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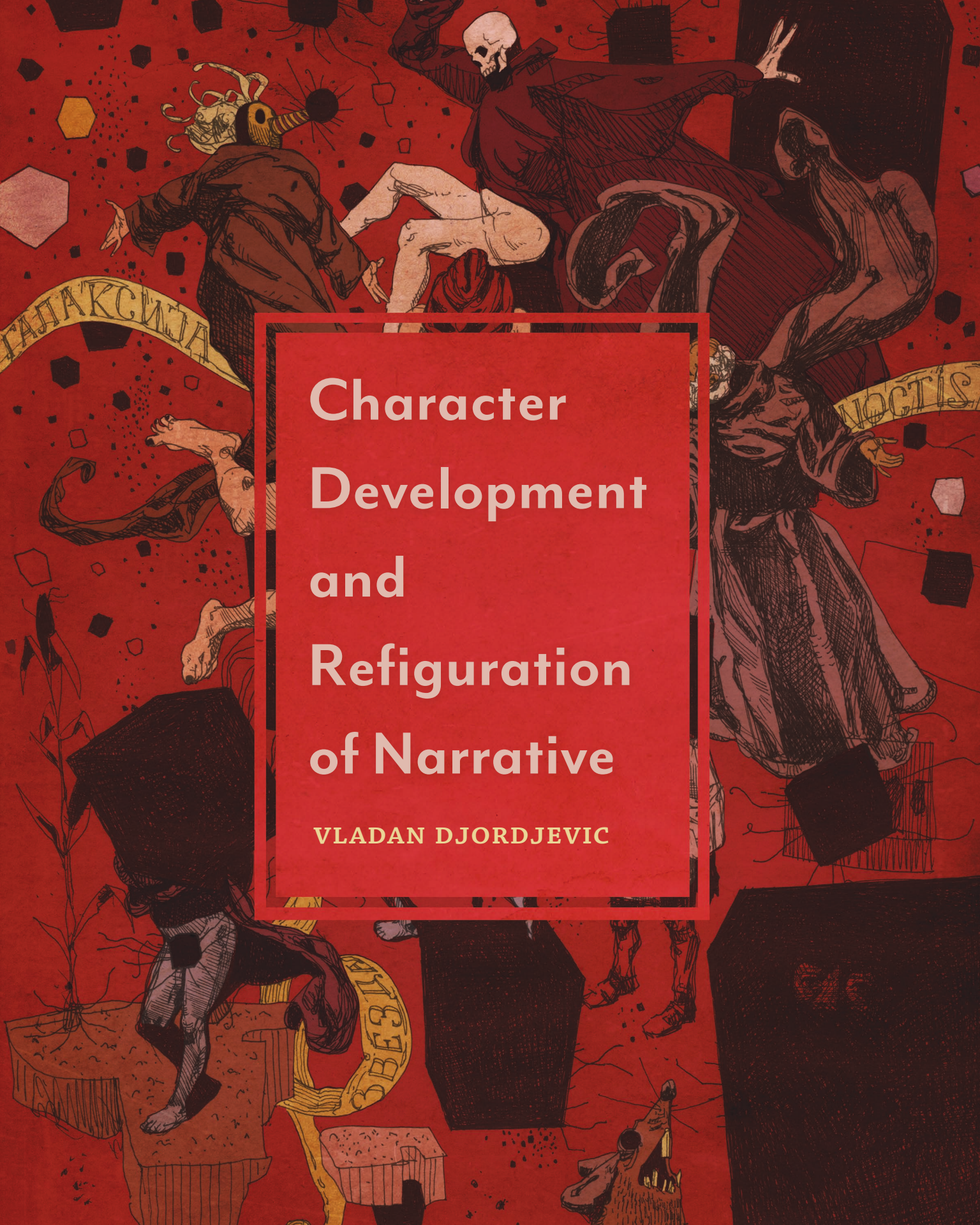
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Character Development and Refiguration of Narrative

VLADAN DJORDJEVIC

Character Development and Refiguration of Narrative

Vladan Djordjevic

Exhibition scheduled at the Springfield Art Museum,
COVID-19 closures required the virtual exhibition:
<https://art-design.missouristate.edu/exhibit/MFA-2020/>

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CHARACTER DEVELOPMENT AND REFIGURATION OF NARRATIVE

Art & Design Department

Missouri State University, May 2020

Master of Fine Arts

Vladan Djordjevic

ABSTRACT

Character development is the process of creating believable fictional characters by giving them depth and compelling visual characteristics, which reveal a narrative framework behind formal solutions. Character development is the creation of effective communication. It gives essential information about character progression and the thought process behind a character’s evolution over time in the practice of visual development. This approach is a procedure of creating visual forms that convey clear messages, very often intangible ones. Their meaning is constructed through the use of different iconographic and narrative structures that, when presented within the same context, give thought-provoking and unusual formal solutions. This personal process of visual selection, extraction, and conflation of ideas does not offer a definitive statement of clarity and meaning but an open-ended exploration of different formal results and possibilities. This thesis is exploring the character development process within the context of Fairytale book illustrations, Cartooning, and Character design; and Instructional Manual/Book Design as a parody of conventional drawing, figure drawing, and anatomy manuals and guides.

KEYWORDS: character, development, illustration, fairytale, books, drawing.

This abstract is approved as to form and content

Eric Pervukhin
Chairperson, Advisory Committee
Missouri State University

CHARACTER DEVELOPMENT AND REFIGURATION OF NARRATIVE

by

Vladan Djordjevic

A Master's Thesis

Submitted to the Graduate College

of Missouri State University

In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements

For the Degree of Master of Fine Arts in Visual Studies.

May 2020

Dedicated to Masha without whom this would not be possible.

А так же Эрику: “Оф палм ки хи гот итт.”



INTRODUCTION

Character development is an essential component of any story. Narratives require engaging, convincing and interesting characters, who act and interact with the surrounding world and themselves and draw the audience into their story. Well-developed characters allow us to engage with the story as it unfolds and reveals its narrative structure. Convincing illustrated characters should be assembled as rich visual and narrative entities which the audience can explore and discover. This thesis demonstrates the visual process of character development as a creation of effective communication and defines parameters within which the development of the characters is explored. Two different illustration projects that revolve around character development as their main driving force are considered in this thesis.

The first project is a group of fairytale book illustrations that are based on the Brothers Grimm's story *The Mouse, The Bird and The Sausage*. This project considers language as the initial basis for visual development of characters, visualizing them directly from the description in the text of the story. Characters are then redesigned and given numerous narrative functions. This transforms their appearance and visually changes their narrative roles in the story. During the process of developing the characters the resulting visual narrative integrates and merges multiple narrative ideas with the purpose of establishing a multi-layered visual communication.

The second project is a parody of the kind of drawing books and manuals which are often used as recommended—and sometimes required—texts for college students and drawing novices. This project was developed with the intent to explore pictorial ideas found in the fundamentals of visual vocabulary acquired through the practice of drawing. It parodies the extensive and elaborate verbal explanations that are part of most drawing books and manuals. This is character development as analysis of what I consider drawing to be as a practice and as an abstract visual language. Visual humor serves as an antithesis to the gravity of verbal instructions in traditional drawing manual texts and also points to the importance of visual storytelling independent from written text.

INITIAL STAGE OF CHARACTER DEVELOPMENT

Drawing is a form of dialogue; every mark is a statement. Marks create shapes, shapes build structures and structures have voices. They talk to me and I listen and I learn. They teach me how to draw them and understand them. They evolve and their voices become clearer with every new mark. My understanding of them changes as they grow and evolve.

I create ideas while I am drawing; it is an exploration. I do not know where the process of drawing is going to take me. From every motion of a hand, holding a drawing tool, new possibility emerges, a new mark that adds to the visual structure of the form. I am looking for forms that tell stories. These can be funny or serious. They can also be flat, solid, ambiguous, or unusual. As I draw, characters start to slowly appear and take shape and they start to tell a story.

I believe visual relationships can point to richer narrative organizations and internal properties within the inner worlds of characters. These visual relationships are essential components of my images. They are found in the design of the characters, their gestures and in the structure of pictorial compositions.

For me, visualizing an already established narrative idea and intuitive visual exploration are equally important; both processes are utilized simultaneously. Mike Mignola, American comic book artist and illustrator, stated that “with experience comes the realization that anything can be drawn, based on your inclinations towards certain kinds of shapes and not based on the need for realistic portrayal of form.”¹ During visual development I have allowed myself to explore more intuitively without need for realistic representation. Characters can change, adapt, and transform; their personalities and visual characteristics are not fixed. Even the absence of a character from an image reveals something about their personality, their relationship with other characters and their function in a story.

I inhabit these characters as I am developing them, and once I leave them they (hopefully) convey messages of their own. The meaning behind these messages often evades me, as these characters now have a life independent from me. The goal of character design, in my view, is to create characters that are expected to continue their existence outside of the realm of the developer’s imagination and into the interpretive realm of the viewer/reader.

