

By Ziggy Nixon

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Dreams Of More Than Mere Shadows

An Interview with Diana Bryan – illustrator, designer, educator and more



When I finally caught up with [Diana Bryan](#) for an interview - not an easy task mind you considering how many demands she has on her time - she alerted me that a pretty menacing thunderstorm that was approaching her way might interrupt our conversation. 'It's getting really dark and the lights are flashing, so I may have to run' she told me; in fact, after some distant rumbling, she even counted once to see how

far away the storm really was. It sounded ominous, but wound up being a pretty good setting for our conversation, as thunderstorms speak to me with the same kind of emotion that it seems dark, creepy shadows and caricatures speak to Diana.

For those of you who associate silhouettes as I did with those old-fashioned portraits hanging in my Grandmother's living room - those stiffly posed, crudely cut black profiles of all various grandchildren, our noses adjusted to be a little bit more presentable or our chins cut out just a little rounder just so we'd seem to be a tad bit more cute than we really were - well, you need to clear your minds-eye before you become acquainted with Diana's works. Growing up a self-described strong-willed child, Diana began her journey some years ago with her fascination for the illustrations of a special children's book. Granted that this same children's book had been faithfully illustrated to match the story-lines - meaning there were assuredly no smiling gum-drops or happy ponies to be found. Instead, the artist portrayed an array of monsters (both real and imagined, human or not) as the author had originally described them. The particular illustrator involved, [Arthur Szyk](#) - one of many talented artists who would eventually flee Europe and the atrocities of the second World War and complete his career in the USA - wound up being a life-long inspiration for Diana, helping her along as she found beauty and truth in shadows, caricatures, and even joy at seeing the familiar features of her Jewish kin.

However, Diana is not only a well-known and accomplished artist, with a career in illustration covering more than the unique silhouettes with which she is most associated. She is also an award-winning animator, sculptor, puppeteer, educator and much more. In addition, she is a very well-respected and sought after-lecturer (and advisor), skilled at making some sense out of being an artist in today's world. Her on-going education – both in terms of her own training and her lectures with countless students and peers – spans the better part of four decades. It's no wonder then that when you talk to Diana, you get the feeling indeed that she is sitting back in a comfortable lawn chair (we'll just



assume the storm has passed for now) and is waxing ever-so-poetic – yet firmly, as she exclaims 'Listen!' yet one more time – holding audience and sharing her feelings about the world, man's place in it (perhaps best replaced by animals often seems to be her sentiment) and everything in between.

Our conversation was filled with lots of reflection, hearty laughter and some good old-fashioned high emotion (please, whatever you do, don't call mention the 'C' word [= 'consultant']). And, as I find many times in this 'business', Diana provided me with a wealth of new inspirations and great artists to learn more about. We are very pleased to bring you our interview with this talented illustrator:

Diana, with your impressive résumé in both teaching and the arts, you must receive constant requests for advice in how to start a career in illustration. What advice do you tend to give to people about getting started?



Oh yeah, people are always asking for opinions or asking me to consult with their kids who want to go to art school, or even for me to review their kids' portfolios. What I always recommend to anyone is get a double degree, including with a defined Major and also a defined Minor. For your Major, you want to go to a college that has a good department in education or in arts administration or even in arts therapy. The reason I say this is that all of these are viable ways to support yourself and still have tremendous flexibility.

You can then have your Minor be in whatever kind of art – fine art, illustration, etc. – so that you have training and all in something that you love, that you have a passion for. You want this hopefully to also be something that you can earn some living from – but obviously it would be

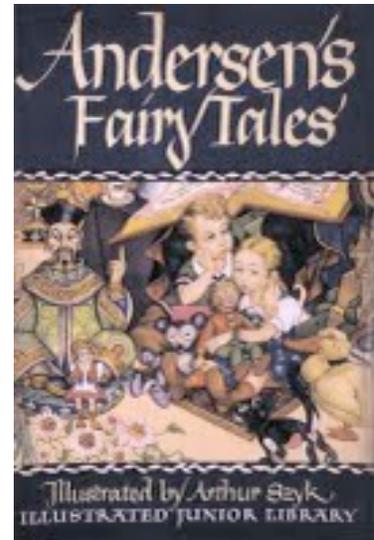
harder to support yourself with just this, at least compared to the way it used to be some years ago. It's just I always tell people that they should give themselves something practical to go along then with their 'art', as a sort of co-career.

This is how I got started. When I first got going, I was teaching and then using my income from this to support my illustration career. And I've continued to teach throughout a good deal of my career not only because I love it, but it also has given me at least some predictable income throughout all these years. Because if you're self-employed and only doing free-lance work, you want to have something to fall back on if you're at any point out of work – or even if the client is slow to pay you.

Had you decided ahead of your own initial education to go this way? Was this part of any master plan you had?

