





AS TRUE *of* ANY ARTIST, THE LOVE *of* DRAWING NEVER DISAPPEARS. HIS BLUE-COLLAR UPBRINGING TAUGHT HIM THE IMPORTANCE *of* HARD WORK. TWO-HOUR ROUND TRIP COMMUTES *to* SCHOOL *of* VISUAL ARTS COUPLED WITH TWO PART TIME JOBS MEANT LITTLE SLEEP. NOT CONTENT WITH AN UNDERGRADUATE DEGREE HE PURSUED NOT ONE BUT TWO MASTERS DEGREES ENDING WITH HIS THESIS PROJECT IN THE NORMAN ROCKWELL MUSEUM'S PERMANENT COLLECTION. TALENT ONLY GETS YOU SO FAR, SETTING *and* ACHEIVING GOALS IS *a* CAREER.

NO.78

SCOTT BAKAL

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PHOTOGRAPHER: SCOTT BAKAL

It's not that Scott Bakal has a short attention span, exactly, so much as he is leery of feeling creatively encumbered, or mired. "If I stick to a style it's like standing still," he says. Bakal tends to work in so many different media and with enough variation in style that it can be difficult to make sweeping pronouncements about his approach. "My goal for quite some time has been to continually change my work process and technique," he offers.

GIVEN HIS COMMITMENT TO REINVENTION, perhaps the most significant thread running through Bakal's career is more of an attitude than anything else, comprising equal parts fearlessness and irreverence. Although he is well versed in a variety of illustration techniques—Bakal graduated from the School of Visual Arts, and went on to get advanced illustration degrees from Syracuse University and the University of Hartford—he is undaunted by technique, and shows little concern about the "proper" way to use a tool or apply a pigment.

"I DON'T USE WATERCOLOR in a traditional way," Bakal confesses. "I use it in a messy way with lots of bleeds and spatters. The way I've come to use it isn't from any classic training. As a matter of fact, I've never been taught watercolor. I've figured out a way to use it in the context of how I work. That goes for most of my media that I use." Bakal describes himself as agnostic when it comes to media. He has found that almost anything can be used in the service of markmaking, and it is evident that he enjoys making marks. Whether in drawing or painting, Bakal is inspired by the aesthetic equivalent of "dirt": the drawings of William Kentridge and Terry Winters, or the work of Tim

Hussey, Cy Twombly, Tom Sachs, and Jean-Michel Basquiat. In the field of design, he mentions the work of David Carson.

"I LOVE THE 'FINGERPRINT' on a piece," says Bakal. "Or when making a drawing, seeing the ghosts of erasure or the side of palm prints left behind while smudging a drawing. It's similar to that little bit of feedback

from the guitarist in a song or hearing the finger slide over the strings during a chord progression that make an abstract sound." Bakal responds to imperfections embodied by the word "dirt," and by what is revealed about the creative process by the residue left by that process.

BAKAL'S CREATIVE PROCESS OFTEN BEGINS in one of the many sketchbooks that he reserves for ongoing visual experiments, what he calls his "play" sketchbooks. "I keep various sketchbooks that aren't really meant to be anything other than my drawing things around me, exploring line, and combining materials together," he explains. "They are not meant to be judged or presented anywhere." Bakal describes these sketchbooks as the "hub" of his finished work; the center out of which everything emanates.

A persistent feature of Bakal's sketchbook drawings is his continuous exploitation of the line's potential for expression. Beyond simply establishing contours, it is a line that he unspools across surfaces like convoluted entrails; nestles against other lines to sculpt sinewy, striated forms; and repeats in arabesques to relentlessly fill space—as if he were a tattoo artist being paid by the square inch.

"My line probably comes from being taught by Jack Potter and Sam Martine, who were both my instruc-

FINDING
AN
ILLUSTRATOR
THAT
HAS
A
GOOD
LOOK
IS EASY
BUT
ONE
THAT
CAN
EMPATHIZE
WITH
THE
STORY
IS
EXTREMELY
DIFFICULT
TO FIND
AND
SCOTT
DOES
THIS.

eson chan
freelance
art director



Unfortunately
I have
a problem
with
self-sabotage.
I want
to
keep
changing
my work
and
trying
different
things,
which
tends to
make things
a bit
visually
inconsistent.
If I had
to do
the same
thing
for
20+ years,
I'd just give
up
and
do
something
else.

tors over 20 years ago,” reflects Bakal. “They were very contour-line heavy instructors and it never really left me. Although the quality of my line has changed—it’s become more ‘stitched’ for certain things and more flowing for others.”

WHAT BAKAL CALLS A STITCHED LINE is the result of linking many short, staccato gestures. In his loosest examples, the quality of this line can appear hesitant, or agitated. A sketchbook spread from his personal series *Skulls of Ultimate Death* features scratchy contour drawings of eight conventionalized skulls floating above a red and black field. The inked lines seem incised, as if Bakal is carving into a resistant surface rather than drawing on paper. Redolent of graffiti, the drawing conveys a raw immediacy.

In other pieces Bakal paints his lines with a fine brush to create what might be thought of as a gestural pin-stripe. In an illustration of a crouching monkey for Story Book Farm Primate Sanctuary, Bakal overlays a bright pink line onto an underpainting of umbers and blacks. He uses these pink lines to map an amorphous silhouette, delineating the primate’s anatomy and facial features in the barest of strokes. The image’s conflict between ambiguity and clarity is one of its delights: Bakal’s pin-stripes transform an otherwise inert mass into one with active, animal potential. Additional linear adornments in contrasting styles activate the negative spaces enveloping the monkey.

