

• DISTINGUISHED • ILLUSTRATORS • SERIES •



Dedicated to the art of illustration in all its variety, Norman Rockwell Museum is honored to present *Elwood's World: The Art and Animations of Elwood H. Smith*, the first in a series of Distinguished Illustrator exhibitions honoring the unique contributions of outstanding contemporary visual communicators. Presented by the **Rockwell Center for American Visual Studies**, the nation's first research institute devoted to the art of illustration, the Distinguished Illustrator series reflects the impact and evolution of Norman Rockwell's beloved profession through vibrant installations exploring a diverse and ever-changing field.

Like many throughout the world, I have long admired Elwood H. Smith's warm, witty humorous illustrations, which lend pointed perspectives to the written word. Always curious and engaged with the many facets of our world, Smith has applied his vibrant creativity to all manner of things — from our nation's most prominent periodicals and advertisements to illustrated books for the young at heart. Beyond the printed page, Smith's inventive animations bring his quirky, dimensional characters to life, and he is a gifted musician and songwriter whose expression knows no bounds.

Our sincere thanks to Elwood H. Smith for his support in making this exhibition possible at the Norman Rockwell Museum, and to Maggie Pickard, his wife and creative partner, and Nancy Davis, for their enthusiastic assistance throughout. We are grateful to essayists Steven Heller, Mary Pope Osborne, and Will Osborne for their insightful commentary, and to Rita Marshall for her exquisite monograph design. It has been a pleasure to delve into the world of this talented artist, and to highlight the body of work that is testament to his extraordinary career.

Stephanie Haboush Plunkett
Deputy Director/Chief Curator
Norman Rockwell Museum

Steven Heller is an award-winning art director and the author, co-author, or editor of more than one hundred books on design, illustration, and popular culture. **Mary Pope Osborne** is the author of over one hundred books for children, including *The New York Times* best-selling series, *The Magic Tree House*. **Will Osborne** has worked in theater as an actor, director, musician, and playwright. He has also written several multi-media planetarium shows, and is the co-creator with Randy Courts of *Magic Tree House: The Musical*.

ELWOOD'S WORLD
The Art and Animations of Elwood H. Smith
February 19 through
May 15, 2011



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Front cover: *Mud Pies*, illustration for *See How They Run* by Susan E. Goodman, 2008
Elwood's World, illustration for *Zazzle*, 2010
Huge Sale, illustration for *Barron's*, 2009
Back cover: *A Scientist Takes on Gravity*, illustration for *The New York Times*, July 12, 2010.

