Picturing the Pulps: An Interview with David Saunders

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The pulp and paperback cover illustrator Norman Blaine Saunders (1907–1989) was known for his exciting action scenes and sexy women. Anyone who savors this 1930s, '40s and '50s genre of hyper-realistic, melodramatic imagery knows his work, if not his name. Saunders painted everything the imagination could conjure: aliens and aviators, heroes and hunters, detectives and demons, quarterbacks and comic books, sex kittens, serial killers and Westerns—from *Mars Attacks* to "Wacky Packs." David Saunders, the youngest of Norman's four children, has written a lavish book chronicling his dad's impressive and alluring output. In this interview he talks about growing up around some pretty wild images and how his father's art has influenced his own appreciation of both fantasy and reality.

Heller: What was it like growing up with Norman Saunders as a dad? Were there always scantily clad models roaming around?

Saunders: He was a great dad! He had a playful, irreverent spirit that charmed our whole neighborhood. We used to sit on the front stoop of our brownstone on [New York's West] 104th Street on summer nights and watch the people walking by. He would spot a gorgeous woman and say to me, "My god! What a beautiful woman!" and I would wonder about my father's marital faithfulness. Then, three minutes later, he would exhibit the same fixation for some guy walking by: "Christ! That guy is gorgeous!" When I looked shocked he said, "What do you expect? I'm an artist!" He would ask neighbors to pose for him, but everyone always kept their underwear on. My father's studio was on the third floor, and that was where most of the scantily clad models were confined. They weren't roaming around. [laughter]

Heller: Your father was king of the sultry paperback and menacing pulp cover. Was this what he wanted to be as an artist?

Saunders: Dad surprised me once when I asked him why he wanted to be an artist. He said, "So I could paint naked ladies." It was so frank an answer that it made me laugh.

Heller: I guess that's way a lot of people become artists. Look at Picasso.

Saunders: Dad was deeply influenced by Huckleberry Finn's philosophy of life, and he aspired to live without pretentiousness, pomposity or any impractical idealism. He was born in 1907 and raised on a homestead in Northern Minnesota surrounded by Indians and fur trappers. His concept of being an artist was defined by the social limits of that context. He actually saw a *Saturday Evening Post* cover at his music teacher's log cabin and admired the cover painting by Norman Rockwell. He said, "Until then I had never known there was anyone else named Norman in the world! I figured, 'If *that* Norman can be an artist, then so can *this* one!'" Luckily, he ran into several excellent art teachers, and his natural talents were nurtured with a healthy academic foundation and the inspired mentoring of Harvey Dunn and Walt Wilwerding. Both of those artists were strong advocates of accepting the social limitations of American artists—to work for commercial clients to fulfill the required agenda, but to strive to make art with their inner spirit to transcend the mediocrity of the assignment—and they both claimed that this was comparable to the ambitions of their European descendants from the history of art who were employed by kings, merchants and churches. So my father's identity as an artist was not conflicted by his sultry paperback and pulp cover work, as long as he was free to paint in the style that he felt was expressive of his inner spirit.

Heller: Did you appreciate what he did when you were young?

Saunders: Yes, I would sit in a chair beside him and watch him as he would paint, because I was fascinated by the magical process in which everything would gradually appear in his paintings. It really seemed like a magic power. It was also a great thrill to see his work in print. I remember him painting the cover for Classics Illustrated's comic *Frankenstein*, and then suddenly the comic was on the shelves at our local candy store and every other candy store in town. That was magic!

Heller: Was Saunders connected to the world of illustration? He never did a Saturday Evening Post cover, but was he friends with other nationally known illustrators?

Saunders: Dad had come to New York City in 1934 and had worked as an illustrator his entire life. He knew most illustrators who were based in the New York markets. He was friendly with Norman Rockwell and several dozen top illustrators. He was also friend with many artists who were not illustrators. He knew Jackson Pollock, Hans Hoffmann, Theodore Stamos and even Red Grooms. [My father] Norm had always wanted to be on the cover of *The Saturday Evening Post*. It was a bitter disappointment when he finally realized that would never happen. The disappointing realization came around 1964, when he found out that *The Post* had fired Rockwell. Most illustrators realized at that point that the whole system of promoting an "art star" was over, and it seemed to have been replaced by a more efficiently controlled mass-marketing system.

Heller: What would you say he was trying most to capture when he painted a picture?

Saunders: Dad confided to me that he was able to close his eyes and envision an entire imaginary world. He would concentrate on that image with his eyes closed and then he would open his eyes and he could faintly retain the entire scene just long enough to jot down a few light scribbles on his blank canvas or illustration board. After he had lightly indicated the placement of all the elements, he would create a more substantial sketch of the composition. Then he would begin to consider ways to make the composition more dynamic. Once the light source was

determined, he would begin to make studies of all the elements under a similar light source. That was when he would get live models to perform his directed actions under his specially arranged theatrical lighting. His primary need for models was to see how their bodies would respond under the prescribed light source. His goal was to create a vision that approximated his initial imaginary vision of the scene. Dad was very sincere about this process, even when painting the most seemingly silly Wacky Package or sleazy paperback cover. He felt that his original imaginary vision of the scene was a distinctive personal quality that would give his commercial work the creative strength to endure the often humiliating hardships of being a freelance artist.

Heller: By the 1960s, illustration's style and content were moving toward a more surreal and expressionistic representation. How did your dad feel about this generational shift?

