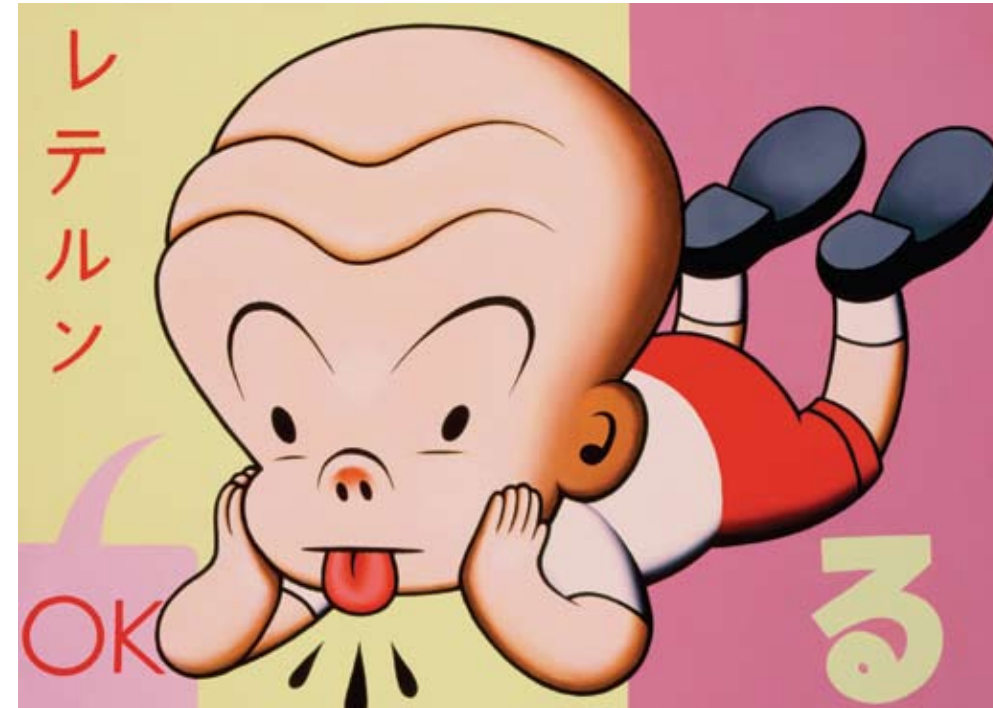




# gary taxali

GLOBAL THERMO-NUCLEAR ILLUSTRATOR

Words :: Kyle Francis // Images :: Gary Taxali



EVEN THOSE BORN WELL AFTER THE 1950s can recall the sweet, lovable cartoons of the era, with all their perfectly rounded features and relentlessly cheery dispositions.

It was a world fairer than our own, where candy tasted better than the sugar it was made from and bucolic fields stretched to infinity in every direction. It was the Saturday-morning fantasy of every schoolchild who ever gazed wistfully out a classroom window. It represented, to those who can remember, life as it *ought* to be.

And if it was scorched to its sediment by nuclear fire, the survivors might look something like Gary Taxali's illustrations.

"One of the first things that really made an impression on me as a kid is Saturday morning cartoons – the syndicated ones that were originally shown in the fifties and sixties," says Taxali. "I think that had a big impact on me in terms of character design and typography."

The 39 year old Indian-born, Torontoniaraised Taxali has brought his unforgettable style to the pages of everything from *Rolling Stone* to *Fortune*, and his limited-run vinyl dolls have become something of a chic collectors' item. Often billed as 'pop surrealism,' his style cribs elements from arts deco and nouveau, mashes them together with

a comically over-sized hammer and throws them against the pages of aging textbooks. Some stick, some don't. It's all art to Taxali.

"I like the aged quality of paper," he says. "There's a real beauty to it. Time does something to everything that you just can't emulate yourself. I've tried to age surfaces artificially in the past, but it just doesn't work. You've got to let that stuff go through the process of time. You can feel it, you can smell it, you can touch it. It's awesome."

## THE BOX ::

Taxali's work began to take on its Loony Tunes-apocalypse aesthetic when he found a box of old books from Indian school in his parent's basement. He experimentally sketched one of his characters onto a cracked, musty page, and the result struck him. By modifying the charmingly decayed textbooks in an on-the-fly, unplanned way, he was creating some of his best work in years.