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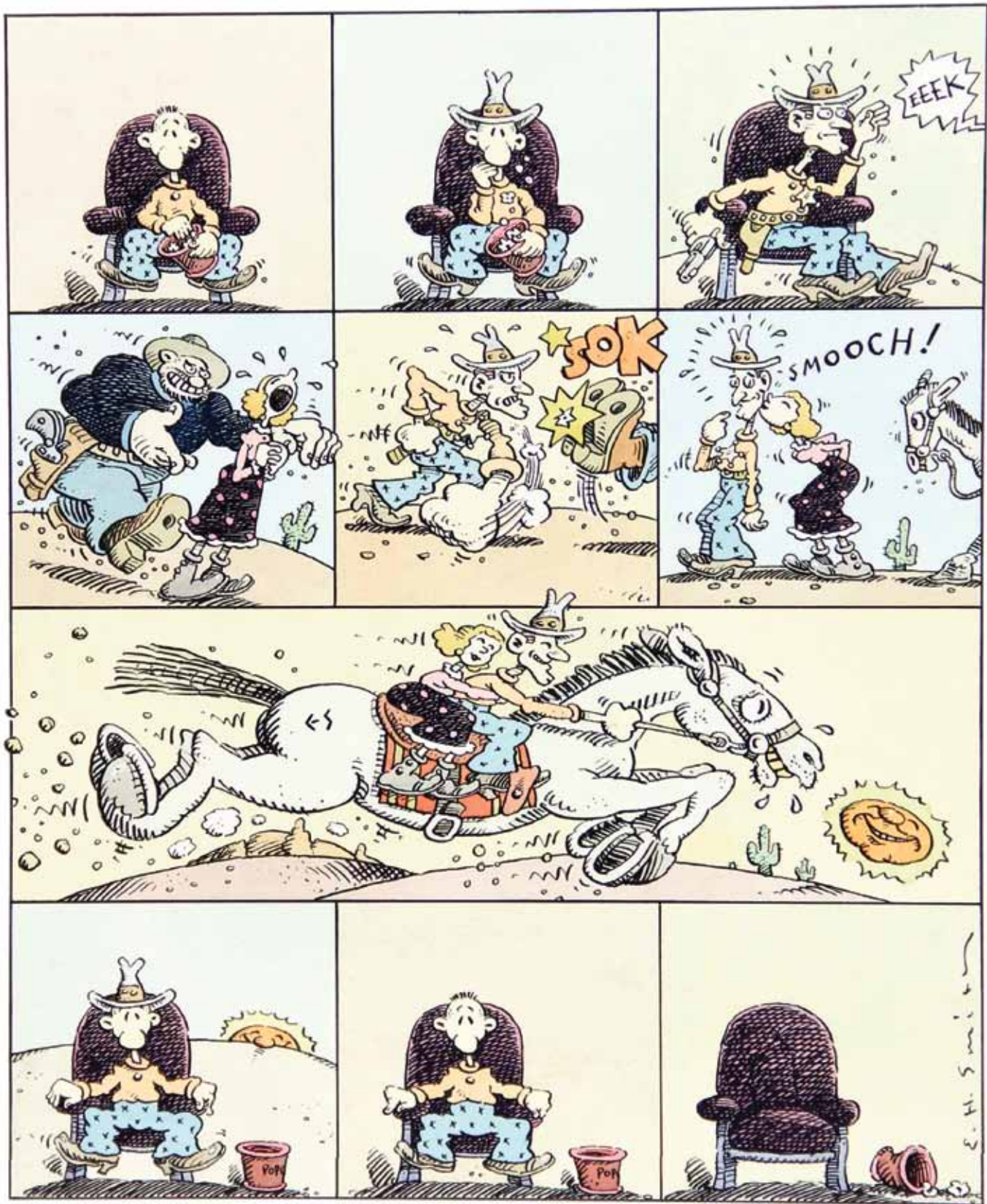
ROCKWELL CENTER FOR AMERICAN VISUAL STUDIES



*The Art and
Animations
of
Elwood H.
Smith*



NORMAN ROCKWELL MUSEUM



Above: Eek, Sok, Smooch. Cover illustration for *Push Pin Graphic Magazine*, 1981.

Facing page, top: *Space Exploration Goes Global*. Illustration for *The New York Times*, December 31, 2006.

Facing page, bottom: Elwood H. Smith (right) with younger brother Dave and Big Red, c. 1945.

FULL CIRCLE

Elwood H. Smith



grew up in a home, in Alpena, Michigan, without paintings on the walls. My parents didn't attend chamber music concerts, read Shakespeare or own a record player. But they owned a radio and we received daily newspapers and various magazines. Those were my conduits to the arts.

Some of my earliest memories are the sounds of nasal hillbilly singers, local polka bands and jazz orchestras like Benny Goodman transmitting from WATZ, my hometown radio station. Long before I began school and discovered Huckleberry Finn, I was poring over the Sunday Comics in the *Detroit Free Press*. I spent hours studying the colorful halftone images. I remember comparing the cartoonists' drawing skills, separating the great ones from the lesser ones. *Mandrake the Magician* and *The Phantom* were fun stories, but the art, according to my rating system, wasn't as good as the work in the strips at the top of my list: *Prince Valiant*, *Krazy Kat*, *Popeye*, *Barney Google* and *Pogo*. No one else in my home or my community shared my enthusiasm for the genre, but I was content traveling about in the world of comics by myself. I have no idea when or why I began rating the comic artists, but the hierarchy I'd created improved my eye for quality. Producing quality in my own work was a much more difficult matter altogether.



Another rich source of art flowing into our household was *The Saturday Evening Post*. The magazine featured cartoons by the likes of John Gallagher and Henry Syverson (my two favorites) but nothing excited me as much as the arrival

of a new *Post* cover illustrated by Norman Rockwell. It wasn't until I met my high school art teacher, Nancy Boyer Feindt, that I stretched beyond my narrow, but carefully constructed world of art.

