaps movement is the ticket to his work, which always seems to be in motion, though he’s never done animation.

Taxali’s style also emerges from the stream of consciousness of his characters,

whose personalities he revels in designing. Though he started creating them solely on paper, he added a dimension—both physical and entrepreneurial—with a line of toys. I recently spoke to him about his greatest hits, what he didn’t learn in art school, and how he balances his sideline businesses.

**I’ve always wanted to know how you developed your style. I see the comics references, but is there more than meets the eye?**

I certainly don’t hide my love for Depression-era graphics and typography, but it’s something I never consciously sought to emulate—and I’m not even



Left: *Are We Serious*, a print created from art that originally appeared in Taxali’s 2009 solo show at the Jonathan LeVine Gallery, in New York City. Below: The toy monkey that launched Taxali’s company, Chump Toys, in 2005.

sure that I do. The characters, concepts, and themes are my original take on things and, from what collectors and art directors tell me, are contemporary in nature. If I can be accused of anything, it is that I was born in the wrong era.

**Has your series of toys expanded your cash flow along with your repertoire?** It’s been a nice supplement to my income, but so far I haven’t had large-scale commercial success. That’s a good thing, because I would never want my toys to compete with my fine-art career. This sort of thing is important to collectors and galleries. How an artist is perceived is very important when building one’s career. Brad Holland talks about an idea of “greatest hits.” We all have them. I’d rather one of my greatest hits be my painting of the Toy Monkey than the Toy Monkey toy.

**Prints are another of your offshoots. Are they an important part of making a profit as an illustrator?** Everything adds up. Some prints have garnered minimal profit, but I’m so glad I put them out in the world, because they were meaningful to me. Others have been phenomenally successful and financially very lucrative. When *The New York Times* asked me for a tribute to Maurice Sendak, I received numerous requests to create a print. It sold out almost immediately.

**In addition to children’s books, you’ve published a couple of monographs in the past three years.** The two monographs were released by different publishers (*I Love You, OK?* by teNeues, in Germany, and *Mono Taxali* by 27.9, in Italy), and they don’t contain a single shared image. The books have been a great way for people to see my work outside of galleries and commercial print media. They’re ideal portfolios and



Above: Coins for the Royal Canadian Mint. Right (from top): An illustration for *Intelligent Life* magazine; *Skunk Electrical Soap*, a large mixed-media work; a tribute to Maurice Sendak, originally for *The New York Times*

have been a great resource for my agent (and sister), Vandana Taxali, in getting me cool projects, like creating limited-edition quarters for the Royal Canadian Mint. Art books are a validation of one’s career.

**What are you working on right now?** I just returned from an eye-opening trip to Sri Lanka and the Philippines. I was sent by World Vision to visit area development projects. I was asked to create art to help raise awareness about child famine.

The Royal Canadian Mint is releasing my final coin in the series *Holiday*. I am working on numerous group shows around the world and will soon start working on a solo show at the Jonathan LeVine Gallery, in New York City. When I have time to myself, I plan on writing another kids’ book.

**How do you perceive the field of illustration today?** Illustration is in rapid flux. How pictures are being used defies what we traditionally knew about illustration. Many artists are empowered by new digital me-

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dia. Yet I sense a fear about the continued life of a still picture. People were talking about how illustrations needed to “move” two years ago. That’s not illustration, that’s animation. Most illustrators can’t animate. The timeless power of a still image will never leave the human psyche despite what new gadgets can accomplish.

**We all have an image of our place in our respective field. What’s yours?** When I turned 40, a friend told me that Ben Franklin had said, of the age, that it “is the youth of old age and the old age of youth.” That’s how I feel as a fine artist and illustrator, respectively. I’ve accomplished all I’ve wanted to as an illustrator (save for doing a *New Yorker* cover) yet feel I’ve barely scratched the surface of my fine-art career.

**If you had to start over, what would you do differently?** I’d have started right away drawing the pictures that I wanted to and not the pictures that I thought people would like. It took me five years out of art school to realize that. ■

