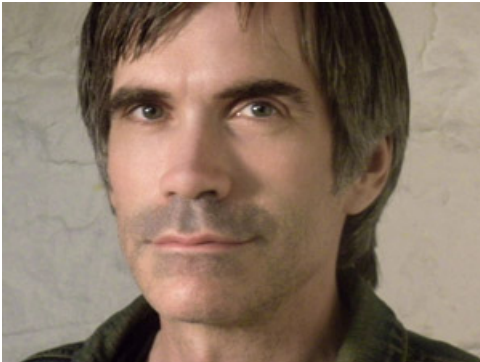


Graphic Eye

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Interview: Kevin Mutch

08:00 GRAPHIC EYE [NO COMMENTS](#)
Text



Contrary to what you might have read, [Kevin Mutch](#) can do much more than [draw a nice pair of tits](#).

Unlike most cartoonists, Mutch has spent the majority of his career working outside the comic book industry. His art school training (he has an MFA from the University of Victoria and a BFA from the University of Manitoba) was as a classical painter, and he has shown his digital art, paintings and drawings extensively in galleries around the US and Canada. In the 1990s, he also worked as the art director for the internationally acclaimed rock

band, [Crash Test Dummies](#).

In the early '00s, Mutch co-published four comics anthologies under the umbrella title *Blurred Vision*, an aptly-named reflection of his experimental perspective on the comic book as an art object. Vastly under-appreciated and largely ignored by the industry, the *Blurred Vision* collections used the medium and idiomatic language of comic books as a starting point for a provocative exploration of the boundaries between visual art and comics, exposing fascinating new intersections between the two.

Mutch's first full-length graphic novel, [Fantastic Life](#), will be released by his publishing venture, Blurred Books, in early 2012. An excerpt of the book, which was partially funded by a Xeric grant, was recently selected by editor Alison Bechdel (*Fun Home*) for inclusion in the *2011 Best American Comics* anthology. Mutch is also the co-editor and co-publisher of the newspaper broadsheet anthology, [pood](#), which recently released its fourth and final issue.


These days Mutch spends virtually every waking moment pursuing two very ambitious projects - his ongoing all-ages web-comic, [The Moon Prince](#), and *The Rough Pearl*, a graphic novel sequel to *Fantastic Life*. I met Kevin after hours at his workplace - the Sony Music headquarters in midtown Manhattan - in September, 2011 and we discussed his career over a couple of beers in a dimly-lit production studio plastered with large prints of his paintings and graphic novels.


-- Marc Sobel

Can you start by telling me a little bit about your background, where you were born and raised, your family life, etc.?

Sure. I'm Canadian. I'm from Winnipeg, which is the coldest city of its size in the entire world. I'm middle-aged, as far as people doing arty, underground comics go. I'm 49 years old.

My background in terms of comics is very much based on comics of the '60s and '70s. In fact, I really stopped reading comics for a long time after 1980 when I went into art school. It was a combination of things. I sort of lost interest in them, but it was also just very difficult at that time in my life to pay the kind of attention to them I'd been paying. I got really busy, and, in art school in particular, it was completely...I don't want to say


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forbidden, but it verged on being forbidden to be interested in comics, or even express an interest in comics.

In the art community?

Yeah, in the art community. And I was sort of disappointed in that, because I had hoped naively that the two things would kind of tie together. But actually, I think a lot of people back then had similar experiences. People that were interested in cartooning wound up in art school and found themselves discouraged out of comics, and perhaps felt a little bitter toward the art world after that. Certainly you used to hear that said a lot. I think now it's probably less common because I think the art world is much more open to comics than it was 30 years ago.

So, in my case, I went through art school. I did an MFA as well at the University of Victoria, and had a career as an experimental contemporary visual artist in Canada doing really Conceptually-oriented work. In the '80s and '90s, in the art world, (Conceptualism) was very much in the mainstream, and I was very interested in it. I still am.

I was making these big Conceptual paintings (which are on my [website](#)) based on found imagery. I would find some ad or illustration, and would think about how taking it out of its original context would alter its meaning somehow. So I would make these large paintings and I would find myself editing the found image to some extent, taking out extraneous information and making this big image version of it.

But it was fairly deadpan work. It wasn't about the paint at all. It wasn't formal work, and eventually I found myself bored by that because it was just so rote, just copying this thing. You could have very easily hired some commercial artist or illustrator to do the actual painting; there's not a lot of juice in that strategy. I found myself getting more and more bored with it.

I was also really troubled by the position that the artist is in in a lot of places, especially in Canada. Perhaps not as much in the United States, but in Canada, visual artists' only option for any kind of support for their work was government grants. There's a lot of government funding out there; it's like the Netherlands in that respect, with four or five times the level of funding that you have here (in the US) for the arts, but after a while, the work starts to resemble the patron. You start getting art that's very bureaucratic and dry.

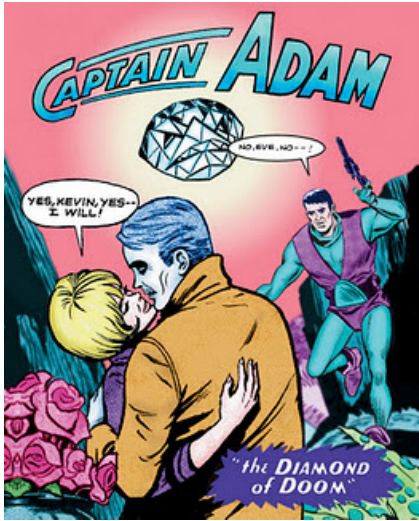
Why is that?

It's because the type of work that's going to be funded by the government most of the time is going to be work that the government finds suits its interests and I think the government, at least in Canada, has very politically correct interests. Which is fine, I don't mean to criticize that, as well it should. But the work that really tends to be supported is work that...if you can picture yourself as a bureaucrat, thinking what kind of work would appeal to a bureaucrat, it's that type of work. It's not problematic or troubling work, and I think that the role of art should really be to make problems, to call things into question.

It's also problematic when your patron is rich people for the exact same reasons. Because if the work is meant to "make strange", or to problematize everything around you and call it into question and make you think twice, then how can your patron be the people who have the greatest possible investment in *not* shaking things up? This is the case in Canada, with the government patronizing the arts, but in the US, it's the wealthiest people imaginable patronizing the arts. They buy this stuff and then hermetically seal it away from the people that really might benefit from seeing it by putting it in their fabulous, well-appointed houses and then, maybe 30 years later, when the work no longer poses any kind of a risk, they'll take it out of cold storage and donate it to a museum where people can come and say, 'well, I'm sure that must have really turned a lot of heads 30 years ago.' But, of course, it never had the chance to.

I was also very involved in the underground music scene at that time, punk rock, and I saw how all of my friends who were musicians had this tremendous advantage in that they could put their work out as what, in the art world we would call "open edition multiples," which for music then basically meant CDs and records. Those things were worth five or ten bucks and they could make them cheaply and get them to people, and nobody asked, 'is this an authentic object?' at all. They just experienced the work through this cheap, inexpensive copy. It wasn't even thought of as a copy, it *was* the work. It was multiples. I was very attracted to that because I thought this is the way to get your work out to people that aren't rich. So I started trying to make artwork like that.

Even before I got into working digitally, I was doing open-edition multiples with offset lithography printing. I did some artists' books very cheaply and I did a comic book, actually, back in the early '90s, although I hadn't been paying any attention to comics throughout the '80s...



Was that Captain Adam?

Yeah.

I actually have a bunch of questions about that book.

Well, maybe I'll answer some of them right away.
[Laughter]

So what happened (with *Captain Adam*) was, I was on the Board of Directors of an artist-run center, which in Canada, most of the art galleries that showed contemporary art are what are called artist-run centers, or parallel galleries, which the government funded. We brought in a travelling show called *Misfit Lit* which Fantagraphics had organized, that was touring the country back in 1992 or '93.

Can you quickly describe what that was?

