









ITALIAN INFLUENCES ABOUND IN HER HOME LIFE—HER PARENTS WERE FIRST GENERATION CANADIANS. EARLY INFLUENCES FROM AN ARTISTIC MOTHER WHO DREW *and* PAINTED ONLY *to* BE FOLLOWED YEARS LATER *by* HER DAUGHTER. INFLUENCES CAME TOO FROM CUBISM, SURREALISM *and* 70s ALBUM COVER ART. COMPLETING HER ART DEGREE IN TORONTO SHE HELD MANY PART-TIME JOBS INCLUDING *a* SEVEN YEAR STINT *at* THE ART GALLERY *of* ONTARIO BEFORE GETTING HER FIRST TWO ASSIGNMENTS ON THE *SAME* DAY. THE REST *is* HISTORY.

NO.80

S A N D R A  
D I O N I S I

INTERVIEWED BY MARK FOX PHOTOGRAPHY BY LUCA MORRIS

SANDRA DIONISI'S WORK constitutes an art of implication. Rather than depict, it suggests; rather than announce, her illustrations beckon. Like the opening shot of a film Sandra's vignettes set the mood and introduce the protagonists, but the internal conflicts she hints at seldom feel resolved. The illustrated moment may be fixed, but the narrative remains ongoing, with any resolution reserved for a later scene we will never see. The effect is simultaneously discomfiting and weirdly appealing. Unless she is commissioned to create a likeness, Sandra's illustrations are rarely based on photographs. The majority of her faces and figures are fictive constructs sprung from the imagination. Sandra describes "drawing the human form in a way that isn't necessarily realistic, but that you can connect to in terms of its power."

What her illustrations of the human form seek are less individual representation than universal archetype—as if she is trying to locate and then reflect the essence of our shared humanity rather than depict the specifics of age, race, or gender. Most of her portraits are not truly portraits, therefore, but symbols that serve as mnemonics for our own longings, anxieties, joys, suffering, or feelings of solitude.

WHEN SANDRA LOOKS FOR INSPIRATION she finds she is drawn to Renaissance paintings of saints or vintage photographs that date from a period when smiling was not expected (nor desired, for that matter) of the subject. What is common to these sources are images of self-possession: faces with an other-worldly coun-

tenance, eyes fixed to an indeterminate middle distance. The impression is of characters who may be in the world, but are not necessarily of the world. These figures often float in Sandra's compositions like specters in a dream.

SOME OF THE DREAMLIKE QUALITY of Sandra's

illustrations derive from her muted color palette, which comprises washed-out indigos, umbers, and warm and cool greys with occasional hits of brighter colors: a celadon green here, a brick red there. The range approximates faded color photographs of the 1940s and '50s, as well as sepia-toned prints from earlier in the 20th century. The palette evokes the past and with it, perhaps, a sense of loss.

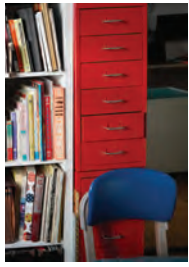
TO PRODUCE THESE COLORS, Sandra favors acrylic paints, thinned heavily and applied to a stretched sheet of Arches watercolor paper. "I use a medium surface cold press. It has just enough of a tooth to catch the color but also allow me to move it without leaving a brushstroke." The absence of a brushstroke and Sandra's atmospheric approach to applying pigment creates an effect that appears to be almost

airbrushed. "It takes a lot of patience, and a hair dryer," she admits. "There's a lot of water and thinning, and thinning, and then dissipating the color as it moves to the edge. Traditionally a piece takes a long time for me because of all that layering and drying, and having to dry between layers."

Sandra attended the Ontario College of Art and Design University in Toronto and started freelancing the year before she graduated. "At the time there were two Brit-

SANDRA'S  
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TRANSCENDS  
JOURNALISTIC  
ILLUSTRATION.  
HER  
WORK  
HAS  
A  
CERTAIN  
ETHEREAL QUAL-  
ITY,  
A  
BEAUTY  
THAT  
TRANSFORMS  
A  
MAGAZINE SPREAD  
INTO  
SOMETHING MORE  
ABIDING,  
MORE  
MEANINGFUL.

Maria G. Keehan  
Creative Director  
Smithsonian  
Magazine



I like  
to  
surround  
myself  
with items  
that  
remind  
me  
of my  
family  
history  
and  
things  
that I  
find  
inspiring.  
And  
sometimes  
those  
two things  
come  
together.

ish art directors that were hiring illustrators from Britain for *Weekend* magazine, which was put out by the *Toronto Star*. One of them was Robert Priest and the other was Derek Ungless. Sue Coe was one of the illustrators—they were called the ‘Radical Illustrators’ at the time.”