"I always feel like the thing is already done, so I'm forced to work in a reductive way," he says. "I try to interact with the surface rather than fight against it. It's my favourite way to



Left :: Toy Monkey  
Above :: OK, Oil on Masonite  
Right :: OH NO; Bronze Statue

work. Even when I send sketches to art directors for publications, it's always very sketchy, loose and idea-driven as opposed to super-tight drawings. That way, when I am working on a picture in a spontaneous way, it maintains that random quality."

In the past, Taxali has even refused to work with certain publications if he felt the art director was exercising too much control over the project. It's not that he's a prima donna in any way, though. His work is born from extemporaneous creative energy, and weighing him down with too many guidelines and adherences would inevitably reduce the quality of his output.

"The more you do anything the more you get confident at it, and better at it, and just more attuned to your expression," he says. "It's my job, it's what I do all day long, so fewer mistakes happen than when I was starting out. I kind of wish more of that would happen. That uneasiness and stress is when things appear that I never thought would. Accidents are great because they remind us of the lack of control we have over the image we're creating. If you aren't surprised by what you do, then there's no point in doing it."

**"ARCHETYPICALLY HORRIFIC" ::**

Of course, thrilling creative energy that produces works of inspired design isn't for everyone. One night, while working on some illustrations for a children's book about a ferris wheel horse that comes to life, Taxali got a strange phone call. It was his editor. His illus-

trations were giving the writer nightmares.

"Apparently, this woman lived on a farm in Maryland with no electricity, she was into the occult and she called my work 'archetypically horrific.' I don't really understand what that means," he laughs. "So they asked me what I wanted to do. I didn't want my first kids' book to give anyone nightmares so I pulled out of the project."

Despite the negative experience, Taxali didn't give up on children's literature entirely. He wrote his own book, titled *This is silly*, and successfully pitched it to Scholastic Canada. Illustrated entirely by Taxali as well, the book is due to hit shelves in the spring of 2009.

"I'd say it's a cross between Dr. Seuss and Richard McGuire," he says. "It's a license for early readers to act silly. The biggest criticism I got from teachers growing up was 'stop acting silly.' It was a negative word. I don't think it's a negative thing. I think being silly is a good thing. So I thought - I'm going to write and illustrate a book where a child can read it and make silly faces and do silly things and just have a good time."

**ARTISTS VS ARTIFICE (OR, THE SNAKE EATING ITSELF) ::**

Though Taxali was eventually able to turn his silly proclivities into a career, the illustrative, narrative style of his work does at times limit his peer recognition. In the world of fine art, the word "illustrative" is a dirty one, and - despite his excessive talent - Taxali is often ghettoized because of that quality of his work. >>



