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ANDY G.
ELLIS

HENRY
ROLLINS

FAITH
COLLAPSING

EYMAREI

MANHATTAN
PROJECT

MAKING
SKATEBOARD
DECKS

CARNIES



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You grew up as a kid in the suburbs. What sensibilities did you take away that found its way into your work?

Probably a sense of optimism. I couldn't live in suburbia at this point in my life, and I wouldn't attempt to defend it from an economic or environmental standpoint, but the relative safety and cleanliness rubs off on a kid. If you leave, you tend to leave with an "everything is going to work out" attitude. One *should* leave the suburbs at some point, by the way.

Regardless of what you draw there's playfulness and happiness to it. Do you see that as well?

Definitely. Many of my favorite artists depict deeper emotions in their work, but I can't take myself that seriously. Painting is a joyful activity for me, and it shows through. I've tried to put heavier emotions to paper or canvas but the work just sort of winks back at me as if to say "come on, seriously?" Hopefully it still resonates with people somehow.

Moving from the suburbs to a larger city, how does going to school and living in Pittsburgh influence your artwork?

One downside of suburbia is how homogenized and lacking in character it can be. In any decent-sized city you're guaranteed some level of diversity in everything you do. The sheer array of people one meets and things one sees on a daily basis makes life richer. Beyond that, the resources - the museums, galleries and libraries for instance are numerous and amazing. There has to be a certain level of openness and character to a city for it to survive, and the result of doing this well is that creativity is inspired in the populace. Pittsburgh in particular is a formerly industrial city that's trying to move forward intellectually and creatively while respecting that heritage. As such, I feel like a part of that even though I'm not originally from here. There's a desire to contribute.

Did you find art at an early age or later on? Were there points of origin - such as reading comic books or Paint-by-Number or family influence?

My parents are both creative people. My dad was an engineer professionally but remains an avid and skilled woodworker and craftsman. My mother is a wonderful seamstress, quilter and baker. I think they grew up with this Midwestern sensibility that says there's real, practical value in creativity. So yeah,

I always had access to coloring books and comics and Lego. Maybe they knew I'd do something with those skills and maybe they didn't. At any rate, they knew encouraging creativity was vital to raising kids.

What can be learned in Art School that can't be obtained naturally as an artist - Discipline? Does proper schooling hone inherent talents?

Discipline is something you commit to or not, but art school makes resources available, which is huge. There are also practical tips and tricks that you pick up that prove to be invaluable. The number one thing, though, is the positive influence of the creative atmosphere. In my first couple of weeks at the Art Institute of Pittsburgh, I thought "I can't believe I was assigned this." It was amazing to be in an academic environment where I could draw or paint or look at Magritte paintings for hours and not be accused of just goofing around. It legitimized my interests.

How long have you worked as a graphic designer? The work itself is a different form of artwork. Is it just as hard to take criticism for it versus artwork?

It's been about four years if you count freelance work I did here and there. It was actually *harder* to take criticism at first, because I worried more about how my performance as a designer affected my livelihood. After a while, though, you detach your emotions a bit and look at clients' problems more analytically. Creating work that pleases a client is almost more rewarding in that way because you've done something outside of your own passions and succeeded. For the same reason, I'm more protective of my personal projects because at this point I do them solely to amuse myself. If someone had negative things to say there, I might feel defensive because nothing is at stake but my own ego.

As a graphic designer for an ad agency how much of your ideas gets into the final product and how much is done by pure instruction? How often are changes made



by client request?

It varies wildly. Some clients come in with very specific ideas about what they want and some have none at all. It's up to everyone on the team to come up with a solution based on the knowledge and skills we each bring. Clients always have changes- sometimes they're small details, and other times nothing works for them at all at first review, even conceptually. It's part of the process and you work with it. Even if I've done the brunt of the creative work on a project, I have hard time taking credit because I feel everyone contributes in a major way.

The ad work for WDUQ, a jazz station in Pittsburgh, was very impressive. How long did a project like that take to conceive and produce?