As I said, my parents weren't familiar with the arts but they were genuinely supportive of my determination to be an artist and, later on, my desire to play the guitar. My father worked as a foundry foreman in a factory. He built my first electric



guitar with wood supplied by his pattern maker. As foreman, he often visited the drafting department and the clean, well lit workspace prompted him to encourage me to study mechanical drawing course in high school. Which I did and did poorly. After a two year struggle to learn drafting, I switched to an art class, where I met the new teacher, Nancy Boyer Feindt, who had arrived fresh from New York City. Nancy and I remained friends over the decades and, two weeks before she died, she told

me that I was the most stubborn student she'd ever taught. Luckily for me, she spotted talent behind the stubbornness, saw possibilities in my amateurish squiggles, and took me under her wing. Mrs. Feindt prodded and encouraged me despite

my resistance. She saw hunger and curiosity lurking behind the fear and ignorance. She slyly eased me into the world of fine art by first introducing me to illustrative artists like Saul Steinberg, Honoré Daumier, Leonard Baskin and Ben Shahn. It wasn't long before she was showing me prints of Vincent Van Gogh, Marc Chagall and Pablo Picasso. As my high school graduation drew near, she asked around and found an art school in Chicago that offered a course in cartooning. Thanks to Nancy Feindt, I was on my way.

It has always been my impression that my life as an artist was like a Conestoga wagon (B-Western movies were a big part of my childhood) traveling along a road, taking me from those early comic days in Alpena, down to art school and my early career in Chicago and then across to my heady New York City days and finally to my Rhinebeck years and my show here at the Norman Rockwell Museum. However, as I began writing these notes for the monograph, I realized that my career and, indeed, my life, wasn't a linear journey, but instead an ever-expanding circle. Those old swing tunes and Nancy Feindt and Barney Google With The Goo-Goo-Goggly Eyes are here, right now, in the circle, not lagging behind in the dust of the past.

Norman Rockwell, who was there, guiding me in my earliest days, is also in my life right now and has been in it all along. So it makes perfect sense that this collection of my life's work exists, at least for a while, in Mr. Rockwell's museum, a stone's throw away from his marvelous paintings.



Thank you, Mr. Rockwell, it's an honor to hang with you in this beautiful space. And thank you, Stephanie Plunkett, Laurie Norton Moffatt, Jeremy Clowe and all the wonderful people at the Norman Rockwell Museum. Thank you, Maggie Pickard, my wife and

creative partner, for all your support and patience. And thank you, Will and Mary Osborne for your friendship and for contributing to the opening and this monograph, to Steven Heller for his essay in this monograph and for including me in many of his publishing projects, and to animator Brian Hoard for his collaboration on many animation projects, to Nancy Davis for her endless enthusiasm and creative collaboration and, finally, to my late sister, Jude (who would have loved more than anyone to have been here), my brothers, Dave, Rich & Bill and to everyone gathered in my ever-widening circle for enriching my life in so many ways.





Above: Tom Mix in N.Y.C., 1986.

Facing page: Branches of Government and Before Concluding. Illustrations for How They Run by Susan E. Goodman, 2008.



Above: *Hell No, We Won't Mow!* Cover illustration for *Chicago Tribune Sunday Magazine*, August 9, 1992.
Facing page: *Nope, Can't, Not Now.* n.d.

ELWOOD H. SMITH CARTOONIST BY ANY OTHER NAME

Steven Heller

Elwood H. Smith is a perfect cartoon character's moniker. Therefore it is fitting that the artist whose name it is — and who sometimes answers to "Wood" — draws in a goofily sketchy manner that recalls the classic strips of twenties and thirties. Smith arguably channels the likes of comic strip masters Frederick Burr Opper ("Happy Hooligan"), Frank Willard ("Moon Mullins"), Elzie Segar ("Popeye"), Walter Berndt ("Smitty") and Russ Westover ("Tillie the Toiler"), among many others of their ilk, synthesizing, repurposing and ultimately producing original creations that are unmistakably "Ellwood."

