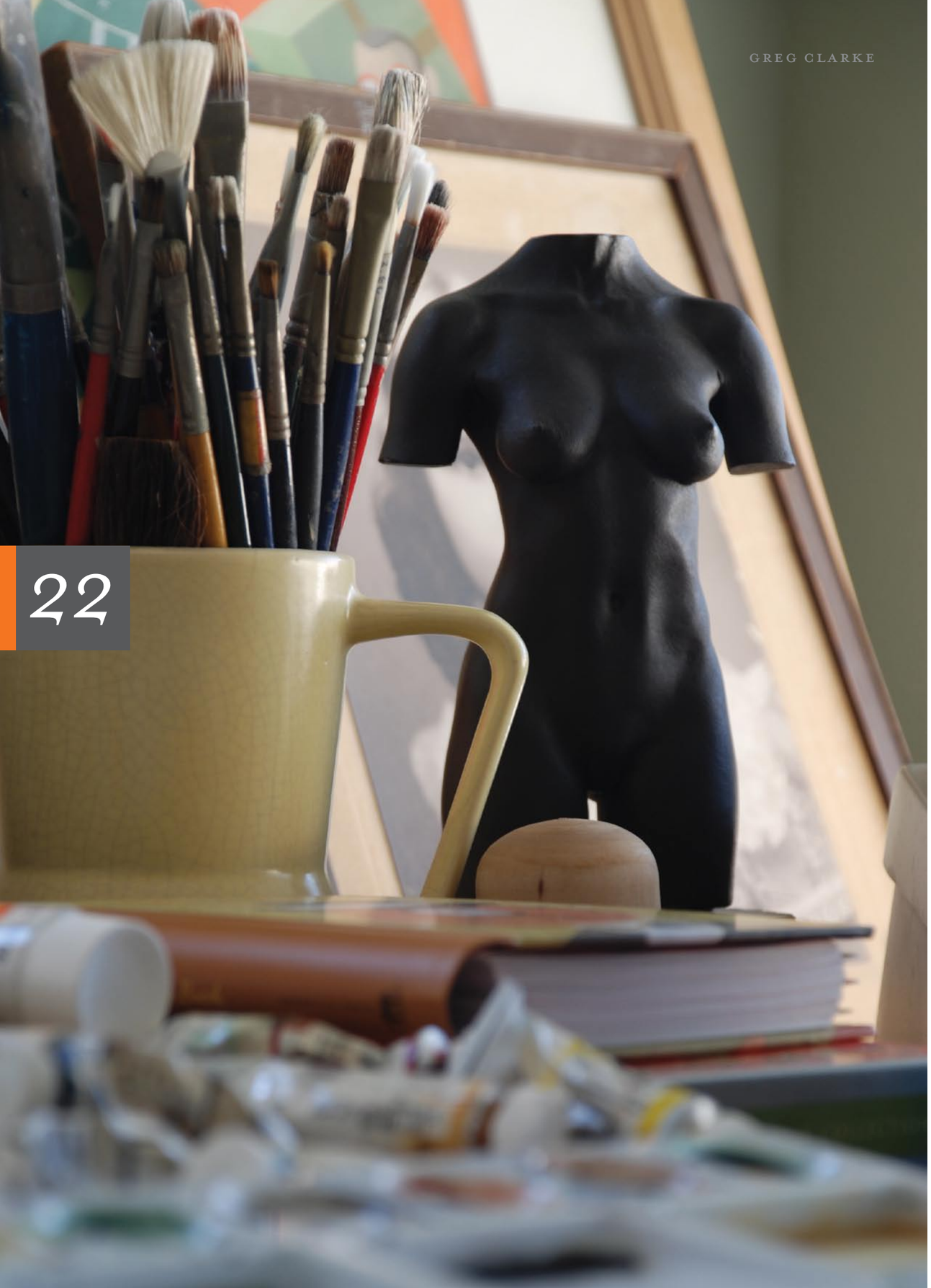

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INTERVIEWED BY MARK FOX

photography by Matt Clarke

There is a sense of mystery that pervades Greg Clarke's work, stemming in large part from his assumption that what he depicts is…well, normal. Those of us who exist outside of Greg's grey matter, however, usually have a few questions. Why exactly is that dog dressed like a French schoolboy? What's with the rabbit with the beard? Which translation of Rilke is the dog in the turtleneck reading? And why not in the original German?

