

BY SUSAN HODARA

SCOTT BAKAL BOLD STROKES

Shortly before his thesis was due, Scott Bakal decided he had to remake every one of his illustrations. “I looked at them,” he says, “and thought, ‘This is the same crap I’ve been doing for years.’”

That was in 2007. Bakal was 36 years old and three months away from an MFA in illustration from the University of Hartford. With his nervous professors standing by, he began revamping the images he’d been developing for close to a year. Colors became bolder, textures richer, every element more complex. His brushstrokes were defiant; he filled the compositions with deliberate and expressive detail. Finally, after more than a decade, he was permitting himself to get personal in his art.

Not only did the resulting paintings and drawings earn Bakal his degree, they went on to garner 21 recognitions, including a Gold Medal from *Creative Quarterly* and a Silver Medal from the Society of Illustrators. Bakal published the thesis, a graphic narrative based on the life of blues musician Robert Johnson, as a limited-edition book titled *Me + the Devil*. In 2013, the complete series of 33 finished pieces, along with related studies and sketches, was acquired for the permanent collection of the Norman Rockwell Museum.

Reflecting on that nail-biting, yet liberating decision in graduate school, Bakal says, “It changed my entire career.”

Since then, Bakal has produced award-winning illustrations for an impressive roster of publishers, among them the *New York Times*, the *Wall Street Journal*, *Smithsonian*, *Playboy*, *Reader’s Digest* and HarperOne. His distinctive imagery is highly graphic and rife with metaphor. Using acrylic paints and inks, sometimes watercolors and occasionally monotype, he places his subjects against backdrops layered with swaths of color and intricate motifs of vines and leaves, flame-like wisps, fierce-looking skulls, concentric circles, and strings of turnip-shaped forms.

Fellow illustrator Rob Dunlavey says, “[Bakal] has created his own vocabulary—he has lots of personal imagery that keeps busting out.” Consider, for example, an illustration he did last year for a *New York Times* article titled “Hurt Before the Birth,” about medical complications in infants who experience oxygen deprivation in utero. A baby’s face is set against a dark background patterned with those hanging turnips, this time in black, but colorful leafy vines embrace the child’s scalp. “I wanted to convey some kind of hope,” Bakal says. “The greenery around the head symbolizes growth and healing.”

So what shifted during those critical months eight years ago? “I decided I would start doing what I love and not care about what people might think,” he says.

In a sense, Bakal was rebalancing his values, trusting the strength of his creative skills in the face of attitudes he had absorbed growing up in a blue-collar household where money was tight. His mother was a data processor, his father a bus driver. When Bakal was seven, his parents separated, and a few years later, his mother moved Bakal and his younger twin siblings from Connecticut to Long Island. Watching her struggle as a single parent, helping however he could, Bakal learned the importance of hard work.

When he was in high school, his mother urged him to take plumbing and heating classes, which he did. But when it came time to apply for college, he was determined to attend the School of Visual Arts (sva) in Manhattan. He assembled a portfolio of life drawings, three-dimensional renderings, and album and book cover designs. He applied as an advertising major; when the sva reviewer examined his portfolio, she asked him why he wasn’t considering illustration. “I didn’t understand the difference,” he says. “She described advertising as working in an office with people. Then she described illustration as staying at home and painting. I liked the sound of that.”

Right: “The first of my many projects commissioned by Irene Gallo, this illustration accompanied the short story ‘At the Foot of the Lighthouse,’ written by Erin Hoffman. The story had so much to offer an illustrator, and given that Irene is a very hands-off art director, I was able to create exactly the painting I wanted. It’s easily one of my all-time favorite paintings of my career.” Irene Gallo, art director; Tor Books/tor.com, client.



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Bakal was accepted into the sva, and with loans and part-time employment, he was able to stay in school, graduating with a BFA in illustration in 1993. He took whatever design work he could find, along with a job in a supermarket. “I taught myself Photoshop and QuarkXPress and created identities for a few local businesses,” he says. “I sold paintings in local galleries. It was a time to survive and to figure out where I fit into all of it.”

During that time, he got some advertising and book cover assignments, but soon found a niche in editorial illustration. By 2000, he’d paid off his debts.

But he wasn’t satisfied. “I was tailoring my imagery to what I thought the market wanted,” he says. “I knew it wasn’t very good.” In the wake of 9/11, his clientele dried up, and he began to think about his career path.