It was all of the type of work that Fantagraphics published and presumably other artists as well. I was completely ignorant of the scene at that time. I'd been interested in underground comix back in the '70s, right up until the advent of ground-level comics like *Cerebus*, but I dropped out of it in 1980, so by 1993, there was 13 years of stuff that I was really ignorant about. So I wasn't aware of Charles Burns, other than maybe an article in *Spin* magazine or something like that, and I wasn't aware of the Hernandez brothers, or Gary Panter, other than *PeeWee's Playhouse*. But because I used to be very interested in comics, I volunteered to unpack and hang the show. So I'm uncrating all these original Robert Crumb drawings and things like this and it was a fantastic experience. I was also pulling out all this work that I was unaware of, like Jim Woodring, and getting to examine these things in the flesh for days. And because it was government-funded, we had a budget, so we brought in Charles Burns as a visiting artist and Mary...



Fleener?

Yes, Mary Fleener. And Chester Brown.

Wow.

We brought them in and I got to hang out with them and was very impressed. I thought that comics had really come a long way in those twelve years or so. I always loved underground comix, but I was very interested in the development in the interim. Things were being addressed that were more serious, in deeper ways. So I was really turned on and started following it a little bit for a few years. I was buying *Hate* and things like that for a while.

But what really happened that was interesting was that Chester Brown, when he went back to Toronto, or Montreal, or wherever he was living then, sent a copy of *Ed the Happy Clown*, his first book, just to be nice. I took this thing into the gallery and I thought I would just open it up and flip through a couple pages, but I ended up reading it cover to cover, front to back. I couldn't put it down.

It really draws you in.

Yeah. I spent two hours completely enthralled by this thing. So, right off the bat, that fascinated me that you could do this long, ambitious work in comics and have it be so riveting and beautiful. I was very moved by it in many ways. I just thought it was really strange and great.

But also, it had several pages where Chester would make work by collaging together old comic panels and he would do a page that way, as a point of departure. So there I was making work that was based on found imagery and I thought, 'well maybe I'll do an entire comic book using Chester's strategy and see if it's possible to make a longer narrative that way.' So that's what inspired *Captain Adam*.

I went and bought a bunch of old comics from the '70s and '60s, and I got comics of every genre, including girl's comics, westerns and science-fiction, because I wanted to diversify it as much as possible, and open it up to narrative collisions. I started by cutting them up into the individual panels. I was very interested in this idea, because back then it was the advent of sampling in rap music, and there was some work being done by an artist up in Canada — John Oswald — called [Plunderphonics](#), and a lot of people, even in contemporary art were very interested in that work.

I was also interested in the idea they had in literary theory of breaking things down into the smallest possible component, like, in linguistics, there was the idea of the phoneme, the smallest part of a word, and I thought, well this is a narreme, the smallest narrative component of a comic book, which would be the panel. So I cut up these comics into their narremes, as I imagined them, and made a huge pile. It was a couple of feet high...

Wow!

I destroyed hundreds of old comics and then I would fish around in this pile of panels and I'd hold one up and try to imagine a connection between that one and the next one that I would fish out. Most of the time I couldn't, in my wildest imagination, think of a connection, but every once in a while I would think, 'this could be what happened next if the characters got switched around...'



So it was a total grab bag? You were just randomly picking panels?

Yes. Randomly. It was kind of like, if this dog was this person, then this would make sense as a narrative. Whenever that would happen I would use sheets of typing paper and I would take a piece of scotch tape and tape them next to each other. Sometimes I would make little notes in pencil saying this dog is that guy from the previous panel. Maybe I would change a word or two, but I tried, when I finished the panel collages, to keep the images as close as possible to the original, without making it impossible to read. In other words, I did the least possible amount of intervention such that it would still be somewhat legible as a narrative - I hoped - but I think it's still kind of difficult.



You mentioned in the intro that Captain Adam references “people and events in your own life, sometimes very closely.” Can you elaborate?

Well, the thing that’s fascinating about found work is that it can open up associations which are allegorical, rather than symbolic. You’re not creating the image to have a meaning; rather you’re assigning the meaning to the image. And that meaning gets built up through these narrative associations because, as you stitch the thing together, you start seeing things like themes and you start realizing that, ‘oh my god, this is just what happened to me and my girlfriend last year.’ I’m not sure if it’s fair to say that that was intentional or accidental, but whichever, it’s certainly true. I admit I steered it a little bit that way as I started realizing it, but what really fascinated me most of all was that these would arrive accidentally. This is

one of the things that people often find attractive about doing Conceptual work - the accident. This is why Duchamp would always talk about this happenstance, or John Cage would talk about these accidents; just opening yourself up to chance and randomness. So pulling the panels out was random, but they had direct, applicable, allegorical relationships to my life nevertheless.

You have 45 pages of [Captain Adam #2: The Diamond of Doom](#) on your website. Why did you abandon it and do you think you would ever go back and finish it?

I might one day. I have the story loosely worked out in my head, but in all honesty, I was getting increasingly disinterested in strongly Conceptual work. I was becoming more interested in formal issues.

Like what?

Well, like the use of the medium. I wanted to make things more from scratch. I felt like there wasn’t enough fun in...there was a lot of fun in making *Captain Adam* and there was a lot of fun in making Conceptual paintings but not enough after a while. It started to feel kind of dry. And may I just say that the art that I do is kind of on the fun end of the Conceptual art spectrum. This stuff can get really dry.

When I did *Captain Adam*, the first one was in 1993 and the second one in ‘94. The second one was digital. This was right when I started working digitally. The reason I started working digitally was because I wanted to intervene directly in the medium, and in this case, the medium was found images from mass media. I wanted to edit them directly instead of recreating them by hand, because I thought that would be more clean and direct, so that people could really see, ‘oh, look, here are the half-tone dots; this was really in some way like this, even though it’s been manipulated since, but he really found this, he’s not inventing this from a whole cloth.’ It was important to me that people knew that about that work.



But what I found when I started working digitally was that it was so much fun. This was back when Photoshop was brand new, and it was very fun to work with this stuff. There was a lot of formal inventiveness that you could do. You could really play with it, and the more I worked with it, the more I started getting attracted to the idea of really working more or less from scratch. I was still basing things on found images, but I started making work where I would restage it with toys, for example.

So that’s why I abandoned *Captain Adam* halfway through the second one. It was because I got carried away with these other images that I was making, where I was photographing things and collaging things and doing all this stuff that had never been possible before. I was really far afield and it was very exciting for me.

So I made digital art for about ten years, and didn’t do any comics. But by the late 1990s to around 2000,

digital art became less interesting because the Internet turned that possibility of making multiple art originals available very easily into a blizzard of content. All of the sudden it was like, 'oh, you're some digital artist, well, you and five million other people.' So that became less interesting - ironically, because what had attracted me initially was how CDs enabled musicians to get their work out. I thought you could actually do that with visual art, get the work out and even have some hope of supporting yourself as an artist, but by the early 2000s, all of the sudden the music business itself was starting to completely collapse because this was carried to its logical extreme.

You mean file sharing and all that?

Yeah. Open edition multiples suddenly looked a lot less attractive. I still love the idea of everyone being able to see the work, but there was a part of me in the end that said 'maybe it would be a good idea to go back to painting.'

But what got me into comics again was, I had been reading some articles here and there in the mainstream media, the *New York Times* or whatever, about comics and thought, 'god, it's getting even more interesting than it was in the '90s.' I was looking at Chris Ware and people like that, not reading the books, but just reading the articles about them and thinking this work really does look fascinating.

Also, my sister-in-law said to me after I turned 40, because I was complaining about digital art and being bored and having all these issues, so she said, 'why don't you do a comic book? You used to love comic books. You'd be good at that.' Because, what I didn't mention earlier was that not only was I very interested in reading comics, but that I made them as a teenager, very enthusiastically, from the time I was eight or nine until I was twenty.

Just for yourself?

Yeah. I was pretty good at drawing superhero comics, using pen and ink and all of that stuff, but it was beaten out of me in art school. I always kind of felt bad about that and I would mention it from time to time, so when my sister-in-law suggested I do a comic book, I thought, 'I bet I *could* do that now with all of this stuff I know about working digitally. Because it would solve the two problems that I had, one of which was how do you publish the work? I thought, 'I could publish the work on the internet; it's fine. Why not?'

