

Excerpt



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CAROUSEL 19 · A · 2006 (PDF Excerpt)

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2006: SPRING/SUMMER ISSUE

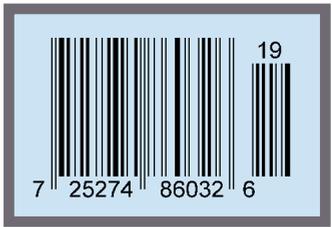
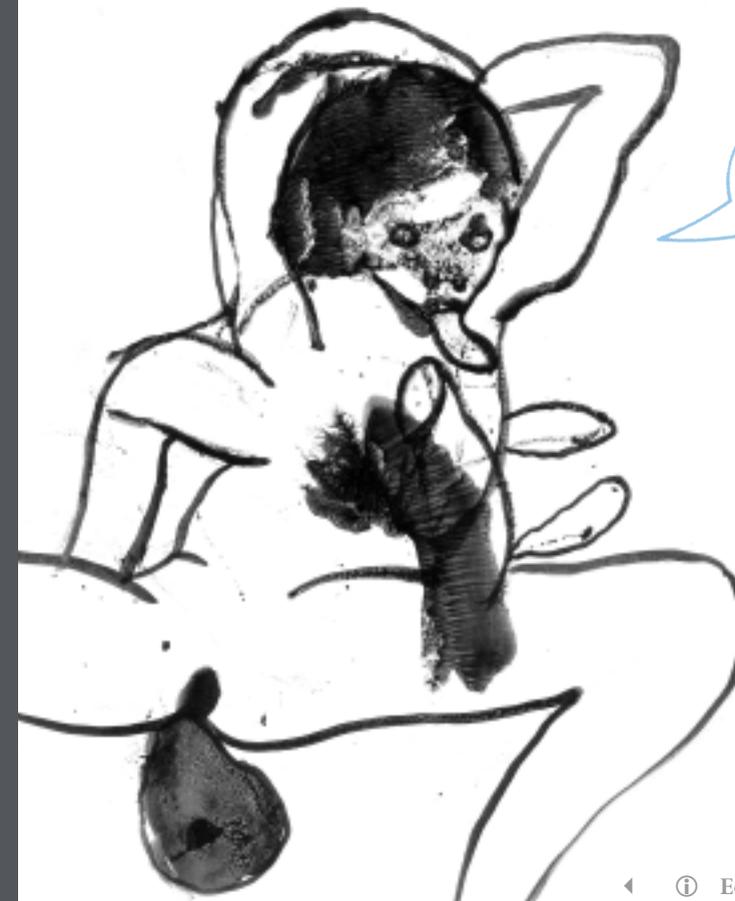
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◀ ⓘ Ed Pien : Disorder of the soul

“ A simple analogy for the rotating frame involves a carousel and two people trying to have a conversation. One person is riding on the carousel and the other person is standing still on the ground. Because the carousel is moving, the two people will be able to speak to each other only once per revolution and no meaningful conversation is possible. If, however, the person on the ground walks at the same speed as the carousel is rotating, the two people are next to each other continuously and they can carry on a meaningful conversation because they are stationary in the rotating frame. ”



CAROUSEL

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PDF Excerpt: NGUI vs SETH (p.17-24 of a 96 page issue)



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Poetry, Design and Comics: An interview with SETH by Marc Ngui