*Dilly*

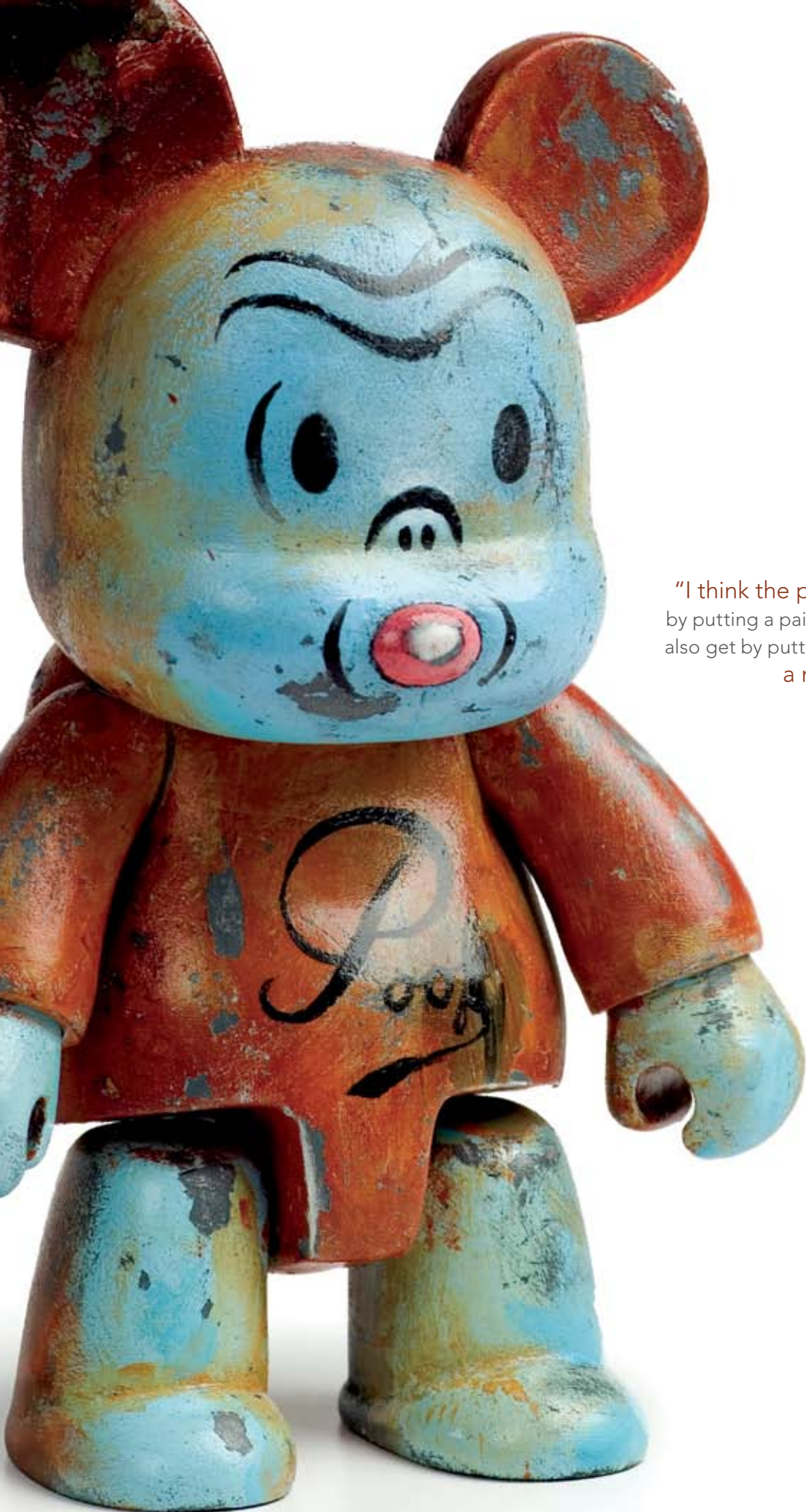


4.

23. I'M "ON IT."

GARY TAXALI

Top Left :: Lunch-Box, *Blab!* #15, Mixed Media on Paper/Book Covers  
 Top Right :: Heed, Enamel Oil and Acrylic on Aluminum  
 Right Page :: Sissy, Mixed media



"I think the powerful effect you might get by putting a painting on a gallery wall you might also get by putting a powerful illustration on a magazine page."

- GARY TAXALI



Left :: Poof-gee toy  
Above :: Bilu, Oil on Masonite

"The bottom line with illustration is that you're paid money to draw pictures to make someone richer, no matter what it is," he says. "No matter how cool and fun and rockstar the job is, you're being paid to make someone richer, and there's nothing artistic about that. So I spend about fifty percent of my time doing fine art and working toward my shows. I understand now that I'll only be taken seriously to a degree if I continue on this path. I have to completely divorce myself from illustration and move to the serious channels of fine art, but I'm battling that because I love being an illustrator."

Though fine art may be appreciated more in the academic sphere, the universal appeal and exposure of illustrations can't be ignored. In terms of social impact, no matter its motivation, it can't be denied that illustrations are commonly used to gently guide viewers to the specific, intentional conclusions laid out by their creators – art by any other name.

"I think there are contemporary illustrators who have shaped our culture," says Taxali. "They're doing some powerful, amazing,

unique work that's affecting the way people think and do things. I think the powerful effect you might get by putting a painting on a gallery wall you might also get by putting a powerful illustration on a magazine page."

#### LIFE IMITATING ART IMITATING LIFE ::

For all his successes, recognition and artistic philosophy, Taxali's roots are still incredibly humble. A press of a remote control and that old, idyllic vision of a better world springs to life in vibrant phosphorus. Only now it's been strained through 39 years of life, and all the ickiness that implies. Not a nuclear war in the literal sense, but Taxali's has always been a realm of metaphor, anyway.

"I think everything is autobiographical to a degree," he says. "Adults are cynical. I think my life experiences end up making it into the pictures in some way or another, and that involves having a cynical attitude towards the world and the way life is generally. There is a degree of hopefulness implicit in the character designs, but also a degree of sarcasm in expressing that hopefulness." ☒

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