My second problem had been productivity. I have a little OCD, like a lot of cartoonists, but I really want to try and be a little bit loose, so I have this problem where if I work the traditional way of drawing in pencil, I would only get so far and then I'd be tired of working in pencil and I'd want to rush it so I could turn it into this beautiful pen and ink drawing. That's also made worse by having been through art school because they really encourage you to work loosely and I love working loosely with a brush, so I want to do that when I'm drawing comics. I want to do these loose brush drawings. But then I also want to fix them, so I would take out the graphic white and apply layer upon layer, and because I'm obsessive-compulsive a little bit, it would turn into this kind of strata, one above the other, and it would get harder and harder to work with. It gets flaky and crusty; I'd have 20 layers of white-out ink and it gets lumpy. I've got old comics from back then that are just torturous to look at. They're moonscapes.

Well, working digitally solves that problem, too. It makes it very easy to rework. So I can do digital inking with Photoshop and effortlessly, quickly edit it. It's very natural to me. I've been a professional digital artist for 20 years. So it all tied back together for me about eight or nine years ago, and I started doing comics again.

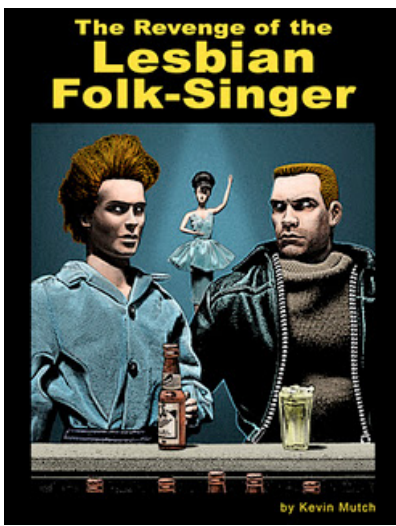
Was that when you did Revenge of the Lesbian Folk Singer?

Yeah, that was the first non-collage piece that I did and you can see that it's not drawn at all. It's just straight photographic digital work. I thought, 'I'll make a comic the same way I do my digital art with manipulated photography.'

Are all of the images in that book manipulated photographs?

Yeah.

How did you do the facial expressions and the clothing?



Well, like a lot of the digital art that I was doing then, it was based on toys. I was re-staging found images using toys and then I would get some people to pose and I would superimpose their faces where the toys' faces were so that they would have these eerie moments of reality. I did the same thing with the comic. I shot toys with a digital camera, a very early consumer digital camera, and I just manipulated their faces digitally. For the main character, I used self-portraits and photographed myself using a little TV attached to the camera so I could see myself in it, and then I collaged those in digitally.

There was a real distinct visual texture to that book, which I wondered how you created. Was it brush effects in Photoshop?

No, it was all just manipulated photography. You know you can create very graphic looks in Photoshop. I used color correction curves to force the contrast and the Unsharp Mask filter on a very high setting, to create a very graphic look. Then I covered the evidence of my collage work just by retouching it out. It was very time-consuming, though. That book, which is 22 pages, took two and a half years!

Wow!

I thought, 'well, this is ridiculous to spend so long doing this.' Plus, I started following the comics world again a little bit and I would try to show it to some people but there was no interest at all. I think there's a certain prejudice against photographic work. Or there's a disinterest, anyway.

Less so now, but certainly back then...

Yeah, perhaps a little less now.

You see more of it in Europe, with fumetti...

Yeah, and that tradition goes back forever, so I was a little bit disappointed that it got the response that it did. But a funny thing about making that piece was that I *wrote* it. It's based on my life. It's not semi-autobiographical; it's directly autobiographical. It's based on something that really happened to me. And I was surprised to find that I enjoyed the writing a lot. I've written in the past; I used to be an art critic, so I wrote art criticism and theory, but that was different. And when I wrote *Captain Adam*, that was like a collage; it wasn't really writing.

But with *Lesbian Folk Singer* I was writing dialogue and I really had fun doing it. So then I thought, 'why not try to write *and* draw something, because I used to be able to draw 20 years ago.' So I thought, 'I'll try that again, but what I'll do is I'll scan it in and manipulate it digitally to polish it up.' It took a couple of years or so to really get moving, but that was the genesis of *Fantastic Life*.

Were you doing painting and digital collage work at the same time?

Yeah. I was doing less of the digital work in terms of my own artwork, but the paintings I was doing were based on that digital work. Plus, I was working professionally as a digital artist at Sony Music.

You founded the ArtLexis gallery. Can you describe what that is and how you ended up doing that?

Well, I did, but it closed last year.

Oh.

Originally it started off as an online gallery but the real genesis of it goes back twenty years because, again, I had this whole issue with making original objects. I thought that that was really backward and reactionary, and rooted in this kind of pre-industrial way of making culture, which music and theater and even writing had

surmounted, because they all made this leap into mechanical reproduction. It was the whole Walter Benjamin idea of the work of art in the age of mechanical reproduction.

I was also inspired by this Danish semiotician named [Louis Hjelmslev](#) who coined this term “the lexis,” which was “the unit of cultural reception.” So the book would be the lexis of literature, and the DVD would be the lexis of movies now. The CD - at that time - would have been the lexis of music. Now it might be the mp3. With ArtLexis and PODgallery, I wanted to come up with a multiply produced lexis for visual art.

So I was attracted to digital art for those reasons, and I was looking for other people making interesting work. Most digital art, then and now, is just horrible - it's mostly just people noodling around in Photoshop - but right from the start, there have been serious artists making very interesting work, too. The first person that I was exposed to was [Yasumasa Morimura](#). He was kind of a hero of mine for a long time. He did this work where he would make these digital collages involving himself that were fascinating. This was the early '90s when it was incredibly expensive. You had to work on supercomputers. Literally. Hell supercomputers or Quantel Paintboxes.

ArtLexis started when I first moved to New York. I had this idea of making work available as open edition multiples using a large format digital printer which I had for a business that I had started back in LA in the mid-nineties, doing digital collage and compositing. It was called an Iris printer, which was the first large-format digital printer. It was basically a big inkjet printer. It wasn't really archival because it used vegetable-based inks which were very fugitive. They would fade after a few years in the sun, but it was a way to take a digital image and create this large print on watercolor paper that was really beautiful. Very high resolution and gorgeous color fidelity. It was the first time this had been possible, and the first person to explore it as a medium for making digital prints was Graham Nash, of Crosby Stills and Nash.



Oh yeah?

Yeah. He was a photographer and was interested in digital imagery. He started a printmaking studio in LA called [Nash Editions](#), which might still be going, for all I know.

So there we were in LA and we bought one of these Iris printers for our business and started doing these large-format prints, and I thought, now's my chance to start an online digital art gallery and offer digital art as these large-format prints.

We eventually moved that business to New York in the late nineties, and started this thing called POD gallery, which stood for “print on-demand.” My idea was that I wanted to make it like music stores are, or book stores, where there is serious interesting, academic work, and experimental work, but there might also be popular work, and the sales of the popular work would drive the whole enterprise. I thought that's how it worked in the music industry.

I also thought visual art was being stymied because there was no popular visual art. I mean, what was there? There was “hotel art”, I suppose, which is populist but not popular... You couldn't point to advertising because that's not “art” in and of itself. There was really nothing you could talk about and say this is truly popular art. People say, ‘what about Pop art?’ but Pop art was not popular art. It was academic art *about* popular art.

So I thought, ‘wouldn't it be interesting if you could create a type of visual art using mechanical reproduction, the same way literature, music and film use mechanical reproduction?’ I envisioned something that was like a full ecosystem of visual art, with popular visual art, academic visual art, and hopefully a really vital alternative visual art that represented a circulation of those two extremes.

So you had academic, experimental and popular artists all together on the same website?

Right. We had all of this popular imagery, like photographers and illustrators, but also experimental, serious digital art. But it was all categorized the way it would be in a bookstore. So, for example, when you go to a

bookstore, you think, 'I'm going to the science-fiction section, or I'm going to the literary theory section...' It was like that. It was popular illustrators and serious contemporary artists, all on the same site.