"Mickey Mouse, Donald Duck, and all the comic characters brought me to the drawing board," he said in an interview in *Innovators of American Illustration* (Van Nostrand 1986). "I read 'Pogo' and didn't understand any of it but liked the drawings." And let's not forget George Herriman's "Krazy Kat," "one of my biggest influences today," Smith added.

Had he lived when his comic strip heroes flourished, he would doubtless have fathered a few popular syndicated comic strips of his own. But he was born into the latter part of the Twentieth Century (May 23, 1941 in Alpena, Michigan, to be exact), and evolved into an artist after the golden age of newspaper comic strips was long over. Fortuitously, the era of ribald Underground Comics was just starting when he was in his early twenties. However, Smith didn't take that route, either.

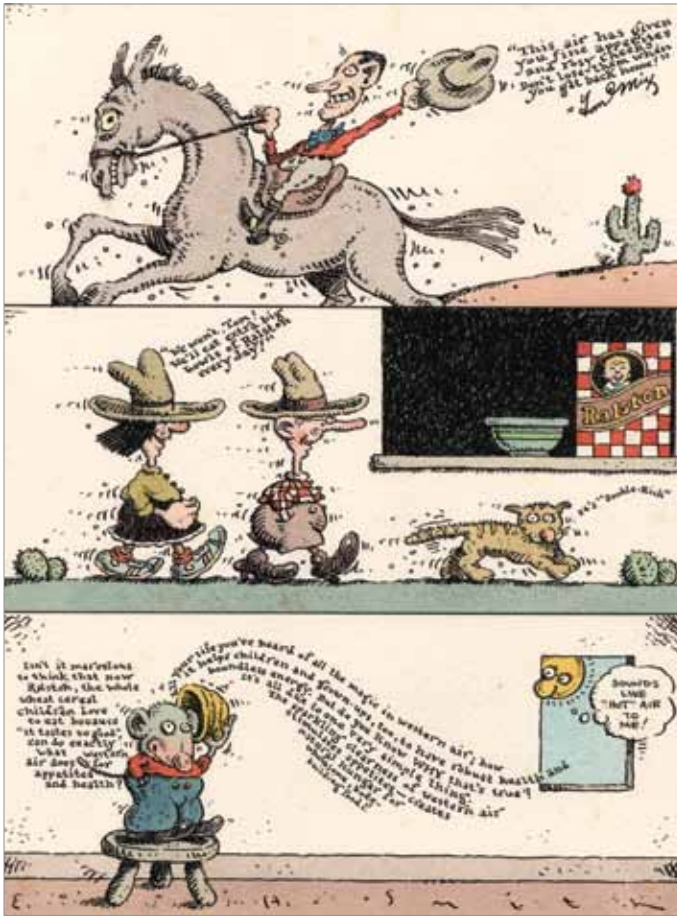
While many young artists with similar penchants for



vintage comics and the old *MAD* magazine (another one of Smith's influences) turned to bawdy, drug-inspired, surreal comic narratives that helped define the hippy sixties (and influenced today's graphic novels), Smith took a different turn. "I moved away from the comics and more toward Seymour Chwast, Milton Glaser [founders of Push Pin Studio in the 1950s] and Heinz Edelman [creator of the Beatles' 'Yellow Submarine' animation graphics] — who were influences on my early style." He also found his way into "art beyond cartoons," with a healthy appreciation of Honore Daumier and

Paul Klee — and later Francis Bacon. Still, comics were his real passion and when he had done a few, his high school art teacher, seeing his potential talent, took his work to Dan Heilman, the creator of "Judge Parker," who later called Smith on the phone "to encourage me to keep drawing."

Keep drawing he did. Smith signed up to take the Famous Artists School correspondence cartoon course before attending the more traditional Chicago Academy of Fine Arts. It was at this so-called "mediocre school" ("almost anyone could get in," he explained) that Smith drew like John Gallagher, an illustrator for *Argosy* and *The Saturday Evening Post*, and further pursued realistic and representational advertising art. "I really wanted to be like Norman Rockwell," he noted, "not work like him but be a well-known illustrator."