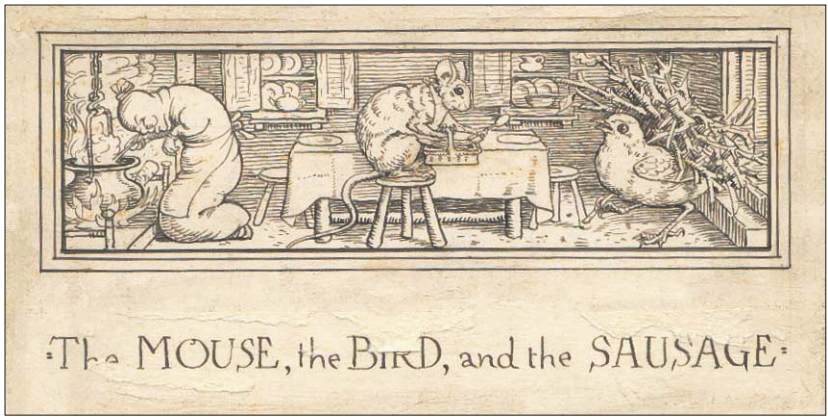
STORY SELECTION AND NARRATIVE LAYERING

I am interested in stories that have strange characters, ambiguous meaning, and unusual structure within rich visuals settings. This is why I have chosen to illustrate *The Mouse, the Bird and the Sausage* from the Jacob and Wilhelm Grimm collection of fairy tales *Children’s and Household Tales*, translated and edited by Jack Zipes.

This story is an old German folktale with three main characters who are referred to in the title of the story. The story revolves around three anthropomorphized characters and their domestic coexistence in which each of the three main characters has an assigned role that is beneficial to the partnership. The story culminates with the disruption of an established working arrangement which causes the demise of all three main characters.

Most well-known illustrations for this story have typically represented the main protagonists of the story in a realistic fashion. The Mouse and The Bird have been depicted as mostly anatomically accurate animals and The Sausage has been for the most part represented with the stereotypical shape of a German meat product (a curved cylindrical form with a stylized human face and limbs). This is a fairly straightforward, unambiguous visual representation of the characters in the narrative. Images of the characters and their behaviors follow the text of the story very closely. These illustrations have a limited range of possible interpretations, and they visually offer very little outside of the already established understanding of the written narrative.

¹ Michael Mignola and John Byrne, *HellBoy, Vol. 1: Seed of Destruction* (Milwaukie, OR: Dark Horse Comics, 2004), 5.



1.
*The Mouse, the Bird,
and the Sausage.*
by Walter Crane.²



2.
*The Mouse, the Bird,
and the Sausage.*
by Robert Anning Bell.³

I wanted to reimagine these characters as part of a different, more complex visual narrative. My intention for this new narrative was to expand the understanding of the written text, change the narrative function of the titular characters, and place the story into an unusual and unconventional context.

In order to expand the storytelling possibilities of the characters in the folk tale, I have included two additional narrative structures to the original configuration of the story. Within the first additional narrative structure, three primary characters from the story are portrayed within the context of Christian religious iconography. This allowed me to transform characters from the folktale and give them visual attributes of the religious characters found in traditional religious imagery. In the image (3.) The Bird, The Mouse and The Sausage are given the roles of saints, biblical figures, and divine creatures. With this inclusion their anthropomorphic quali-

² Walter Crane, *The Mouse, the Bird, and the Sausage*, 1882, in Jacob and Wilhelm Grimm, “Grimm’s Fairy Tales” Translated by Lucy Crane; illustrated by Walter Crane (London: Hurst & Co, 1882), 127.

³ Bell Robert Anning, *The Mouse, the Bird, and the Sausage*, 1912, in Jacob and Wilhelm Grimm, “Grimm’s Household Tales.” Translated by Marian Edwardes; illustrated by Robert Anning Bell (London: J.M. Dent & Sons Ltd., 1912), 24.



3. *Eye Around My Head*, 2020, mixed media. 11"×14.4".

ties have been visually expanded, and their narrative function has been altered. I wanted characters to have religious connotations where actions and appearances of characters reference biblical stories and their spiritual significance.

The second supplementary narrative structure envisions characters as three agencies of psychic apparatus. These three agencies could be broadly defined as hedonistic selfishness, idealistic morality, and a third entity that mediates between two opposing behavioral extremes. During my visual research, I have introduced this narrative structure to explore physical relationships between the characters and define their individual psychology. Images are intended to illustrate their struggle for dominance, acceptance, or more intricate states of coexistence (5.). The psychological state of the characters was explored within the depiction of the narrative gesture of a figure in relation to the narrative gestures of other figures. I have been visually influenced by Mike Mignola's tenebrism, pattern of light and dark and structure of the form. Mignola's clear graphic statements that emphasize the contrast between dark and light, closely related to tenebrism of Baroque painting, seemed appropriate to indicate the various psychological states



4. *Princess*, 2020, mixed media. 11"×14.4".



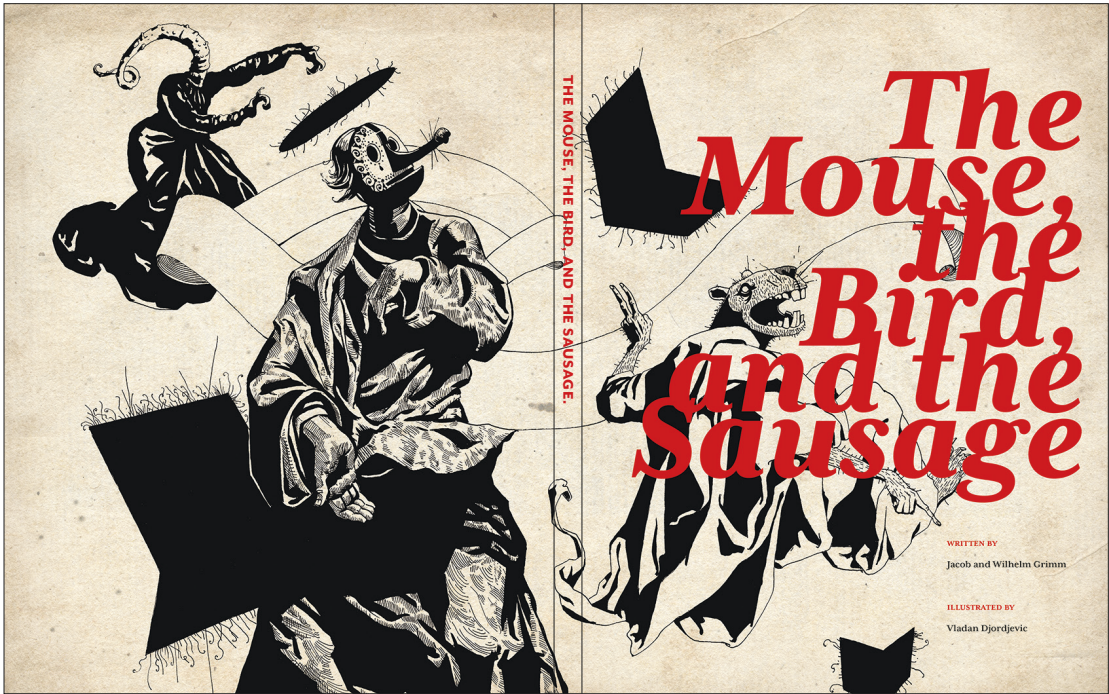
5. *Galaxy*, 2020, mixed media. 11"×14.4".

of the characters. In image (4.) characters are seated, laying down, levitating or calmly standing. Each gesture of light and dark shapes was conceived as an external manifestation of the potential emotional and mental state of a particular character. The viewer can infer the meaning and function based on visual information solely.

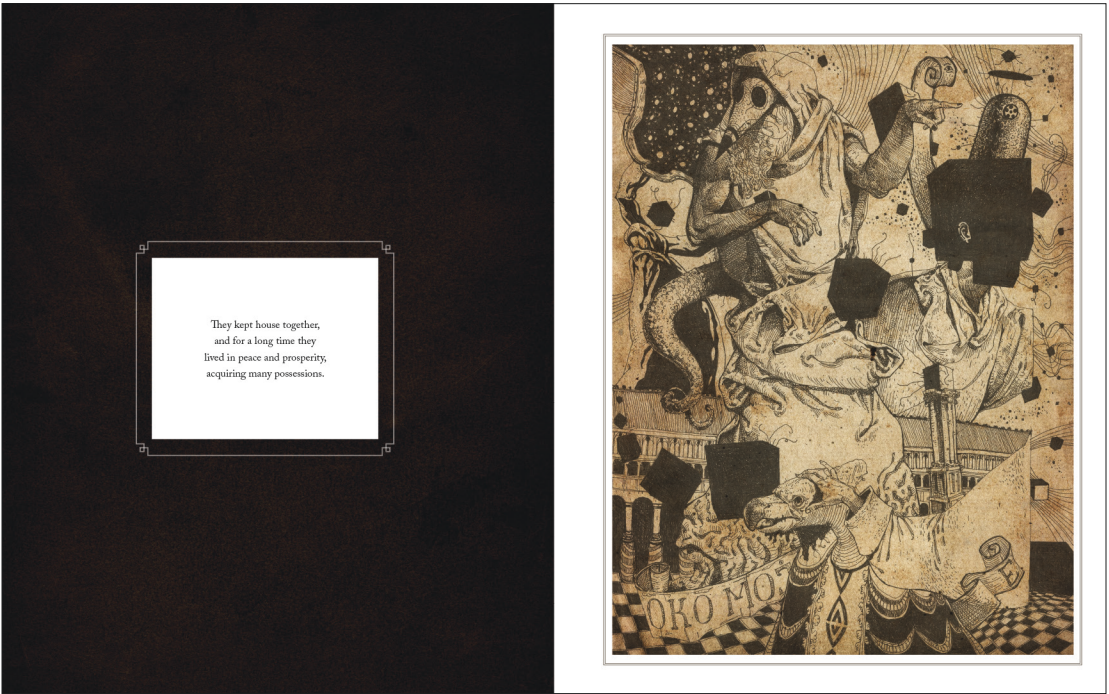
As I am developing characters, I want to discover the motivations and reasons for the characters to act, to engage with other characters and to behave in a certain fashion. I want to know how they inhabit their fictional world. I merged these narrative structures with the intention of giving the characters from the folk tale spiritual and psychological properties. The resulting composite narrative produces richer visual statements and influences the possibilities of what form can do in the pictorial space. Characters can hold multiple symbolic and narrative roles which guide the search for unusual visual solutions that have multiple interpretations. Characters emerge from these narrative consolidations. Their visual appearance and their behaviors are formed within this narrative union. They are amalgamations of both formal and narrative ideas. This allows me to frame their personas and place them in a specific visual context.