I have to admit that I never said or even thought in my wildest dreams that I could make it just as an illustrator, never in my whole life. But at the age of 5, I already knew that I wanted to be an artist, and I knew without a doubt that it was definitely my passion.

I really had two things that I loved: one was illustration. I had this great children's book – a collection of Hans Christian Anderson stories - that was illustrated by Arthur Szyk. He was by far my favorite illustrator at that time and remains so even today. Szyk was born in Poland and even studied art in Paris. He was involved in World War I both with the Russian Army and also the Polish Underground. During the 2nd World War, he immigrated to Canada and eventually wound up working in New York City. But even before World War II came around, he was already well known as a master illustrator. For me, it was not only his illustrations that I knew from my childhood, but also later his political cartoons and all the extremely hard, pro-Allies depictions he made of Hitler and his cronies. It really is just amazing and like I said, it's a life-long inspiration for me in terms of caricatures.



But this particular children's book had some of the creepiest illustrations I've ever seen in my life in it. He did these macabre caricatures of really grotesque people and animals and monsters. It was all very dark and extremely disturbing but yet still very beautifully done. I mean, he makes someone like Tim Burton seem sort of wholesome. But he was a master and I loved pouring again and again through these magnificently illustrated pages.



Plus, I have to say that as a Jew growing up in the South, I never saw children's books with anything that looked like a Jew. But all of Szyk's characters were very true to their 'origins' and even looked like my own family, like my Uncle Izzy or even my Grandmother, that is, with droopy noses or other traditional 'Semitic' traits. I'm not being racist at all, it was just how these people in my life looked! And of course, the heroes in all of the books never looked Jewish! If anything, the villains looked more

like my family than any of the fair-haired heroes or maidens did. So I loved this book not only because of all the wonderful illustrations but also because it was the only place I saw anyone that looked like the people I really cared about!

The other thing that inspired me was that I loved animals. I spent not only an enormous amount of time drawing them, but also sitting up in tree's and watching them. I remember even when I was 5, I started my own business. You see, the kids in our neighborhood would steal birds nests and destroy the eggs that were in them, for whatever reasons kids do things like that. I even had a little bird cemetery that I took care of, where I would bury the

baby that had fallen down or had otherwise died. And I'd even put moss over their graves, so that they wouldn't be disturbed.

The whole thing made me really sad, but I was a determined and head-strong little kid and decided to do something about it. So I'd create my own birds nests, even intricate and big bird's nests, because I'd watched exactly how birds made them. Then I'd sell them for a nickel. I really liked this, because I was not only making a little bit of money but I was helping the birds, too.

I even thought I wanted to grow up to be Jane Goodall or Diane Fossey or a veterinary surgeon... AND also a children's book illustrator. However, I was from the generation where women were told that they couldn't be veterinarians because we couldn't handle big animals. Which I think is totally ironic because nowadays probably AT LEAST 50% of all vets are women. But again, back in the early 60's, girls were just pushed away from the field. I was even told that to my face by some local veterinarians so that really discouraged me.



But I always loved art and I drew constantly. And I also had jobs in a hospital and the Philadelphia Museum of Natural History when I was a little older. I loved biology, too, and I would sometimes do biological illustrations. So that and the animals have always been a part of my art. Somehow to me, I've never thought that you could separate these. I've always used animals and skeletons and representations of the body and all of that in my work. I even had a couple of years of pre-med in college which I still rely on today!

In terms of your own education and career, what role does Art Therapy play in your work?

First of all, I've only had so-called Fine Arts training, I was never trained in any commercial art at all. I did take business courses after I got my Masters degree. Prior to that, every arts school I went to was a 'Fine Arts' one.



But I always took some courses that the Fine Arts schools would call 'Mere Illustration' because, again, this was in the early 60's and 70's. The reason I liked it was that it was recognizable story telling and it was frequently very funny. However, the prevailing notion of what you were supposed to do in that era – and that was before Red Grooms rose to popularity (who in my mind was an illustrator, because he was funny and told stories) – was anything but going into illustration. You were either supposed to be a pop artist like Andy Warhol or become an abstract expressionist, which was really the preferred 'in' thing to be. Or you were even extremely hyper-realistic like a salon artist. But I didn't fall into any of those categories, even though I was doing all kinds of eclectic and interesting things.

I was always drawing from life or dreams. I did a lot of annunciations and I was doing political satire, too. But I think the process of being the type of illustrator I was – which was always drawing from life using animals or people on the subway or in night-clubs or wherever they were – that process of observation is not very different to that required for being a good therapist. You see, I actually did get back to your question! (laughs)

See, there are many different kinds of illustrators. There are decorative ones, metaphoric, and more – but I don't do that. I'm a story-teller. And part of what I like to capture is the personality or the emotions. I love doing caricatures, although my cut-outs frequently don't show that or maybe it's just a little harder to see. But certainly when I was a puppeteer, all my puppets were totally caricatures. Perhaps in my cut-outs you see it more so in the animals I illustrate which are more anthropomorphized. But I do try to put personalities into the characters in my illustrations.