The late sixties was a moment when illustrators, who once ruled the editorial and advertising roosts, were competing for prominence against photographers. With the dwindling of newspapers, syndicated comic strip markets were harder to break into. Yet there was still a chance to become “a well-known illustrator” with a distinctive style and point of view. Given one or more sympathetic art directors who generously commissioned visible work, it was relatively easy to become a “hot” illustrator of the day — although remaining hot was not so easy.

Actually, Smith was torn between art and music. As a kid he played trumpet, but came into his own with strings. “I played guitar off and on over the years,” he recalled, “and then as my interest broadened to classical music, I learned to play Renaissance music on the lute.” He even built a clavichord from a kit (which he never learned to play). “As much as I loved it, I realized I was a better artist than I was a musician.” Though years later he played guitar in an illustrators’ band (Ben Day and the Zipatones) and in recent years has issued

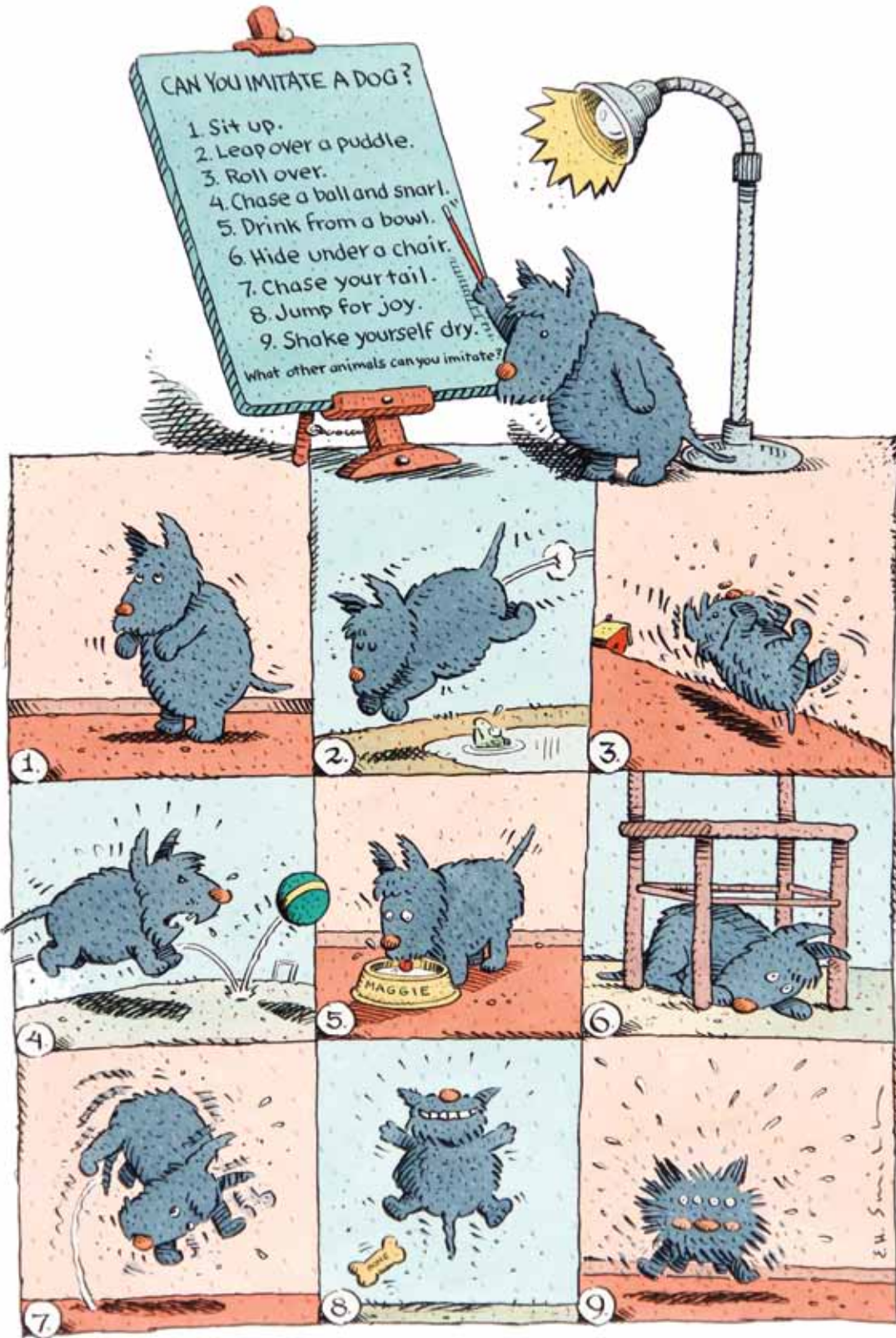
CDs and animations featuring his own musical compositions.