Then, in 2003, he had a significant encounter in a mall. “I was walking around, trying to figure things out, when I bumped into an old friend,” Bakal says. She asked if he would be interested in teaching art classes at a local college. At first he was hesitant, but he accepted, and the four years he spent at the institution reawakened his passion. “Interacting with students and other teachers was great,” he says. “It made me start working harder as an artist. It made me love art again.”

It also made him set his sights on graduate school, which would not only give Bakal the credentials to become a professor, but also enable him to immerse himself in his artwork to an extent that hadn’t been possible during college. He proceeded to earn two degrees: an MA in illustration from Syracuse University, followed by his pivotal University of Hartford MFA. In the process, he adopted creative practices that he continues to use today.

For example, his sketchbooks. Years’ worth of Moleskines and Hand-Books line the shelves of his studio, in the two-story house he shares with his girlfriend, Kristina Carroll, in the Boston suburb of Roslindale. Bakal moved there when

he was hired by Massachusetts College of Art and Design in 2009. Carroll, who’s also an illustrator, joined him soon after. Her studio is adjacent to his. On a recent afternoon, Bakal stood between his two desks, one for making art, the other for his computers. He had a mustache, goatee and chin-length brown hair; he wore jeans and a black button-down, no shoes on his socked feet. He grabbed one of the sketchbooks and flipped through it. Inside were explosions of free-form imagery—patterns, textures, characters, many on pages daubed with broad strokes of color. “I’ll fill an empty sketchbook with whatever paint is left on my palette,” he says. “It makes it less precious and encourages me to play.”

As he plays, concepts emerge; some find their way into paintings. “If we’re going to talk about where my art comes from,” Bakal says, “it begins right in here.”

Concurrent with his illustration work, Bakal has been teaching again, first at the Fashion Institute of Technology in Manhattan before his move to the Boston area and now as a full-time associate professor in the illustration department of MassArt, where he is embarking on his seventh year. He’s known for engaging students with his professional savvy, and he regularly shares in-progress projects with his seniors. “I say, ‘Here’s the problem I’m trying to solve.’ I show them my contract. I tell them, ‘They’re offering me this much—should I take the assignment?’ They get to see the process, so it’s not so foreign when they get the call themselves.”

When Bakal finds time, he develops personal projects, but his focus is on assignments. He regularly receives commissions from the *New York Times*, the *Wall Street Journal* and fantasy fiction publisher Tor Books. Nevertheless, he continues to diligently promote himself through regular postcard mailings. “I still think they’re effective,” he says. “If I get one new client, it’s worth it. Even if I don’t, I’ll still do the next mailing because everything is cyclical. The point is that people are seeing the work.”

Seeing Bakal’s work was what first led Tor Books associate publisher Irene Gallo to hire him; his fertile ideas are what repeatedly bring her back. As of press time, Bakal has created eleven illustrations for seven stories. “He’s a great problem solver, and I have come to trust his vision,” Gallo says of Bakal. “He finds a unique solution for each job.”

Often Bakal seeks inspiration by imagining himself in the place of the subjects of the article. “I don’t always work on stories I agree with, but I try to have empathy for their viewpoints,” he says. “There is usually some emotion I can relate to.”

Right: “I love music, especially the blues, and if I weren’t an illustrator, I’d be a musician. This series, titled *Me + the Devil*, was created for my Hartford MFA thesis and later published as a limited-edition book. My first artwork to be truly personal in style and content, the series marked a creative and professional turning point in my career. People saw that I was finally being myself, and there was such an amazing response to that honesty. The awards and work that came from this series—the pinnacle of which was its acquisition into the permanent collection of the Norman Rockwell Museum—validated my trust in myself. Although my work has evolved since then, I look back on that time as my own crossroads, where, instead of selling my soul, I found it.” Scott Bakal/Bill Thomson/Murray Tinkelman, art directors; Crisford Press, publisher.





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He presents an art director with at least three approaches. “I make sure to send sketches I want to execute,” he says. “In an e-mail, I’ll defend the ones I think work best.” Once a concept is approved, production begins. Generally, Bakal completes a job in several days, though some deadlines demand all-nighters. On occasion, he’ll turn to Photoshop to add texture, but most of his work is done with brushes and pens. “I adore technology,” he says, “but when I create a piece of art, I like touching it, holding it. There’s a tactile quality that I can’t seem to shake.”

While painting, Bakal follows a preferred routine. “I like to start in the afternoon, stop to eat dinner, then continue until I fall asleep,” he says. When he’s conceptualizing, he requires silence, but the execution stage is accompanied by music—anything from Ella Fitzgerald to Brian Eno to Black Sabbath.