That was one of those false starts I alluded to before. DUQ is a public station that also does News and NPR programming, but in this case they wanted to focus on the fact that they're the only jazz station in town. They weren't really responding to any of the clever ways we thought they could communicate that, so my creative director decided the ads should be an exercise in pure style. I had already done a Holiday card for the station with a mid-century jazz album cover aesthetic, so things flowed easily from there, to the point that it only took a few hours to create the final artwork for each one. DUQ has been my favorite station since I moved here, so being on that account is a lot of fun and this was no exception.

In a recent documentary about the show Mad Men they discuss how ad agencies don't wield as much power/influence as they once did. Do you agree with that or is it dependant on other variables?



It's very true, because the audience has become so powerful in deciding how and when they interact with media that it's nearly impossible to control advertising messages once they've been released into the wild. This is why many agencies, including the one I work for, have taken on the mantle of "branding agency." It's become necessary to oversee a client's every interaction with the public including PR and websites. It's not enough to throw a print ad or a TV spot out there anymore and hope your message sticks.

The term 'retro art' seems unfair given the immense detail and style that goes into your work. With artists like Eric Tan utilizing the older styles for newer art do you see this as an influx of merely good choice or looking to the past for new ideas?

It may be unfair only in the sense that it's slightly dismissive to use the word to generalize large swaths of artistic history.



Andy D. Ellis

works as an artist and graphic designer in Pittsburgh whose creations straddle the line between work output and artwork itself. His muse is sometimes the past, a period in which promoting a company or product was more than towing the bottom line. Ellis' style is playful and edgy, a loving nod to creativity and style rich in texture and character.

interview by Brian Tucker



ANDY RAMA



Last night I watched a movie about the last days of the Third Reich.



I thought it was pretty interesting.



The actor who played Hitler was quite good and actually made me feel a little sad for him.



But then I remembered it's Hitler and I went back to hating him.

Bauhaus, Art Nouveau and even 80's video game pixel art can all be called retro, but you wouldn't confuse them. If someone defines my work that way, I'm fine with it. But if someone approaches me about a piece with slightly better insight into what my influences were, I want to have a conversation with that person. It's definitely worth exploring the old styles if they speak to you or if something you take away from them fits what you are trying to communicate. Its part of our collective heritage as artists and as human beings, and it would be tragic for this stuff to just disappear from our minds. So guys like Eric who do it really well are great.

Do you collect older pulp and science fiction publications like *Amazing Stories*, *Doc Savage* or *Eerie*?

No, but I love that stuff. I have dozens of books that have done the collecting for me, and I study those. Books on art deco, pin-up girls, WPA posters, roadside architecture, golden age sci-fi and superhero covers. I love them. It's a lot more efficient than collecting originals, and not as mildewy.

Are you a child of the fifties stuck in the modern world?

Ha! Maybe. A doctor once told me I had a good "50's face, what with the glasses and the hair" before he administered a tetanus shot. It's not like I long for a bygone era. I wouldn't want to live through the Red scare or segregation or anything but I definitely identify with the iconography of the 1950's and early 60's more. I own a turntable and a rotary-dial phone and roll up my jeans, but it's not some kind of statement. It just makes sense to me to do and have these things because they look right. For instance I sort of feel the need to get one of those creepy cat clocks, because that's what a kitchen clock looks like.

Why do you disagree with the impracticality of returning to the moon? Did you want to be an astronaut as a kid?

No, I wanted to be some kind of kooky inventor or scientist, but I didn't have the smarts. I don't necessarily disagree with the idea of going back to the moon because I don't really understand the cost/benefit ratio. If a guy in a lab coat at NASA thinks there's a reason to do it, my crushed dreams instruct me to defer to him.

What films did you enjoy growing up and the obsession with the Sta-Puft Marshmallow man?