New York City of the late seventies was a fertile period for all kinds of illustration. The stricture and demand for realism had loosened. Eclecticism abounded; abstraction, cartoon, and even l’art brut — and particularly conceptual art — was dominant. Smith “formulated a style,” he said. “I tried to converge my various influences into one, and what resulted was a very cartoony thing done with tight cross-hatching.” What he called his “first New York stylistic incarnation” was, however, noted for its very mannered, very stiff line accented with wit. “I got work right away because art directors could see something that was a little different.”

That little difference soon evolved into “Elwoods” that was both curiously familiar and distinctly new. Smith’s work was a cross between Krazy Kat and Rube Goldberg but was neither. He began developing characters. Paradoxically, they were characters without a home, as he didn’t have a comic strip in which they could reside. One could say they were like hermit crabs, seeking out different homes in transient illustration venues. In this Smith found invention. “I’m using the approach in illustration in a way that strip artists wouldn’t do it,” he explained. “So I’m taking something from them and using it in a way they wouldn’t have been able to use it.” Smith has been happy with this approach, though he also lamented “My style is either too early or too late.”

In fact, Smith was not entirely alone. The cartoonist Bobby London, for one, employed a Herimann-esque linear looseness for his underground comics and illustrations. Other illustrators followed suit, for many it was just an interim affair — a stopover before finding a voice. Smith’s voice and personality are entirely suited to this method and manner. At seventy, his work remains fresh, joyful, jolly and smart. Just “click on the thumbnails” on his website and the expressive line, goofy graphic tics and wily water color never tires and always elicits a smile.

Back in 1986 when I interviewed him, Smith admitted, “I’m pretty satisfied right now, but I’m refining my approach. There are still days when I feel I’m nowhere near the quality of the masters.” In the ensuing years he is not only somewhere near their quality — he’s right on target!



Above: *Can You Imitate A Dog?* Illustration for *Let's Find Out*, A Scholastic Magazine, 1984.
 Facing page: *This Air Has Given You Fine Appetites*. Illustration for *Junk Food*, 1980.

ENTERING ELWOOD'S WORLD

Mary Pope Osborne



In 1977, I was working as a barmaid in New York City and my husband was playing music on street corners. We were struggling artists, living in a 6th floor walkup; one of us dreaming of being a writer; the other of making a living as an actor and musician. Our dreams seemed remote and ever receding, until we met a man with a funny name: Elwood Smith.

Will's musical partner Nick introduced us to Elwood, who was a fine guitarist and loved to play the same country music that Will and Nick played. But Elwood was not only a musician; he was also a professional illustrator and the first person I'd ever known to make a decent living in the arts. I knew plenty of actors and musicians, but I'd never been around an artist who worked freely at home, made his own hours, labored to realize his own unique vision, and surrounded himself with a creative world spun from the silk of his imagination.

As the guys played music in Elwood's living room, I'd steal away to study the details of his life. I fell into a sort of enchantment in that apartment on 21st street. I remember Eleanor, the moody Abyssinian cat who wrapped herself around Elwood's neck while he drew and painted; and Lionel, the thin little Siamese who slept in the laundry basket Elwood kept warm with the light of a gooseneck lamp. I was enthralled by Elwood's workspace: his wooden drawing table, wide drawers that stored his art, linen drawing paper, glass-enclosed



bookshelves filled with reference books, fine watercolor brushes, sketches and finished illustrations tacked to the wall.

I fell in love with Elwood's palette: the mint green of a duckbilled platypus's coat, faded blue of a smiling pig's overalls, pale yellow of a tiny propeller plane, soft pink of a teapot, and tomato-red nose of a Santa sitting on a gray-white iceberg. I began choosing clothes and curtains and

china in Elwood's blues and pinks, mint greens and yellows. I wrote stories about the pig in the overalls and the duck-billed platypus in the checked coat. Elwood, with his great generosity, helped me get my first work published, and also helped Will find a job in the art world to tide him over until he began making a living as an actor. How lucky Will and I were to have stepped into the whimsical, compassionate, darkly comical and provocative world of Elwood Smith's imagination. How lucky the viewer of this exhibit is to do the same.