When you spend your whole life drawing people and trying to figure out who they are when you're observing them, that's not very different from being a therapist. And if you're any good, you're trying to develop good powers of observation. Either watching or listening or frequently both – because a lot of times people say one thing but their body language is saying something else. So in my mind any good artist who's fairly observant probably would make a pretty good therapist. Because sometimes when you ignore what someone's saying and instead focus on how they're saying it, you're actually getting more accurate information. And since I enjoy observing – either observing to illustrate or observing in order to help someone – it's not that hugely different to me.

You've been involved in Art and Art Education for many years. But how did you get started helping others with their business sense? I've read that in part you're even working with and teaching people to survive financially.



Among other things, sometimes yes, surviving is part of it. But there's much more to it than that. Listen, I have to tell you: every business course I have ever taught has always had a large focus on earning a living (a) doing something that you not only get emotional pleasure and satisfaction from but also (b) something that allows you to give back to society. I believe very strongly in that and I've never separated those things. I've always made them an important part of my lectures. Because I have to tell you, if you want to earn a living being an illustrator, it's not the easiest way to go.

Plus, depending on your style and also your emotional proclivity, it can wind up being an even tougher route. For example, I had absolutely no taste for advertising. I worked for 3 years in advertising and didn't like it. I was treated a thousand times better doing editorial work but I didn't make nearly as much

money. So clearly, money wasn't my main motive. And earlier you asked about if I had a 'master plan': well, that didn't exist. I mean, I went to a Fine Arts school and nobody there had ever heard of an artist making a living. Everyone knew if you wanted to make a living you had to be a bartender or a cab driver or you did something (or you had to teach). But you didn't make it as an artist.

I'd just get so (sighs)... I mean, at first, I'd take my work to magazines and publishers. And they'd say to me, 'oh it's very interesting but it's too much like fine art'. So between this and people at the Fine Art school insulting me about my 'mere' illustrations, I just decided everyone was full of shit. I mean, I had this pretty good-sized, over-developed ego when I started out when it came to my work. Maybe not in other areas, but I've always trusted my work more than almost anything else with few exceptions. So I just thought people were crazy when they didn't love my work as much as I did. I thought if they'd just keep looking at it long enough, that it would grow on them and they'd learn to love it.

I just never internalized anyone's – my teachers' or any else's – criticism. If they were willing to tell me how to make it better, okay, then I would listen. If they just wanted to tell me it was crap, I would simply ignore them. But I never thought that I had could have a



career doing that. And in my mind when I was growing up, 'little girls' or women illustrators did fashion drawings, which I knew I would never do. Or even biological illustration: I didn't want to do that, even though I did do that a few times on the side.

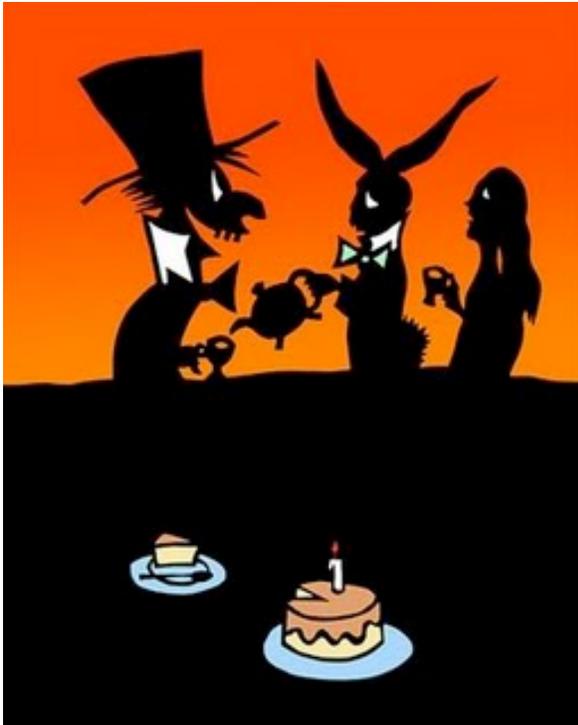
It was just that I would get so crazy when I would open the New York Times or a book or a magazine and just see this horrible stuff. And I thought I could do so much better than that. I just knew that I was better than what they were publishing. Still, I needed the satisfaction of seeing my stuff published, even if I didn't actually think about making a living at it or having a career in this area. So that's why I got all those degrees in teaching, in Fine Arts and in Education. Again, I took Fine Arts because I loved it

and got a Masters in Education because it suddenly occurred to me I might actually have to earn a living some day. Sure, like any good artist, I had a lot of menial jobs earlier in my career. Still, I knew that because my knees were starting to go, my chances of being a waitress or bartender forever in the East Village were going pretty quick.