Greg studied fine art at UCLA and his exposure to painters, in particular, has proven seminal to his vision. "There are two attributes I most respond to in art: mystery and/or subtle humor. Balthus and Morandi haunt me with their enigmatic depictions of the ordinary. George Grosz' elegiac observations of humanity are also devastatingly funny." Those two attributes—mystery and humor—merge in Greg's work, and are interconnected. The humor in his illustrations derives from their mysterious nature, not in spite of it.

His interest in illustration developed while perusing old Graphis *magazines in the school art library. There he discovered the work of Tomi Ungerer, André François, Pierre Le-Tan, Sempé, William Steig and Steinberg—illustrators who all seemed to straddle the line between fine and commercial art and, interestingly, all had wry tendencies. "These graphic humorists expressed themselves with a highly personal visual vocabulary and a poetry that was missing from most of their non-humorous peers," Greg notes. "This was a revelation."*

Greg has succeeded in developing his own highly personal visual vocabulary, one that includes wiggly men, dogs and cats with epicurean tastes and tobacco addictions, and women with preposterous hair. Part of his visual vocabulary is the way he positions his characters to create a sense of disconnection or isolation. This is true even when his characters are packed into a dense space such as on the Pagor merlot wine label. While ostensibly a social scene, where conversation abounds and the wine flows, in reality no one is speaking or listening. There doesn't even appear to be two people—let alone animals—making eye contact. This is not uncommon in his work. Like the characters in a Balthus street scene, Greg's figures tend to be treated like planets, each with their own orbit. They may occasionally pass each other in the sky (or street), but they rarely stop to engage with one another. His alkyd painting inside a wooden drawer is a classic example: eleven figures occupy the picture plane, and not one of them is conscious of the other ten. The sense of isolation is reinforced by the fact that none of their silhouettes overlap—they appear almost as cutouts.

His characters are not so much self-absorbed (or narcissistic) as they are solipsistic. They know themselves, and are content with this knowledge. (Gustav Katz need not explain why he dresses like Egon Schiele, nor does he expect an explanation from anyone else as to their proclivities.) The absurdity—and inexplicable nature—of a smartly tailored mammal exemplifies Greg's sense of humor at its most Clarkian. "I clearly find an impeccably dressed animal amusing," he admits. This human/animal bestiary is lovingly rendered in lush, modulated tones that imbue Clarke's work with a richness and depth that is unique. Oddly enough, he claims that color "terrifies" him. "I become paralyzed with indecision whenever I attempt to broaden my color range. Aside from the fact that I simply like the more unified look of a muted palette, there are emotional shadings in my more personal work that are better expressed with a quieter choice of color. I add a lot of raw umber and unbleached titanium to almost everything I squeeze out of a tube. Unadulterated color just doesn't carry as much emotional weight for me."

Emotional weight is one of the qualities Greg's work achieves, and the mystery is that he can do it with the strangest of subjects: a dog and rabbit, side by side, gazing fixedly at god-knows-what…a dog poet, strolling purposefully down the street of a neo-cubist town… the musician Beck as an unshaven mutt, beatific smile on his face (or would that be his muzzle?). By treating banal or improbable subjects in a careful, painterly fashion, Greg forces the viewer to reconcile the subject with an unexpected mode of representation. Fellow illustrator Marc Rosenthal puts it this way: "What pulls me in is the craft and the design. Greg's watercolors tend to be both graphic and atmospheric; a feat I have yet to pull off. It often looks as if he approaches an illustration as if it were a logo—tracing and refining scale and placement until it gets that 'locked-in' quality."