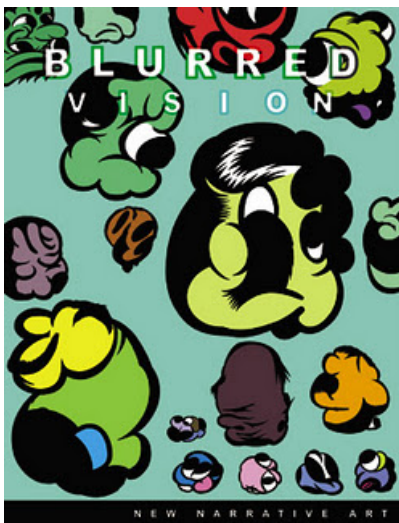
But after a while, that kind of betrayed its fallibility, which was that nobody would buy the serious stuff. We actually had a real business going doing the popular stuff, and we were proving a certain point, but it wasn't working on the "serious art" level which was supposed to be the whole point of the exercise. So we started ArtLexis as a kind of alternative to PODgallery. That way we could focus on the serious work and keep it off to one side, because a lot of the artists were really uptight about rubbing shoulders with comic book artists, even though I thought that was great.

So this is what got you back into comics?

What really drew me back to comics, more so than reading the odd article, was that I had a guy who was doing our content development who loved comics. He kept saying, 'we should have comic books for sale as prints,' and I said 'great, I love comics' and he said, 'great, well I'm going to phone Neal Adams...'

Neal Adams!

Yeah, people like that. He would just phone these people up and so we had Steve Rude and Neal Adams and the Brothers Hildebrandt, Will Eisner...we signed a contract with Will Eisner! We were offering their prints for sale, and some of them did quite well. So that really got me interested again in comics.



Did Blurred Vision grow out of ArtLexis and all the comics connections you made?

Yeah, well my partner at the time, Alex Rader and I were getting more and more interested in comics artists, but what I was noticing, which I thought was very striking, was that a lot of the comics I was seeing - I guess you would call them art comics, or alternative comics - a majority of them were very interested in a certain type of art that, to the extent that they had a connection to visual art, you might broadly characterize as Expressionist.

Visual art, like all culture, is full of dualisms. For example, you've got Expressionism versus Conceptualism, or Formalism versus Conceptualism. You might have Expressionism versus Realism, or Romanticism versus Classicism. Kenneth Clark, who was a British art historian

back in the '50s and '60s, famously characterized this dichotomy between work that he characterized as Dionysian and Apollonian. Apollonian work would be Conceptual work, or Realism, or academic work, things like that; whereas Dionysian work would be Expressionism or Romanticism. For whatever reason, cartoonists seem to be overwhelmingly attracted to this kind of Dionysian, Romantic, Expressionist work. And I don't mean to disparage that attraction because I share it. I always have. I love that stuff. But, having said that, I think that it's good to have a balance.

In the art world, that pendulum perhaps went too far the other way, the Apollonian way, and you had a lot of very dry academic work for a very long time. Certainly the '70s and well into '80s (other than the neo-Expressionist moment of the '80s) were dominated by Conceptualism. [Jeff Koons'](#) style, maybe was more fun, like Pop-Conceptualism, but there was a lot of literary criticism that got brought into it - critical theory, French theory, post-structuralism, all of it was brought to bear. There's been a reaction against that in the last few years where you've seen a lot of visual art that's been influenced by comics and illustration, but I think comics itself may have the opposite problem of the pendulum swinging a little too far in the direction of Expressionism.

So, there we were, five or six years ago, thinking 'let's do some comics anthologies.' You know, pour a little money down the rat hole. *[Laughter]* So we thought, 'why don't we do some anthologies with the type of art that we're not seeing anywhere. So we looked for work that, first of all, was not necessarily about drawing because so much of it was. Instead, we looked for comics done with photography, or digital imaging. Or comics that were Conceptually-oriented or that involved collage or found imagery. That type of thing.

The idea, and the reason we called it *Blurred Vision*, was that we were looking for, in particular, things that were inter-disciplinary - comics that came out of people who were working in another medium. So, for example, we were publishing [Gary Sullivan](#), who is a well-known poet, and does tremendous comics based on found imagery. He even describes his work as Conceptual comics, which obviously warms my heart deeply. And we published work by [Icecreamlandia](#), which is tremendously funny and cerebral work based on photography, using digital imagery. We published work by people who were writers that were interested in comics. Things like that.

We also included people who were working in more mainstream alternative comics styles, but had not been published before, and whose work we thought deserved a chance.

You published four volumes of Blurred Vision. How did they do?

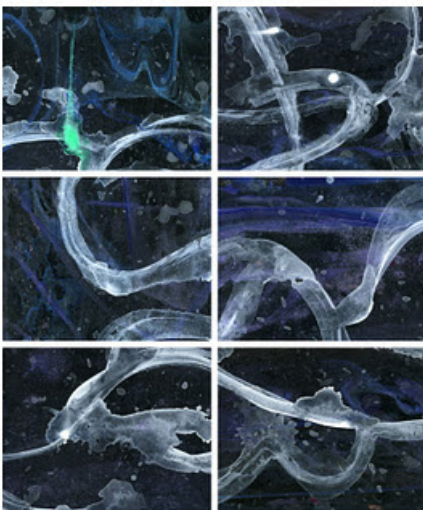
I guess they did OK. They didn't get a very positive critical reception. I was disappointed to find that when they did get reviewed, the work that would get talked about was always the people who were working in a familiar alt-comics style. I mean, we were publishing people that were very serious, heavy-hitting major contemporary artists. For example, we published [Roland Brener's](#) work. Well, Roland Brener has represented Canada at the [Venice Biennale](#) and shown work at [Deitch Projects](#) in New York City. This is a very serious artist who's had books written about him, and he was doing this really interesting comics work. But none of the reviews of *Blurred Vision* ever mentioned Roland Brener, as though he was not even worth trying to engage, which I found disappointing. I just thought, 'this is kind of chauvinistic, or provincial.'



One major review site ran a lukewarm review, only addressing the people who were doing recognizably alt-comics work and not even mentioning any of the people that were coming in from the art world. The review said something like, 'well, it isn't *terrible*,' and then a major "art comics" artist and critic whose name I'll redact posted a comment and said, 'no, it *is* terrible. They've *all* been terrible. *Beyond* terrible!' [Laughter]

Wow!

I bring that up as an example of the type of reception that it got, not as indignation. I was kind of delighted actually that it would raise that type of hackle in a way. But I was a little disappointed that people didn't engage with the work that was coming from outside of comics, or from outside the traditional way of making comics.



There seems to be a divide between the fine art world and comics that, while it may be converging more and more, still feels like a hard wall at some points. But there was that anthology that Fantagraphics published about [Abstract Comics](#).

Yeah, and in fact, we published sixteen pages of Andrei Molotiu's abstract comics in *Blurred Vision*. I love Andrei's work.

I used to do a blog with Geoff Grogan, who's another person from a fine art background that's interested in comics. He teaches at Adelphi University, at the art school there. His background's in painting. We wrote this blog called [Next Issue](#), and we addressed these issues about the relationship between comics and art. We talked about Andrei's work and I did [a whole post](#)

[about that anthology](#).

My premise was - and I think this goes to the heart of your question about the barrier that exists between visual

art and comics - that people tend to think that art should be more sympathetic to comics than it is since the two of them are obviously about imagery. But what's missing from that discussion is the fact that visual art is very ambient (in the Brian Eno sense) and comics aren't. This goes to the heart of comics. Comics are narrative. Visual art, at its core, is not narrative. Visual art does not have a beginning, middle or end traditionally. To the extent that you would attach a beginning, middle or end to it, it often stops being visual art and becomes something else. So if you take art video, like [Cremaster](#), or something like that, it almost doesn't matter when you walk in. It's ambient. You take it in in these little sips. It's not about this story that has to be told in a linear way. A painting is not experienced in a linear way.