But it took me 8 years to get published for the first time. Every time I'd present anyone in publishing with one of my paper cut-outs, they'd never even really look at it. They'd just dismiss it and say 'oh, it's too old-fashioned'. Nobody would see or understand that I was doing unconventional work, they'd just view it in terms of the traditional American style silhouettes, a lot which are frequently extremely boring.

Instead, in my mind, I was more in my mind a German or let's say European illustrator. Many of these, like George Grosz and other artists, were very sardonic and dark with their work. Just as Szyk, a number of these great illustrators had immigrated to the United States, fleeing the Nazis for one reason or another. There were just so many outstanding artists from that time even though I can't remember all their names.

For example, this included Boris Artzybasheff, who was absolutely amazing. He was not only honored for his work caricaturing the Nazis but he also did a lot of simply classic TIME Magazine covers. And there were other children's' book illustrators as well that influenced me. There were simply so many different images that just blew me away, back when children's books were done in those wonderful oversized formats. I remember I had several of these large-sized children's books and they had all these dark images and pictures including animals and people, and so many were so dark and creepy and yet so poignant in their messages.



And also Disney's *Fantasia*, especially 'A Night on Bald Mountain' may have been my favorite thing (even though Disney stole that). It was originally from [Alexandre Alexeïeff](#) whose animation technique involved using a screen filled with thousands of movable pins, which he gave movement to by pressing the image out onto the screen. The screen was illuminated from the side so that it created these fantastic shadows and he would manipulate all the pens so that it created these really surreal images. [His film](#), made along with Claire Parker, had such a hallucinogenic quality to it and yet it looked so real, almost like photographs even with all its morphing images. (ZN: even though the video is obviously crude, it's truly impressive if you consider both the time in history as well as the technique!)



Diana, your works are often described with words like creepy, macabre, and dark. Others comment that your pieces can be 'intense and gloomy', featuring either 'creatures of the night' or images that are slyly erotic, with 'long, slinky, slight naughty silhouettes (that) titillate viewers.' Do you think that your works fit into these types of descriptions or is it more the natural tendency of what a silhouette can or should express?

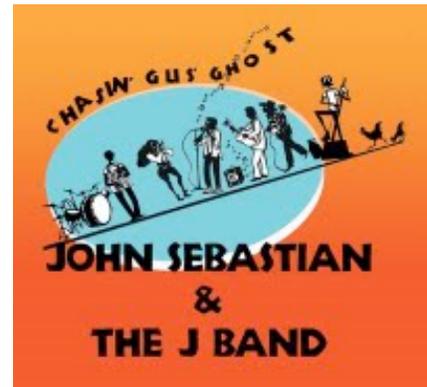
People have a weird reaction to silhouettes. If you look at any German expressionist film, you'll see that and how they use this to create heightened emotions. That was also true of some 'American' films in the 40's - even though a lot of these were usually by European immigrants as well. They'd use silhouettes or really spooky shadows

whenever they were trying to create a certain kind of quality of being creepy, scary or something else like that.

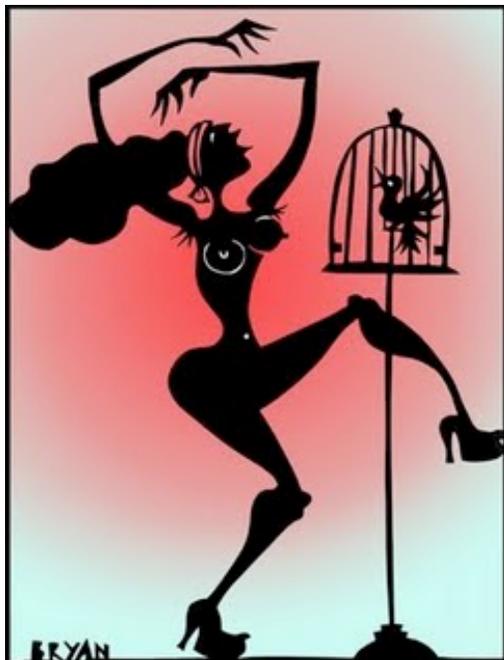
So even if you were doing a so-called 'benign silhouette', the simple fact that it's a silhouette evokes this kind of Jungian collective racial memory we all share. It's just our inherent feelings that we have as humans that are deep within us about shadows and dreams and the darkness. People are just very emotionally responsive to shadows, for better or worse, depending on your point of view. It can involve fear and suspense, darker emotions or even lust – but my work is also quite often very humorous.

You're obviously very specialized in your silhouette and paper cut out art and illustrations. What medium have you then not worked with – either at all or not enough even?

(answers very quickly) Oh, I'd like to do more animation for sure! And BIG sculptures, but still working with silhouettes. I mean, in terms of sculptures, I don't have the money to do anything like that on my own. So I guess here it would have to eventually be more public art. Most of what I've done has been for us in interiors. I've done one outside thing, which was in cement, which is definitely not my favorite media.