IN THE FALL OF 1981, the Association of Illustrators in London devoted a special issue of *Illustrators* magazine to a loose-knit group of young artists and illustrators associated with the Royal College of Art. Designed by George Snow, the issue is gleefully irreverent, its approach to layout owing something to the office copier collages of Sex Pistols’ designer Jamie Reid and the “instant trash” aesthetic of punk gig flyers. Superimposing a stenciled “Radical” across the magazine masthead, the moniker came to encapsulate the work of Ian Pollock, Robert Mason, the Brothers Quay, Georgeanne Deen, Catherine Denvir, Carolyn Gowdy and Andrzej Klimowski, among others. “And Blair Dawson,” recalls Sandra. “He is from Toronto, not Britain, but he was in that group that was doing work that was just out of this world. It was an approach that I had never seen before:

it wasn’t literal, and it was heavily influenced by fine art and Dada. I think the illustrators that were coming out of school or at the beginnings of their career around the early ’80s were heavily influenced by that group of people, and I can say I was one of them.”

LIKE MANY OF SANDRA’S INFLUENCES, however, it can be difficult to locate exactly where (or how) this particular influence is manifested in her work, at least from the standpoint of surface or style. One quality Sandra shares with the “Radical Illustrators” is a preoccupation with the human form and its potential as a signifier for emotion. Where she differs is perhaps more interesting. While Sandra’s illustrations are indeed emotive, the faces within them are not. This paradox is a recurring feature of Sandra’s work: editorial illustrations to accompany articles on mental health, sexual assault, or parenting in which the subject’s countenance is strangely calm.

SANDRA DESCRIBES THE CHARACTERS she draws as “stoics.” Rather than using the face to telegraph her

intentions, Sandra prefers to convey emotion “by the position of the body, the tilt of the head, the hand—all of those things that signify action.” Signify, but not demonstrate. Sandra uses the motif of hands, in particular, like secular “mudras”, using small gestures to evoke a range of feeling. “The first time I started using hands was after seeing a painting by Fra Angelico, ‘The Mocking of Christ.’ It’s very contemporary.” Painted around 1440 in a Florentine convent, “The Mocking of Christ” is startling in its dramatic use of disembodied hands (and one head) silhouetted against a green background. The restraint and surrealistic nature of this fresco are frequently echoed in Sandra’s work.



HER PORTRAIT of Edgar Allan Poe for *Smithsonian* magazine exemplifies Sandra’s tendency to pair quietude with the unexpected. Inspired by Edward Steichen’s 1924 photograph of Gloria Swanson, Sandra submerges Poe’s image below an arabesque of embroidered lace. “The challenge with any portrait of Poe is leaving out that poor, overused raven,” she says. “Poe was deeply affected by the death of both his mother and his wife. The mourning veil, a Victorian era tradition, was my way

of symbolizing that.” The effect is mysterious and formally beautiful, but also mildly disquieting in its gender-bending juxtaposition. “I’m after a quiet strength in my depiction of figures and busts, juxtaposed with surreal elements. I want to infuse them with mood, mystery, and maybe even humor.”

THE QUALITY OF INSCRUTABILITY, of an image that is simultaneously clear yet veiled, is a persistent feature of Sandra’s work, and it prompts not simply passive interest, but active contemplation. This invitation to contemplation is one of the recurring pleasures of Sandra’s work, and I find myself poring over the details of her illustrations in an effort to decipher the external cues of deeply internal and private states of being. “Canadians,” Sandra notes, “are observers of the more prominent and influential cultures around us—the United States and the United Kingdom. I think I could apply that definition to myself.” As an illustrator and practiced observer, Sandra creates work that induces us to be more observant as well.