Mr. Stay-Puft was the most appealing thing in *Ghostbusters*, which as a whole was very appealing to me as a kid. I also loved the *Back to the Future* trilogy, the 1938 *Robin Hood* ... Anything where clever, smiling adventurers were using their wits to get out of sticky situations, that was right up my alley.

What appeals to you about the Coen Brothers' films?

The same things that appealed to me as a kid: Good stories told with affection for the characters and attention to detail. But these days the characters don't have to travel through time or punch Nazis to get my attention. The Coens seem to think more about those vital elements than most modern directors, so I like them a lot.

You created a DVD box set of case and artwork for their films. How did you design and then print it?

It was one of my final art school projects, so I decided it had to represent a combination of the techniques I had learned there. The characters were all hand-drawn and then cleaned up with Adobe illustrator, which I also used to design the type layouts. All that went into Photoshop, where I added textures that I either photographed, scanned or simulated.

I designed the container box the same way, based on a template I devised from literally just tearing another box apart, flattening it out and taking measurements. That had to be printed on the school's large format printer and then cut, folded and glued together. The whole project ran the gamut of my skills at the time and was probably the closest in terms of number of steps to what I do for a living now. It was good preparation, which is why I'm still very proud of it.

How do you reference the artwork style, from old advertisements to matchbooks. Do you pour over old magazines and scour the Internet?

Both of those, and through my own personal library as I mentioned earlier. It's funny that I dogged on the term "retro" since, in retrospect, it was my most useful search keyword on Google and in the Carnegie Library's catalog. I also keep bulletin boards, binders and gigabytes of images on the PC, because you never know when you might want to revisit something!

How much of your art is air brushed versus hand painted? How much do you rely on computer software?

Most of my illustration work has been drawn or painted by hand. I usually only use the airbrush if I need a large area of flat color. The computer is very valuable, but mostly in the early stages. I like to sketch things out loosely and then tighten up the drawings in Photoshop, where I can make crazy edits and save multiple versions without fear of destroying the original.

Do ideas spring from other places or is it a combination of new ideas and ideas by proxy?

Ideas come from everywhere, all the time, if you're open to them. You can't be dismissive of any idea. I save all my doodles because I never know what they might become. A decade from now I may pull out a sketch I did in my sophomore year of High School and decide it's the basis for my next painting. I may refer to reference materials to help me with the execution, but generally my personal projects are ideas that have already been bouncing around in my head for a while.

When did you begin the comic strips?

It was 2005 or 2006 and I was working all the time and my friends were all moving away, so I was feeling very isolated. This was despite the fact that MySpace had just gotten really big and everyone was writing these long, wordy blog entries. I did a few as well, but after a while decided I wasn't really saying anything. I figured that for me, a short, crudely-drawn comic strip about small observances was more communicative than eight paragraphs about an ex-girlfriend or my weekend or something. So I did five or six of them over the next couple of years whenever something amusing happened to me, and they were a great outlet that brought a lot of positive feedback from friends. Then last year the CEO of Fitting Group saw them and she asked me to draw one every month for our email newsletter. I hesitated because I wasn't sure people would get them or what they'd think of me based on reading them. I decided that was something I'd have to get used to if I wanted to make any kind of impression, so I agreed. I'm still not sure what readers think, but I get a kick out of making them and now they happen on a regular (if infrequent) basis.

Do you have interest in designing album artwork or literary endeavors?

I'd love to do either of those someday. If I could listen to an album or read a manuscript, and then be asked to illustrate what I just experienced, that would be amazing to me. It'd be the purest kind of creative collaboration I can think of.

Do you listen to music while working? If so, what's a good energy source, musically, for working?

I do, but what I listen to depends on the project and my mood at the time. For instance, Johnny Cash and Elvis Costello are good for all-nighters because of their persistent, driving rhythms. I try to familiarize myself with as much music as I can when I'm *not* working so I can select something for pure atmospherics later. Hopefully Andrew Bird or Regina Spektor wouldn't be insulted by the fact that I'm ignoring their lyrics half the time if it means it's helping my creative process.