But in terms of animation, I've just wanted to be an animator all my life. Because in the 50's when television was black and white, we'd get all these older cartoons from the 20's and 30's. Like 'Farmer Brown' and 'Felix the Cat' – both of which could be pretty disturbing sometimes, but were really fun to watch.



So I grew up watching all this totally creepy and odd animation. I mean, the animation's in the 30's, especially the black and white ones – even the original Superman – these weren't little cutesy-pie, innocent cartoons at all. Even something like

'Betty Boop' was extremely erotic (ZN: she was also interestingly involved with a male character called 'Bimbo', go figure). Still, not only was the imagery great, but the music was wonderful, too, just like it was in some of the others I mentioned. These first cartoons would feature either classical music or jazz pieces in their scores. But the cartoons themselves were often made up of demented, distorted images and caricatures. And later during the 40's, all these

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fantastic cartoons came out with these really powerful caricatures of famous actors. So animation was a big influence on me and how my art developed.

And to me, puppets are a poor man's animation. I mean, you don't need any kind of ultra-complex technology, but you're making stuff move and you're still creating an unreal world. It requires that you're creating sometimes more emotion and making things even more real in this sense.

How long did it take you to illustrate a piece like 'The Fisherman and His Wife', the well-renowned animation short that won so many awards and was narrated by Jodie Foster?

Well, to me that's not really what I'd call 'full' animation. I did push the producers to allow in as much animation as possible. But you see, the series of various children's books that they were using for these narrated videos like this had already been based on several other books and some really terrific and talented artists. However, this series of films weren't being fully animated and most of the artists up to that point had just worked as illustrators, that is, they weren't obsessed with animation and having their pieces move in any way.

So they insisted that they didn't want anything that was too different from the other videos. However, I understood how to work economically and create more movement out of the pieces I was doing. And there were two of us – both of us being illustrators – that were pushing them in the direction of more animation. Of course, it helped that I knew how to do it just as cheaply, I knew how to do composite shots and camera movements and make things happen. Plus, with my style of cut-outs rather than drawing, you can manipulate the figures and not have to do 400 drawings for just a few minutes of movement, you can just do it in a jointed sort of way.

So I eventually did get a little more animation into both of the videos – including 'The Monkey People' which was narrated brilliantly by the late Raul Julia – than I think they originally wanted. And I even won two animation awards for the work even though, again, I didn't really consider them what I'd call 'full' animation. One of them was done with about 200 separate pictures and the other with about 400. I forget the exact number, but it was a lot. But for the most part, these weren't complete pictures, keeping in mind that some of this was also before the age of relying on computers for this stuff. Instead, there was a lot of manipulation and I had pieces that I'd assemble and re-assemble. There were lots of modular pieces to the works so I could move things around, including the figures, the clouds, and much more. And everything was done in layers which made it easier as well. I think I had something like 9 months to do them in, working sometimes at different paces depending on what else was going on in life.

Diana, I wanted to ask one thing that I'm not entirely clear on: even though your works are produced by hand with cut out paper, you mention as well that often pieces will be digitally enhanced. What does this entail?

Well, I say that because it's easier for people to understand. I mean, most of the time – I'd say about 97% of the time – it's ALL cut paper. What I mean by 'enhancing' – and it depends on the job – is that when sometimes when you're cutting paper, you have a little rough edge, a little bit of a tear or pull effect. I like the look of that usually, because it looks more real to me or even a bit primitive, somehow a little more like actual 'cut paper' should.



But again, depending on the client and the assignment, sometimes I don't want that look. So I may clean it up a little bit on the computer. Or if it's a black and white cut-out, I'll change the color to be purple and place the changed piece on whatever other background

color is desired. But I'm not changing the essential image at all, it's still cut paper. I'm literally using the computer to just clean up little tiny imperfections in the paper itself or to create airbrush-like color backgrounds.



This is in large part owing to the fact that when I cut paper, I always use either black or white. This is because I have two types of paper that I like to work with that are just the right weight and quality for me. They give really good clean cuts and edges, which is hotpress Xerox paper or black 'paper by the pound'. I've tried to cut out other paper including heavier versions that I can't control them the way I want, or even after a while they begin to hurt my hands. As such, if I'm doing a more complex image where I have to use several colors in an illustration, or even for example include figures in front of buildings or layers of various images, they all start off as a black or

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white image. So I'll also have to use the computer to change the colors. In these cases, I have definitely have to 'enhance' the pictures, otherwise it'd just be black on black and you wouldn't see any differences or distinctions when I put one image in front of another.

I mean, if it were all just black and white all the time, it'd just be like an Egyptian frieze. If you look at Egyptian art, you don't have something in front of something else. So to create the illusion of space with a silhouette you really need colors or at least shades of gray or something to help distinguish space.

Is it just my impression from your portfolio, or are you moving more to sculptural work recently?

