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"Call it design, illustration, art or a waste of time, but for me it is a therapy and makes me happy"  
Eduardo Recife, see page 35

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**Gary Taxali**  
 For nearly 30 years, Gary Taxali has been building a career in design, advertising, branding, and more. He has worked for clients like the Ontario College of Art, and has been a frequent contributor to design magazines and newspapers and magazines in North America, and other clients include The Economist, Corbis, American Express, and more. He has been recognized by the AIGA, the Creative Advertising Awards, and has been named one of the top 100 creative people in the world. He is also a frequent speaker at design conferences and has been featured in numerous design publications. He is currently the Creative Director at Gary Taxali Design, a design and branding firm in Toronto. He can be reached at gtaxali@garytaxali.com or on Twitter at @garytaxali.



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# Taxali

"You don't one day decide to have ethics in your business – you always have them." **Garrick Webster** visits Gary Taxali in Toronto to discuss design principles and the magic of a little whimsy

Computer Arts May 2012





Down a hidden driveway in west Toronto, an old solvent factory sits beside the railway line. One of the converted units inside form the home and workplace of Gary Taxali, one of North America's most prolific and talented illustrators. The sweet sound of what he calls the air-soft Gary actually guides me around, sleeping at his desk to whom all of his painting life revolves, and at his blue table has been sketching some roughs for The Simpsons. He pulls out an early copy of this upcoming children's book, *This is Billy*, and — surrounded by vinyl toys, books, sketches, plants and paintings — begins to reveal his creative philosophy.

**Computer Arts:** Many people enjoy your work because it's ironic and satirical. How would you characterize your style?

**Gary Taxali:** I like those words, they not characterize too much because that starts to limit what it just happened to being open to it. Outright I like to laugh. I like to be really silly and to make people think I like to be really, like, what? I like to be a little bit of a nerd. That's never going to go away. My pictures at the root, are always going to have that quality to them.

**CA:** What's the last silly thing you did?  
**GT:** The last silly thing I did was a drawing this morning.

**GT:** The mid-80s was a time when I was really into it. I was really into it. I was really into it. I was really into it.

**CA:** A lot of your work has been for books, magazines and newspapers. Do you think your style and approach is most suited to publishing?

**GT:** I think my style is suited to everything — a picture is a picture. I've done illustrations for publications where I've been so absolutely excited because I've felt like I'm the only illustrator suited to that. It's undoubtedly the art director that that why so many feel like an amazing charity.

I feel that always advertising work, so in the UK there was a Vodafone campaign — there was a billboard of a guy I drew as a coach jockey and the TV ad was on a track. That was that. Vodafone brings you down to earth, and I felt that the art director I was working with really understood my style and its visual language. A magazine's artwork was another example of a project that I felt was really good fit.

**CA:** What types of media do you most like to use?

**GT:** My media changes a lot. I use mixed media in my work. A lot of my illustration will be screen-printed. My fine art work will tend to be even more mixed media and infused with painting and sculpture, assemblage, installation-type work. But I don't love versatility in my media as much as possible. There's obviously more room for me to be experimental with the fine art than there is with illustration because of the constraints of time, for example art directors will usually reference what they like or will hire me for a specific thing.

**CA:** How long does it typically take for you to produce a piece of work?

**GT:** Illustration — depending on the complexity of it, from sketch to image — half a day if it's for The Simpsons. Things and they work as fast as I can, and it's black and white and I can do it faster. But on one side, about a day or two. More complex work will take the three or four days. Hard to work, like if I'm doing a painting, or like a few weeks.

**CA:** Your fine art and commercial work both feature similar characters and themes, but do you approach them in different ways?



## The essential Gary Taxali

Four commercial highlights from the illustrious Gary Taxali.

### 01 'Milk' - 1995

Taxali is passionate about the rights of illustrators. This 1995 poster for a campaign against stock illustration won a lot of major illustration awards in North America. Taxali makes points to demand that the stock image being constructed was actually created for the poster itself, and was not the work of another designer.

