

DRAWING ON DEADLINE

THE MOST RECENT ILLUSTRATIONS OF
JOHN HENDRIX POSTED WITH AVERAGE FREQUENCY

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Interview with Jack Unruh



I was asked by Washington University, (where I teach illustration) to write a short piece about one of our distinguished alumni, Jack Unruh. He was inducted into the Society of Illustrators Hall of Fame last fall. His work has been so influential in finding my own visual voice, it was a great pleasure to work on this with him. (Jack and I together at SI48, where we both won silver medals.)

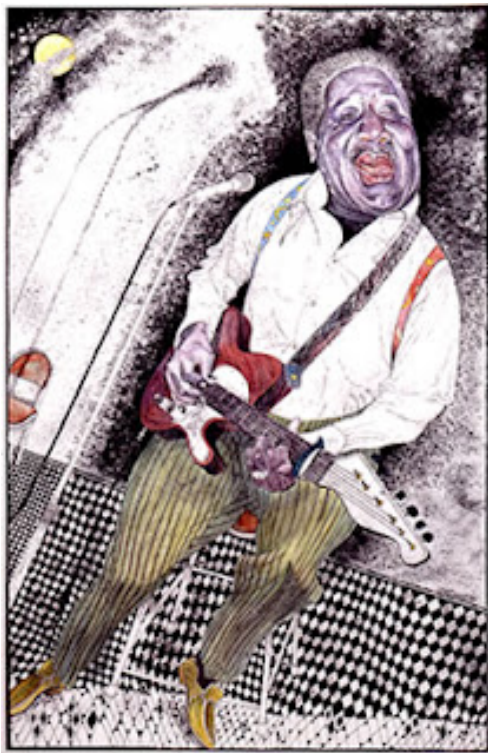
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Tap-dancing in Ink

Gremlins and pixies appear in the margin. The environment pitches forward and backward with a kooky seasick wobble. Flutters of ink explode next to tightly manicured portraits of weeds, pelicans, and Harry Truman. In the work of illustrator Jack Unruh, Washington University alumnus (1957) and 2006 Society of Illustrators Hall of Fame inductee, the picture plane becomes a playground. Jeff Pike, dean of the College of Art traveled to New York City in November to represent Washington University and celebrate this tremendous honor. Membership

in the Society of Illustrators Hall of Fame has a truly legendary roll call. Norman Rockwell, Al Hirshfeld, Dean Cornwell, Maxfield Parrish, Al Parker, N.C. Wyeth, and Robert Weaver are just a few members of this hallowed fraternity of master pictorial storytellers.

Don't think Jack hasn't earned his spot. His work has appeared in countless publications, books, annual reports and anthologies. Over the years his illustrations have been seen in Entertainment Weekly, Rolling Stone, Atlantic Monthly, Time, National Geographic, Sports Illustrated, GQ, Texas Monthly, and a regular back-page spot in Field and Stream to name just a handful of editorial clients. In the world of advertising he has worked on campaigns for American Airlines, IBM, Citicorp, Herman Miller, Sony, and the Bronx Zoo among many others. Not to go unmentioned are his countless awards and juried show appearances. His work has been recognized with the prestigious Gold and Silver medals from Society of Illustrators and has appeared regularly in the Communication Arts Illustration annual as well as American Illustration and The Society of Illustrators Annual Juried Show. In 1998, the Society of Illustrators awarded him its' highest single honor, the Hamilton King Award. He taught at East Texas State, his former students including future standout illustrator and designer Michael Schwab, designer Chris Hill and cult comic illustrator Gary Panter. As he rattles off the list of projects currently on his desk (about seven- including 18 portraits, a Field & Stream spot, a set of posters for the Santa Fe Opera and a massive sketch for a 40-foot mural) you can tell that he has earned his place in the Hall of Fame through good-old-fashioned elbow grease.