Well, I ... listen, I've had a very successful career and I've typically worked for wonderful clients. Ones with high visibility or that treated me well and gave me a lot of freedom and with whom I've had a lot of fun. And because of this I was typically able to work in a very good mindset, which meant usually that they let me be very creative and very funny ... which occasionally meant very creepy, too, which I guess they hired me for in the first place (laughs). And I've had the privilege to do that for 30 some years.

But as we all know, the economy has been changing for some time and I've always wanted to try more anyway. Perhaps it goes back to that conflict between fine arts and illustration, again, how the first one always has this snobbery about the other. Even so, I always wanted to see my art in public galleries. You know, with something that would be more substantial or let's say permanent than my paper cut-out works. It's just because with a lot of my work, my final art products are not archival because of my material or because of the size of my typical pieces. Yes, I had done the animation which has a real sense of permanence, but that was different. And I also think that's why I think I wasn't satisfied in this way just doing children's books.



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So I found this way to make pieces with a sculptor colleague of mine. I was very lucky that he helped me find a relatively affordable way to convert my images into steel. After the pieces are cut out, they're then powder-coated which gives something that is really permanent. They're usually displayed with some back-lighting with colored light, which looks just incredible. And this approach has really led me in the direction of galleries and public art. True, I don't sell a lot because they're not cheap and they're not a cute little decorative thing that you can just hang on your wall. I mean, you have to find a way to display them, or build a way to have them fit in with your furniture. Plus, they can be a bit dangerous because they can be sharp so you need to find a way to hang them up a bit high. But I do have people that collect them and enjoy them.

And I have been getting some grants as well. I just finished a 5 foot piece for a wonderful grant for the Ulster County Transportation Building's permanent installation, where they built this fantastic, museum quality showcase to display it. It was fabulous and I couldn't have been more happy. They also had some other terrific artists involved whose work I love. So it was nice to be involved in that context.



Look, I've done all the commercial illustrating I need to do to feel like I can prove that I can do it. But I just love challenges and overcoming obstacles. And I mean, I'm okay financially as well. I'm not rich, but I'm very happy and I am still getting free-lance jobs. Maybe not the same quantity that I used to, but I'm also not promoting the way I used to because I've really become more interested in doing more public art and more gallery art and trying to get more grants.

I think part of it is that I was 'unfortunately' treated EXTREMELY well by this one grant. I was given so much freedom and when I brought it in they were just so happy and the woman who ran it said my piece was so much better than they ever thought it would be. Everyone involved was just so great. So when I get treated very well, I really like that. And, of course, they paid me very well, too.

But I love to teach, and I'm still active giving lectures. I do still try to give talks at colleges all over the country when I can, but my allergies don't let me travel like I used to and I stay closer to home these days. So again, I am doing free-lance but there are other directions I'd like to follow. Among other ideas, I'd like to work more in collaboration, maybe with photographers or other artists that I like. Plus, I'd love to try to work with glass (*ZN: small world!*).

Diana, you've mentioned your interest in supporting causes for a range of issues. Do you think that artists in general should exhibit a stronger social or environmental conscience in their work than compared to other professionals?



No! I mean, come on. Many artists can barely earn a living, for crying out loud! I think they just have a responsibility to stop whining that no one will hire them. My opinion is: get out there and work at it! Stop acting like just because you're creative that you're special and more important than anyone else in the world. I mean, try working in a factory for a few years. Then you'll see how lucky you are!

I just think that if you get ANY money at all for being an artist, you should feel extremely privileged. Because you're getting paid to do something you love. And so few people can EVER say that in their lives. So, definitely the answer is 'no' to your question, not at all. I mean, artists are just like any other person. You can't lump them all together in terms of responsibility or traits or whatever for any purpose. There's every kind of artist just like there's every kind of person. For example, I have a friend who's one of the best activists I know and she never even went to college, not that that matters. But she's very active and has even managed to have laws changed owing to her activities. I support her whenever I can, and help her environmental groups and get her information. She's just a fantastic person who happens to be an activist because that's who she is.

Listen, my opinion is that if an artist can figure out how to survive, then great. There's people like me and someone like Jean Tuttle - whom I respect so much - well, we make it because we've got a monster work ethic. You have to have that. But in terms of any obligation to social or environmental issues - no, I think it's strictly personal. In my case, I am involved in various activities because I was raised that way, and that's MY value system. But I'd never go up to anyone, I don't know, who does abstract



sculpture and ask them what they were doing to save the world or save their community. I just don't believe in being that judgmental about people.

I hope I didn't offend you by the way I answered (ZN: *not at all ... sniff*). But the reason I reacted like this is that recently within one month, I swear I got 9 separate phone calls asking me to donate free work for an auction. And it got to the point where I'd ask, well, how many dentists have been asked to donate a free filling to someone or even give a free root canal? How many lawyers have been asked to donate a free will? How many doctors have you found that are willing to give even one free colonoscopy?



