

Language of Line

Early in senior year of college, each art student had to say something about the work they do, and bring in a physical object to describe it. I needed no time to decide my object(s); and when it came around to me I dumped on the table sixty-four black pens, and fourteen brushes of all shapes sizes. “These are my weapons”, I said clutching a handful of them in my left hand, and holding up my right hand, “This is how I use them”.

I am an illustrator, and my language is line. I often illustrate text, an article, story, memoir, or poem that is not mine; breathing life into a body of letters, literally drawing out the most significant ideas. I also illustrate without words, letting the line alone do the speaking. The power pictures have when paired with words is extraordinary, and the relationship they have can create a deeper understanding of content. But images without words also tell a story, a narrative that lies within the contour of a face, the curve of a spine, or the wrinkle of an eyelid. Though I appreciate both of these modes of visual communication, the power of illustrations standing alone as well as accompanied by texts, I am most in awe of illustrators who can walk seamlessly through both modes because their talent, style and creative process allows them to make intuitive decisions about what images to pair with words, and what images stand alone.

Deemed at the “King of Line”, Al Hirschfield was still ticking away at his drawing table at age 87. In a video taken shortly before he passed away in 2003, his wife pleads with him to put down his pen and ink for the evening. One, two, three more lines, “I’m coming” he says into the paper, and doesn’t move.

The passion and infatuation for Hirschfeld's own work is clear, and each of his drawings has a distinct narrative. Simply put, he is famous for his lines, or lack thereof. He made a fantastic amount of work, and is significant and influential in the world of contemporary caricature and cartoon artists. He creates astounding likeness to his subjects, using the most minimal lines possible. No shading, just black line on white paper. Yet never is his work lacking of information, and that is what attracts me most to his mode of visual communication. How can a personality, an emotion, expression and entire soul be captured in the form of line? The talent comes in finding the most significant lines in a body, focusing only on them, and letting every other line fall away. His drawings work alone because the line speaks loudly. Caricatures of his in magazines were often given full pages, and his drawings sat with ample white space surrounding the figures. The gesture of his line is powerful and the lines he leaves behind, the bottom of a skirt or the entire back of a body become the most important—the perceived lines, leaving no room and no need for the presence of text.

The world of contemporary comics, graphic narrative and illustrators has no doubt been influenced by the groundbreaking work of Hirschfeld, among others. Recent graphic novels seamlessly blend text and word together, enhancing the words with the use of a visual element. If done well, the two forms of communication work symbiotically, the words start the dialogue and the visuals complete it. 'Persepolis' by Marjane Satrapi, 'Maus' by Art Spiegelman, or 'Stitches' by David Small are examples of pushing the new line of story telling through images. Satrapi uses simple black and white line quality, adding distinct elements such as taking speech bubbles away to express someone shouting (Pictures and Words). The style of her work, reverse white

lines on a black background, reflects the content of her journey from child to young adulthood in Iran, before and after the Islamic Revolution. Along the same grain, Art Spiegelman's *Maus* was groundbreaking for the world of graphic novels, winning the first Pulitzer Prize for a comic book. A memoir from stories by his father who lived through the Holocaust in the second world war, his depiction of Jews as mice and Germans as cats is only the start of visual analogies and subtle emotion and expression through the his drawings. Word and text work together to tell the story here, they need each other to communicate a narrative. Graphic novels use words to guide the audience in a fuller understanding of meaning. The beauty of the lines here is again what they don't fill. The creative mind is put to work to connect each panel and the lines from one drawing to the next. This *storyline* is the heart of my own adventures with the language of line.

My most recent endeavor explores the language of the line in a series of large-scale portraits of people close to me. Apart from a statement accompanying the body of work, each piece stands alone on a wall, no title, no text. The subjects each have a thick narrative of their own, and I need to make their story come alive, and speak aloud, using the quality of line. The subjects, friends of mine, were chosen because of the immense influence they have each had on me in my personal and artistic growth.

Each portrait reflects aspects of the subjects' energy, expression, and form according to the individual role they fill in my life. I observe and digest the way each subject carries him or herself; what they occupy their time with, how they move their hands or rest their eyes when bored. I recall how they act in varying situations, what they wear, how they stand, sit, recline, and sleep. I soak up this information like a sponge and

use it to inform my *storylines* about them. One of the portraits is of myself, a reflection on my own lines, a narrative of myself as the artists. This exploration practiced a new level of insight into what lines I wanted to exemplify in a portrayal of myself. I chose to represent a portrait of me with a male twist, a baseball cap and grounded stance; an outfit I adorn on a regular basis as a sign of my confidence as a female to outwardly dress like a boy. It is this self-reflective practice that is indicative of my desire to translate the multi-layers of a human being into simple form.

I appreciate well-rendered illustration such as Hirschfeld or famous illustrator David Levine in making line speak. Though it does not make or break a piece of work, I believe a weighty grasp and technical skill on the medium of pen and ink increases the ability of an artist to accurately express emotion and environment. I don't believe I can adequately express myself, or the stories of my subjects, without a knowledge, practice and familiarity of inks and how they act. Iterations of size, color of ink, manner of ink usage, line weight etc can all weigh in on the subjects storyline. Only with this study and practice of illustration under my belt I felt ready to move onto such large-scale drawings and began to find ways to access individual narratives through each of them.

The size of each portrait is significant, with paper seven feet tall and four feet across. This larger than life scale is a practice of close inspection and truthful scrutiny. The physical freedom of such large work is exhilarating; I incorporate my entire body in the process of making each piece, stretching, crouching, my nose nearly touching the paper or standing twenty feet away. Chin hairs become as big as the brush I use, the eyes the size of footballs. This allows for the audience to appreciate close line work and detail

of tightly rendered face, as well as appreciate the broader manipulation and form from the other side of a room.

The fact I use inks as my medium for virtually all of my portraits has become a defining factor in my illustration and expression of line. It gives me the versatility I need to create the most defined line---above all other types of mark making. Cut any way, I am infatuated with the quality of inks, the relationship they have with brushes, quill pens and the paper they make contact with. When the tip of a brush is dipped into jet black India ink, the subsequent mark it makes on the matrix it bonds with gives me a pleasure than runs through my spine. The second of sheen before the ink is absorbed into the paper, the delicate change in pressure changing slightly the thickness of the line never fails to amaze. Call it an obsession, but pushing the boundaries of inks has laid the groundwork for what these portraits have become, and the more familiar I am with the possibilities of ink, the better the *storyline* will be.

The series of five portraits along with few other recently completed portraits are an example of where a fine art expression and figure studies meets an illustrative, almost comic-like style. Visual communication comes in a slew shapes and sizes and a story can be told in any way; my way is through illustration, in finding the language of the line and using line alone, to create a narrative. Each portrait is a passionate expression of mine to tell the story of those close to me through my knowledge of a medium, the power of will and a personal creative voice. Line quality, size, texture and form influence the *storyline* of each person, and the result is a means of better drawing, seeing, and understanding the people who surround me.

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