Even if you go to a gallery, or a museum, and you walk through a long line of paintings, you're still not experiencing painting in a linear way. You're experiencing it in a terrible way, actually, because the right way to experience a painting is to have it up somewhere where you can take it in over a period of years, in little sips, out of the corner of your eye, looking at it up here, and then down here, and then peripherally, and then focusing back and forth.

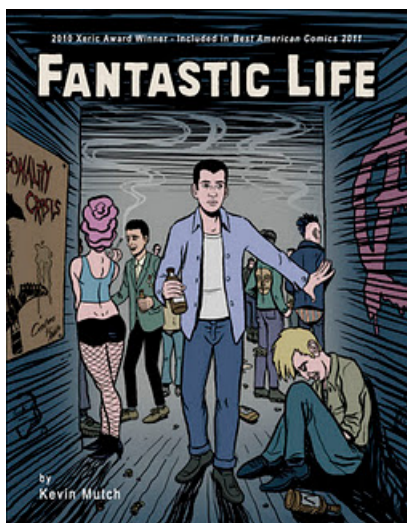
But a narrative is not meant to be experienced that way. It's meant to be experienced in a particular order, or the work stops working. That's not ambient. So, I think at the heart of comics, there's a fundamental difference and I think that, even though you have tremendous fertile crossover, they are two different things. You can have art video that tries to be more and more narrative, but you know what you wind up with? A movie. I'm attracted to the idea of these crossovers, but I also think that at the heart of things, there are differences, and it's worth exploring these differences to understand why there can be difficulties in understanding.

Let me turn to [Fantastic Life](#), if that's OK. It's your longest work to date, and your first full-length graphic novel. Can you describe the genesis of the project?

Sure. When I was seventeen-years-old, I saw [Night of the Living Dead](#), the classic George Romero zombie movie, and it was a wonderful movie but I started having recurring nightmares because of it. I've had them ever since, for over thirty years. I still get them every few weeks.

Of zombies attacking you?

Yeah. My wife is so used to it. I'll sit up in the middle of the night and she'll go, 'oh you had another zombie nightmare.' They're very vivid.



What do you think it was that struck you so profoundly about that movie?

I'm honestly not sure. I speculate about that actually in *Fantastic Life* because it's semi-autobiographical. I have Adam, the lead character, discussing that with a female character who has this idea that maybe it was because he's a loner, like a lot of artists, and he's always afraid that the other males are going to turn on him. That is an old primate fear. Chimpanzees do that; they tear each other to shreds. They'll turn on one of them because 'he's the outsider' and they'll eat him. [Laughter] But I don't know if I buy that. I thought it was a good thing for the character to come up with in the book, but I don't know if I buy that or not.

At any rate, I decided I would make a short piece about it, sort of therapeutically. So I started doing that and toolled around with it for a few years, trying different techniques. I tried photographing toys like I had done with *Lesbian Folk Singer*, but that was so time-consuming. I also tried a few other things but finally I just decided to try and draw it.

Around the same time, I had done an attempt at a hand-drawn short story about something else which I published in *Blurred Vision*. It was called "Uncertainty Principle." It didn't look great, but it didn't look too bad.

So *Fantastic Life* grew out of that short story. It was reproduced from the pencils, but I was working in Photoshop to add some tones to it and fix the contrast so it would be better for reproduction. I'd do a page of very loose pencils, scan it in and then polish it up a lot. I found that I was able to do it fairly productively and get a page a week done. I wrote it as I went. I had an idea of the story that I wanted to tell, or a rough outline,

but I really wrote it as I drew it a page at a time.

One of the things that fascinated me was how you incorporated many of your old paintings into the story. It felt almost like you were going back through your career as a painter and trying to make sense of it all.

Yeah. It was partly driven by necessity because I had a scene late in the book where the main character and this girl are talking and I needed something for them to talk about. It was a seduction scene and there were all these paintings around.

But as an artist goes through art school and especially does this type of Conceptually-oriented art, you develop a real rap about your work. It's called 'the take.' People always ask 'what's your take?' and you get very used to, because you have critics, or you get interviewed, or you do studio visits, and so you get very used to talking about your work in a certain way and explaining it. And Conceptual work in particular has these ideas that make it very easy to tell a story about the work, so I already had those from years ago. So it was great; it was very convenient. I could open up the old suitcase and bust out these old ideas, and it wasn't so much that I was revisiting the paintings as I was revisiting all of my old takes on the work. Or just dusting them off and throwing them into this dialogue. But they pre-existed.

One of the other things that struck me was the whole premise about the nature of reality and perception. I'm not as familiar with some of the theories that are described in the book, but it almost seemed like there were several layers of reality, approaching this theoretical description of imagination.

Yeah, well the thing is, in the book, Adam is very young. He hasn't read a lot. He's read a little bit, but he's flummoxed at the party when somebody brings up quantum mechanics to him.

Were you envisioning yourself as Adam?

Pretty much, yeah. Adam is me in the sense that a lot of his experiences in the book are based on things that happened to me, but he's not me in the sense that he's a lot more cynical than I am. I come out of this background of punk rock and Conceptual art where it's very fashionable to dress in black and adopt a very cynical demeanor. And I *look* cynical, too. I have this kind of cynical face and people often take one look at me and think, 'oh, that guy thinks he's too cool for school,' or "he looks like some type of hipster asshole or prick". But I'm honestly really nerdy and enthusiastic. *[Laughter]* Adam is more like how I look, but he's not like how I think. So, he's more about trying to be cool, and trying really hard...

He's trying to get laid...

Yeah! Whereas I would *never* get laid because as soon as I opened my mouth, I would be very enthusiastic and would always blow it. So, Adam is more like how I tried to come across as a young man, but never succeeded in doing.

But, as a character, he's now aware of this stuff — quantum mechanics and things like that — and he's flummoxed by them. There's this idea that somebody puts across to him at a party, saying that 'there's no such thing as reality because everything, if you look at it closely enough, is indefinite, in many places at once.' That's known as "the uncertainty principle." You can measure a particle's position, or you can measure a particle's velocity, but not both. So you can never really know for sure where something is, which is very unsettling. Especially, given that most of us have what's called the

"
classical
" intuition about reality, which is that things are solid objects in one place at one time. So, Adam's disturbed to hear this and spends the rest of the book grappling with the ramifications.

I'm intrigued by all the layers of perception; it's almost like Aldous Huxley's Doors of Perception...

Right, so here's the thing. Starting in the teens and '20s, these various ideas evolved out of quantum mechanics which really, seriously undermined the classic concept of reality. One of these was the [Everett interpretation](#), which is now a fairly mainstream interpretation of quantum mechanics. It's an attempt to explain the fact that every particle is in some sense in every possible place, when you look at it closely enough, most famously through the double slit experiment. So if you fire a single photon at two slits, it essentially goes through both of them, even though there's only one photon. This has been repeated many times; it's mind-

boggling. That's the nature of reality.

The explanations for that are known as the interpretations of quantum mechanics. The most mainstream one is called the Copenhagen interpretation, which holds that at a certain level, the uncertainty at the microscopic and sub-microscopic *quantum* level of reality somehow collapses into a single, fairly deterministic reality that we see around us, and that we consider the classical universe. That's the Copenhagen interpretation.

The second most mainstream interpretation is the Everett interpretation, which simply says, 'there's no magical collapse of the wave function that describes how something can be everywhere in the universe at once in every single particle'. It's simply that they are in parallel universes, and what we experience as we move through time is actually a splitting off of ourselves into each possible direction that literally each subatomic particle of our body could go in. So, an astronomically large number of possible universes co-exist.

One of the criticisms of this is this idea that parallel universes are being created at every moment, but really, the Everett interpretation simply says that they always existed from beginning to end in a super-position, and that you simply travel through them and your point-of-view happens to be somewhere in that, but it's really just a refraction somewhere in that larger whole, which is essentially every possible solution to the universe, mathematically.

So, I'm very interested in this idea, and it's becoming more and more interesting now because there's more and more evidence to support it.

At the core of that idea, and very intrinsic to it, is the idea that, in some sense, the universe itself, what we perceive as reality, is every possibility. And that gets into something that I don't really address in the book, but it's an idea in philosophy that's traditionally been called "Monistic Idealism." So, are you familiar with it at all?