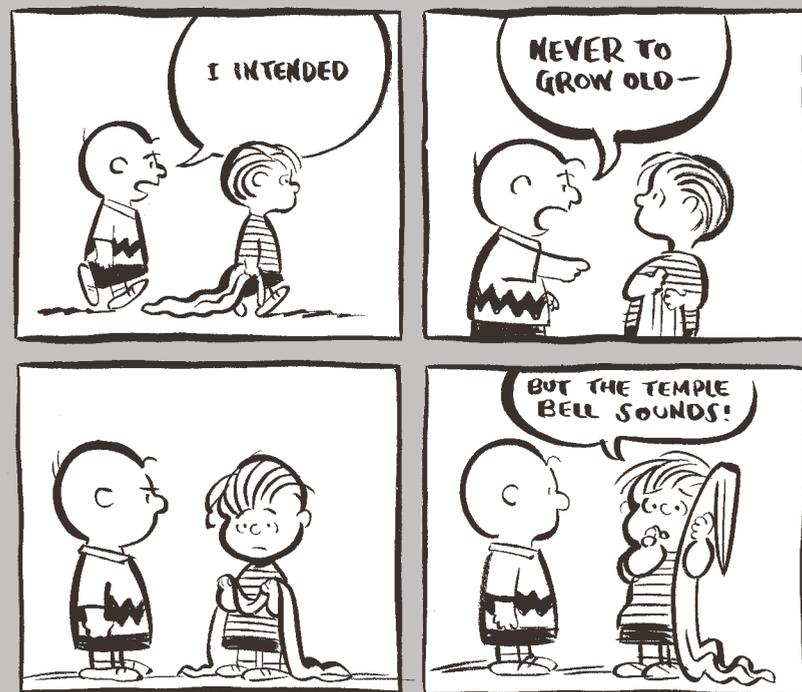
Seth is a cartoonist, illustrator and book designer based in Guelph, ON. His work is well known and admired in the world of independent comics and magazine illustration. He recently had an exhibition of work at the Art Gallery of Ontario (the first for a cartoonist) and is currently designing the complete reprint of Charles Schulz's *Peanuts* comic strip for Fantagraphics. In a recent online interview Seth began to talk about the relationship between comics and the seemingly polar disciplines of graphic design and poetry. As the conversation turned, he was unable to elaborate on his ideas about the language of comics. This interview rectifies that situation.

In regards to comics' relation to poetry, you spoke of the fundamental role that rhythm plays in both mediums. I was wondering if you could describe this rhythmic connection?

I have felt, for some time, a connection between comics and poetry. It's an obvious connection to anyone who has ever sat down and tried to write a comic strip. I think the idea first occurred to me way back in the late 80's when I was studying Charles Schulz's *Peanuts* strips. It seemed so clear that his four-panel setup was just like reading a haiku; it had a specific rhythm to how he set up the panels and the dialogue. Three beats: *doot doot doot* — followed by an infinitesimal pause, and then the final beat: *doot*. Anyone can recognize this when reading a *Peanuts* strip. These strips have that sameness of rhythm that haikus have — the haikus mostly ending with a nature reference separated off in the final line.



A QUICK DOODLE TO DEMONSTRATE RHYTHM IN A PEANUTS STRIP.



AS A HAIKU BY JOKUN

As time passed I began to see this connection as more and more evident in how I went about writing my own work. Certainly, it is not a process that is very tightly worked out — but when I am writing a comics page (or sequence of pages) I am very aware of the sound and ‘feel’ of how the dialogue or narration is broken down for the panels. If you have to tell a certain amount of story in a page then you have to make decisions on how many panels you need to tell it. You need to arrange these panels — small, big or a combination of the two — and decide how to sit them on the page. All these decisions affect how the viewer reads the strip; there is an inherent rhythm created by how you set up the panels. Thin panel, thin panel, long panel: this rhythm is felt by the reader, especially when you put the words into the panels. When writing a comic strip I am very aware of how I am structuring the sentences: how many words; one sentence in this panel; two in this one; a silent panel; a single word. These choices are ultra-important in the creation of comics storytelling, and this unheard rhythm is the main concern for me when I am working out a strip.

I imagine poets feel this same concern. If you read any free verse poetry you can see how the poet has made certain decisions for how to break the thoughts apart and structure them, often in a way that defies a system.

Are there other significant relationships that you see between comics and poetry?

It seems to me that the language of poetry is very dependant on setting up images and juxtaposing them against each other. A poet will create an image in the first two lines of his poem and then he will create another in the next two lines, and so on. I do find this jumping from image to image in poetry to be a very interesting, comic-like element. Many poems are almost like word comics.

