INTERVIEWED BY MARK FOX PHOTOGRAPHY BY JASON HOLLEY

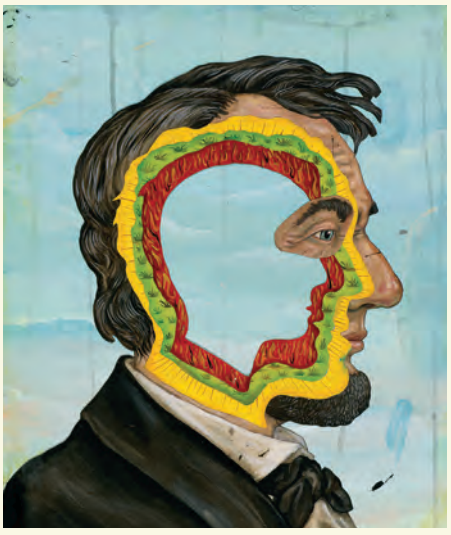
"Mutate, evolve, destroy, rebuild, repeat." This mantra, from an Instagram post about a drawing class he teaches at ArtCenter College of Design, encapsulates JASON HOLLEY's approach to image-making. "I have never found anything particularly appealing about perfection," he says. "In fact, I think I have a hefty amount of distrust for the whole concept."

Like the illustrative equivalent of Mary Shelley's Frankenstein, Jason's paintings can appear to be coming into being while simultaneously falling apart. It is as if each painting, regardless of its subject matter, surreptitiously alludes to the cycle of life. When I ask about the recurring themes of disintegration and decay in his work, Jason pivots. "It's more than a visual theme—its physical reality, and it's happening right now to all of us together at the same time. And I think it's kind of beautiful."

Originally from Texas, Jason moved with his family to Southern California at the age of four. "The one thing I can say about growing up in LA is that the weather and culture are very conducive to skateboarding," he offers. "And that I agree with Ian MacKaye of Minor Threat (and Fugazi) that skateboarding changes or reorders the way that you look at the entire world. Stuff that everyone else ignores or takes for granted—curbs, walls, parking stops, empty parking lots—all become opportunities to express yourself when you're skating. Even the texture of the street means something entirely different."

After high school, a two-week internship at a family friend's ad agency on the East Coast proved to be a formative experience. But perhaps not for the expected reasons. "I ruined everything in the entire place," Jason recalls. "They kept giving me jobs and I kept mangling them: the stat camera, pasteup... I even screwed up the lunch order. There was a mutiny." Fortuitously, Jason was banished to the owner's office where he was given a desk next to a library stocked with Society of Illustrators annuals. "I picked up the most recent one and it was 'Wow! This is a job? This is a job!' That's where I came across Guy Billout, Marshall Arisman, Sue Coe, Henrik Drescher, and all these people for the first time."

Back in Los Angeles, Jason toggled



between art classes at City College by day at ArtCenter by night. He finally enrolled as a full-time student at ArtCenter, graduating in 1992. Describing himself with a shy grin as a "lifer," this is Jason's twenty-seventh year teaching illustration at his alma mater. "As a teacher, it's relatively easy to explain the commercial end of things," he says, "but the art side of the equation is far more complicated, in large part because I am in the same position as the students. We are all trying to do something that has no guidelines, rules, or parameters except for the ones we create for ourselves—and those can change at any given moment." For Jason and the students he teaches, the classroom "can be a beautiful, dynamic, and strange laboratory of ideas, and I try to bring a piece of that back to my studio every day."

Jason's visually striking, often surreal editorial work can be seen in the pages of T*he New York Times*, *The New Yorker*, *Texas Monthly*, *Road & Track*, *Fast Company*, *Mother Jones*, P*sychology Today*, and *Harvard Divinity Bulletin*, among others. And because of his proficiency at addressing themes of nature and science, he also regularly fields assignments from organizations like The National Audubon Society, World Wildlife Fund, and Stanford Medicine.

His generative process starts with "with a ton of thumbnails which are almost indecipherable—they're more like notes. And these get distilled into tight pencil sketches." When I ask Jason about Milton Glaser's dictum that "Drawing is thinking," Jason demurs. "I wouldn't use such a limited definition of drawing," he says. "Drawing can be a whole lot things, but one of them is being able to generate a sort of seismographic visual record of a moment: physical impulses, emotions, memories, whimsical flights of fancy, and yeah—thinking. I have always found that drawing has an authenticity, rawness, and immediacy that can feel almost primal. And that's way better than thinking."

Once a drawing is approved, all of the individual elements of an illustration are redrawn on tracing paper and then transferred to heavily gessoed boards where Jason renders them in oil and acrylic in a palette he describes as "the color of failure." It is an ochre-inflected palette that might ordinarily conjure medieval religious iconography—were it not for the presence of so many animals in varying states of decay. "I work with a simple glazing technique," Jason says. "I use really thin layers of paint—an embarrassingly small amount of paint. And then everything gets cut out with an X-Acto knife." After slicing through the top layers of illustration board, Jason carefully peels each painted element up and transfers it to a new board where he can adjust its relationship to the other elements. "I like having the option to move things around and create different dynamics or tensions within a composition," he explains.

Beyond additional glazing, Jason may subject his compositions to scratches, scrawls, scraps of packing tape, and other illustrative debris. Or he may bring out his hole punch. "I'm attracted to the tactile and the arcane," he explains. "That's the way I build a relationship with the object as I'm making it. I have to live with it, and it has to live with me." Because Jason regards his paintings as if they were life-forms, they tend to evolve—and devolve—over time. "Disintegration plays a big part in how I construct and deconstruct my paintings," he says. "The things that I find truly influential are fragile and fleeting."

Which brings us to *the box*. "I have these big boxes in my studio and one of them is marked 'Compost.' Those are the paintings that get disassembled." Rather than treat his finished work reverentially, Jason makes a habit of stripping his paintings over time—literally peeling the painted elements up like a Band-Aid—to potentially live anew in some future project. "This process goes on and on until the pieces fall apart, or they settle into a permanent home on a painting that feels 'finished,'" he says, adding, "Most of the time I feel like I'm salvaging things—that I'm rescuing parts that ended up in a bad relationship. I'm giving them a chance at another existence."

This ongoing exercise in recontextualization is fundamental to Jason's process—and to the emotive power of his work. The fluidity it offers lets Jason consistently destabilize

the assumed trajectory of an image by introducing new, unforeseen elements. "There can come a point where I become overly familiar with where a painting is going—where I understand how it's going to turn out. And when that happens, I get restless or anxious about it being too predictable, and that's when the box comes out." For Jason, remaining open to uncertainty, even in the later stages of a painting, is an antidote to formula. "When I am in the studio things can get a little procedural," he admits, "and it's easy to neglect the stuff that matters most: transcendence, mystery, misadventure, and raw emotion." Fortunately, Jason is particularly adept at giving form to the stuff that matters most.