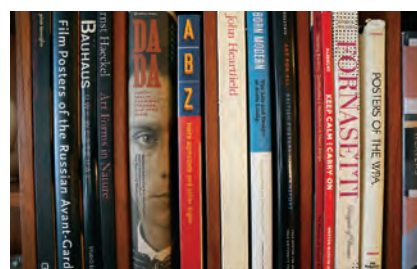






WHEN THE SIERRA CLUB WANTED TO ADD IMAGERY TO EDUCATE ITS STAFF (AND OTHERS) ABOUT THEIR INCLUSION AND DIVERSITY INITIATIVES, I LOOKED TO SANDRA TO HELP SOLVE THIS POTENTIALLY TRICKY ASSIGNMENT. SHE RESPONDED WITH HER USUAL GRACE AND ELEGANT WORK, AND WE ENDED UP WITH A SUITE OF IMAGES THAT COULD WORK IN MULTIPLE CONTEXTS

Tracy CoxFormer  
Art Director  
Sierra Club















SANDRA POSSESSES AN ABILITY  
TO CONSISTENTLY  
DEVELOP  
COMPELLING IDEAS  
AND BREATHE A MAGICAL QUALITY INTO HER ARTWORK—REGARDLESS OF THE SUBJECT.  
I'VE ENJOYED COLLABORATING WITH HER IN PART BECAUSE OF  
THE STRIKING,  
EVERGREEN QUALITY OF HER WORK  
AND HER TOTAL COMMITMENT TO EACH PROJECT.

Joseph Yacinski  
Owner  
Yacinski Design







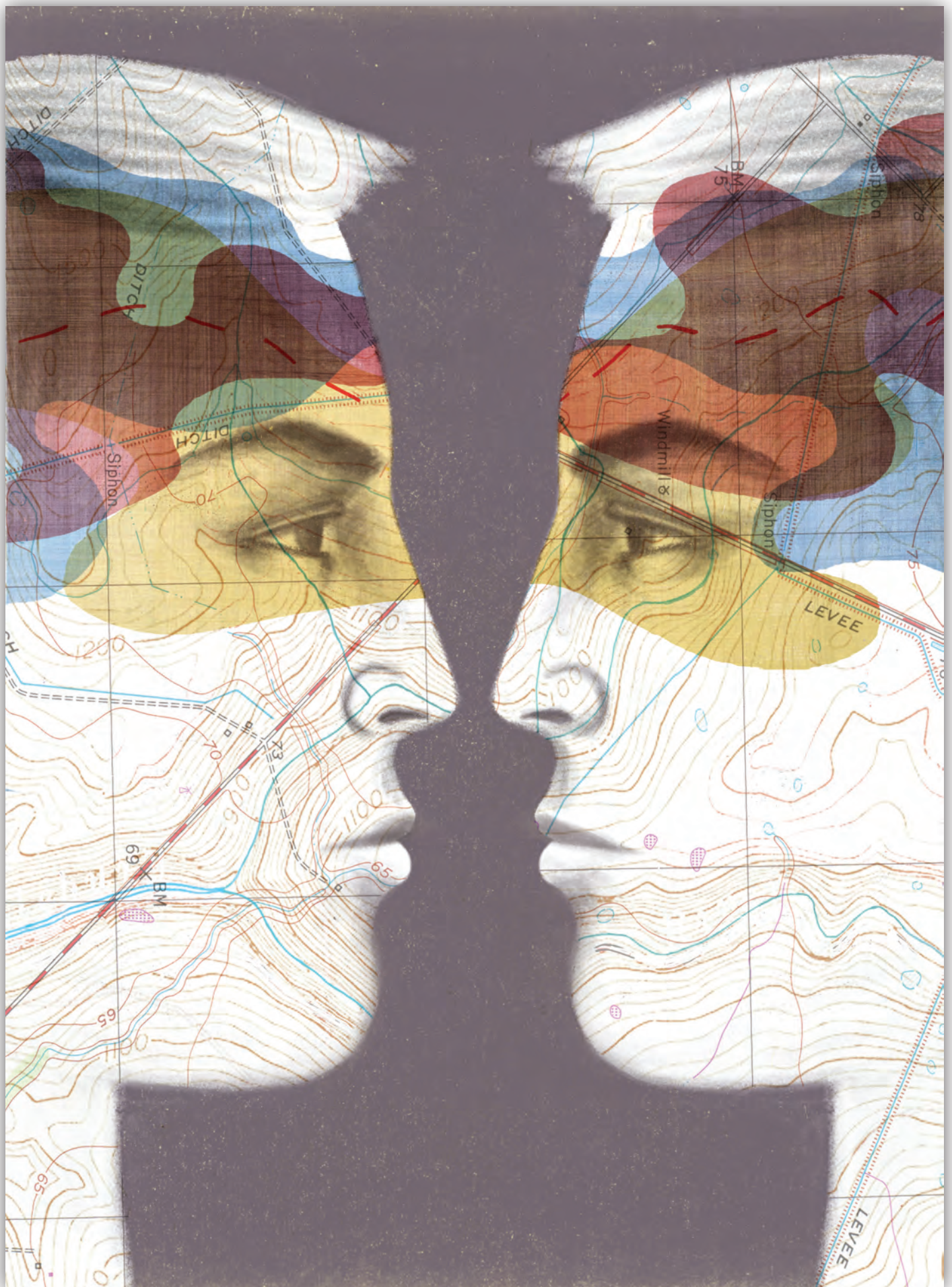
SANDRA USES METAPHOR TO GREAT ADVANTAGE AND CAN DISTILL COMPLEX ISSUES INTO GRAPHIC AND ETHEREAL WORKS. HER PAINTINGS EMBRACE THE BEST OF ITALIAN RENAISSANCE FRESCO PAINTERS AND FUTURISTS LIKE DIEGO RIVERA AND CHARLES DEMUTH.

