





HE FIRST WORKED *for* MORE THAN a DECADE *as an* ITINERANT CARICATURIST—THINK PARTIES, WEDDINGS
and BAR MITZVAHS—BEFORE BECOMING a STAFF CARTOONIST *for the* LOCAL NEWSPAPER. THAT WAS *then*, TODAY
HE *is* AN ILLUSIONIST—SOME SAY *he* MUST MIX a FEW DROPS *of* HIS SUBJECT'S BLOOD *in* HIS PAINT,
HOW ELSE *is* *he* ABLE *to* CAPTURE a SOUL ON CANVAS.

NO.75

DALE STEPHANOS

AUTHOR: MARK FOX
PHOTOGRAPHER: BELLA STEPHANOS

DALE IS
A TRUE
PROFESSIONAL.
I HIRED HIM
FOR
A CARICATURE
OF A CAT
EATING
A BIRD—NOT HIS
TYPICAL
SUBJECT MATTER—
AND WHEN
THE FINAL
CAME IN,
EVEN OUR
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GRUMPY
EDITOR HAD
A SMILE
ON HIS FACE.
IT'S STILL
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FAVORITE
COVERS AND
IT'S HUNG
ON MY WALL
AT HOME
EVER SINCE.

andrew j. nilsen
former art director
sf weekly

DALE STEPHANOS IS AN ILLUSIONIST who performs two magic tricks, both of which are transformative. The first trick is an act of creative ensoulment—the process by which Dale imbues his portraits not only with the illusion of life, but with sentience. “My obsession is really the face, the gaze,” he says. “I’m very concerned that the work feels as though it’s looking back at me with life behind the eyes.”

THIS IMPRESSION—OF A FACE “LOOKING BACK” at the viewer—is partly achieved through blinkered framing, amorphous backgrounds, and a shallow depth of field. A charcoal drawing of Samuel Beckett typifies Dale’s approach: cropped tightly to the head, stripped of context, with ancillary details eliminated. In other portraits, soft-focus backgrounds recede and serve to thrust the foreground—always the face—toward the viewer. Generally fully frontal and with an implacable gaze, Dale’s portraits invariably draw the viewer’s attention to a set of luminous eyes. “Sergio Leone’s movies had a big impact on me. The way he’d linger on close-ups, building the tension, was amazing and frightening.”

WHICH BRINGS US TO THE SECOND TRICK. In a handful of pieces—in likenesses of David Bowie, Prince, and even a recent self-portrait—Dale effectively transforms the picture plane into a mirror, and the viewer into the subject. I find I am no longer looking at Prince, I am Prince, basking in all of my purple glory; a moment later I am Tom Waits, casting a wizened glance at myself in a pork pie hat. These shifts in perspective are as rewarding as they are deeply unsettling. With artistic sleight of hand, Dale relocates the viewer from the periphery of the picture to its center, and in the process collapses two souls into one—if only for a moment. But that brief moment

only exists thanks to hours of arduous labor. Dale estimates that his pandemic self-portrait took thirty to forty hours to complete. Time, painstakingly spent, is one of the key elements that separates Dale’s work from his photographic sources.

ANOTHER IS FRICTION. The manual processes of applying charcoal to paper or oil to canvas—and of removing them—requires both friction and the passage of time. (Photography, which relies on light to capture an image, is notably frictionless and instantaneous.) It is through the gradual accumulation of pigment—successive gestures that collectively coalesce into an image—that Dale’s portraits transcend their sources and become one-of-a-kind artifacts. “The fascinating thing about handmade art is that you are looking at the marks somebody made to create the illusion of reality. There was nothing there before but paper, and after making mark upon mark, hour after hour, it finally resembles something that’s alive.” *Creatio ex nihilo*.

CURIOSLY, THE ILLUSION OF REALITY that Dale creates relies on exaggerated lighting and an extreme depth of field. It is an amplified reality. “Even the more realistic portraits exist at a higher volume than the photos or real-life subject they’re based on,” he admits. “I really see in an exaggerated way.” He understood just how exaggerated when he learned to edit his own iPhone photos to better match his perceptions. “I love working from photos, but I don’t like that photography flattens everything out.” To counter this flattening effect Dale calibrates light and shadow to sculpt the face; he may also shoot his own photographs with alternate lighting. In fact, light plays such a crucial role in his work that luminance may be thought of as an auxiliary protagonist or

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or co-subject. He marvels when he recounts first seeing the “glowing” Rembrandt self-portrait at the Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum in Boston, and reflexively looking for a spotlight. “It fascinated me that this flat piece of art with paint on it could actually emit light. It’s magic. I’m fascinated by the idea of work that has a feeling of life within it. That’s what I’m chasing here with my own work, the portrait work.”