### 02 UK Vodafone campaign - 1997

In 1997 Taxali created this campaign for Vodafone, a mobile phone network based in the UK. It was one of the first times that the mobile phone network itself was used as a visual metaphor for the brand.

### 03 Lunchbox - 2008

Taxali was invited to create a comic strip for BLAB!, a comic and fiction anthology published annually by Panopoeus. The book is a satirical approach and created parallel worlds in a world of work, rather than the world of a story.

### 04 'Oh Mr Figure' - 2008

Taxali has developed one of his drawing inspired characters, as well as creating designs for the book, *Oh Mr Figure*, which has the same character. The book is a satirical approach and created parallel worlds in a world of work, rather than the world of a story.

### 05 This is Billy 'Woody Car' image - 2009

One of Taxali's most iconic characters is Billy, which includes the *Woody Car* image. The book is a satirical approach and created parallel worlds in a world of work, rather than the world of a story.



Take

some time to create from your heart on a weekly basis; that's the only way you'll advance and create an impact ●●

08 Taxali sets aside time to explore his own themes through **personal works**, which will often go on to inform his commercial work and vice versa



03

→ **GT:** Yes, absolutely. The whole experience is different. It's the same person that's speaking but, for illustration work, the concept and the idea being advanced are there to serve the needs of the art director or the editor; with my personal work, I approach it the opposite way, and that's where the imagery is more important than the concept, as a result of the imagery that I want to draw.

**CA: Do the two feed off each other?**

**GT:** All the time. And the really great thing about having those two jobs is that they both simultaneously fuel each other. If I be working on a personal picture, be adventurous and draw [a character] that I haven't drawn before, then I'll get a commercial job and that [character] will make its way in there and will feed into the concept part of it because I've unlocked some doors in my head to get me closer to that concept.

**CA: How would you advise someone who is working commercially but also wants to get their personal work off the ground?**

**GT:** Take some time to create from your heart on a weekly basis: to create some personal work. That's the only way you'll advance and create an impact, and maybe become known for having something to say that nobody is saying.

It's easy to look at somebody and say, "You're in a position where you can say no to Google; you can do personal

work and set aside time." And I say, "Yeah but the reason I'm in this position is that I've always been in this position, ever since I was out of the starting gate. That's always the way I've done things! You don't one day decide to have ethics in your business – you always have them."

**CA: What do you mean by 'ethics'?**

**GT:** I don't give my work away for free, I don't sign bad contracts, I don't draw pictures that I'm not happy with, I have self respect for my career and my work, I don't give away my rights ever and I don't like lowball. I try to maintain industry professional practices.

**CA: Which artists inspire you?**

**GT:** It's hard to remember specifics because it changes on an almost daily basis, but there are core people like EC Segar (the creator of Popeye) and the Fleischer brothers. I've always really liked Dr Seuss; Maurice Sendak; 1930s typography, package design and advertising posters; the Russian constructivists. Andy Warhol is a favourite – he helped me a lot. He helped all of us a lot. Picasso helped all of us too.

**CA: Early in your career you didn't use computers but you said you wouldn't rule them out. What's your stance on digital today?**

**GT:** If I'm doing an illustration and I want to do some screen printing, I'll make my

halftones digitally print it out and from there I'll burn screens. So it's part of the process. Sometimes it doesn't come into the equation at all when I'm doing more straight painting and working in a more spontaneous way. I like to grab whatever's around me, whether it's an eraser or CSS. It's all good.

**CA: As your range of projects expands, do you see digital becoming more important to you?**

**GT:** I've become more interested in applications like 3D software in terms of what they can do for me as a toy designer. For my last few toys I've had to work with toy designers, and for them to depict my imagery in 3D software programs helps me to understand what it's going to look like from different perspectives. So it has been fantastic. Animation stuff – Flash and that kind of thing – I'm really interested in that. I think I would definitely never rule it out. In fact, I would like to become more friendly with it.