Mornings are reserved for clerical tasks, after which, when the weather is good, Bakal and Carroll go for a run. He also enjoys socializing, despite (or perhaps because of) long stretches alone in his studio. He frequently hosts parties, and he and several illustrator colleagues meet regularly in a restaurant. “We talk about business, but we also just catch up,” Bakal says.

One of the participants is Alan Witschonke, owner of Alan Witschonke Illustration in nearby Natick. Before Bakal



Left: “This was a commissioned editorial illustration that, unfortunately, fell through during the sketch stage. It was the first time in my 20-plus-year career that I just couldn’t bend on my vision for the art—to the point of stopping the job. The rise of **suicides in the armed forces** is a serious problem, and I wanted an image that hit hard and put this issue front and center. The editors were frightened, thinking it was too harsh, and pushed me to paint something unrelated to the issue. The art director and I parted ways amicably, and I completed the project on my own. The piece led to more work, and I was later contacted by appreciative families with loved ones suffering from PTSD, and I got to hear some of their stories.”

“This painting, titled *Proposition 8*, is a conceptual favorite of mine. I spent a week doodling ideas, and when this finally came from my pencil, it was the obvious choice to accompany an article in *Liberty* magazine. At the time, a heated debate about Prop 8—which banned same-sex marriages in California—was in full swing and the story presented the views on gay marriage from all sides. Prop 8 was later ruled unconstitutional, and rightfully so.” Bryan Gray, art director; Genesis Design, Inc., design firm; Liberty, client.

“This illustration was for a story about **medical complications in infants** who experience oxygen deprivation in utero. I received a touching note from a woman in Argentina who has a son with many of the complications written about in the story. She thanked me for creating an image that shows the beauty in all people. A note like that underlines how honored I am to do the work I do.” Peter Morance, art director; The New York Times, client.

This page: “I enjoy using ink and charcoal together, and create a lot of personal work combining the two, as in this portrait of Kim Jong-Il. I rarely get to work with these mediums in commissions because clients almost always want color.”

“This poster for *Tosca* is from a series of posters promoting all four operas of the 2013–2014 season. The scope of the project was incredible, as the images were used not only in posters, but also on displays, tickets, murals, bus wraps and mass transit kiosks as well as in two TV spots in which the artwork I created was animated. It was a bit grueling because I had just one month during the winter holidays from start to finish, but it was a thrill and an honor to do the project, and I couldn’t be happier with the results.” Annie Mack, art director; Vancouver Opera, client.

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relocated to Boston, the two had met through the website Drawger. Witschonke posted a comment saying that he would try to catch Bakal's exhibition at the Society of Illustrators. To Witschonke's surprise, Bakal responded, suggesting that when Witschonke was in town, they meet for a beer. "That was so Scott," Witschonke says. "He's a one-on-one, down-to-earth guy. We ended up having a few drinks and sketching people at the bar."

Lately, Bakal has been experimenting with photography and filmmaking; some of his videos, recording the progress of specific illustrations, can be found on Vimeo. Although he intends to build portfolios in these media, for now the activities provide new opportunities to play and create. "They are explorations, sort of like my sketchbooks," he says. "The romantic way of putting it is: I'm an artist." [ca](#)

This page: "Moving from New York to Boston a few years ago, it felt nice to do some work for my new local paper. This was part of a large project for the *Boston Globe's* Magazine section, which included a cover and four full-page interiors. Each piece of art corresponded to a section of the story detailing the various ways to prevent over-gentrification in Boston and an obvious division of rich and poor, as other cities are experiencing. Efforts to bring **racial and economic diversity** into the city to keep life rich and varied in culture are in action. And planned expansions of the mass transit system into neighborhoods cut off from Boston's downtown area could help bring more economic growth and opportunities to those communities." Greg Klee, art director; The Boston Globe, client.

Right: "Used as a magazine cover, this was the first painting of a series that shares a color palette and particular tone. The most recent of all of the art shown here, the series marks another shift in my work. I've been experimenting with **looser brushstrokes** and a dirtier way of working. Although there is a structure to my work—here, for example, the hands, which anchor the image—I always make up the rest as I go along. I often just wing it. Of course, this has consequences. I've had to redo plenty of paintings because I didn't think they worked. But the art director doesn't see the failures. Now that I am very comfortable with what I do, I want to see how far I can take the abstractions and how they transform my work." Bryan Gray, art director; Genesis Design, Inc., design firm; Liberty, client.