Top: *Man's Best Friend*. Cover illustration for *Chicago Tribune Sunday Magazine*, 1983.
Bottom: *Think I'll Call It Nothing*. Illustration for *The Washington Post*, January 12, 2000.
Facing page: *The Wrong Shoes*, 2010.

TRAVELS WITH ELWOOD

Will Osborne



It's easy to see what makes Elwood's work good — command of his tools, exquisite color combinations, powerful sense of design. It's perhaps more difficult to analyze what makes it truly Elwood.

I find it impossible to look at Elwood's work without smiling, whether it's a monkey dancing in his underwear or a turkey traveling to wish everyone a Happy New Year. It's not just comical, certainly not cute (oh, how Elwood hates that word!), but there is always something in Elwood's art that genuinely engenders a sense of wonder and joy.

How does that happen? I'm not qualified to discuss Elwood's technique (though I know he is incredibly skillful), his methods (though I know he reveres certain artists and has drawn on their styles to develop his own) or his sources of inspiration (where do those talking hot dogs and musical lizards come from??) But I do feel somewhat qualified to comment on what I believe it is that makes Elwood's work special and, indeed, wonderful.

I believe it is Elwood's heart.

The smiles that come from looking at Elwood's characters are never smiles of derision or mockery. He has an uncanny ability to make us feel compassion for the inhabitants of a trash can (including a rotting banana and piece of moldy toast), and I believe it's because in the way that some folks wear their hearts on their sleeves, Elwood has implanted his heart firmly in his pens and brushes.

I first got to know Elwood's heart in the late seventies. I had formed an old-time country music group called the Pope Brothers, which performed in various configurations and in

various locations around New York. At a certain point, Elwood was inducted into the family as DeWitt Pope (I trust the apt pun is obvious). The majority of our gigs took place in nursing homes, psychiatric institutions, and hospitals in the outer boroughs of the city. Our audiences ranged from terminally ill children to adults suffering from dementia and Alzheimer's, with everything in between.

Elwood was the perfect partner for these performances, always willing to allow a mentally challenged child to feel the musical vibrations on the top of his guitar, or stay an extra half-hour to chat with an elderly gentleman about the first time he had heard Brown's Ferry Blues back in the twenties.

After these concerts, Elwood would spend the entire long subway ride home marveling over the compassion of the caregivers, the power of music to inspire joy in even the most extreme circumstances, and the deeply moving nature of the entire experience. I returned from each of these many subway rides energized about life and very much in love with Elwood's heart.

That was three decades ago. In the intervening years, Elwood's deep compassion and loving spirit have continued to surprise, enlighten, and elevate me on a regular basis.

So, as you look at the work in this exhibition, if you find yourself oddly moved by a dancing turkey or a mongrel dog in a space capsule, don't spend too much time analyzing technique or wondering about sources. I'm pretty sure what you're really responding to is Elwood Smith's heart.

THE WORLD ACCORDING TO ELWOOD H. SMITH

A Conversation with the Artist

"I hope I live to be quite old because I'm just embarking on all of this and need sufficient time to get it all done. There's just so much to learn."

Infused with "high grade" humor, Elwood H. Smith's masterful visual commentary has appeared on the covers and pages of *Forbes*, *Fortune*, *Time*, *Newsweek*, *Bloomberg*, *GQ*, *Money*, *The New York Times*, and *The Wall Street Journal*, and has enhanced the corporate profiles of Sony, Blue Cross/Blue Shield, Pizza Hut, AT&T, McDonald's, Cellular One, Bell Atlantic, and many others. *Stalling*, *Hot Diggity Dog*, *Catfish Kate and the Sweet Swamp Band*, *See How They Run*, *The Truth About Poop*, *Raise the Roof!*, and *Bug Muldoon* are among his illustrated children's books, and he has also explored the world of animation in creative shorts like *Kyoti Kapers*, *Little Green Monkey*, and *Sweet Dreams*.