No.

Well, you know how there's Cartesian Dualism, which says that there's mind and body, and then Monism, which says, there's no dualism; there's only one type of thing. Most scientists tend to be Monists, so they'll say that one thing is matter. There's no goddamn spirit, so forget about it. No soul. And we can prove it, and they go to great lengths to prove it.

But the flip side of Monism is Idealism, which basically says, 'there's no matter, there are only ideas.' So Monistic Idealism is tied, in a sense, into the Everettian multiverse by saying that what we experience as reality is simply the sum total of all possible ideas. And to make that even a little clearer, and less mumbo-jumbo magic sounding, the sum total of all *math*. You can describe the entire universe mathematically. In fact, if you wanted to do that digitally - and I'm not saying you should, nor am I trying to say that the universe is digital like a computer - but theoretically you could do a very high-resolution description of the universe just using ones and zeroes, to the point where it would be arbitrarily close to what we see, just like a bunch of ones and zeroes can be arbitrarily close to a perfect representation of a song, or to a photograph, if you look at the code for a jpeg, or an mp3.

Well, this is fascinating because what it implies is that if there's a mathematical description of the universe that is completely identical to the universe in every respect, except that it doesn't need any kind of physical substrate. And, in fact, it's congruent with the universe; it's perfectly identical with it. So from there, it's not a very large leap to say, 'well that *is* the universe, and it is the multiverse.' It's the solution for every possible mathematical problem, and those things can exist outside of physical space.

So that solves one of the oldest problems in philosophy, which is, why is there something instead of nothing? The answer is, there isn't *something*, it's not a materialist answer; it's an idealist answer. In one sense, there is nothing, but in another sense, you can't really have true nothing because even in nothing, in the absence of material, you could have math. You could have the idea of one and zero, as many of them as it took to describe the entire multiverse. So, in that sense, reality and dreams and ideas are all the same thing.

Is this where Adam ended up at the end of the story?

Well, yes and no. To be real honest with you, at the end of story, if you pinned me down and said, 'are those equally legitimate answers; is it equally true that there's this multiverse and he's traipsing around in it?' I would say, 'well, no, only because it doesn't appear that it's possible to do that.'

I think he's crazy! *[Laughter]* He's been doing too many drugs. I do think it's interesting that all of this stuff is coming up, that's, in one sense, fairly legitimate, but the idea that you could wander around in it is kind of a poetic device. It's not legitimate from a realistic standpoint.

But I hedge my bets in the book because he starts saying stuff that he couldn't possibly know. So maybe he does know it and he read it somewhere or he's just really out of his mind. I don't want to have done one of these books where it's like, is it real or isn't it? Da da da dummm! But I guess I did. But if you ask me which side of the fence I fall on, I think Adam's crazy. He's having mental problems and has done too many drugs.

And, by the way, I never did drugs.

Never? So this was all creative license?

It was creative license, but let me admit something. When I say I've never done drugs, I mean I've never been somebody who does drugs, but I have tried pot. The reason I don't like drugs is because I feel like I have a tenuous enough grasp on reality as it is. I don't mind a drink, because it's metered, and I can control it, but I'm afraid of drugs.

On my eighteenth birthday, a lot of my friends and I were at a party, and they had this giant joint. I don't smoke pot because I don't like what it does to me, but they made me smoke this thing. They formed a big circle and chanted at me to smoke this joint. It made me incredibly stoned, and deeply paranoid, to the point where I looked around and I thought they were all zombies and I ran out of the room.

So, to that extent, I took this one small event and spun it into this big book about a guy who's really losing his grip on reality, and these nightmares that he's having are starting to conflate with his waking life.

Yeah, as a reader, you never really find your footing in the story. You're always trying to figure out what's real and what's not, along with Adam. That's what's fascinating about it.

Thanks, and I think about that every day, because of this interest that I have in quantum mechanics and the Everett interpretation. There's a philosopher by the name of [Nick Bostrom](#) who's very interested in these ideas, and I read some of his writing years ago and it's never stopped turning around in my head. I just constantly think about this stuff every day and it's very unsettling. It's really unsettling! It really challenges what you think of as the experience of life, past, present and future.

You've obviously done a fair amount of reading...

Well, quantum mechanics is one of these things that attracts a lot of really flaky, hippy dippy...

Comic book artists?

[Laughter] Yeah, comic book artists. So take all this with a grain of salt.

Seriously, though, go read Nick Bostrom or Hugh Everett. These guys make legitimate points that are deeply disturbing, and they're taken seriously by serious scientists.



Let me ask you another question about something I thought was really interesting in the book, which was this idea of re-contextualizing images. You talked a little bit about this before, but, for example, that image of "When Pussy Gets Her Back Up" or some of the other paintings; what is it about that idea of taking an image and expressing it in a whole new way that interests you?

Well, it's the classic Duchampian strategy. When people talk about Conceptual art, it really started with Marcel Duchamp taking a urinal and

putting it on a plinth at the famous armory show, which was, incidentally, held in the same building where MoCCA is held every year...

Really?

Yeah. I think it's the same building. There's more than one armory, but I'm pretty sure it's the same one.

Anyway, he took a urinal and put it on a pedestal and called it a sculpture. That armory show was one of the first large exhibitions of capital M, Modern Art to be held in the United States. It was all these European avant-garde artists.

But this urinal, which he called "Fountain," was a deliberate act of provocation. He said, 'I'm going to take a urinal and put it on a plinth and I will call it a sculpture. And this will prove, simply by this act of re-contextualization, of calling it a sculpture, that what we refer to as art is simply a social consensus, an agreement between ourselves to regard certain things as art.' In other words, you could take a Rembrandt painting and use it for an ironing board and it would be an ironing board. Likewise, you could take an ironing board and hang it on the wall and call it a work of art and it would not be an ironing board anymore. But then you could take it back down and start ironing with it again.

So people started talking about "The Fountain's" allegorical meanings. They started talking about the relationship that the shapes of it had to a painting of the Madonna, all of these things. To this day, many people are deeply skeptical of that, even though it's already almost a hundred years old. But that work had a profound impact on contemporary art and more or less created, single-handedly, the idea of Conceptualism.

When I do that type of work, I'm very much operating in that tradition of taking a thing out of its original context and seeing how its meaning changes. It's a pure Duchampian strategy, and frankly, it's always fun and it never tires in a sense. But on the other hand, I always used to say, 'it's another turn of the Conceptual screw' when I would walk into a gallery and see people doing that same strategy over and over again, in micro-variations. For example, 'what would it be like if you took something like a computer, but made it out of chocolate? Or, what would it be like if you took a human head and made it out of frozen blood? Or, what would it be like...'. You see? It's another little turn of the screw. And because that strategy is so simple and pure, it gets repeated endlessly, which gets kind of boring after a while. Nowadays, frankly, I'm enjoying drawing and painting for formal reasons, and for things that have nothing to do with Conceptual ideas.

Just pure aesthetics?

Yeah.

Are you still actively doing paintings?

Yeah.

In addition to The Moon Prince?

Yeah, right now I'm doing two graphic novels and painting, and holding down a full-time job. It's all about time management.

How do you balance everything?

I have to be very careful, and I have to strictly set myself a weekly goal. Every week I have to produce one page of the sequel to *Fantastic Life* that I'm doing, which is called *The Rough Pearl*.

You're doing a sequel?

Yeah.

With the same characters?

The same characters, ten years later. I'm four pages into that and I'm writing it as I go, just like I did with the other one. I have a very rough idea, but I know how it's going to end.

So, on Monday I write it, and do a layout. I don't thumbnail it because I don't have time. I have an hour to write a page and do a rough layout. And then Tuesday, Wednesday and Thursday, I do the rough pencils, and then Friday I scan it in and do the lettering and coloring in an hour.

You do this in the evenings?