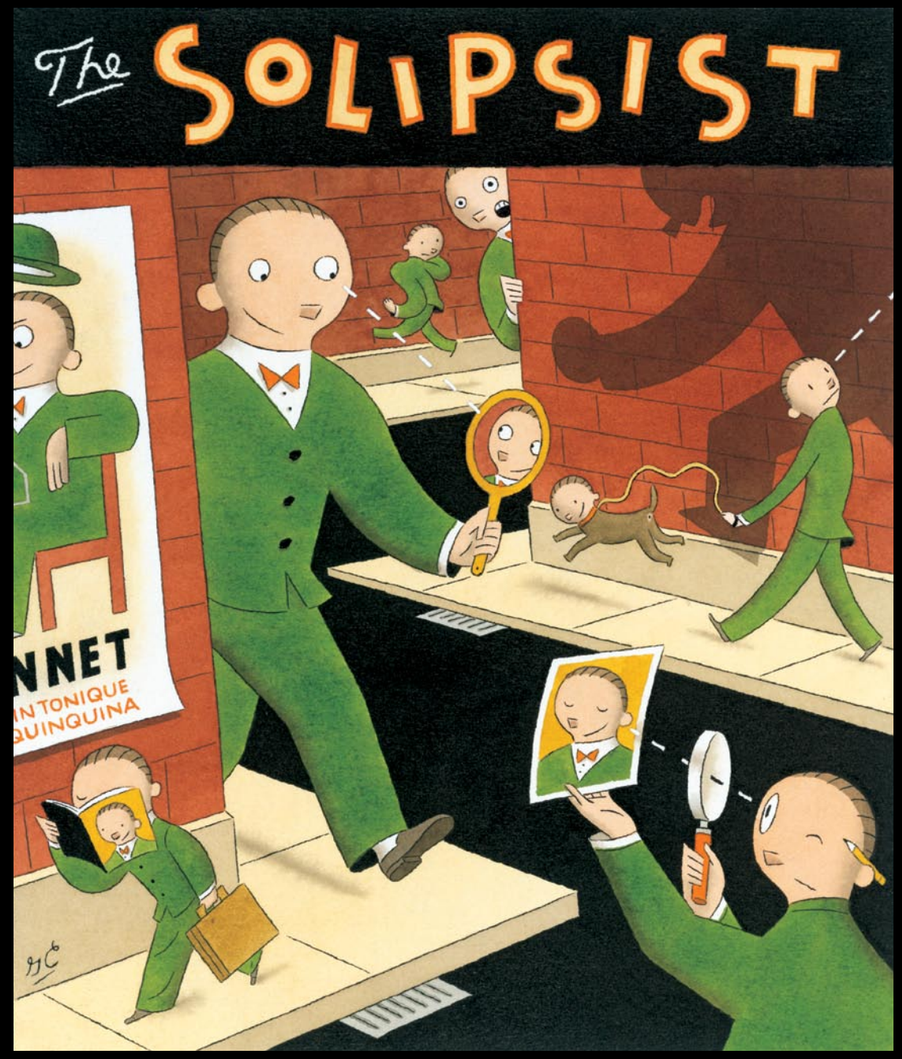
Rosenthal, like the rest of us, is responding to the structure of the work and that structure is the result of the years Greg worked as an art director and graphic designer. Greg approaches an illustration in the same holistic manner that a designer approaches the page—i.e. his pieces are conceived and executed to create a balance between image, the image within the space (layout), and hand-lettered typography. Although he was never formally trained as a graphic designer, he has always had an interest in the interplay between image and type. "As a kid," Greg confesses, "I often preferred a museum poster, with a painting and elegant typography, to the painting itself. I had an affinity for illustrative poster designers like Cassandre and Bernhard, and later Chwast and Push Pin Studios." He continues, "As an illustrator, I'm always pulled in two directions, torn between the need to create something simple, direct and iconic, and the impulse to generate something dense, complex and painterly—between flat form and highly modeled form." This conflict, often on display in his illustrations, produces a tension that is both appealing and haunting. It is the graphic nature of the work that pulls your eye initially, but it is the painterly quality that keeps it there.

Clarke works in a variety of media, and believes this keeps him from stagnating. He typically doesn't know what medium he will use until a sketch has been approved, and a variety of factors go into his decision: "The degree of complexity in the composition, the final size, and the subject matter all have a bearing on what medium or combination of media I end up using. Acrylic or alkyd paint requires some scale—I never use it for small spot illustrations. I almost always use an ink line for smaller pieces because forms need edge enhancement at that size."