In my opinion, if and when they get those people on their donation list, then they can call me. People like this always seem to go to the poorest segment of society – the artists and the musicians - and want them to work for free, because they think it's either, quote, good for society or it's good for their portfolio or their exposure or whatever. And that's just more BS, really, I tell them it's just cheaper for me to donate money than to donate my art! To me that's wrong, I think it's terrible exploitation of artists. I mean, if an artist has a social or environmental conscience, then yes, they should act on it and try to do some good on some level. But if not, then don't. I'm just not into moralistic judgements like that.

Okay, now

]]]]] [that our blood pressure is elevated, let's move on quickly. In addition to your video work and other awards, you have received high praise for your work with murals, including perhaps your best known public work featuring 'The New York Public Library's Books of the Century' list. How much of an endeavour was this for you?

Oh yes, that was a great, great experience. I'm even trying to get grants now to expand on this idea. You see, I have this wonderful printer that does work for me. I simply adore factory people because they have a top-notch work ethic. And if you find a really good one, they're usually real craftsmen and it's such a pleasure to work with them. In my case, I have this guy that can do these beautiful mural pieces that can be used indoors or outdoors. They can be rolled up and shipped easily, they come with double-sided tape already attached, just everything.

<http://ziggynixon.blogspot.com/2009/10/dreams-of-more-than-mere-shadows.html>

So I'm trying to get grants to not just have the murals done in only the original 3-foot high by 30-foot long format, but maybe 1- or 2-feet high depending on the setting or needs. You see, I want to donate these to local libraries or public buildings for display, with the name of the authors and everything included. And I've even had librarians ask if I can include the Dewey Decimal System numbers for some of the books!

But this was really just one of my all-time favorite jobs, easily in the Top 2 or 3 projects I've ever worked on in my life. I had total freedom, the Art Director in charge of the exhibition for whom I was working was also a very talented artist in his own right, plus he had a great sense of humor. And he said I never had to provide sketches for approval, so again, I could do whatever I wanted. As you know, the librarians at the New York Public Library picked 150 books, even though there was only room for me to illustrate 50 in terms of the space we had architecturally. So the murals had to fit into a space 3 feet high and up to 30 feet long, and each one had a theme, a different subject matter. And I could pick just whichever books I wanted, so I picked 50 that fit and made 12 large murals for display. At first, I was nervous when I brought the first one's in, but the Director just loved everything! We really had no problems at all! None!

How long did it take you to complete such a seemingly daunting task?

I actually only had 6 weeks! I had to do research for the books, even though I had read most of them or was at least familiar with most. But during this period, I also had to supervise the photo-static blow-ups and we had some production problems where I had to switch suppliers half-way through it. So with all things considered, I probably had only 5 weeks to work on it!



Still, I was working so frantically day and night on it that I kind of lost track of time. I even had my boyfriend (Bob) help me with some of the research. And again, although I had read a lot of the material, some of the details were missing for me, like exact locations, decades, etc.. These were things where an illustrator like me – that is, one who is trying to be a good story-teller, rather than working only with metaphors – wants to get their facts straight. I mean, take 'Things Fall Apart' by Chinua Achebe: I wanted to make sure that the plants and animals I illustrated were 'truthful', that is, actually indigenous to Nigeria. I didn't want to put like, leaves or trees from South America in there. I had to make sure then that it was accurate.

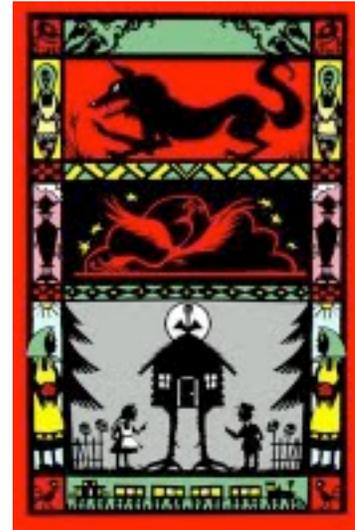


That's part of the pleasure I get, that is, the research into a piece to have that kind authenticity. Even though I often work with humor and distortion, I always try to start from a real place. Unless, of course it's a total fantasy. Like 'The Monkey People': even though the story took place theoretically in South America, I didn't necessarily see it this way. I took it as a kind of fantasy folk tale rather than one that was in any way restricted or tied into one geographical region. And because I felt this way about this work, I put, for example, a husky (dog) in the scenes and I would put other things that clearly shouldn't be there if it were indeed 'just' taking place in South America. But this made it funnier to me

and was also my commentary on my opinion about where it could take place.

Diana, you've been extremely kind and generous with your time today. Are there any last words you would like to add before we stop?