Comics are often referred to in reference to film and prose — neither seems that appropriate to me. The poetry connection is more appropriate because of both the condensing of words and the emphasis on rhythm. Film and prose use these methods as well, but not in such a condensed and controlled manner. Comic book artists have for a long time connected themselves to film, but in doing so, have reduced their art to being merely a ‘storyboard’ approach.

The underlying rhythm seems to have gone unheard for literally decades in the world of commercial comic books (a few noticeable exceptions: Kurtzman, Kirby, Stanley).



Comics and poetry are very condensed media; they rely on an economy of language where every little word or picture counts. It is the interplay of meaning generated by using limited symbols that creates the dense imagery that both media are capable of. Both make use of the symbolic and both ask that the reader fill in the gaps to complete images in their minds. What are your thoughts on this matter? How does it affect the way you write comics?

The condensing of real life experience into a comic page is the very essence of what making a comic is about. The choices made in how you condense this information and how you arrange it to tell a story is the barebones of what your job as a cartoonist is. If you wish to tell a story about how you got up this morning and went to work, there are a great number of choices you could make in how to tell it as a comic. Most of the decisions will be determined by the amount of space you have to work with; traditionally cartoonists had very limited spaces to tell stories in — usually 6 or 7 pages — and therefore they developed a language based on economy. You would have a character get out of bed in [panel one](#) and be on the train in [panel two](#). This is no longer always the case today — in a graphic novel, you can have as many pages as required — and cartoonists are learning how to use this condensed storytelling language in new ways. Let's assume you can do whatever you wish and use as much space as you like: you will still be condensing information onto the page as you take life and plot it out in little pictures. If you do five pages of large panels showing night turning into day followed by five pages of little panels showing yourself waking and taking in the details of the room and the light changing colour and then rising — well, these choices are utterly important in conveying experience to the reader. While it's true that choices have to be made on how much information to include and what to exclude in writing for any medium, the difference in comics is that this medium is inherently about condensing information. What you are getting is a series of 'still' pictures combined to tell a story... [panel one](#): eye opens; [panel two](#): shot of face, awaking; [panel three](#): see whole room; [panel four](#): behind the figure now, see light coming in window; [panel five](#): close up on light beam; [panel six](#): dust motes in the light... you can see the condensed language right there.



For myself, this is the great pleasure in arranging the information of the story: the choices you make in how to apply this language.

Is this condensed language a strength or a weakness?

Probably a bit of both... there are strengths and weaknesses to every medium; comics are no different. Increasingly, I think we are seeing that cartooning is just another artistic medium and is not limited by its language; as a medium, it seems capable of handling

any kind of story. However, comics are very young and it is hard to determine what they do best yet. Clearly they are capable of many different narrative approaches but each of them has their challenges. An interior monologue is something comics do much better than film, but you have to work hard to keep it visually interesting when you employ this. The same goes for a long conversation between characters: you don't always want ten pages of two heads talking to each other. Prose does not have these problems. Prose, however, has to point out everything visually. If someone is wearing a red sweater in a novel then the author has to comment on it; in a comic you can just draw it and let the reader take it in less conspicuously. I could go on and on.

How does graphic design relate to the language of comics?

The 'words & pictures' that make up the comics language are often described as prose and illustration combined. A bad metaphor: poetry and graphic design seems more apt. Poetry for the rhythm and condensing; graphic design because cartooning is more about moving shapes around — designing — then it is about drawing. Obviously when creating a strip about a man walking down the street you are drawing pictures of the man and the environment... however, you are also trying to simplify these drawings down into a series of more iconic, graphic renderings. The more detailed the drawing — the more it attempts to capture 'reality' — the more it slows down the story telling and deadens the cartoon language. Don't get me wrong; the cartooning can be very specific, it doesn't have to be generic. It simply has to properly 'cartoon' the images. The drawings become symbols that are arranged on the page (and within the panels) in the most logical way to make the reading of the story work; you place these cartooned images together in a way that does what you want them to do. You aren't concerned with drawing a proper street scene so much as you are concerned with moving the reader's eye around the page in the way you wish it to move. Trying to draw realistically just sets up a myriad of frustrations for the proper use of cartoon language. Think of the cartoon language as a series of characters (letters) being purposefully arranged to make words.