This narrative expansion is considered and conducted only through the creation of images; the original text is left unaltered. I want the resulting images to impose a different understanding of the original text. With this method I indirectly question the nature of language, as a verbal, foundational structure behind narrative organization, and I impose images as the primary source of communication.

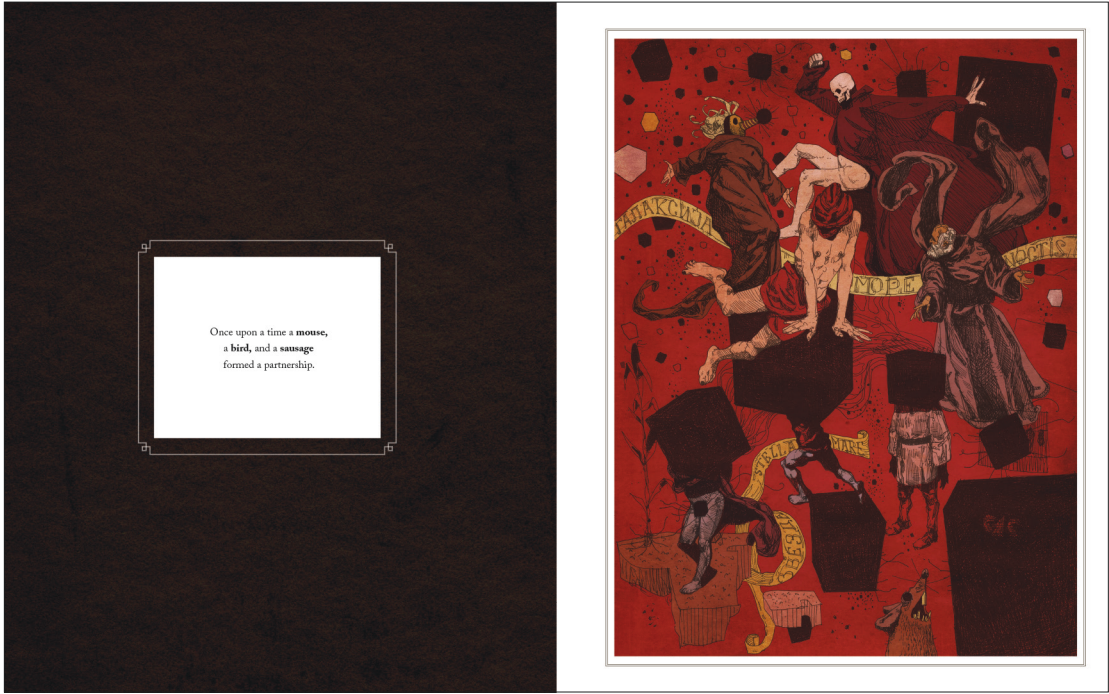
THE MOUSE, THE BIRD, AND THE SAUSAGE.



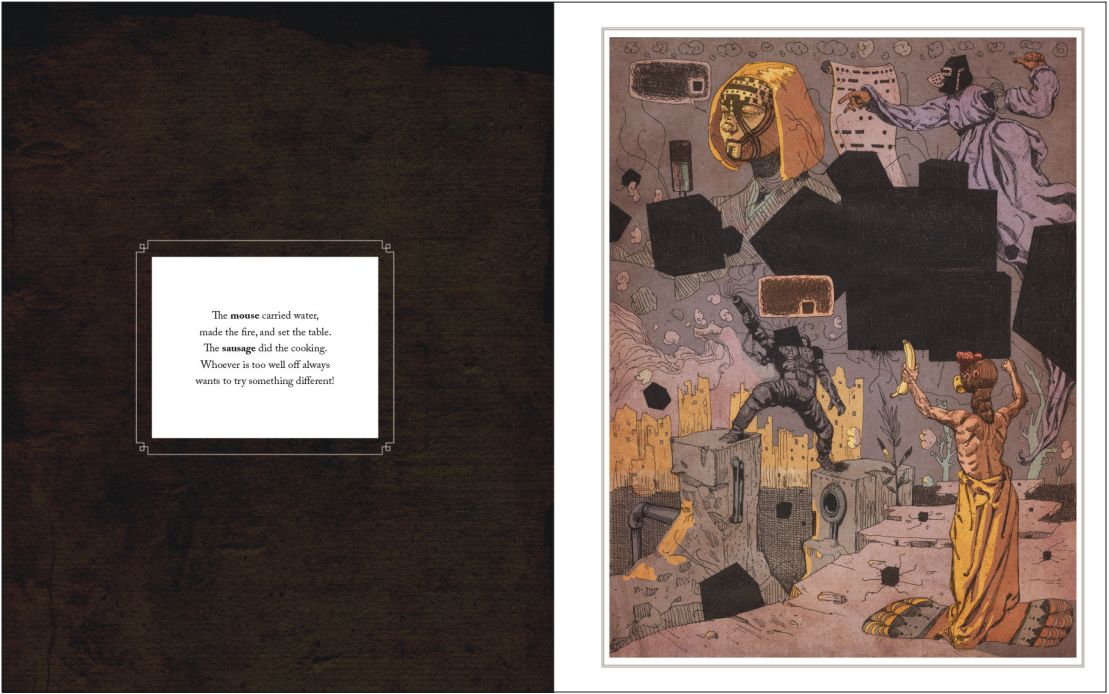
6. Cover for *The Mouse, the Bird, and the Sausage*, 2020, mixed media. 8"×10".



8. *Eye Around My Head*, from *The Mouse, the Bird, and the Sausage*, 2020, mixed media. 8"×10".



7. *Galaxy*, from *The Mouse, the Bird, and the Sausage*, 2020, mixed media. 8"×10".



9. *Dusk*, from *The Mouse, the Bird, and the Sausage*, 2020, mixed media. 8"×10".



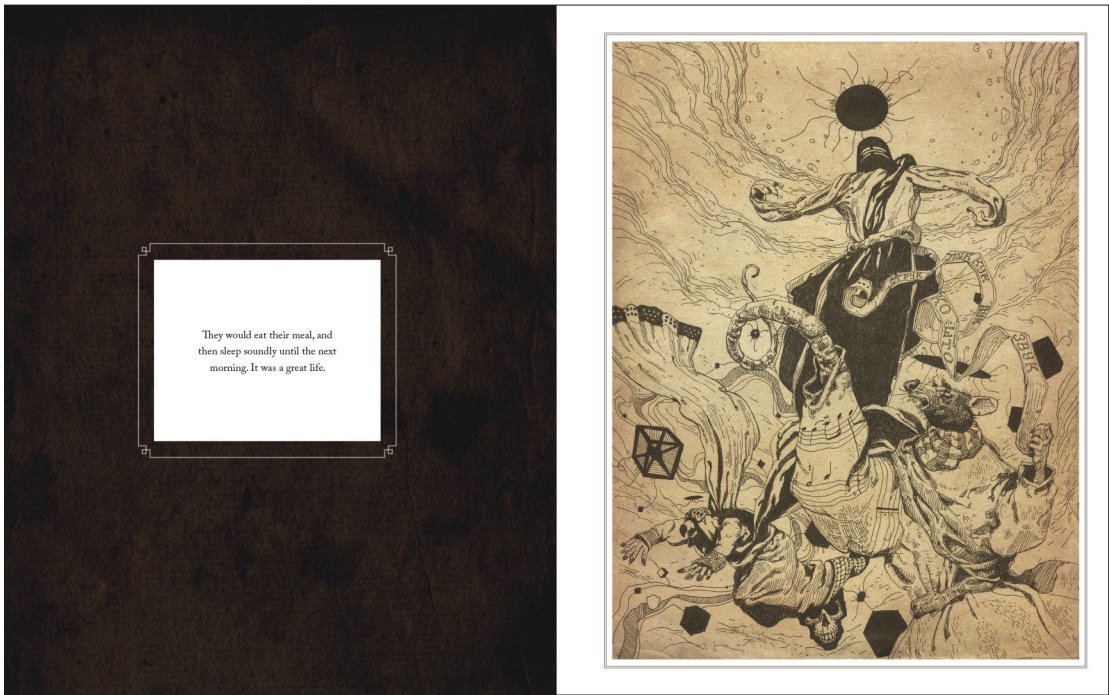
10. *Desert*, from *The Mouse, the Bird, and the Sausage*, 2020, mixed media. 8"×10".