Saunders: Dad always attended all of the art museum shows in New York City as well as many gallery shows. He read the art reviews in *The New York Times* and he enjoyed the controversial progress of artistic trends in the art world. He loved to make non-objective abstract art and to thereby explore expression without identifiable content. When Pop Art became fashionable he was delighted with the prospect of a wealthy home hanging a Roy Lichtenstein painting of a hand pointing a gun—"That's a real pulp composition!" He loved to see it in museums and art galleries and wealthy homes, but when magazine art directors demanded that all illustrators totally conform to a prescribed style, he refused to comply. He was from an older generation of illustrators who considered their career to be entirely based on developing a recognizable style, with the hope that their style would eventually become popular enough to land an annual contract with *The Saturday Evening Post*, and that career strategy would be completely destroyed if they were willing to behave like a chameleon who would adopt whatever style might be needed each season. Dad said he had seen many artists ruin their reputation by changing their style to suit a particular magazine. The only way to have a long career was to develop your own personal recognizable style. [Dad would say,] "That way, they need to hire you when they want work in your style!" Actually, Harvey Dunn instilled that belief in him. Oddly enough, my father's career does follow one arcing trajectory of developing style, which is pretty clear in the book, and he did work continuously from 1926 until 1984, so perhaps he was onto something.

Heller: But did he do anything different to conform to the new styles?

Saunders: He was a keen observer of styles and fashions. He always used men and women in his scenes that reflect the fashionable stars of the times. He gathered many photographs of famous actors in his photo morgue and he would pick models that resembled whoever was popular at the time. The publisher Martin Goodman got him started on that habit. He gave Dad a giant box of Hollywood publicity stills and insisted that everyone on his pulps looked like some movie star, saying, "Why use some schmuck, when I can use a glamorous unpaid cameo appearance by Clark Gable?"

Heller: What, if anything, would you call his style?

Saunders: Dad was also delighted to incorporate aesthetic influences from fashion into his work, but again the emphasis was always on his retaining the creative vision of his personal style. He felt that style was deeply embed-

ded in each artist's drawing method, somewhat the way handwriting analysts can identify forgeries. Dad felt his drawn line was completely his own, just like a signature on a check. From that basis, he also developed a style of composition and a style of color schemes. He was delighted to take those personal skills and subject them to a painting with a 1966 mod "a-go-go" flavor, but he was still working in his own style. This tenacious individualism was essential to his whole personality.

Heller: Are you an artist?

Saunders: Yes, it is all I ever wanted to be from a very early age. My father enrolled me in a preschool art program at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in 1958. I studied at the Museum of Modern Art when they had art classes, and then I studied at the Brooklyn Museum Art School. I went to Music & Art high school and the Kansas City Art Institute. I had a show at The New Museum and my work is in the collections of the Met, MoMA, the Brooklyn Museum, the Hirshhorn and many others. I have taught painting at Yale, Oberlin, Washington University and dozens of other colleges. I showed with Grace Borgenicht Gallery in the 1980s, and I now show with Fischbach Gallery in Chelsea. It has been an amazing emotional process for me to make my father's book, so I am sure it will influence my future work.

Heller: I studied at MoMA, too, in the late 1950s. I was expelled, however, for bad behavior. But I digress. Obviously this book is a great tribute to Norman Saunders. While he's been featured in books on pulp art and paperback covers, what did you want to accomplish with this book?

Saunders: Dad lived barely long enough to be rediscovered by fandom. One day around 1969 he came home from delivering some freelance assignments to Topps bubble gum company in Brooklyn and he was very emotionally upset. He sat at the kitchen table and confided to me that he had just met a young kid named Artie Spiegelman who was hanging around the office, "This kid Artie seems to know more about my work than I do! I always knew other illustrators know my work, and a few old farts who are nostalgic about their own childhoods, but I can't believe I actually met a young kid who loves my work. It's the first hope I have ever had that my work might be appreciated by future generations!" Then he sobbed and put his head down on the kitchen table and started to cry like a baby. I was deeply impressed. It finally dawned on me that my father's archive of tear sheets and original paintings was probably the only record of his entire life's work. He said, "Everything I ever did was sold for pocket change at newsstands and was thrown away with yesterday's papers. My life's work has turned into the dust of oblivion and blown away from the trash heaps of popular culture. Here I thought it was all gone, and then this kid Artie shows up and gives me some hope."

Dad and I discussed the importance of doing an art book that would combine examples of all of his many decades of work, so people can see the development of his personal recognizable style. Most enthusiasts of vintage popular culture are only concerned with certain subject matter, as opposed to an artist's style. There were many book offers over the years, but they always boiled down to one specific orientation, such as a book about pin-ups, men's maga-

zines, sci-fi or Westerns. I realized there was a market demand for those types of special subjects, but if I wanted to see a book about the entire career of Norman Saunders, I would have to publish it myself and not expect to make the money back. It was a thrill for me to send a copy to Art Spiegelman, in thanks for inspiring the whole project 40 years ago!

About the Author. Steven Heller, co-chair of the Designer as Author MFA and co-founder of the MFA in Design Criticism at School of Visual Arts, is the author of *Merz to Emigre and Beyond: Avant Garde Magazine Design of the Twentieth Century* (Phaidon Press), *Iron Fists: Branding the Totalitarian State* (Phaidon Press) and most recently *Design Disasters: Great Designers, Fabulous Failure, and Lessons Learned* (Allworth Press). He is also the co-author of *New Vintage Type* (Thames & Hudson), *Becoming a Digital Designer* (John Wiley & Co.), *Teaching Motion Design* (Allworth Press) and more. www.hellerbooks.com