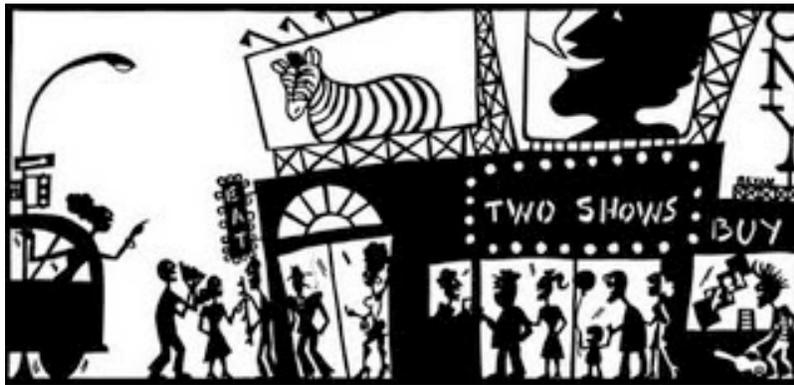
Listen, getting back to our earlier discussion: I want to make it perfectly clear that I think art is a wonderful thing, even though I don't think artists should be required to do anything other than be decent people, just like you'd expect of anyone else. But clearly, I don't want it to seem like I'm being too negative about the profession in ANY way, even for younger people thinking about studying art of one kind or another. Yes, it's tough to make a living as an illustrator and it's probably become much tougher than ever before in the past 10 years, as I'm sure you've heard many times in other interviews. It's just that I think that the ones out there that do well and can make a living are the ones that manage to be the most flexible and passionate about their work. An ounce of prevention and all that.



Another thing that I'd add is that within the circle of people I know that are doing well, one thing that we have in common is that we've set up our lives to not need as much money. We don't live beyond our means and can be flexible when money is coming in or even when it's not. It often comes down to a lifestyle choice. For example, I love fashion like you wouldn't believe, but I have strict limits in what I'll spend. Maybe I'll wait and look for other economical options, but I just won't spend, I don't know, 400 dollars on a designer pair of

jeans. For example, I'll just wait and pay 5 dollars for the same jeans after some rich kid donates them to the thrift shop.

The only thing I've EVER spent a lot of money on beyond having enough health insurance and eating healthy is my technology. Unfortunately, in my work, the cost of computers over the years, especially as an 'early user' back when computers couldn't be had for only a few hundred dollars (*ZN: first computer to write my thesis = 6'000 \$ WITH student discount!*), has really eaten into my earnings. Also, because I'm not a techno-freak, I can't do any of my own repairs or hard-ware updates, so that gets expensive sometimes, too. It's just, after all, as an illustrator, my income can fluctuate quite a lot. There have been times where I've made a good amount of money and other times where I haven't. But I've always made sure that I didn't have to spend a lot of money in the first place.



Like I don't know how people nowadays can move to Manhattan. The cost of a studio apartment there runs \$1,500 a month or more. I just don't understand how they can survive! And for that kind of money, you could own a huge house with everything where I live in upstate New York! But my point is: I teach,

I give lectures, I consult (*ZN: she said the 'C' word, not me!*), I do all kinds of different things. I also look into all kinds of manufacturers, I do a lot of stuff with them. I just try to stay very flexible in terms of how I'm willing to earn a living.

And I'm always looking for something new to do. Not in terms of changing my style! Even though changing your style might be might provide a much more economical means of being more flexible, there I'm not willing to be very flexible at all. But rather, I'm flexible in terms of where my work is going to appear or how it's going to be used or how I'll use any other talents that I may have. So I'm okay financially, but I also don't really need that much. And we're very happy! I have a fantastic big studio, it's like a magnificent old barn and it has all my sculptures displayed and Bob has his areas to practice his drumming. It's great! We're just very economical: what we need the money for, we have.

My point is that I try to talk people out of being JUST an illustrator as a full-time profession. Sure, it can be a viable field just by itself and there are some jobs out there for illustrators. I even know some



that are doing quite well. But today what I see is that if you want to be an illustrator you ALSO really need to be a graphic designer as well. As I told you, I have no commercial background, I'm self-taught. But I always tell everyone that they have to have a good background in computers, web and graphic design as well as being able to draw and create exciting images. If I were designing an illustration program, I would make sure that half of that was graphic design and computer work. I mean, you still be able to draw and unfortunately a lot of schools don't emphasize that enough, at least not anymore.

I'll say it again: I don't want to discourage anyone at all, and in no way am I trashing the field. There are lot's of ways to make money but you have to very, very flexible. But flexible also means that there will be lean times – and you can only stay flexible if you're not starving! It's especially important for young people going into this field to understand that it's necessary to balance their passion for illustrative art or fine art or whatever it's called – especially if they're exploring what direction they want to go in – with something that can earn a more steady living and put food on the table and a roof over your head!

Ziggy Nixon



Including even a small part of Diana's biography, résumé, list of exhibitions, or even clients' list here would require at least another multi-page blog entry. Needless to say, she has enjoyed an outstanding run as an educator and guest lecturer.

Her ability to mix the realities of the art world along with practical advice are respected throughout the industry. Instead we'll leave you with a short portion of the tale of 'The Monkey People' below the disclaimer (kindly note that the full video can be see at this link, noting run-time is approximately 26 minutes).