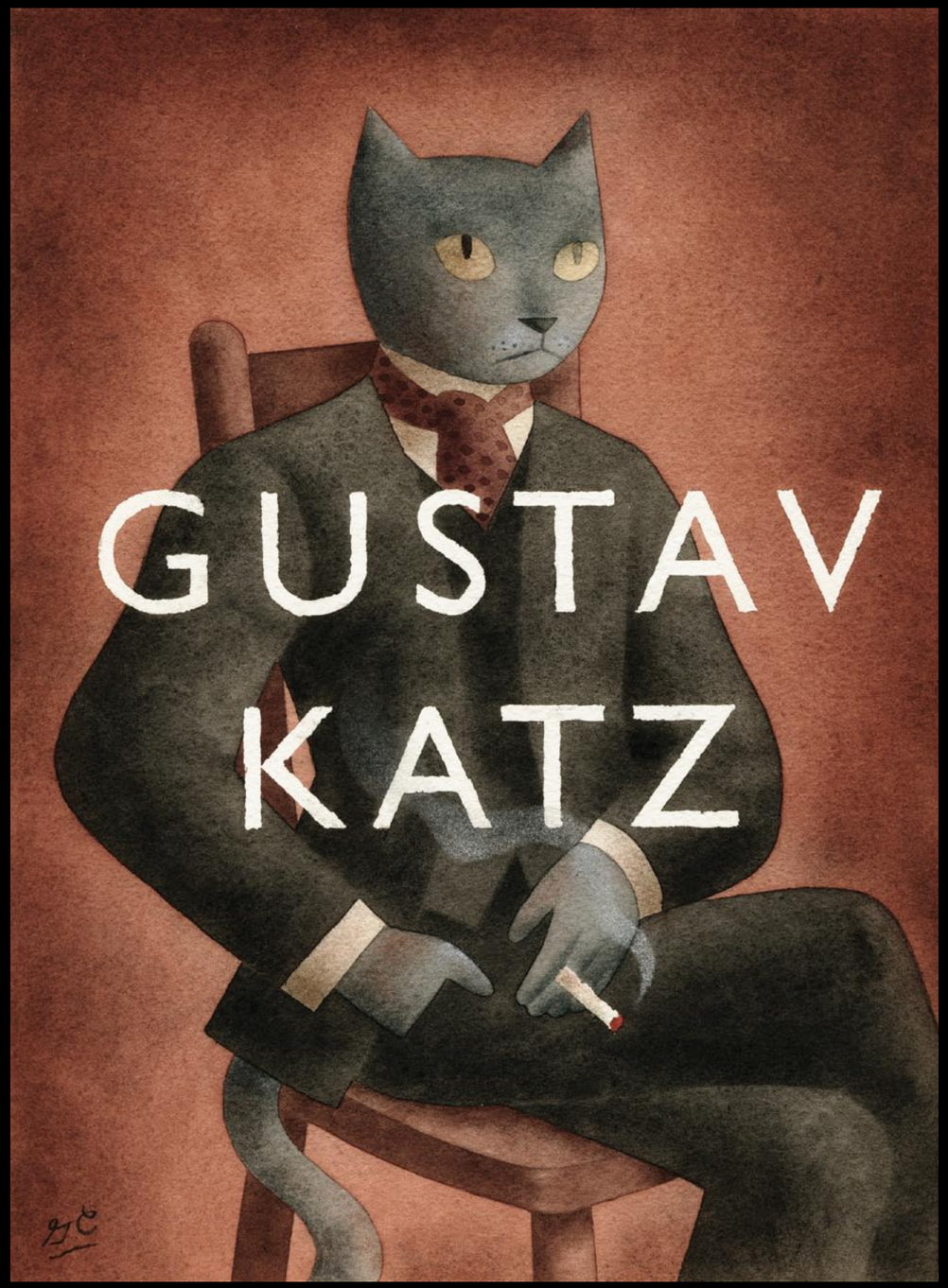
Unlike most illustrators, Greg is commissioned to write as well as illustrate. He cut his writing/drawing teeth for Monte Beauchamp at Blab! *and this has lead to other self-generated narrative assignments for publications like* Mother Jones, Los Angeles Magazine, *and* The New York Times.

What's next for Greg? He has been longing to author and illustrate his own children's books, especially now that he is a father of a daughter (Greta, 9) and a son (Julian, 5). Something tells me that it will feature an animal, and that this animal will be impeccably dressed.