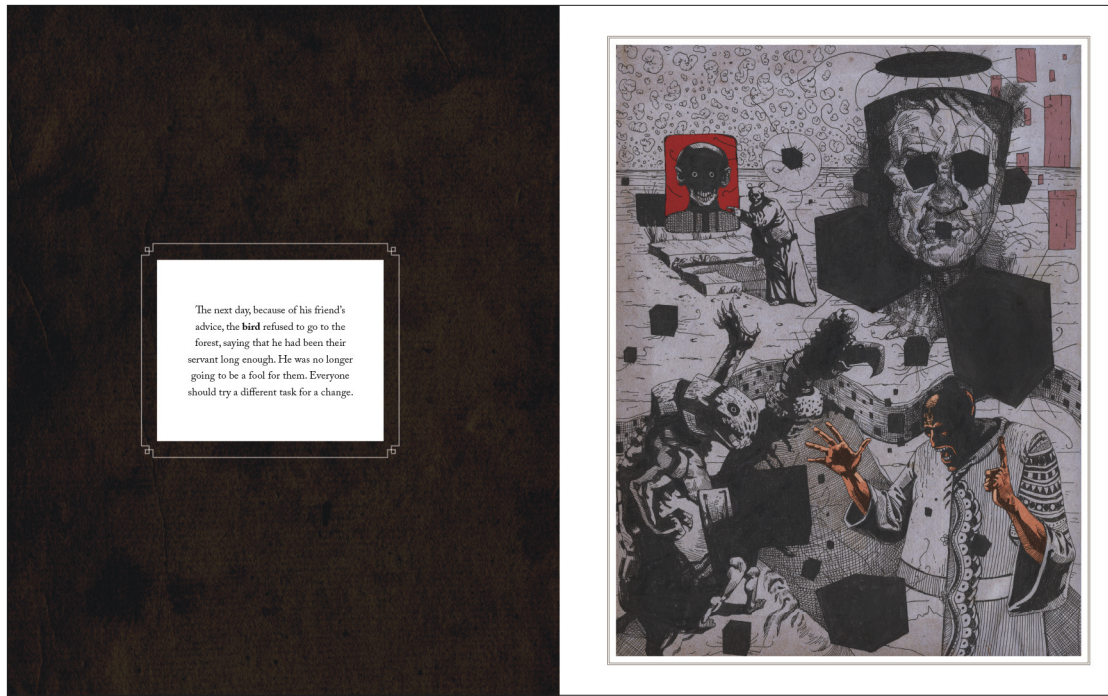
11. *Manna*, from *The Mouse, the Bird, and the Sausage*, 2020, mixed media. 8"×10".



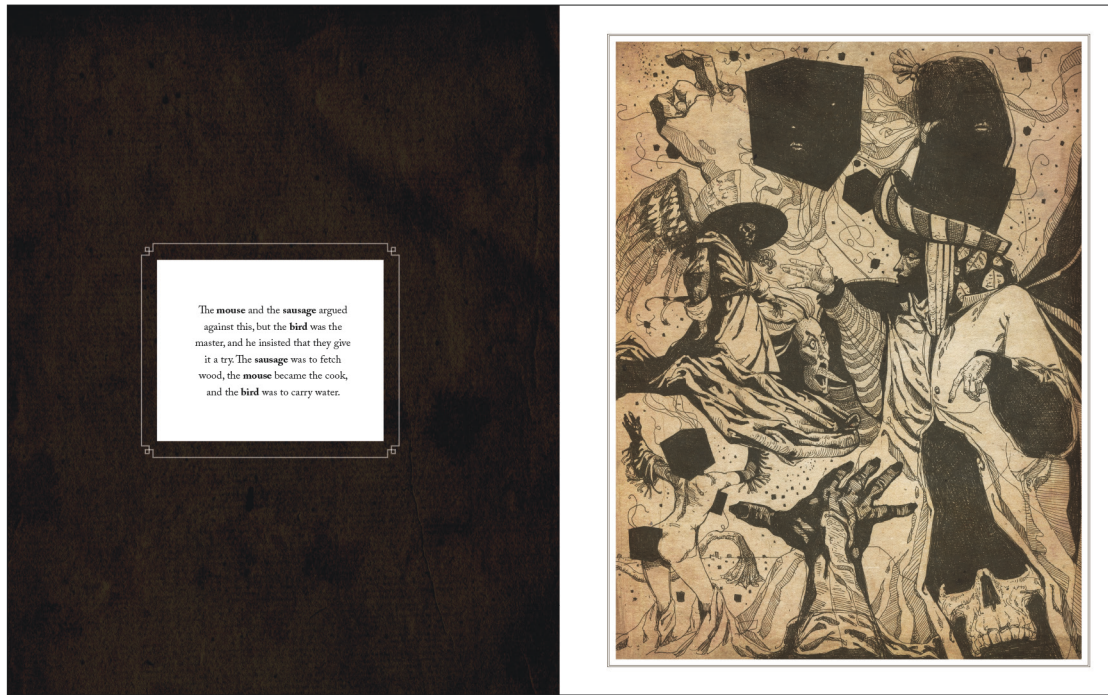
12. *The Last Supper*, from *The Mouse, the Bird, and the Sausage*, 2020, mixed media. 8"×10".



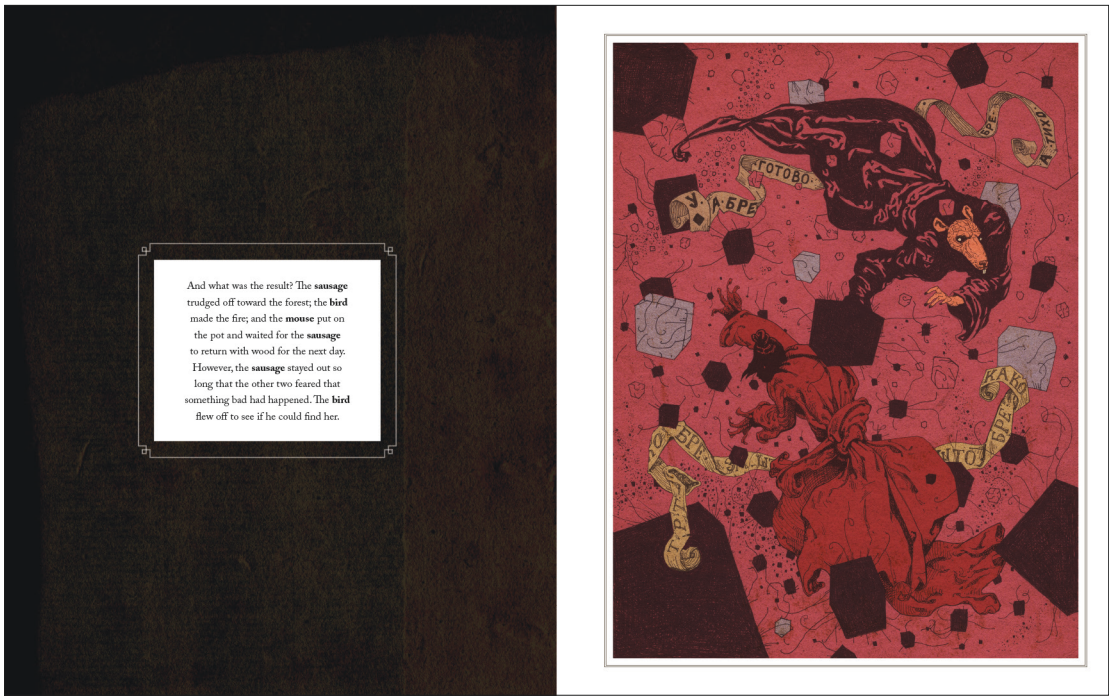
13. *Black Sun*, from *The Mouse, the Bird, and the Sausage*, 2020, mixed media. 8"×10".



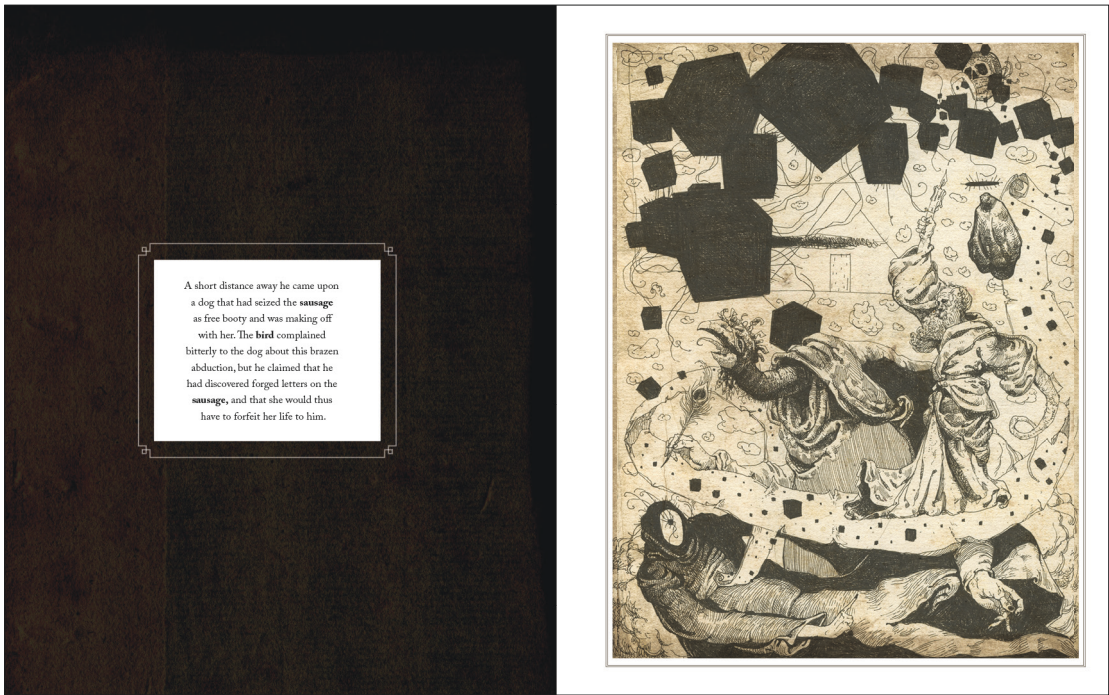
14. Saints, from *The Mouse, the Bird, and the Sausage*, 2020, mixed media. 8"×10".



