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Member Spotlight

Gary Taxali

Illustrator • Toronto

[September 23, 2002] Eager to start working professionally after his third year at Canada's Ontario College of Art, Gary Taxali began visiting art directors and designers with a portfolio that consisted of eight black and white pen and ink drawings of angst-ridden human forms in various stages of contortion. "I thought the portfolio was good enough and it took me over 120 appointments to learn that my work and presentation were lousy," says the artist, though "not exactly what we're looking for" may be more accurate. Taxali finally did get a call from Toronto Life magazine to buy the drawings for an article that complemented them perfectly: "It was about civilized men who become rageful monsters when behind the steering wheel," he says. "After so much rejection," he adds, "nothing compared to the high of being



offered my first paying job."

Taxali's tools of the trade are simple: " I grab just about anything I can get my hands on," he says. Taxali will often take drawings and create rubber stamps, a practice that came in handy when Red Herring magazine asked him to repeat a certain character. The only tool he doesn't use is a computer, surprising for someone who graduated from art school in 1991. "The funny thing is my friends say the computer is so fast and you don't have to labor over the picture," he says.

Truth be told, Taxali has been known to finish the illustration before hanging up from the art director who's making the request.



The response to Taxali's raw organic approach is evidenced in a long list of business clients that include Levi's, Sony, Coca-Cola, and Bonny Doon Vineyard; periodicals such as Newsweek, TV Guide, Penthouse, L.A. Times Magazine, Psychology Today and Fortune. "Some of my favorite clients are business magazines like Fast Company, Worth and Inc.," says Taxali, whose over 100 awards include the Silver Medal from the Society of Illustrators 43, Communication Arts Illustration Annual,

American Illustration, the Advertising and Design Club of Canada 2002, a Gold Medal from The Society of Illustrators of Los Angeles and the National Magazine Awards-Gold Award 2002. "Business magazines credit readers with having the intelligence and cerebral ability to conceptualize."

Taxali was born in Chandigarh, India, the 20th Century "Utopian" city

designed by Le Corbusier. When Taxali was a year old, he moved with his family to Toronto, where he still lives. When Taxali is not illustrating for clients, he is working with Picture Mechanics, a creative consortium of artists and illustrators that he co-founded, or teaching graduating students who are ready to market themselves.



"My emphasis is on the portfolio. I try and arm the students to get the work," says Taxali. "The other thing I emphasize is the importance of doing the work you love, and the rest usually follows."

When it comes to the work he loves, Taxali has recently begun working with Scholastic Press on a children's book which he wrote, a dream of his since he was first asked to do this 10 years ago. At that time he had teamed up with an award-winning children's author and did the illustrations and revisions only to receive a phone call from the editor who said, "I don't know how to tell you this, but the writer is having nightmares about your work. She described it as archetypically horrific." Says Taxali, "I don't think I would consider my work that way and I think in some way it was a compliment, but not a good way to start a children's book career."

Altpick spoke to Gary Taxali in his Toronto studio about creating characters and plans for the future.

What's it like to be in a marketplace where a lot of illustrators use technology, but you choose not to?

I'm pretty busy so I guess it is a good sign.
I've never really thought of it as an issue.
Only out of interest to maybe try a different way through which I can explore different

effects in making a picture. Although having a web site has been invaluable for marketing my business. My new site features a "For Sale" section where interested parties are able to purchase original works, prints and posters. I have been getting great feedback in terms of sales from strangers out of the blue. And of course, having an online portfolio is a necessity in terms of generating illustration assignments.

How would you define your style?

I always have a hard time with that question because my style keeps evolving. I like what David Hockney says, "Style is a result of good intentions." I'll leave it at that.

Do you have a defining component of a character before you start working?

I don't start thinking about it until I have started drawing it. The more direction I have in terms of what the product is, what the article is about, the better. Usually art directors will reference a few pictures that have the same sensibility as what they are looking for.

I'm looking at 'Toy Peanut'. Can you describe your creative process for that image?

I wanted to do a series of pictures that were fictional products. I imagined that would be packaging for a toy or the actual character you'd get inside the box. I was really fascinated by the way the Japanese create a Japanese version of an American cartoon character like Mickey Mouse. It's looks slightly disjointed but there is something beautiful about it. As of late, I have abandoned the use of Japanese type in favor of using Hindi and Urdu, which relates more to me personally.



What role does collaboration play in your work?

A huge role. Mark Murphy who designed my first web site really opened my eyes to the artistic importance and necessity of collaboration. Working with Mark and teaching graduating illustration students led me to co-found a group called "Picture Mechanics" a few years ago. We rounded up a bunch of our friends and we created a site that is, in effect, a portal to our own individual web sites.

We have been pretty active in promoting the group by doing everything from source book advertising, group shows, direct mail and now we're in the process of creating a product which we will actually sell. I am proud of this group and honored to be promoting myself alongside 36 of some of the top illustrators in the industry.

What has teaching contributed to your work as an illustrator?

I think of my fellow students as colleagues. They are fellow artists and they are fellow picture makers. The only thing separating them from professional illustrators is that we do this for a living. We exchange ideas and information. We have discussions about art and movement, what is going on in culture, and the cool pictures people are making.



What makes an illustration successful?



I think an illustration must communicate a concept or idea. Even if the idea is abstract, if it successfully communicates a visual message to the viewer, then it works. It is a very challenging thing. One of my current clients, Bonny Doon Vineyard in Santa Cruz, which has already assigned no less than 16 wine label illustrations, is a very challenging client. They are a forward thinking company that encourages artistic freedom in the labels they commission. And that makes them the most challenging client to date because I always try and outdo myself, create something new and push my artistic limits. Because of this, I think I have done some of my best work to date. And yes, I get crates of wine too! Their wines are truly exquisite.

Where do you see yourself in five years?

I would like to have a few children's books under my belt. I have a wealth of ideas for stories. I think my work lends itself to that. I am also interested in animation. A few years ago my work was animated for a Coke commercial where the animators used 2D and 3D stop motion animation. And then there is my passion for doing gallery shows. Next year I am planning my second solo show at La Luz de Jesus Gallery in Los Angeles.

- [Contributed by Mary-Beth Holland](#)

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