

34 Everyone knows cartoonist, illustrator, and caricaturist Barry Blitt from his famous or infamous, perfect pitch or deaf-eared (depending on where you stand) cover of *The New Yorker* during the 2008 Presidential Campaign, showing Barack and Michelle Obama fist-bumping in the Oval Office while besotted with all the 'fear' clichés ascribed to them by the right wing. No other caricature in recent memory received so much mass media scrutiny. **STEVEN HELLER** caught up with him long enough to test his mettle, ruffle his feathers, and stroke his collarbone. Here is almost everything you wanted to ask Blitt, but couldn't find his phone number or email address

STEVEN HELLER Barry, you have become one of the more comically strident illustrators of the 2000s. You weren't born that way. I remember your earlier work was formally and conceptually, well, tentative. Was it *The New Yorker* that gave you the brass balls for graphic commentary?

BARRY BLITT I remember drawing pictures as a small child in my room, dreaming of becoming one of the more comically strident illustrators of the 2000s. The truth is, I am still very tentative, work-wise and everything-wise. Getting published by *The New Yorker* has been emboldening, but I still have to force myself with every drawing and every sketch to not hold back, to not be too timid on the page. And for the record, my balls are not brass, but rather vulcanized rubber.

S.H. May the force be with you. But seriously, one of the earlier *New Yorker* covers by you showed a cityscape of men standing precariously on skyscraper windowsills smoking cigarettes. It was a comment on the then prohibition against smoking in New York office buildings. I recall you received a letter of congratulations from Ed Sorel. Was that your certificate of validation?

B.B. Actually, that's not quite what happened. The smokers on the window-ledges was my first accepted cover for *The New Yorker*, and I got so nervous and tentative trying to draw the final art that I turned in several lifeless, dreadful versions of the thing. Finally Françoise Mouly (Art Director for covers, see also p8) suggested I talk to Ed Sorel, the king of loose, seemingly effortless illustration for *The New Yorker*. I was terrified about speaking to Ed, my hero, about my petty problems, but he was very kind and helpful, and I finally got the thing done with his advice (which mostly involved suggestions about photo reference, and varying the composition, etc). A month or so after the magazine hit the newsstands, I ran into Ed somewhere, and he told me "Hey, I saw you got your cover done. Nice try; we can't always do our best work every time." If there's a certificate of validation coming to me, it must be lost in the mail somewhere.



In my work I'm looking for ridiculousness and hypocrisy wherever I can find it

S.H. For years you, and your wife, the lovely Teresa Fernandes, did not drive a car, yet you lived outside New York City where autos are a way of life. In other words, you were something of a loner. How do you view the world and how does that view influence your work – especially your satire?

B.B. I think I am much more of a loner now that I do drive a car (I used to rely on other people for lifts; now I like to get in the car and take long drives by myself). I think the illustration business encourages a solitary mindset, whether your worldview is upbeat or negative.

S.H. I don't mean to pry, but what is your politics? Or is your satire more observational than partisan?

B.B. I would hope my work is more observational – what could be more boring than partisan satire? I really don't think it makes a difference what my politics are – I'm probably to the left of centre on most issues – but in my work I'm looking for ridiculousness and hypocrisy wherever I can find it.

S.H. That's a fair, though safe, answer. But it does stop me from telling you what I think of all you rightwing Neanderthals. But seriously, again, what is your process? Do you wake up in the morning and scour the news. Or are you a conduit from some other intelligent life form whose mission is to critique our social foibles?

B.B. Wake up in the morning? I'm already up. I do scour the news everyday, but not consciously looking for fodder for work. I try not to be conscious of being 'on the job' all the time. I read what I'm interested in; let it stew, then sit down with a sketchbook every few days and see what I dredge up.

S.H. I assume that everyone reading this (is anyone actually reading this?) is waiting to hear about the famous "fist-bump" cover of *The New Yorker*. If you've forgotten, it's the one showing the Obamas as Muslim-terrorist-40s radical-commie-pinko-eteteras. What was going through your mind when you did that image? And did you foresee the controversy that followed (i.e. for its inherent racism)?

B.B. That idea came about after hearing one



10 **STEVEN HELLER**
on **Mirko Ilic**

I HAVE KNOWN MIRKO ILIC AS ILLUSTRATOR, designer, co-author, and friend for twenty years. Since he arrived from the former Yugoslavia to New York we have worked together in various roles, I've been his art director, he's been my colleague (when he was *The New York Times* OpEd art director), and as collaborator (on three books).

As an illustrator his conceptual acuity was one of the foundations of *The New York Times Book Review* (as well as other Times sections). His drawings – usually produced in scratchboard at the time – were detailed and pristine, but his ideas on virtually any subject – simple to complex, social to cultural

– were masterpieces of visual erudition. In other words, he is damn smart! He easily translates words into concepts, concepts into pictures, and pictures into distillations of any issue. Ilic's thorough understanding of politics made him a huge asset at a newspaper where visually explaining politic intricacies is paramount. Art directors rely on acute artists to make them (us) look good. His wit and humour, his sense of irony, and his keen sense of allegory and symbolism made him an invaluable graphic commentator.

Ilic produced this piece for *The Village Voice*, an admittedly liberal/left weekly newspaper, in 2004 for an article titled 'I'd Leave the Country, But my Wife Won't Let Me', a story about a lesbian couple. At some point in the late 1980s Ilic switched from black and white scratchboard to digital tools (and not just Photoshop, either,

but higher end technology). At first I was sceptical. I vehemently didn't want him to change his style or method. But he insisted that stagnation was not an option and perfected more versatile methods. This image shows just how capable – indeed masterful – he is when it comes to rendering abstraction using realism. The notion that liberty and justice are often at odds and yet must come together speaks to the dualities that plague our system. I also think there is enough space in the artwork to draw one's own conclusions.

SPEAKS AND DRAWS HIS MIND

The gay experience is still disturbing to some – even the most liberal among us. It is a defining issue of the past couple of decades. Of course, in New York City homosexuality and lesbianism are facts of daily life. Still, the coupling of two of America's most conventional and official symbols in a decidedly gay context is jarring. It is also liberating. Liberty and law are often at odds, particularly when it comes to this civil rights issue. Ilic created a timely icon of the age – time will tell whether it is also indelible. I knew he made one of those rare emotional connections (at least for illustration) when a lesbian friend of mine asked to buy a print for her partner's birthday. The image was subsequently used for gay/lesbian projects such as the Massachusetts Lesbian and Gay Bar Association brochure. Quite a few times Ilic gave rights to use the image for t-shirts, posters on college campuses, and stickers.

Ilic is not a passive artist. He speaks and draws his mind. If he doesn't agree with the content of an assignment he refuses to do it. If he doesn't like the way his work is being art directed he withdraws (usually in a gentlemanly manner, but not always). He does not compromise nor acquiesce. His activism is what defines his art (though he is also a strict formalist). You might say this is often a conflict when required to be neutral.

Illustration plays a minor role in political debate, yet a few illustrators, such as Ilic, Barry Blitt, Steven Brodner, Robert Grossman, have been voices of protest and critique. Of course, there are those who can ignore their commentaries, but others who embrace them as icons of belief. (1)

STEVEN HELLER was an art director at the *New York Times* for 23 years, almost 30 of them at *The New York Times Book Review*. He is currently co-chair of the MFA Designer as Author and co-founder of D-Crit programs at the School of Visual Arts in New York. He is the author of over 150 books on design and illustration.