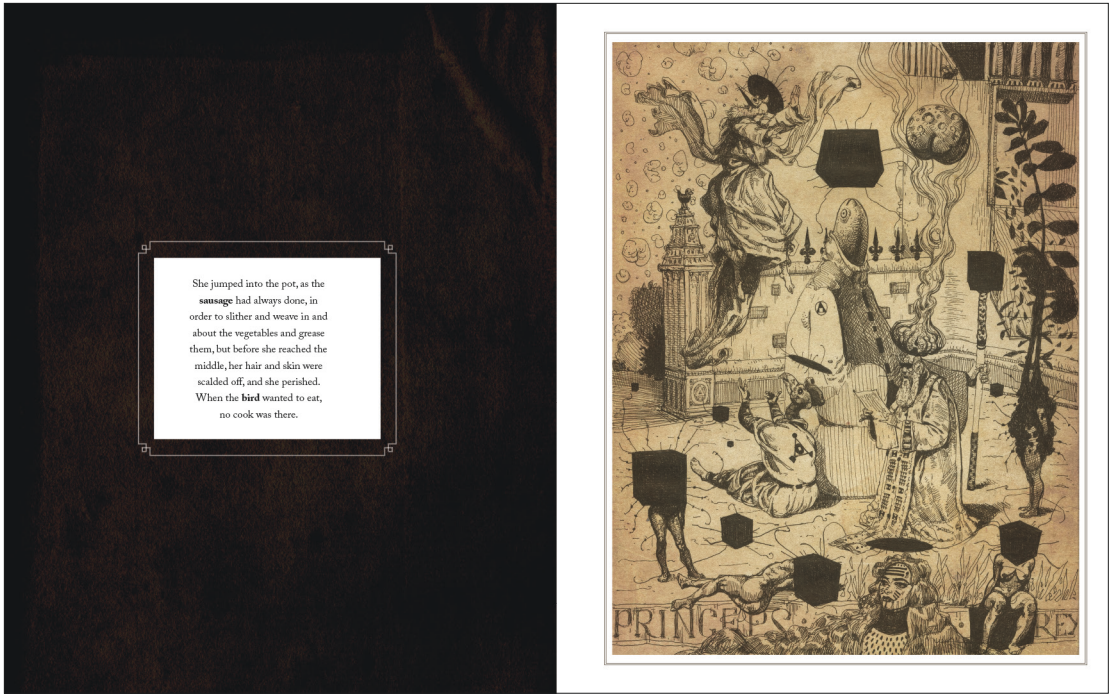
15. Dancer, from *The Mouse, the Bird, and the Sausage*, 2020, mixed media. 8"×10".



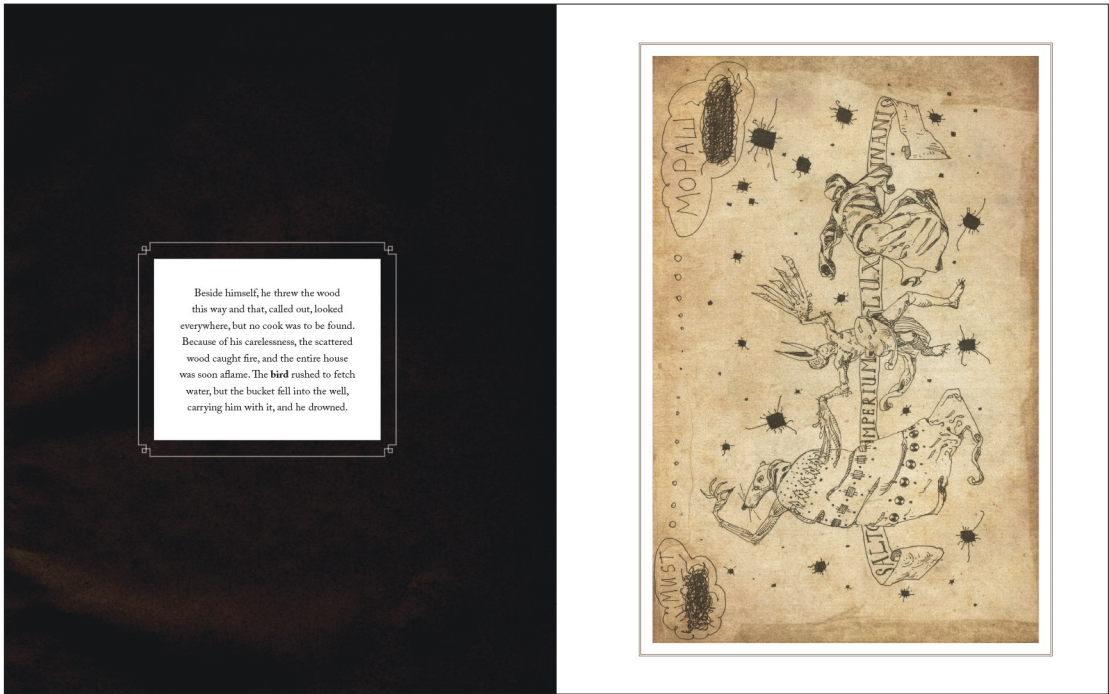
16. Ready from *The Mouse, the Bird, and the Sausage*, 2020, mixed media. 8"×10".



17. Prediction, from *The Mouse, the Bird, and the Sausage*, 2020, mixed media. 8"×10".



18. Princess from *The Mouse, the Bird, and the Sausage*, 2020, mixed media. 8"×10".

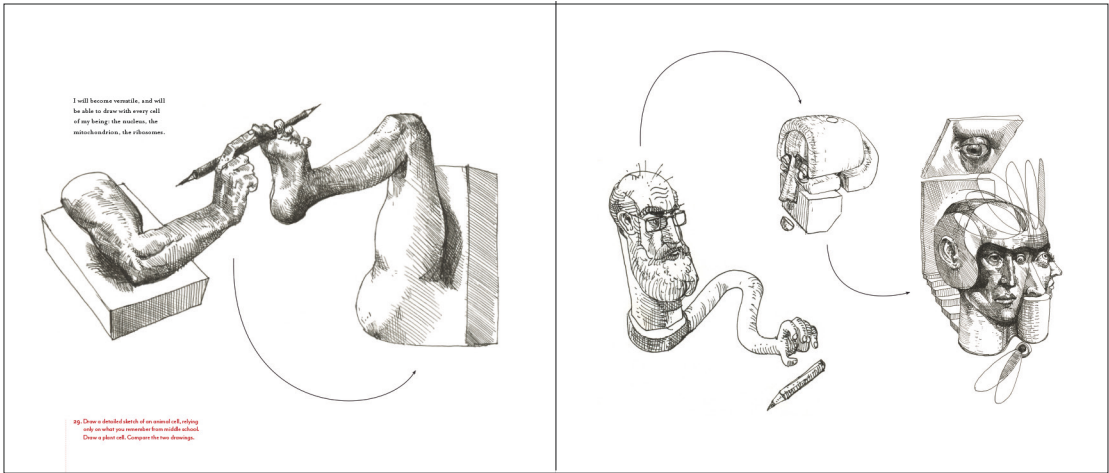


19. Must from *The Mouse, the Bird, and the Sausage*, 2020, mixed media. 8"×10".

CHARACTER DEVELOPMENT AS A VISUAL EXPLORATION AND REFIGURATION OF A NARRATIVE

The second illustration project for this thesis deals with character development as a refiguration of the conventional educational narrative found in drawing books and manuals. The books that this project parodies are well established texts on drawing methodologies that are often recommended to drawing novices. These include, but are not limited to: *The Art of Responsive Drawing*⁴ and *A Drawing Handbook*⁵, by Nathan Goldstein, *Drawing on the Right Side of Brain*⁶, by Betty Edwards, and *Human Anatomy and Figure Drawing*⁷, by Jack N. Kramer.

Drawing books and manuals contain constructed narratives that have an instructive purpose; they tell stories that lead the readers to certain conclusions and guide them to form particular habits within the practice of drawing. I wanted to destabilize this established structure because, in my opinion, drawing is a practice that cannot be properly verbally explained. The language of drawing has an independent visual function that verbal statements can only vaguely suggest and never truly define. Written text usually becomes more ambiguous, evasive or unapologetically incomprehensible when dealing with these issues of meaning of verbal explanations. In her book *Drawing on the Right Side of Brain*, Betty Edwards states: "Remember, you are always searching for your way of seeing and drawing. No matter how your style evolves, however, you will always be using edges, spaces, relationships, and (usually)lights and shadows, and you will depict the thing itself (the gestalt) in your own way."⁴ The author is explaining the process of drawing as "depicting the thing itself in your own way." which is, in my opinion, impenetrable. Authors of drawing books and manuals rarely address this deficiency of written text.