I do it in the morning, between 8:30 and 9:30. Then I go to work. [Laughter] Then my evening comic is *The Moon Prince*. I have to do a page of that a week, too. But I also work on it a little bit on the weekend, because it takes more time. I take about 15 hours to do a page of *The Moon Prince* and about six hours to do a page of *The Rough Pearl*, and then I spend about eight hours on the weekend painting. I also try to spend some time with my family.



[Laughter] I was wondering...

And I also...we live in an old house that I have to fix up. I've been fixing it up for nine years.

I have to make sure I do all this every week or I won't get enough done. And I'm 49 years old, so I have to watch it. I only have a limited amount of time to do everything I want to do.

It sounds like you're incredibly regimented and disciplined.

I have to be, but it can be a little crazy.

I remember reading Chris Ware in an interview where he said something like, when he had a baby, he had to learn to go from hours of creative time to fifteen minutes here, fifteen minutes there, and he just had to do it. It was the only way he could get work done, and it was just a matter of carving out little pockets of time in the day. It sounds like you're in that same boat.

Yeah, and the reason I do that morning comic is because the kids have left for school. And the evening comic I do after they go to bed. Then on the weekend, I make them pose for *The Moon Prince*.



Yeah, I wanted to ask you about that. Do you use photo references for all your work?

I didn't use it for *Fantastic Life* or *The Rough Pearl*. I draw those totally out of my head. *The Moon Prince* is totally the opposite. It's completely photo-based.

And your kids are the two main characters?

Yeah. I'll photograph them just using my crappy iPhone. I stage everything based on these little crappy thumbnail pages I did using ball point pen on typing paper. That's how I wrote that book. It's all written; all 419 pages.

Wow!

Yeah. Then, every two weeks, I set aside time on the weekend to make the kids pose. They put on their little outfits and then I make the props, and I make them pose for five pages worth. I do that because I need to make sure that I do 120 pages a year of the photography. Otherwise they'll be too old by the time I finish drawing it, because I'm only drawing 50 pages a year.

How do they like posing?

They're very good sports about it, and they're cheap. I just buy them ice cream. [Laughter] We can do five pages in an hour. I'll usually do ten shots of each panel, each kid's pose, and then I pick the right one. Then I'll take that, and I'll create a photo collage and use 3D software for the backgrounds.



What software do you use?

SketchUp. A lot of comic book artists use it. The backgrounds in *The Moon Prince* are all found backgrounds that I've downloaded. I might manipulate them, add and change things...



Like all those images of the zeppelin?

Yeah. Believe me, if you use SketchUp, and go to the 3D warehouse that Google has, there's a lot of zeppelins and you can download them. They're free to use. I have time issues, so I'm not going to create another zeppelin from scratch. Instead I just downloaded a zeppelin and tweaked it to be what I wanted.



The log cabin set was the same thing. I downloaded various cabins, found one I liked, furnished it with things I found in the 3D warehouse, and built a digital set, so I could quickly put it in whatever angle I needed. So it's all photo-referenced or CGI-based. I want to be very blunt about that because I know it will set a lot of cartoonists' teeth on edge. But I want to be honest since that's what I'm doing.

But, just to defend myself against certain people who always come out against this type of thing, I will say, 'look at *Fantastic Life*.' It's maybe not the greatest drawing in the world, but it's from scratch, I promise you that. So, at least I can say I did it "out of my head". And I continue to do it.

But with *The Moon Prince*, I'm trying to tell this other story and I have things about it that I want to look a certain way. I want it to have a certain type of realism. It's a fantasy story, but I want it to be, as much as possible, something that you can enter into and believe. So by drawing it in this realistic way, and having these realistic gestures and nuances that come out of the photography, and from the use of photo-realistic 3D sets and things like that, I think I can help that along. With the other work I'm doing, I'm not as concerned with realism, so I'm perfectly happy to make them more cartoony.

I've always believed that there's a broad variety of tools out there and the artist should feel free to choose whatever they need to get their ideas across.

Absolutely. I'm just being proactively defensive because I know that this is a sore spot in some fairly prevalent circles. I want to say, too, that I'm not unsympathetic to the idea that it's wonderful to draw. I'm deeply sympathetic to that idea. I wish I drew better. I think if I hadn't stopped drawing for 20 years I probably *would* draw a lot better. I draw ok, but I also know that I can make my drawings a lot better by polishing them up using digital media.

And by the way, I do agree that photo-based drawings often look warped.

Or stiff.

Yeah. But the great thing about working digitally, especially in my case having done it for a really long time, is that I'm very used to dealing with problems like that. It's almost second nature for me since I do it for a living.

So, in *The Moon Prince*, I start off by digitally "inking" over these sources – tracing them, in other words, but that's just the first step. The next is to make it more fluid and less stiff. So, while inking a panel for *The Moon Prince* might take 20 minutes, I probably spend three or four times that reworking it afterwards. More than anything, I use the Liquefy filter in Photoshop to squish the ink lines around to change proportions and composition, and I might do that 20 times to each panel.

Do you do the coloring in Photoshop, too?

Yeah. It's very simple coloring. It's just flat colors and then I use curves to give it some modeling, but very quickly since I've got to do a page in thirteen or fourteen hours. I do it as fast as I can and try to make it look as good as I can, but if I had all the time in the world, I'd spend more time on it.

Do you have a plan in terms of print for The Moon Prince?

I'm hoping to take it to a major publisher, but I won't even approach anyone for another year. I want to have it fairly far along. It's only 81 pages right now. It's going to be a total of 1,300 pages or so.

Wow!

Yeah. It's going to be three triptychs.

That's incredibly ambitious.

I know, and at the rate I'm going it'll take me until I'm 73 years old. *[Laughter]* Although I guess I'll be retired so maybe I can pick up the pace towards the end. But it's going to be three triptychs, so nine books.

Do you have everything more or less written?

The Moon Prince itself is written, which is the first triptych. The second triptych is going to be called *Escape to Mars* and the third is *The Callisto Stone*.

And you're committed to seeing it through?

Yeah, as long as I can do that and still do the more grown-up stuff. *The Rough Pearl* is being done quickly compared to *Fantastic Life* so that I can do a page of it a week. When I did *Fantastic Life*, it was the only thing I was doing in terms of comics, so it was my morning comic *and* my evening comic. But now I've got *The Moon Prince* and *The Rough Pearl* and I'm trying to do a page each a week. That's two pages a week. So, whereas *Fantastic Life* was taking 20 hours a page, I'm trying to do *The Moon Prince* in thirteen hours and *The Rough Pearl* in seven hours, to get to twenty hours a week.

And you're also working full time?

Yeah, it's tricky, but I've been doing it for the last five years.

Do you ever have any down time?

No, I don't watch TV.

No recreational hobbies?

No. Well, painting. *[Laughter]*

That's it? Just painting and drawing?

Yeah. I try to read, but...I do read with my kids. We have reading time before they go to bed, so that's when I

read. Right now I'm reading [Exit Wounds](#).

Rutu Modan?

Yeah.

It's beautiful.

Beautiful book. Great book. I suspect there's a little photo-basis there, too.

Oh yeah. For sure.

But not obviously. Modan makes her work abstract in terms of the drawing, but in a very beautiful way. It's really a wonderful book.

I didn't even get to ask you one of the first questions on my list, which was who, in the comics world, were your primary artistic influences.

Well, there are my kid influences, from back when I was reading and drawing comics as a kid, and then there's my grown-up ones. My kid influences would be Carl Barks, first and foremost. He's my hero. Also, Jack Kirby, Neal Adams, Bernie Wrightson, Michael Kaluta, Moebius, Joe Kubert, Gray Morrow, Frank Frazetta. All the people that were big at the time. Will Eisner.

Ditko?

Absolutely. I was also reading underground comics, so R. Crumb and...

Shelton?

Shelton for the writing, more than the drawing. His writing reminds me a lot of Carl Barks.

Really? You mean like Wonder Warthog?

Yeah. And in the way he would tell a story...the type of story he told and the interests that he had in things out in the world. It was a really romantic type of interest that he had in travel.

That's a really interesting comparison. I've never thought of Shelton in that way.

Yeah. *Uncle Scrooge* and the *Fabulous Furry Freak Brothers* really remind me of each other.