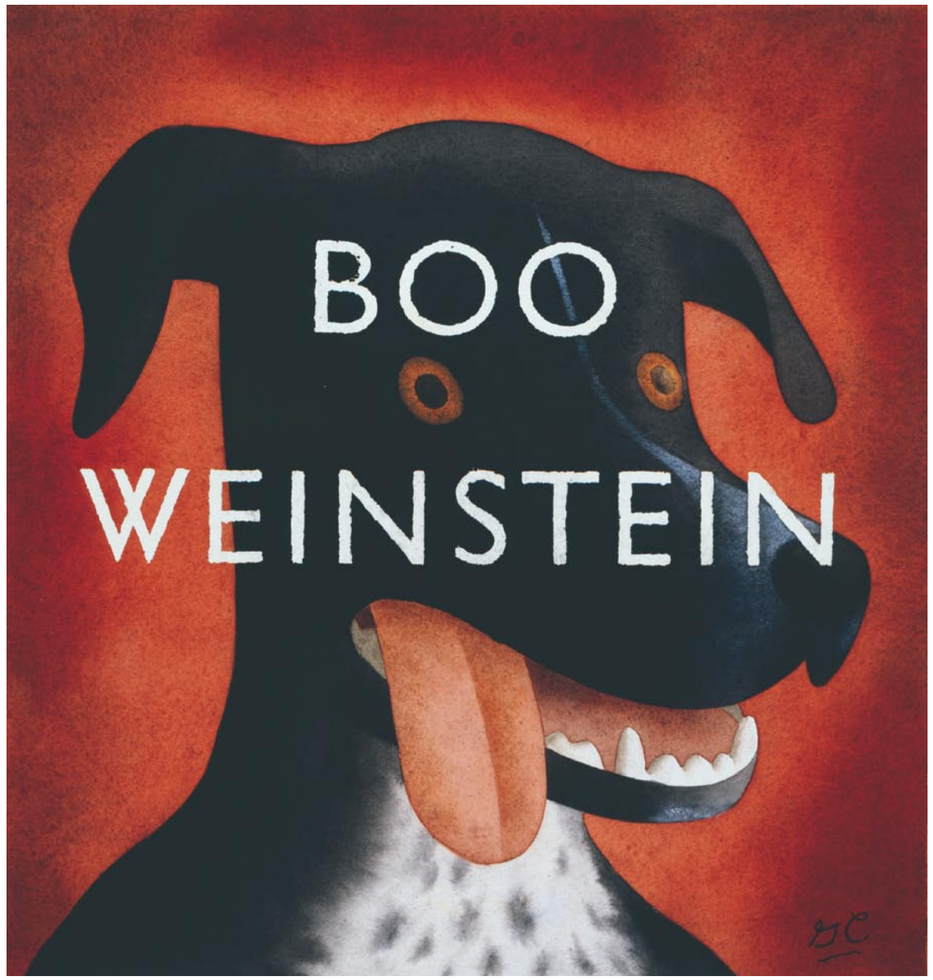
(THIS PAGE) **SIZE:** 8" x 9" **MEDIUM:** ALKYD ON PAPER **ART DIRECTOR:** STEVE BANKS **CLIENT:** LOS ANGELES TIMES (OPPOSITE) **SIZE:** 9" x 12" **MEDIUM:** INDIA INK AND WATERCOLOR **CLIENT:** PERSONAL PIECE



On the solution: *"As an illustrator, I'm always pulled in two directions, torn between the need to create something simple, direct, and iconic, and the impulse to generate something dense, complex, and painterly—between flat form and highly modeled form."*



SIZE: 9" x 13" **MEDIUM:** WATERCOLOR AND PASTEL **ART DIRECTOR:** GREG CLARKE **CLIENT:** GEORGE MCCALMAN



On his approach: *Greg approaches an illustration in the same holistic manner that a designer approaches the page—i.e. his pieces are conceived and executed to create a balance between image, the image within the space (layout), and hand-lettered typography.*