20. Duality from *The Drawing Book*, 2019, mixed media. 13"×11".

⁴Nathan Goldstein, *The Art of Responsive Drawing*. (New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, 1973)

⁵Nathan Goldstein, *A Drawing Handbook*. (New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, 1985)

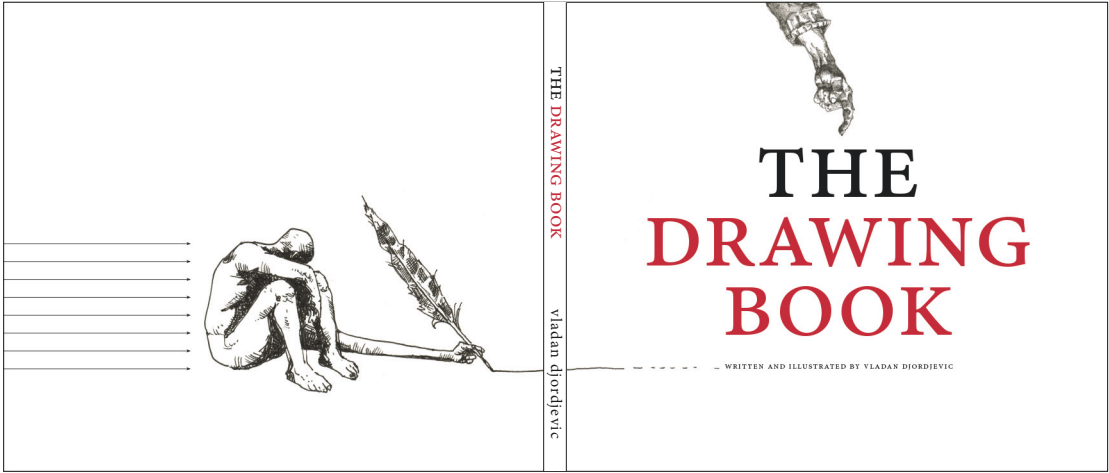
⁶Betty Edwards, *Drawing on the Right Side of the Brain: A Course in Enhancing Creativity and Artistic Confidence*. (Los Angeles: J.P. Tarcher, 1989), 204.

⁷Jack Kramer, *Human Anatomy & Figure Drawing*. (New York: Van Nostrand Reinhold, 1972)

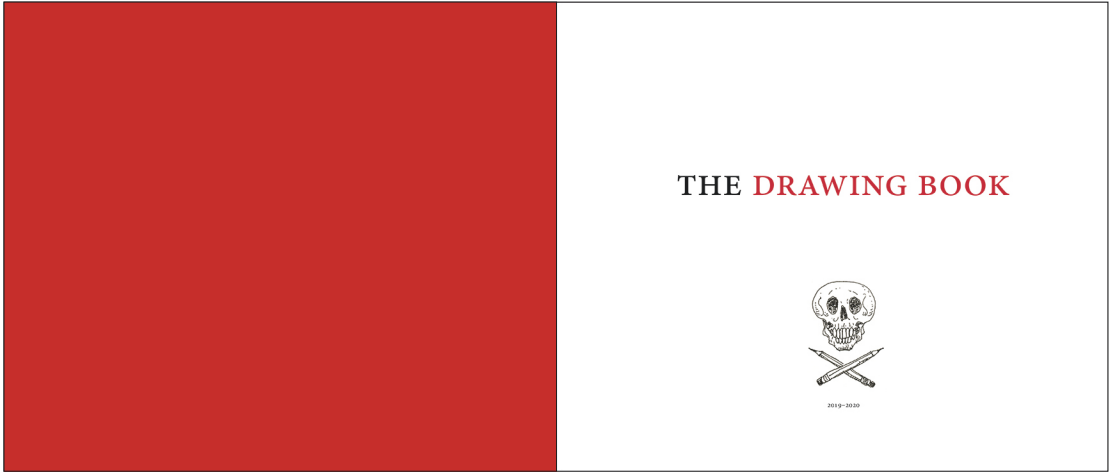
In my second thesis project, intangible visual ideas that are inherently present in the process of drawing are visually defined through the process of character development. Developed characters within this context are envisioned to serve multiple functions. They are ironic visual statements that serve as a substitute for written explanations and they point to the inability of text to truly explain the most elusive and important components of the drawing practice. Their function is to offer ironic visual instructions that are intended to be even more elusive and confounding than verbal descriptions. Developed characters are constructed as instructional images that intentionally misguide the viewers, undermine the form of the instructional book and invite the viewers to construct their own visual narrative (*image 20.*).

Drawings of characters are created to contain self-referential narrative properties. They tell sarcastic stories that explain how they are created through the drawing process. These narratives point to the visual language that exists outside of verbal communication and they serve as a visual pun.

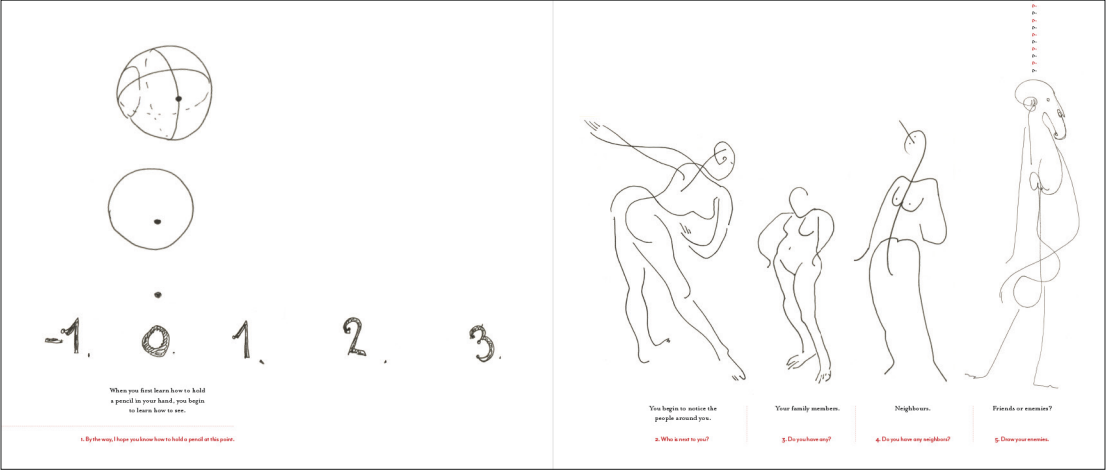
THE DRAWING BOOK.



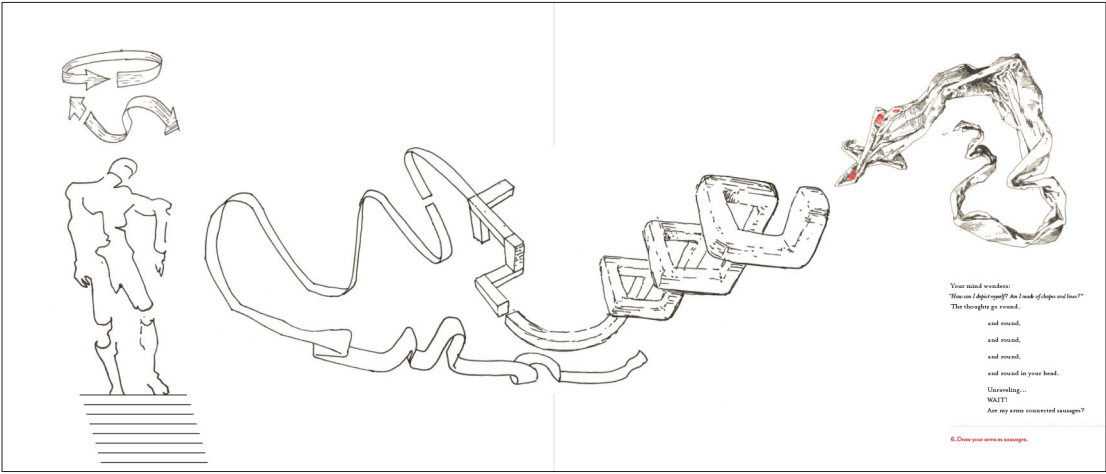
21. Cover for *The Drawing Book*, mixed media, 2019. 13"×11".



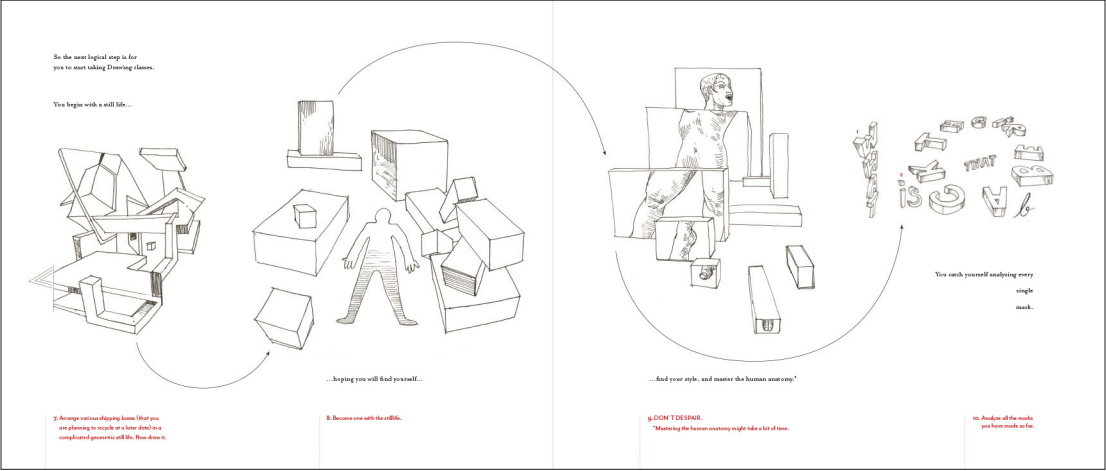
22. Title Page from *The Drawing Book*, mixed media, 2019. 13"×11".