I also read *Cerebus*, though only the first fifty issues or so.

"High Society"?

Yeah. I dropped it because I stopped reading comics, not because I lost interest in it particularly.

I'm sure there's a lot more I could probably come up with, but in terms of now, as an adult? Chester Brown, a great deal. I'll read anything of his. I'm also a huge fan of Chris Ware, but I find it very difficult to read his work.

Why is that?

Because of my eyesight.

You have eye issues?

I'm near-sighted *and* far-sighted, so I need a fucking magnifying glass to read that stuff. That's the only reason. I just wish it wasn't so physically hard for me to read. But I love his work.

It's brilliant.

I love Dan Clowes work, but I've only read a bit of it. I've never read *Ghost World*.

You should read that.

Yeah. I saw the movie and loved it.

Are you a fan of the Hernandez brothers? I have to ask that in every interview. [Laughter]

I am, but I am grossly unfamiliar with their corpus. For the same reason; I just have not had a chance to catch up. But I love their work. I try to read all the big anthologies, like the Yale anthologies...was it Ivan Brunetti who edits those?

Yeah, he did one volume. And, of course, you're in the Best American Comics 2011.

Yeah, how about that!

Congratulations.

Thank you. That's thrilling, I'll tell you.

I'm sure. That's wonderful.

Which reminds me to give a shout out to Alison Bechdel. One of the things that made it so thrilling was that, having read the excerpt from *Fun Home* that was in *Best American Comics* a couple years ago, I went out and bought her book. Now, I was aware of her work from *Dykes to Watch Out For* through the underground newspapers, but I hadn't really followed it that closely. But I was really taken aback by the excerpt of *Fun Home* in *Best American Comics* because it was so bloody deep.



Sometimes, I have to be honest, I worry about comics. I worry that the possibility of comics is so much deeper than the execution in most cases, although of course that's also one of the things that attracts me to the medium. I think that there's so much that can be done; the surface has barely been scratched. Dan Clowes made a fantastic observation when he said how crappy comics are. He said, you think that you're going to look at Alex Toth stories from the '50s and they're going to be these fantastic stories, like little Howard Hawks films, but they're not. They're unreadable. They're awful. They're beautifully drawn, but they're unreadable pieces of crap.

It's true.

And Alex Toth is a hero of mine, as I'm sure he is for so many people. But, reading a deep book like *Fun Home* just reinforces how comics as a whole has not even scratched the surface of its potential. It's focused too much on its formal potential and not enough on its potential for rich, meaningful stories. But *Fun Home*, my god! And *Exit Wounds*. My god! Chris Ware's stories, Clowes' stories. The Hernandez brothers. Chester. Seth. Eddie Campbell. I love this stuff, and I think it's only going to get better.

Actually, I'm delighted to be doing comics right now. I feel like I almost missed it and I wish I hadn't been scared off back in 1980. But luckily circumstances re-oriented themselves and all of those things that were keeping me away from it somehow solved themselves for different reasons. A lot of it was computers and being able to work digitally and get the work out on the Internet.

But a lot of it was also just having had a life. This is one of the reasons that I think comics has been stronger formally than it has been in terms of the ideas and stories. It's very formally demanding to get good at comics and it takes tremendous discipline. I think it was Chris Ware who made this really funny remark about how if you want to be a cartoonist, it's very simple: just lock yourself in the basement for 20 years and learn how to draw every single thing in the universe from every single possible angle, but have no life. In terms of writing, I think that's a problem for people trying to make comics. How do you write comics if you haven't had a life

because you had to completely devote yourself to the craft? I don't have much of a social life anymore, except for my family, which is a very rich life, although I wish I could devote more time to it, but I sure did have a life when I wasn't doing comics for 20 years. I was mixed up in music and art and...there was a lot going on, so I kind of feel like, from the perspective of somebody trying to write stories, that was very useful.

I'm also concerned that a lot of the comics that do try to go deeper are just about comics. They're up their own ass too much. And that includes art comix. My criticism of a lot of art comix is that they're too much about themselves as comics, or too much about the act of formally making a comic.

Like elaborate grid structures and page layouts, things like that?

Yeah.

Rather than the ideas underneath?

Right, and I don't mean to sound too heavy about that because I think that that stuff is wonderful and interesting, but I do think that comics could really use some of the other side more. Again, I'll point to something like Alison Bechdel's book as something that really succeeds at that.

People often talk about *literary* comics and *art* comics (and I'm a little troubled by both of those nomenclatures because they both get away from what comics are good at, which is comics), but I think that we have to recognize that it's a hybrid medium. It is art and it is writing, but there's a specific type of writing that suits comics, and there's a specific type of art that suits comics, and I think in all of our exploration, we'd do well to pay attention to those facts because it might help us get back to the issue of how can we make comics that are better than have ever been made before, as opposed to just worrying about how can we make comics that are great like art is great, or great like literature is great. The real challenge is: how can we make truly great comics as comics.

In some ways, I think of writing comics like writing a haiku. You've got this panel and everything has to work formally in the panel. The balloon has to work with the drawing and the composition. I will often sit there and find that I need to shave as much so that the balloon doesn't get too big for the panel. That's not like writing a novel. It's not like writing a poem. It's not literature. It's comics writing. It's writing a haiku for a limited space. You've got to find the perfect fourteen words or 100 letters that are going to work in that panel, and you have to think about the relationship between the panels on the page, and in the narrative. So, that's a specific type of writing that's been explored in a much more limited way for a much shorter time than literature has, although it's getting better and better.

Actually, I think comics is the perfect medium for today. It's fantastic now because you have the iPad and tablet computers, which, if you've ever read a comic on it, it's a jewel. It's beautiful.

The iPad is a game changer that the industry has barely started grappling with.

Yeah. And you can get it out there through the Internet, so it has these advantages that books don't necessarily have.

Fans have figured it out, but the industry has not.

Walt Disney's Comics and Stories used to sell a million copies, and everyone points to that and says that comics has been nothing but downhill since TV came around in the '50s. But you know what? Three quarters of those never sold anyway. They were just thrown out because of the crappy distribution networks at the time. Comics has never been a truly mass medium, except maybe in the newspapers. And today there are no mass media left anyway. Everything's fragmenting.

So I actually think the comics medium is of its moment, in a way that...I don't know if comics has ever been of its moment before. Suddenly its historical limitations with physical distribution have disappeared. It's still a marginal labor of love with a relatively small base of interested people, but I'm hoping personally that that gets overcome now. I would way sooner be trying to do comics now than TV.

Really?

Yeah.

Except that there's so much more money in TV.

Yeah, but look at the trend lines. The audience for TV is fragmenting. There used to be a time when the whole country would shut down to watch Milton Berle. Theaters would close. Now you have audiences of one million, where you used to have twenty or thirty million. Or even just a few hundred thousand. Well, that's not mass media anymore. Some comics sell a hundred thousand. So it's kind of funny; it's like they're catching up.

So you think comics is entering its moment of cultural transcendence?

I'm hoping that it's coming into its moment. I'm hoping that it's coming into its second Golden Age.

And that all's that's needed is more writing depth?

I think it's developing that inevitably. It's had it here and there all along, but it's getting more and more of it. Plus, comics have real formal advantages, like the fact that they can be experienced semi-ambiently is a real advantage over films.

People nowadays view movies as a real investment of their time. And I'm not speaking just as somebody who is heavily over-scheduled, but I think a lot of people today view a movie as something you really have to make time for; whereas it used to be, 'let's go watch a double feature and wile away the day.' And there were newsreels, too!

It sounds like you're talking about attention spans.

It's attention spans and also just the amount of time people have in their lives. Movies demand a fairly long space of free time spent focused on one thing.. Comics have kind of an advantage there. You can pick it up and put it down, come back to it.

It's like a 20 minute commitment...for a standard pamphlet comic, I mean. Of course the best graphic novels demand much more time.

Yeah, but even with a really deep graphic novel, there's something about the portability and flexibility of reading it that is, I think, very suitable to the moment. I'm very optimistic and delighted to be doing comics right now, at this point in its history.

We'll see what happens.

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