DALE’S CAREER PATH HAS BEEN UNORTHODOX. He first worked for more than a decade as an itinerant caricaturist—think parties, weddings, and bar mitzvahs—before becoming a staff cartoonist for a local newspaper. “In my heart I’m still a cartoonist and I love Mort Drucker, Jack Davis and the whole Mad magazine gang.” Later, while pursuing magazine assignments, the work of Mark Fredrickson, C.F. Payne, Brald Braldts, Gottfried Helnwein and Chuck Close became influential. And now? “Today, my heart jumps when I see Tim O’Brien, Marc Burckhardt, Bill Mayer. Kadir Nelson is becoming probably the most important and beautiful illustrator working today.”

Considering the historical role of caricature as an instrument of ridicule—Adam Gopnik refers to it as “an art of indignation”—Dale’s caricatures are remarkably polite. Unlike George Grosz’s lacerating anti-WWI drawings, or the grotesqueries of fellow German Otto Dix, Dale’s caricatures are more comical than indignant. (Michael Bloomberg cosplaying as Marshal Will Kane of the western *High Noon* is about as impolite as he gets.) Dale’s digital illustration of Brittany Howard of Alabama Shakes is typical of an editorial approach in which he employs distortion to establish hierarchy—and delight the viewer. Howard’s proportions are pure T. rex—with a massive head, cavernous maw, and subordinate, tiny hands. Although the effect is ludicrous, the spirit is cele-

bratory, even affectionate. Eyes slammed shut and microphone smoking, Howard’s vocals are joyfully incendiary.

DALE’S MASTERY AT DEPICTING THE HUMAN FACE at different scales and in different media is especially impressive. Of a five-by-eight-inch Moleskine pencil drawing of David Lynch, he says: “I think small drawings and paintings have a magical quality to them. It’s like whispering. People pay closer attention. You have to have a lighter touch and work with your fingers and hand, unlike the large paintings.”

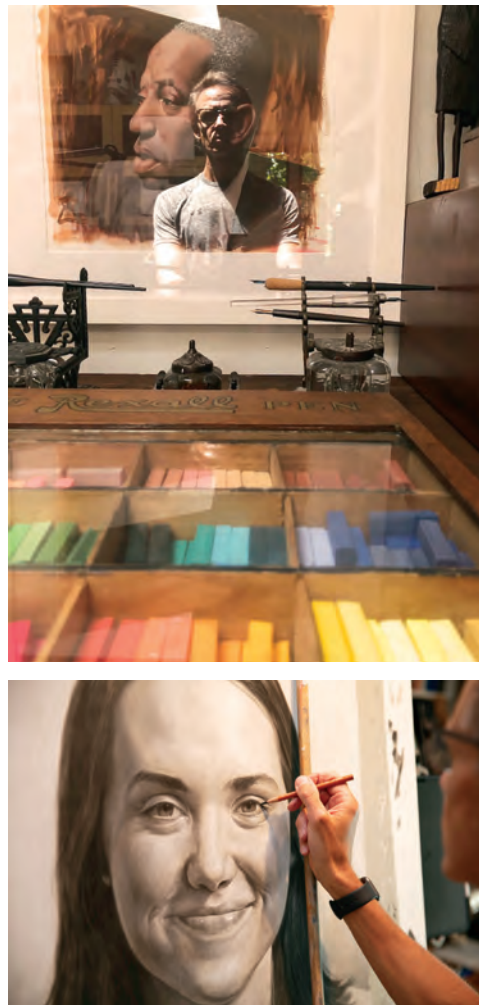
For larger works—his oil of Prince is four feet high, the musician’s head filling three full feet of it—Dale

uses his whole body, leaning in and back, side to side. “There’s also a lot of arm movement that goes into making those paintings, so when you see them up close the brushstrokes are more expressive, the paint is thicker, and there’s more surface to pay attention to.” Fellow illustrator Tim O’Brien agrees: “Dale’s work is powerful, often funny, and his large portraits loom in a stark and raw way, demanding the viewer take notice. We do.”

It would be a mistake to think of Dale Stephanos as a photo-realist. Yes, his portraits rely on photographic reference, but it is probably closer to the truth to suggest that what Dale draws or paints is not the reality offered by photography, but the reality of what he experiences when looking at that reference. What he feels—

and what he wants the viewer to feel. “I need to make things the way I see them, not the way they’re being presented to me,” he explains.

French theorist Roland Barthes believed that “Photography transformed subject into object.” The brilliance of Dale’s portraiture is that he succeeds in reanimating photography’s object—in transforming the object of our gaze back into subject. Rather than its verisimilitude, it is ultimately the humanity of Dale’s work that is so thrilling.