What is the difference between looking and reading?

Ideally, when the viewer 'reads' a comic strip they are ingesting the information in the same way that they would when they are reading text. They take the words and the iconic condensed drawings, and process this information to make the story come alive, much like they do when reading the printed letterforms of a novel.

When viewing a painting, you don't tend to read the image in the same way; instead,

you look. The eye wanders around deciding what it all 'means'. Some paintings are more directed in how they control the eye, but I still think that this is an entirely different process. You don't look at a comic — you read it. Even if there are no words in the strip, you are reading those panels; it's all little blocks of information. A drawing or painting tries to impart the experience of living in the world in a much different manner: it is more of a sensory experience, an outside experience. Comic reading happens more inside the reader, it is a different mental process... a solitary experience.

The idea that “the line drawing is a blueprint for experience” came up during a lecture you gave about Thoreau Macdonald at the AGO. How is this a useful model for a cartoonist? What is the role of memory in the generation of effective symbols in comics storytelling?

If you went out into the backyard and stood there and then returned to the house and drew the scene with just an eye for simplifying it, you might have a good cartoon drawing. Imagine that the real scene was quickly decomposed down to a black & white, high-contrast photo, and then traced: a sort of memory drawing.

The drawings in a comic are generally memory-drawings; the simplicity of the ink lines can act as a memory trigger. You fill in the blanks of experience and remember, for example, a field you have been in. You recall the colour, the smell, the way the grass moved; like a memory flash you create the textures... the reader/viewer ideally is a ghost floating over a dream world of memory.

The cartoonist is trying to boil down real life experience into an image that is capable of conveying the depth of life by only suggesting it. This is what good cartooning is about. It is difficult to do properly. To see a good cartoonist suggest a winter day in just a couple of lines is to understand the beauty of a thing done well.

During this same lecture you spoke about how cartoonists have to navigate between the figurative and the abstract in their work; this is an intriguing paradox. Can you explain the role/use/function of this paradox in comics?

If you are drawing a picture of a house, you want it to look like a house, a specific house. However, to cartoon it properly you have to simplify it down to a usable graphic. You have to walk that fine line between trying to convey some 'real' element of the living world that is recognizable as just what it is, in all its specificity, and to make the image iconic and simple enough to be moved about on the page effectively as a piece of the cartoon

language. This tension between the ‘real’ and the ‘cartoon’ is the central tension in drawing a cartoon strip. You don’t want to fall too much into the iconic because then the strip becomes visually boring, and you don’t want to become too detailed (or real) because then the drawings become dead things sitting there on the page and slowing down the reading of the cartoon language. Of course, this attempt at balance can be broken anytime to its own effect: once in a while you may want a strip that is entirely iconic/generic and once in a while you may wish to stop a strip dead in its tracks with a ‘real’ drawing.

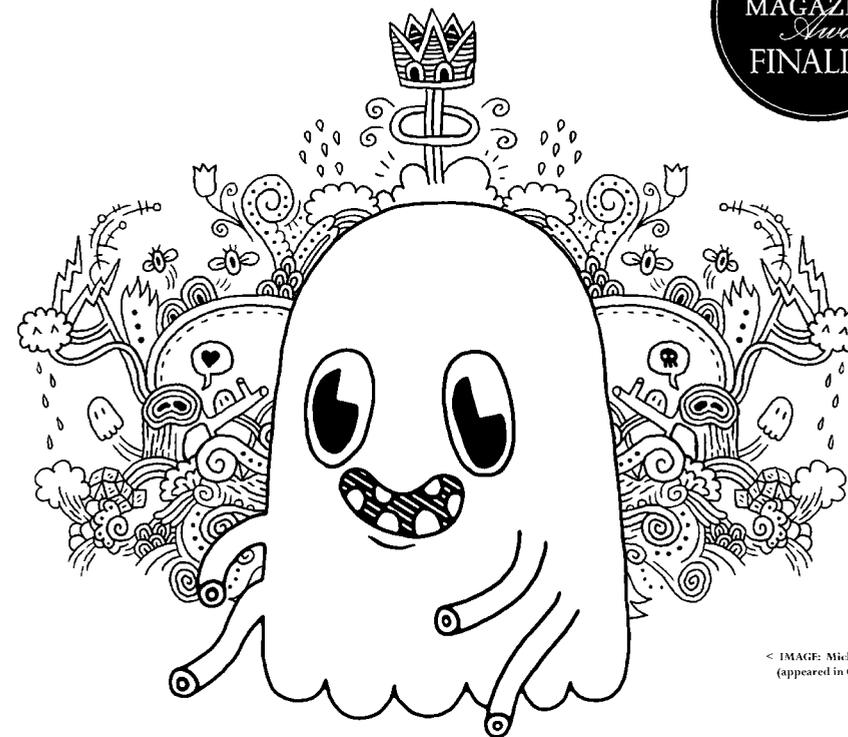
Comics in North America have a long, rich and mostly forgotten history. Can you outline one or two important lessons regarding the production of comics that you have learned from your study of its history?