An accomplished musician, Smith began playing guitar in the late 1950s, and has been composing his own songs for more than three decades. The former lead guitarist for Ben Day and the Zipatones, an all-artist band, he is the creator of *Lucky Dog*, his debut compilation, produced and sung by John Platania.

A true life-long learner, Elwood H. Smith shared some of his personal observations about life, art, and creativity with the Norman Rockwell Museum.



You have been working in the field of illustration and design for almost five decades. What have you learned?

I've long held the belief that my work is not about technique. However, my technique has, in many ways, defined my style. I've learned that it is important to simplify. I used to fuss over things, but there is something about economy of line and getting to the essence of a thing. My favorite, and I think, most successful drawings are the ones that I do for myself. I want that looseness to translate

into other work that I do, and I find that more and more I can just let a drawing unfold.

Who are your inspirations?

Starting out, my heroes were George Herriman (*Krazy Kat*) and Billy DeBeck (*Barney Google*), and the infamous cartoonist Rube Goldberg. I was trying to draw like those guys and even bought the same pens that they used. It took awhile, but I managed to channel their classic style to establish my own voice. Jack Davis was also one of my favorites, but he didn't need another imitator. I really wanted to be like Norman Rockwell—not work like him, but be a well-known illustrator.

What aspects of your youth may have led you toward a career in art?

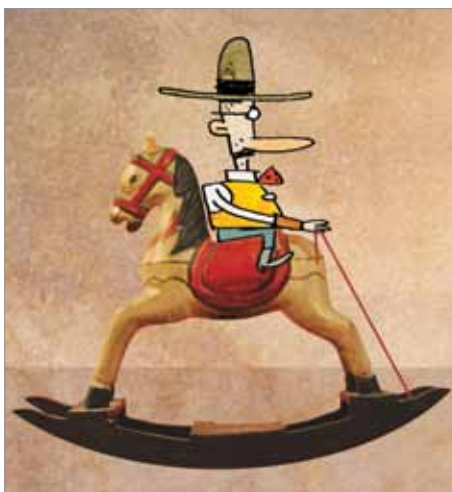
I was about 14 years old before my family got a television, and since I wasn't athletic, I drew and read comics as a child. I knew what it was like to grow up in a small town as a

Elwood Smith (left) and fellow musician Al Zdan in Long Lake Supermarket, Michigan, 1958.

kid who didn't quite fit in. Many artists and musicians whom I have met have felt that they didn't fit in. How much was a burning desire to make pictures and how much was inspired by the sense that I didn't fit in? I found in the world of drawing a world that I was comfortable in, and one in which I was praised for my accomplishments.

How did music become such an important part of your life?

When I was quite small my parents encouraged me to play an instrument, and rented a cornet from a local music store because there were no trumpets in stock at the time. After playing for awhile, my music teacher determined that I might be better suited for another instrument. Fortunately, close family friends Cootch and Mabel Couture, who played Spanish and Hawaiian guitar, agreed to give me lessons, and I've been playing guitar ever since. As a songwriter, I'm able express another side of myself and compose music that addresses life's harsher realities. When I draw, there is a staccato like feel, a charged energy that is like music or motion. But when I draw, I don't specifically think of music.



What do you most love to draw?

I seem to have my own cast of characters. I like rabbits peeking over hills, and mice, rabbits, dogs and cats. I never liked drawing pigs but then they started turning out well. Animals are expressive, and can be used to reveal action in a cartoon when the humans in the drawing are oblivious to what is going on. I was one of the first illustrators to have people say things in a cartoon format. I've never been a good drawer naturally and I don't carry a sketch pad or attend drawing classes. I like making funny little characters, and am at my best when doing spots that allow me to get into energy of those characters.

What projects are most satisfying for you now?

If I didn't have to make a living, I would probably make my little films, scooping together found objects, collage, and imagery—both still and moving—and throw in the occasional drawing. I love creating music for movie soundtracks, too. All in all, I truly believe that my most creative times are ahead. I've been laying the groundwork, and I'm a slow learner.

Top: *Too Many Hats*, 2010.
Center: *Not A Texan*, 2010.
Bottom: *Sea of Heartbreak*, 2010.