THE SOCIETY OF ILLUSTRATORS HALL OF FAME ARTIST Anita Kunz, who invited Bakal to create and donate his monkey art for a Story Book Farm Primate fundraiser, values Bakal’s ability to telegraph a message. “The two defining characteristics of successful illustration are originality and immediacy,” explains Kunz. “In a complicated world, the effectiveness of clear, concise visual communication cannot be underestimated—and Scott Bakal has mastered the craft. He utilizes a great economy of line, and his color sense is spare and effective.” In addition to his expansive use of the line, another recurring feature of Bakal’s oeuvre is his use of layer-

ing. Bakal loves to combine background textures with overpainting, overdrawing, and transparent pigments so that images can be “read” through other images. The simultaneity of these illustrations operates like double-exposure in photography or a printer’s make-ready sheet: it forces the viewer to oscillate between foreground and background, and between multiple or even conflicting narrative elements.

THESE JUXTAPOSITIONS OVERLAP to defy realistic spatial limitations, and they can defy linear time as well, collapsing both the past and present into a singular moment. (A personal piece about deforestation, in which tree stumps are overlaid with linework of mature trees, exemplifies this effect.) Bakal also uses layering

to create narrative ambiguity or to color a narrative with symbolic shadings. The visual impact is dynamic, dimensionally rich, and it invites the eye to linger among the details. “When there is a chance to look into a painting with different layers there always seems to be something new to see, and it gives the piece more depth,” he says. Bakal describes his use of layering as a “sound aesthetic.” He cites the bands Sonic Youth and SŪRL, as well as the No Wave and Noise movements as inspiration. “I’ve always tried to emulate the style of music I enjoy in my art,” he says. “The music that excites me is something that has a consistent rhythm or

beat to it but the overlapping sounds, noise, and feedback are quite random or experimental. If you close your eyes, you can pick out sounds and noises flowing around to the front, then back into the background, building up a thickly layered piece.”

TRYING TO EVOKE the spatial and temporal nature of music within a two dimensional, fixed illustration is a heavy lift, but Bakal succeeds in pushing against the limitations of his medium. With sound as a frame of reference, one begins to “hear” his layered motifs in new ways. Russian painter Wassily Kandinsky likened the soul to the piano, declaring “Color is the keyboard. The eye is the hammer.” As one’s eye strikes a Bakal illustration, the effect is indeed vibratory.







WHAT I LOVE ABOUT SCOTT BAKAL'S WORK
IS ITS UNIQUE,
UNABASHED
HANDCRAFTED QUALITY.
WHEN YOU GET ONE OF SCOTT'S PIECES YOU CAN IMAGINE
THE ARTIST AT HIS DRAWING TABLE HUNCHED OVER A PIECE OF TOOTHY WATERCOLOR PAPER SURROUNDED BY WELL-WORN PAINTBRUSHES AND DRIPPY JARS OF PAINT.
YOU CAN SMELL THE INK,
EVEN THOUGH
THE ILLUSTRATION
WAS DELIVERED
ELECTRONICALLY.

dj stout
partner
pentagram



SCOTT NEVER CEASES TO AMAZE ME
(AND THE CLIENT).
HIS
PROBLEM-SOLVING SKILLS
ALWAYS MAKE
THE JOB EASIER FOR ME
IN THE LONG RUN.

jeffrey wolverton
graphic designer
pentagram







YOU CAN ALWAYS PICK OUT SCOTT'S CREATIONS FROM THE CROWD.
 THEY ARE
 VISUAL SONNETS
 THAT RING CLEAR
 AND LOUD
 AS A BELL.
 HIS ILLUSTRATIONS ALWAYS HELP
 TO MAKE ARTICLES
 POP
 NO MATTER THE TOPIC.

soojin buzeli
 creative director
 iss media



I was in bands for quite a few years
and I think a sketchbook
is like the equivalent
of putting a cassette into a tape deck, pressing record
and
just letting the tape run while rehearsing,
catching all of the mistakes, the restarts, chatter, successes and failures.
That's what I want to see in a sketchbook
and I think that's what they're meant for.





SCOTT HAS CREATED TWO COVERS FOR *SCHOOL LIBRARY JOURNAL* IN RECENT YEARS EACH ADDRESSED CHALLENGING LIFE CIRCUMSTANCES—AND WE WERE LOOKING TO BALANCE HEAVINESS AND HOPEFULNESS IN BOTH PROJECTS. SCOTT DOES THIS PARTICULARLY WELL HE INCORPORATES THESE THEMES IN A GROUNDED, SOULFUL WAY.

mark tuchman
creative director
school library journal









NO MATTER WHAT CHALLENGES I THROW AT SCOTT,
HE CONSISTENTLY DELIVERS SOLUTIONS
THAT ARE
DISTINCTIVE
AND GRAB THE ATTENTION OF OUR READERS.
EVEN WHEN THE SUBJECT IS MUNDANE
AND A LITTLE STALE
SCOTT'S
ONE-OF-A-KIND STYLE
MAKES IT FEEL FRESH.

bryan gray
art director
types & symbols