I don’t even know where to begin with such a question. The history of cartooning is mostly a history of mediocrity. There have been a few artists of great talent who suffered lives of thwarted desire as they tried to apply their aspirations to a stilted commercial medium, a medium in perpetual adolescence. But mostly it has been a field dominated by huge numbers of small-minded hacks churning out reams and reams of 2nd rate (9th rate, really) material.

Like film and photography, which eventually shook off their biases from the art world, comics have recently begun to come out into the sunlight. I do have some fondness for the medium’s junky pop culture background, but ultimately I am happy to see it go elsewhere. If there is anything to be learned from comics history, it is that it takes a great deal of dedication and perseverance to pursue cartooning as an art form. It is a painfully slow and labourious process to draw comics; most who tried in the past burned out from lack of public interest or the inability to make a living. Only now are these two stumbling blocks being pushed aside. A lot of the old time cartoonists seem to have become a bit nutty in the end. Perhaps it is just the type that is drawn to cartooning; I suspect it may have more to do with a life of isolation and frustration. Certainly it is a lonely career...

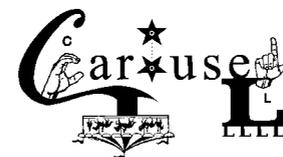
...Personally, I love it. ✨

① Special thanks to Seth for providing *Carousel* with a set of supplementary “sketchbook-style” illustrations, which he was kind enough to create specifically to accompany this interview.



< IMAGE: Michael DeForge (appeared in CAROUSEL 19)

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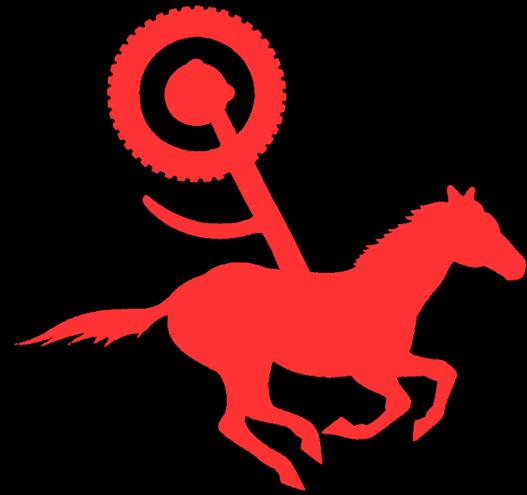
{ WORD ON THE STREET }:

“...*Carousel* is a delicious paper treat created with care for the tasteful reader with a ravenous appetite for contemporary culture.”
– David Morand (*Naked Air Literary Review*)

“I like the drawings in here. Whoever picks them has an eye for what intrigues them and the gumption to call them worthy.”
– Jim Munroe, *No Media Kings*

“...it really looks good and is a delight to hold in the hands, and there is some particularly strong text inside... *Carousel* is a fine read.”
– review of *Carousel 17: Broken Pencil 28* (Jon Pressick)

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