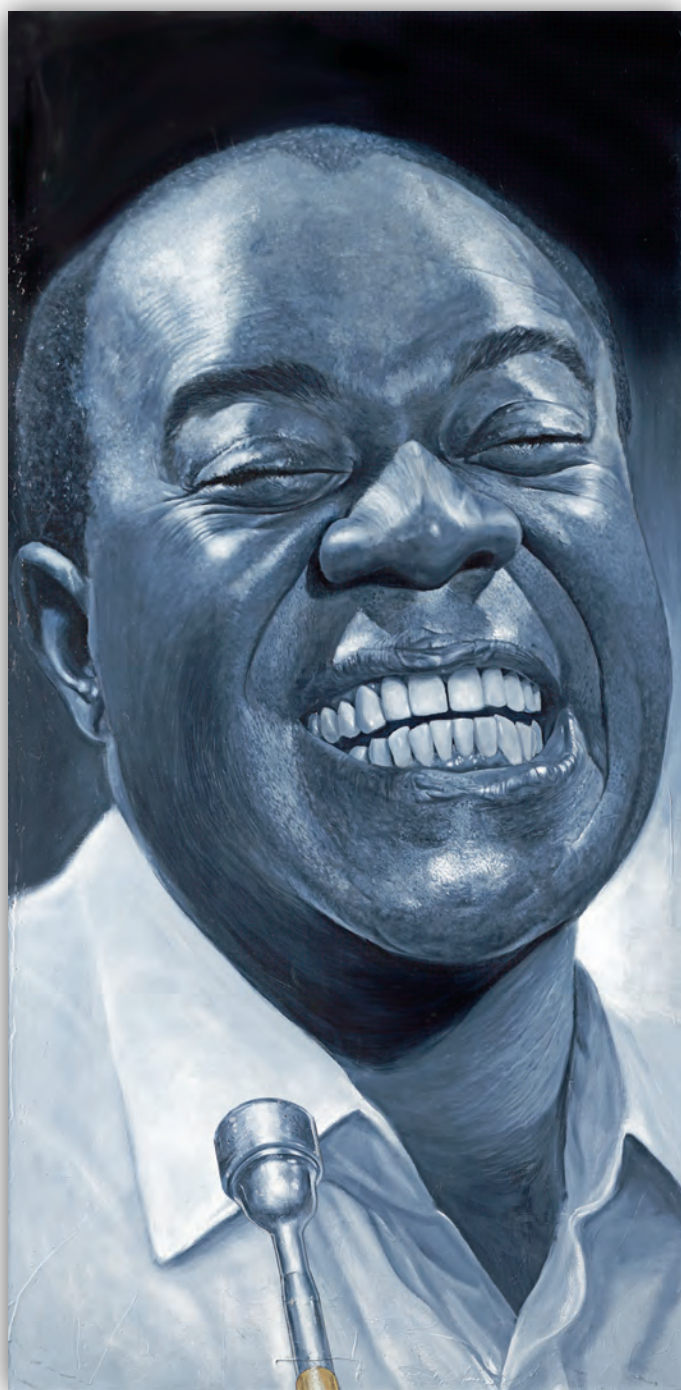




LIKE ANY NUMBER OF TALENTED ARTISTS OUT THERE,
DALE STEPHANOS CAN NAIL THE LIKENESS OF A SUBJECT ON CANVAS.
BUT I'M CONVINCED THAT HE MIXES A FEW DROPS OF HIS SUBJECT'S BLOOD
IN WITH HIS PAINT.
ALTHOUGH I DON'T KNOW
QUITE HOW HE PROCURES IT.
HOW ELSE CAN YOU EXPLAIN THAT WAY HE UNCANNILY CAPTURES
THE SOUL OF HIS SUBJECTS
SO CONSISTENTLY?

kory kennedy
digital design lead
hearst enthusiast group





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WE'D BE GOLDEN.

t.j. tucker
creative director
texas monthly













DALE IS THE RARE ILLUSTRATOR
WHO CAN RENDER LIKENESSES
IN PRETTY MUCH ANY POSE OR SITUATION IMAGINABLE—
WITHOUT REFERENCE.
HE CAN RUN WITH IDEAS WE'VE COOKED UP WITH THE EDITORIAL TEAM,
OR BETTER YET
TAKE OUR DIRECTION
AND COME UP WITH SOMETHING
FAR MORE CLEVER
AND APT.