SIZE: 9" x 9" **MEDIUM:** WATERCOLOR AND PASTEL **ART DIRECTOR:** GREG CLARKE **CLIENT:** JOE KIMBERLING

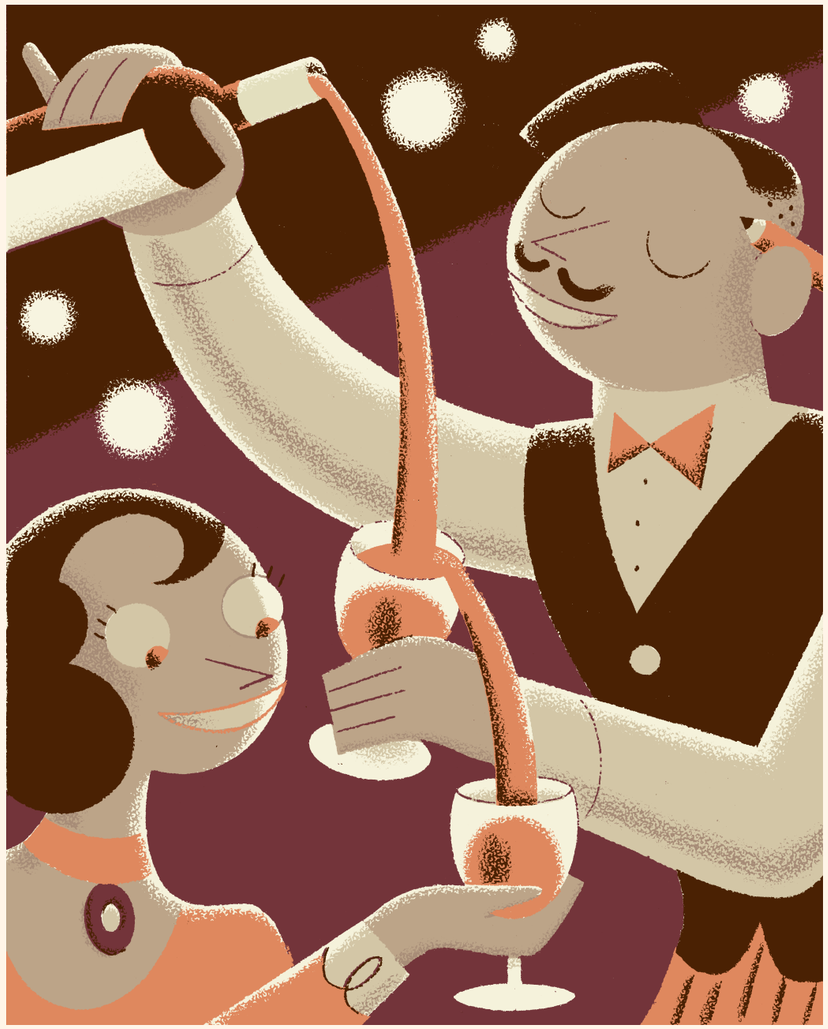

Gérard DUBOIS
DEBORAH BUTTERFIELD
YOU AUTO HAVE A HAPPY HALLOWEEN
Los Angeles Picture
HARPER JULY
Mysteries OF Beef
BIÈRES DE CHARTRES
BEACON
DUNLOP


TEARSHEETS
TEAR SHEETS
ORIGINAL ART
ORIGINAL ART

(THIS PAGE) **SIZE:** 14" x 14" **MEDIUM:** ALKYD ON WOOD **CLIENT:** PERSONAL PIECE (OPPOSITE) **SIZE:** 10" x 14" **MEDIUM:** WATERCOLOR AND PASTEL **ART DIRECTOR:** FRANÇOISE MOULY **CLIENT:** THE NEW YORKER

On color: *He claims that color "terrifies" him."I become paralyzed with indecision whenever I attempt to broaden my color range. Aside from the fact that I simply like the more unified look of a muted palette, there are emotional shadings in my more personal work that are better expressed with a quieter choice of color. I add a lot of raw umber and unbleached titanium to almost everything I squeeze out of a tube.Unadulterated color just doesn't carry as much emotional weight for me."*

SIZE: 9" x 13" **MEDIUM:** WATERCOLOR AND PASTEL **ART DIRECTOR:** GAIL ANDERSON **CLIENT:** ROLLING STONE



On collaboration: *Nicholas Blechman, an art director at the* TIMES*, enjoys collaborations with Greg "because his work goes beyond illustration to tell a story. He doesn't need an article; you can give him a theme or a topic and he can comment on it with wit and humor. Greg is one of those rare illustrators who can draw and write."*

SIZE: 7" x 8 1/2" **MEDIUM:** INDIA INK, CONTE CRAYON, ADOBE ILLUSTRATOR **ART DIRECTOR:** MICHAEL CORY, HILLEBRANDCORY **CLIENT:** MACARONI GRILL