23. Spheres from *The Drawing Book*, mixed media, 2019. 13"×11".



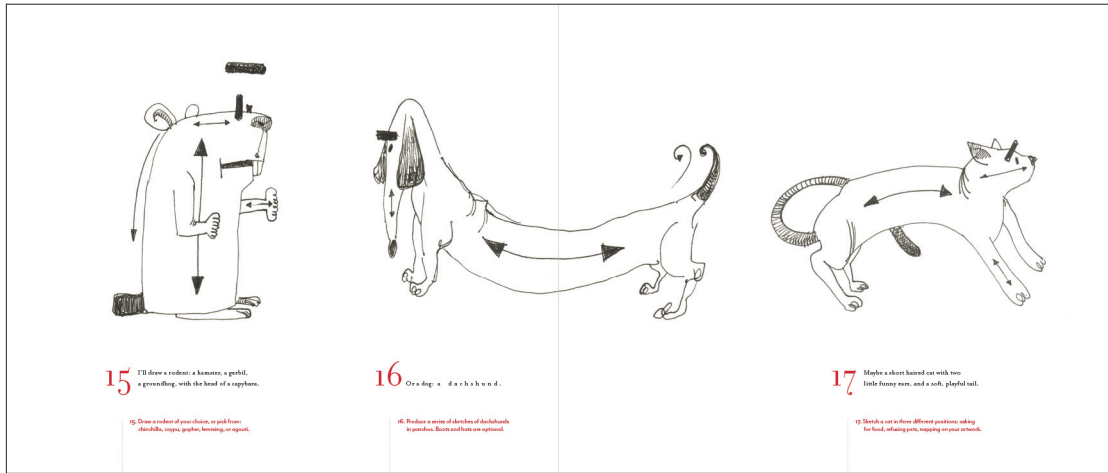
24. Ribbons from *The Drawing Book*, mixed media, 2019. 13"×11".



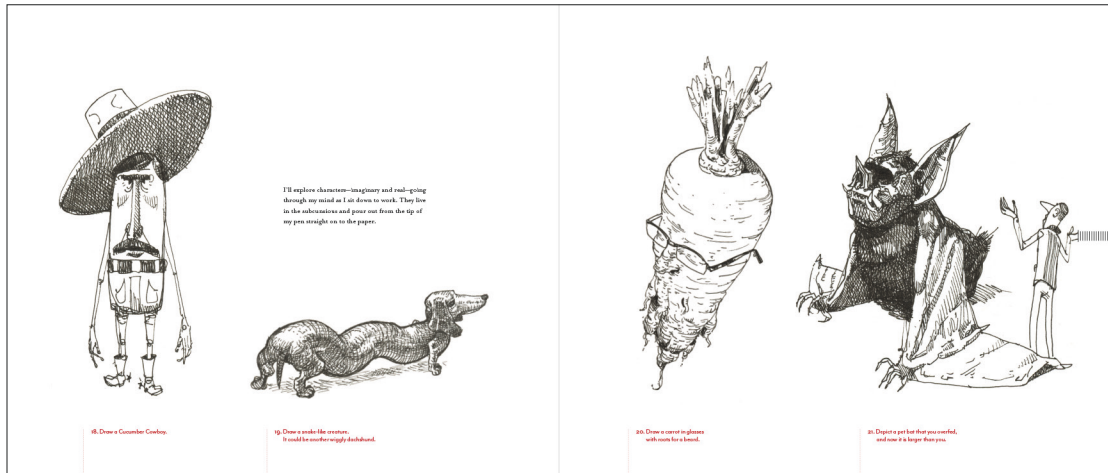
25. Boxes from *The Drawing Book*, mixed media, 2019. 13"×11".



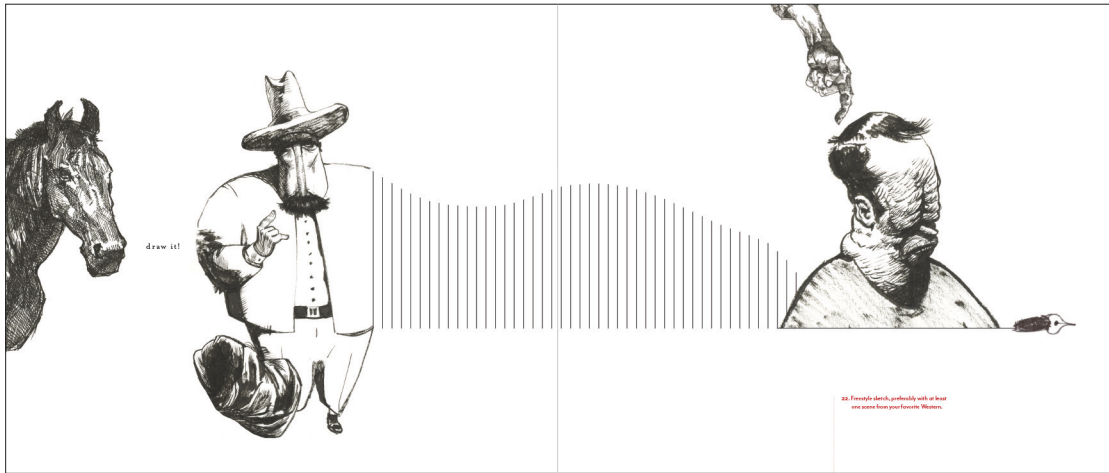
26. Faces from *The Drawing Book*, mixed media, 2019. 13"×11".



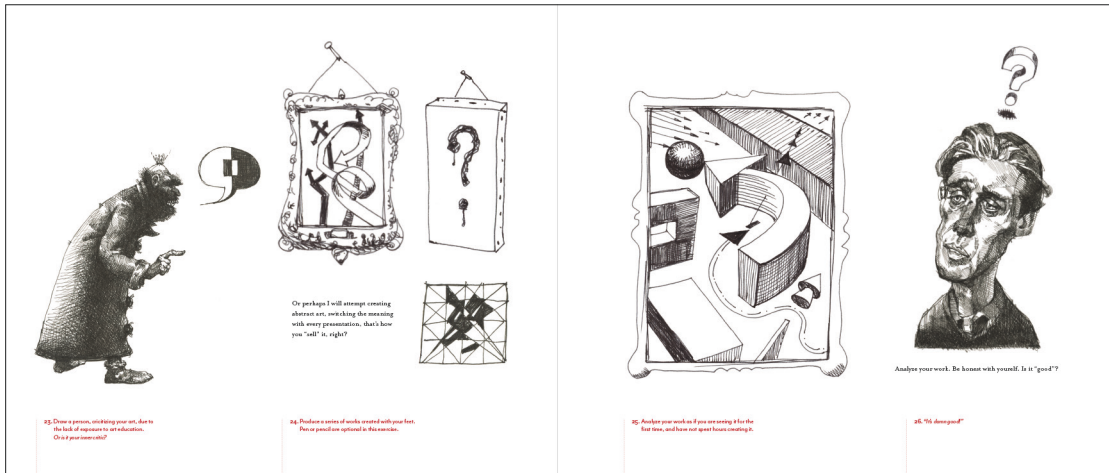
27. Capybara from *The Drawing Book*, mixed media, 2019. 13"×11".



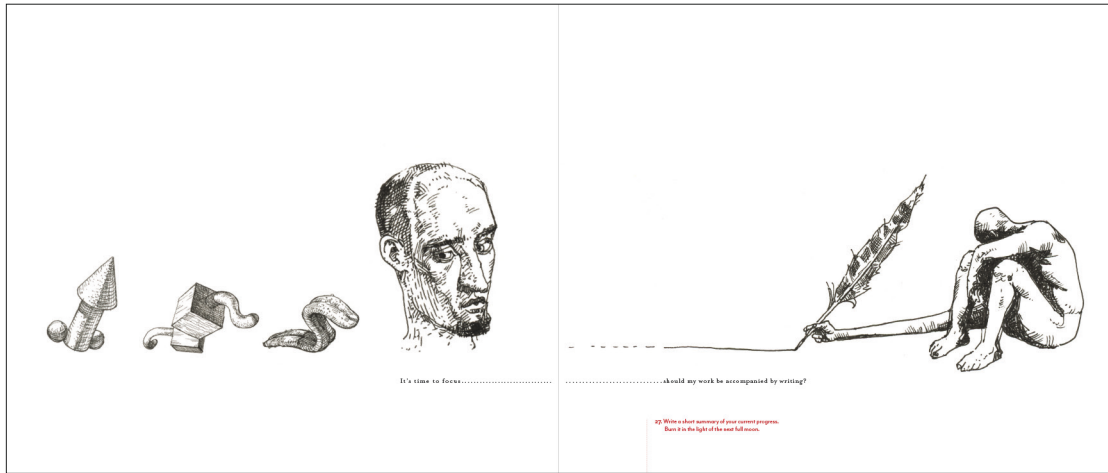
28. Dachshund from *The Drawing Book*, mixed media, 2019. 13"×11".