carolyn perot
creative director
mother jones





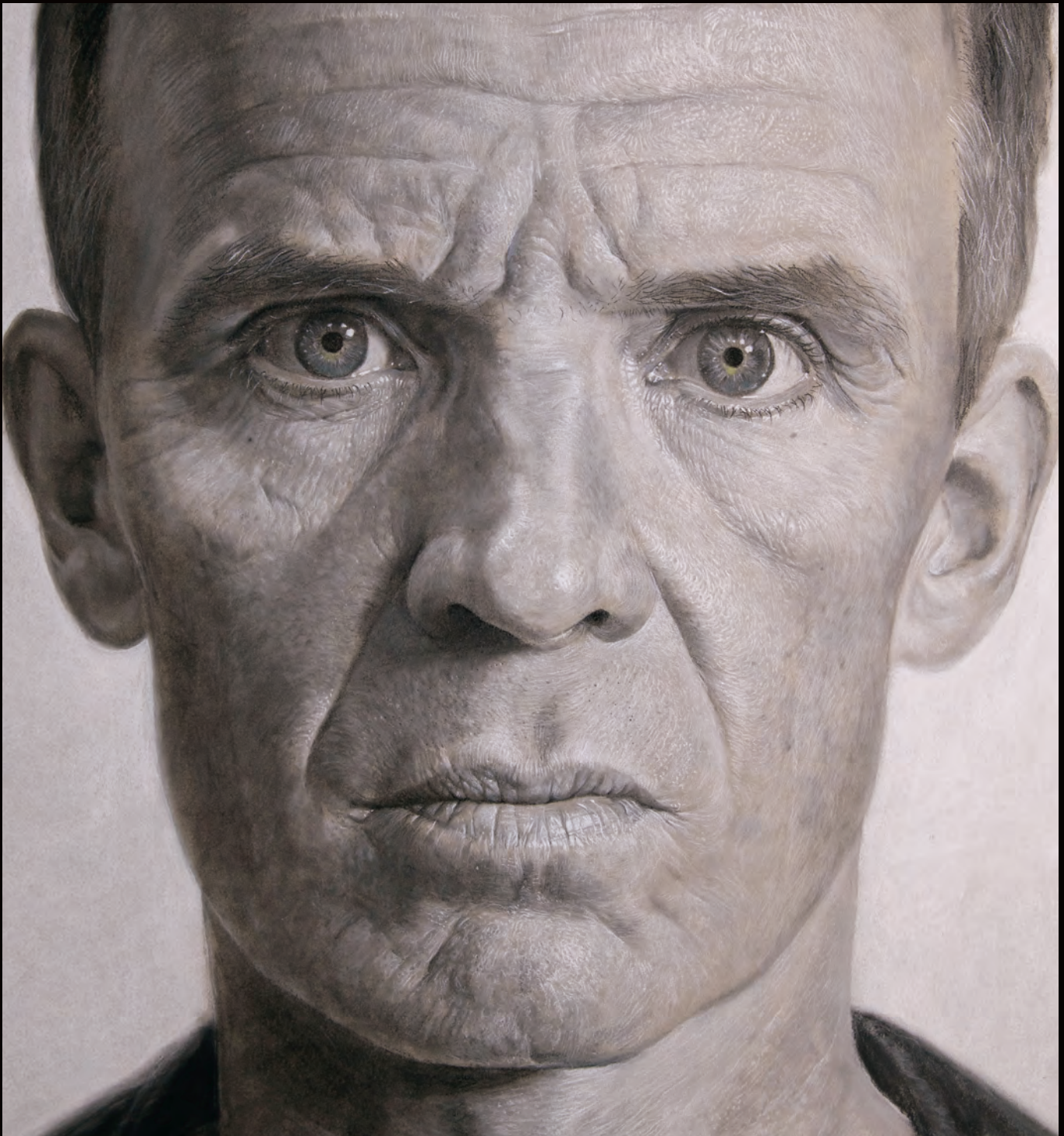




DALE CAPTURES
THE CONCEPT
AND SPIRIT OF EACH
ILLUSTRATION HE PRODUCES.
HIS SKILL
AND ATTENTION TO DETAIL
ARE AT THE TOP
OF THE FIELD.
BEST OF ALL,
HE'S A CONSUMMATE PRO
AND A JOY TO WORK WITH.
WITH DALE,
THERE'S NEVER A DOUBT
THAT THE END RESULT
WILL BE A MASTERPIECE.

michael hogue
staff artist
the dallas morning news





In exercise,

*you can't grow muscles unless you break the muscle down first,
then it repairs itself and grows, given proper nutrition.*

It's similar with art.

If you're not

filling up your head

with new, challenging things,

you'll eventually

find yourself

out of ideas,

and at best,

repeating yourself.