Barbara Woolley  
Partner Emerita  
Hamblly & Woolley

YOU CAN ALWAYS DEPEND ON SANDRA TO GET TO THE VERY ESSENCE OF A STORY. SHE CREATES IMAGES THAT ARE EASY TO UNDERSTAND, HANDSOME AND OFTEN PROVOCATIVE. AND HER COLOR SENSE IS EXQUISITE!

Bob Hamblly  
Founding Partner  
Hamblly & Woolley











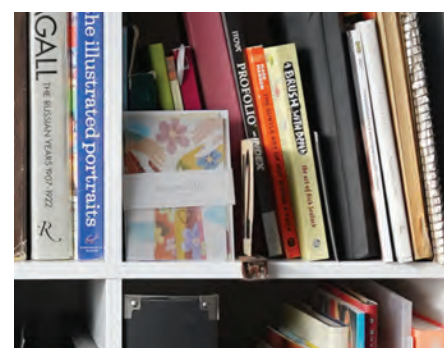






SPUTNIK HAS WORKED WITH SANDRA FOR 25 YEARS. HER ILLUSTRATIVE VOICE, WHILE COMMUNICATING THE BRIEF, BREATHES LIFE INTO EVERYTHING, EVEN THE MUNDANE. CORPORATE DESIGN BECOMES IMAGINATIVE, PACKAGING BEAUTIFUL, AND EDITORIAL MEANINGFUL.

Karen Satok  
Founder, Sputnik Design Partners  
Partner Emeritus

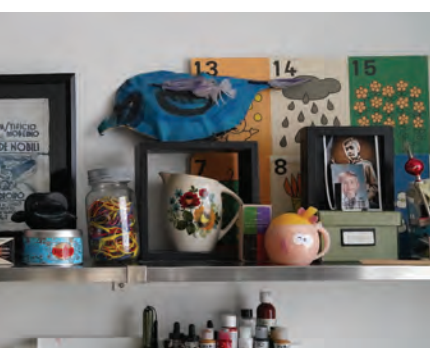






I'VE HAD THE PLEASURE OF WORKING WITH SANDRA A NUMBER OF TIMES OVER THE YEARS AND THE EXPERIENCE IS ALWAYS THE SAME. FIRST, IT'S HARD TO SAY WHICH SKETCH I LIKE BEST AND THEN A GORGEOUS FINAL ARRIVES THAT EXCEEDS MY HOPES AND EXPECTATIONS.

Greg Klee  
Deputy Design Director  
Boston Globe







I KNEW BOTH SANDRA'S MOOD AND STYLE WOULD BE A GREAT FIT FOR A FEATURE ABOUT HOW DEPRESSION AMONG TEEN MALES CAN TURN FROM VIOLENCE AGAINST ONESELF TO VIOLENCE AGAINST OTHERS. THE CREEPING VEIL OF DARK SHADOW LET THE VIEWER KNOW THAT YES, THIS IS A DARK MOMENT BUT THE CLOSE-UP PORTRAIT OF A SUFFERING TEEN IS ALSO BEAUTIFUL AND EMPATHETIC.

Dave Mckenna  
Art Director  
5280 Magazine









*My earliest recollection of being interested in art  
was at about age eleven.*

*I think it started by watching my mother  
paint and draw—I basically started by  
copying what she was doing.*





SANDRA IS A WONDERFUL CREATIVE CONTRIBUTOR TO WORK WITH. HER QUIET, CALM STYLE HAS A WONDERFUL WAY OF BRINGING IDEAS INTO STRONG FOCUS.

John Montgomery  
Art Director  
Reader's Digest Canada