But, Jack would be the last person to say that he deserves such an honor. After decades of drawing pictures, Jack has learned not to take himself too seriously (as demonstrated in the above photo). "I was embarrassed all to hell. I don't understand it, really. There are so many amazing artists who aren't in there yet. I'm not sure how they decided on me. I guess I can't turn it down though," he said through a hearty laugh that lasted a good 10 seconds. The first thing you learn about Jack, as evidenced in his generous laughter, is that he has perfected the gentle art of finding daily enjoyment in his work. "I love drawing, it's that simple. I'd enjoy drawing this tree out of my window. It may not be art, but it will be interesting." His images incarnate this whimsical and unabashed love of drawing. Jack is quick to tell you that his passion for image making runs parallel to his love of the outdoors, and of course, fishing. It takes only a few moments of wandering through his portfolio to notice his affection for drawing nature and its inhabitants. He has taken many exotic location assignments, shadowing reporters through caves in Europe, flying in helicopters over the Valdez oil spill, floating remote rivers in Alaska and even visiting the L.A. Dodgers Fantasy Baseball Camp.

If you have never had the opportunity to stand in front of one of his drawings, let me describe the experience: First, you are struck by the sheer comic lunacy of the scene before you. As your eyes adjust to the laws of this visual funhouse your nose moves a bit closer... and then closer still. Underneath those spatters of ink and meticulous hand lettered typography are thousands upon thousands of fluttering ink marks. Each one made with a flash of his Gilotte nib (carefully honed with a fishing hook sharpening stone) and the whole herd carrying

a calculated visual weight. And then you see how much of the space he isn't using at all! The frame can barely contain the kinetic hum of mark making (like a Durer engraving hit by a mack truck) and yet, in the midst of this inky explosion is beautiful white space. In the illustration industry, there is no one who puts more work and poetry into a quarter-page spot than Jack Unruh. There is a particular kind of honor reserved for one who will often spend three days on a small spot for Field and Stream. Perhaps that humble work ethic came from his heartland upbringing.

Born in 1935 in Pretty Prairie, Kansas as the son of an Air Force pilot, Jack lived in many different places. He began his studies in Lawrence, at The University of Kansas, but it was a Christmas trip to St. Louis that brought him to Washington University. He toured the campus and saw an exhibit of the illustrations of recent graduate Bernie Fuchs, also a member of the Society of Illustrators Hall of Fame. Jack immediately transferred to WU and majored in Magazine Illustration. He fondly remembers the art school and how it was one of the few schools that offered a major in Magazine Illustration. Dean McKay and Bill Fitt were faculty that had a significant impact on the young artist. "They really taught me that drawing is about seeing, and gave me a method for translating what's in front of me onto the paper." After graduation, he and a classmate Lee Schwartz went to Dallas to escape the humidity of St. Louis. Jack got his first job in Dallas, designing a logo and identity system for the city's "Help Keep Dallas Clean" campaign. He slowly began to make a name for himself in Dallas, taking any freelance job he could get. But then in the late 1970's everything changed: Federal Express. Suddenly, an illustrator living in Dallas could do drawings for anyone in the country. His client list expanded to include Sports Illustrated and National Geographic. His one of a kind drawing style began to emerge. "When I started out, I was trying to be a painter, but my strength was drawing. I started out as a Jack-of-all-trades, so to speak. But I tried drawing with everything, toothpicks, twigs, popsicle sticks, anything that would make a mark." He purposely avoided crosshatching, as popularized by Alan Cober and David Levine. In his drawings, in an array of tiny lines the visual weight would build up slowly, and in contrast, he would add bold organic brush strokes and ink spatters.

Today, Jack is still in Dallas, and at the age of 72, one could argue he is in the prime of his career. He still spends countless hours drawing in the barn-like studio behind his house. His brazen delight in drawing is only matched by his love for his colleagues. "Illustrators are wonderful people, I've always loved being around them." During his long drawing sessions he'll often talk on the phone to other illustrators like John Cuneo or C.F. Payne (or even illustrators interviewing him for yet another article on his work). A mark of his integrity in this industry is the astonishing fact that when you bring up his name, people don't talk about his drawings first, but about his genuine spirit.

Through another easy laugh, he says, "Drawing is a magic wand!" After making enchanting images for over 45 years, it's safe to say that Jack Unruh's spell won't be wearing off any time soon.

POSTED BY [JOHN HENDRIX](#) AT 10:41 AM

This story was originally written by John Hendrix and posted with Average Frequency.