











*GARY BASEMAN is excited: his eyes shine, and he flashes a mischievous grin. Located somewhere between childlike delight and maniacal zeal, the effect is riveting. Gary's exuberance has a way of building exponentially, his enthusiasm generating even more enthusiasm as he warms to a topic.*

One example: "I wouldn't use ink—it had to be charcoal pencil. Just like my art, it had to be raw, it had to be rough, it had to feel legit. You could smudge it, you could mess it. Ink was a normal ball point pen. *Anyone* could use that: *banks* used that, *corporations* used that. I was an animal! I was human, I was real, I was raw!" Gary describes his art as "pervasive," and one of his intentions is to outmaneuver the barriers that separate media and enforce hierarchies of importance. Dissolving boundaries—or simply ignoring them—has been a hallmark of Gary's career. Although he started as an editorial illustrator, over the last forty years Gary's work has found expression in a dizzying range of media that includes painting, toys, fashion, advertising, television, film, video, installation, performance, and sound. Ironically, the shape-shifting nature of Gary's work over four decades

has become one of its constants. Gary spent his childhood in Los Angeles' Fairfax District in the early 1960s at the crossroads of two distinct cultures: Eastern European Jewish culture, and American pop culture. The youngest child of Holocaust survivors, Gary grew up in a center of Jewish life in LA. (His mother Naomi worked the bakery counter at Canter's Deli for nearly forty years; today there is a booth at Canter's with Gary's art gracing it.) But the Fairfax District also lies in the shadow of Tinseltown, both literally and figuratively. "Just that whole neighborhood," Gary offers. "There was CBS Television City—that iconic eye! And Kid-ieland, the amusement park that Walt Disney used as inspiration for Disneyland; and Tail o' the Pup; and the Pan Pacific Auditorium. We were a block away!" Between the eclectic neighborhood and a steady diet of Warner Bros. cartoons on

TV, Gary was immersed in a lot of visual stimulation. "I was a latchkey kid and I had to put that stimulation somewhere, so I put it into art. If I was home and my brothers and sisters were out I could just sit there with a piece of paper and draw. I can't remember a time that I didn't draw." Gary didn't study art in college—he graduated from UCLA in 1982 with a degree in Communications—but he always knew he would be an artist. He just didn't know how. Surprisingly, courses in logic and statistics helped Gary







understand that he had a mind for syntactics, for the formal properties of systems. “When I drew I created and formalized my own visual language, and knew how to apply it,” he says. Gary started to create what might be considered the evolving Baseman lexicon.

It was in a History of the Comic Strip class at UCLA that Gary first met fellow illustrator Greg Clarke. Outings to favorite bars with their sketchbooks soon followed, as did post-graduation night classes in advertising concept and production. Steve Heller’s 1981 book, *Man Bites Man: Two Decades of Satiric Art*, also proved pivotal. “*Man Bites Man* elevated artists like R.O. Blechman, Edward Sorel and Jean-Jacques Sempé—illustrators with amazing senses of humor. And we’d look at their work and think, Oh! That’s something people do, and they can make a living at it.” Gary’s response? “Let’s go to New York!”

Gary made the first of many pilgrimages to New York in 1984 with his friend Greg. “The first trip we started showing our work around, and even though we were giant fans of Steve Heller, I had no idea that he was the art director of *The New York Times Book Review*. But then we found he would meet with *anyone* in New York early in the morning. And we did that!” Gary pauses, then says with a grin, “And he actually liked Greg’s work more than mine. I barely remember the story, but Greg told me that I threw my portfolio in the trash in



Times Square and he pulled it out.” Greg confirms this, adding, “When Gary returned to LA he holed up in his parents’ apartment for six months and rebuilt his entire portfolio with the sole purpose of going back to Steve Heller and proving him wrong.” Gary is nothing if not determined. It was on a 1986 trip that Gary again met with Steve Heller.

“The third time he saw me he gave me the cover of the *New York Times Book Review* for the summer reading issue. And then he turned that into giving me the entire edition. It was the cover and something like twenty spots. And I was living in LA! And he rarely used anyone outside New York. It was crazy! That gave me the incentive to move to New York.” Over the next



decade Gary’s illustrations were regularly featured in *Rolling Stone*, *The New Yorker*, *The New York Times* and *Time*, among dozens of other magazines, as well as in ad campaigns for Nike, Levi’s and Mercedes-Benz. Gary worked in pastels and charcoal, and he was notoriously fast: “I did ten to twenty assignments every month for ten years.”

Success notwithstanding, Gary was hungry to grow. “Even though I had been successful for five years, I was willing to completely reinvent myself. And I did that by moving from pastels to acrylic paint. In the very beginning I would do sketches in my old pastel style and then I would do three or four images in my new style, just to show the art director. And some of them would say, Yeah, let’s do the new

work.” Gary’s new style was so raw and he worked so fast that he would often create multiple finishes for his assignments. “I didn’t just do one illustration. *American Illustration* asked me to do a cover and I literally did twelve covers! I was working with color xeroxes of old photographs,



cardboard, and minimal color to create graphic imagery. And I loved it!”

Gary transitioned beyond commercial illustration just as the publishing industry started to contract. “I didn’t know it was the end of print. I was just excited to move from being an illustrator to becoming a TV show creator.” It was a labor-intensive process that took Gary eight years—including two pilots for Nickelodeon and a return to Los Angeles—before he saw the launch of *Teacher’s Pet*. Meanwhile, in the midst of trying to break into television, Gary had his first “real” gallery exhibition, *Dumb Luck and Other Paintings About Lack of Control*, in LA. “In New York I could only show in a so-called illustration gallery, but in LA they were open to misfit artists.” Since that breakthrough exhibit Gary has shown his work in galleries and museums nationally and internationally. His latest exhibit, *Nine Lives*, just opened in Beijing,



China. Gary’s creative restlessness, his need for reinvention, is rooted in the humanist desire for freedom as well as in his own

resistance to being pigeonholed. “How do we break down societal walls enough that we can live our lives in a complete way?” Gary asks. “A lot of my performances are aimed at getting people to lose their inhibitions and participate in some way. That’s what I always try to do: get them to sing if they’re scared to sing; get them to move if they’re scared to dance.” Gary’s art practice embodies a kind of boundlessness that makes room for all of us to be our true, imperfect selves.