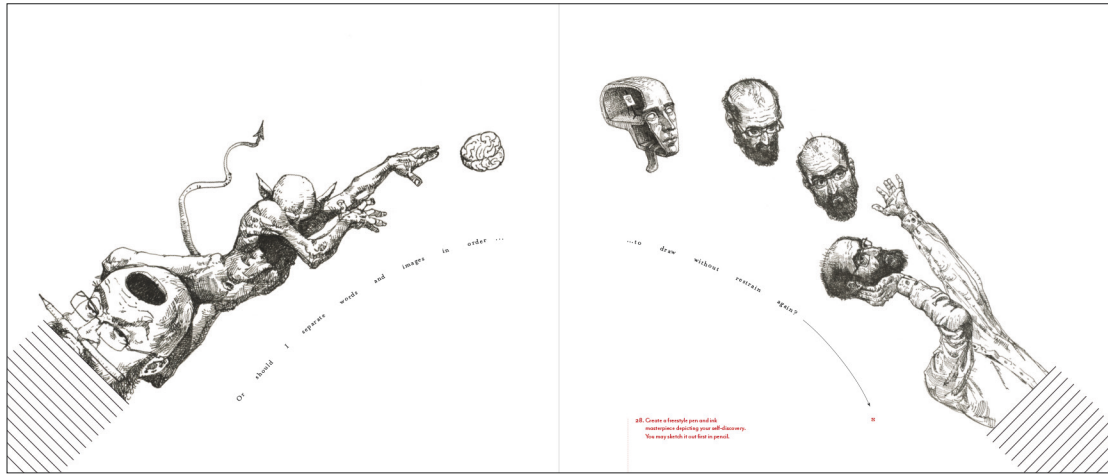
29. Draw It! from *The Drawing Book*, mixed media, 2019. 13"×11".



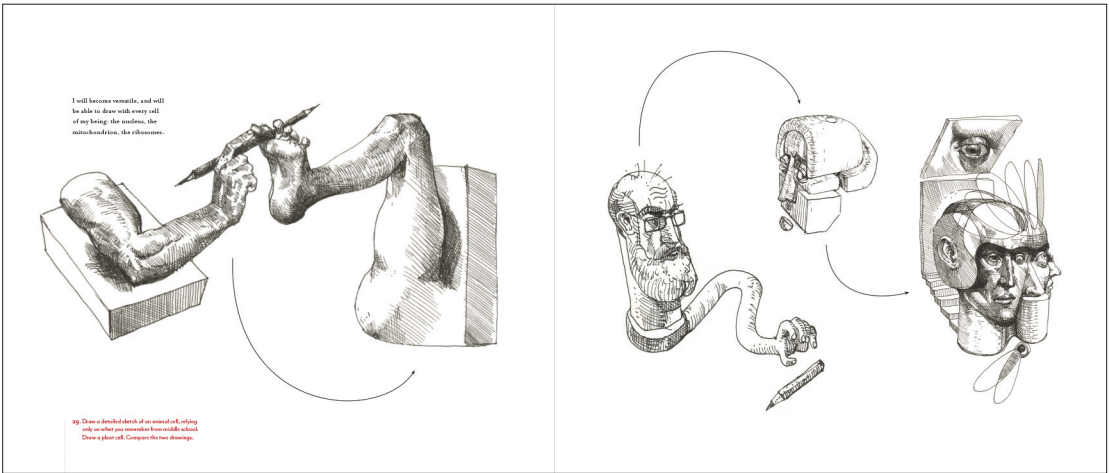
30. Abstraction from *The Drawing Book*, mixed media, 2019. 13"×11".



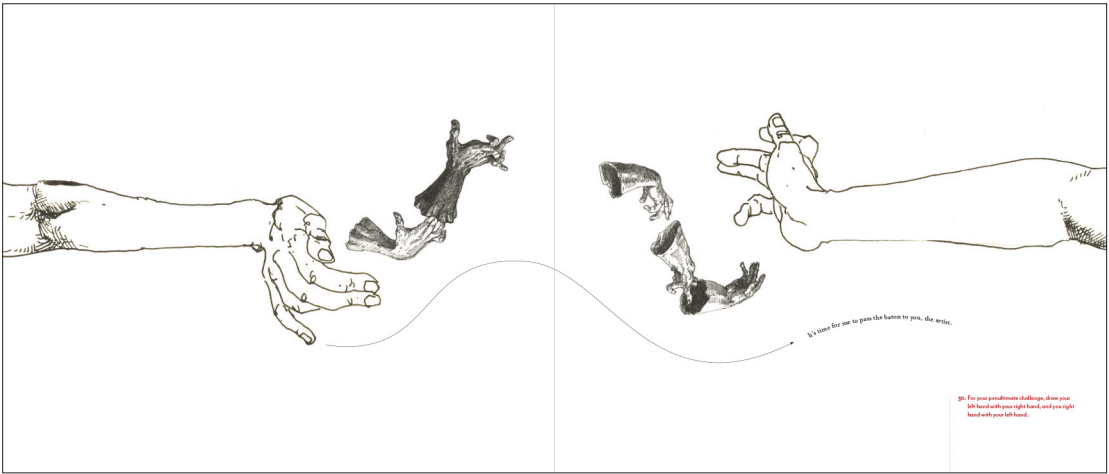
31. *Penmanship* from *The Drawing Book*, mixed media, 2019. 13"×11".



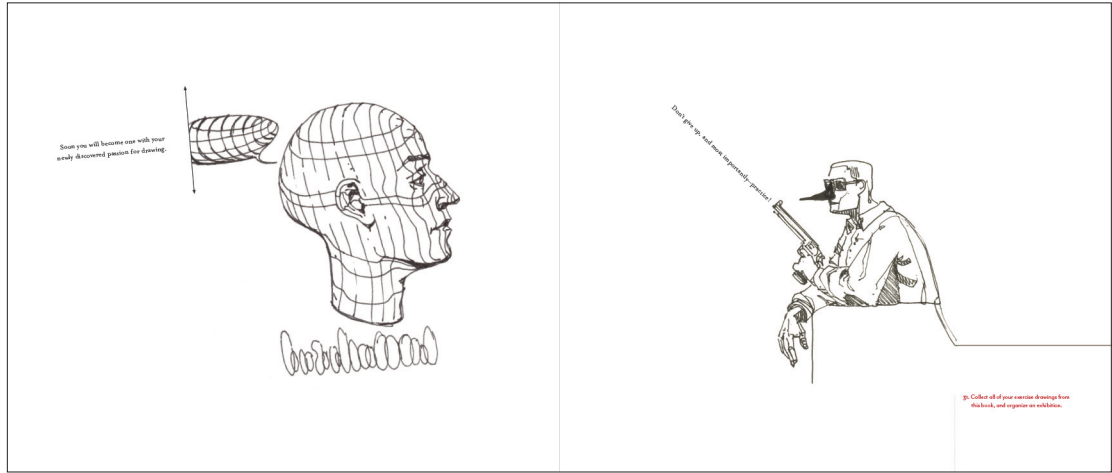
32. *Brain freeze* from *The Drawing Book*, mixed media, 2019. 13"×11".



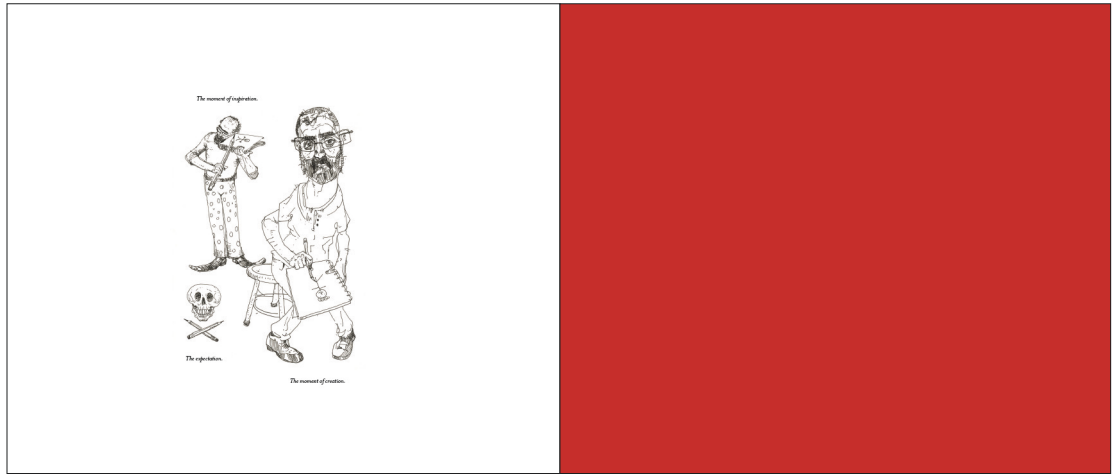
33. *Duality* from *The Drawing Book*, mixed media, 2019. 13"×11".



34. *Handholding* from *The Drawing Book*, mixed media, 2019. 13"×11".



35. *Revelation from The Drawing Book*, mixed media, 2019. 13"×11".



36. *The End from The Drawing Book*, mixed media, 2019. 13"×11".

CONCLUSION

I am a visual storyteller and I depict stories in unconventional ways. I am interested in the creation of images that communicate independently from verbal language. Images that contain characters that tell stories. Once these characters take a form, I want them to deliver meaning. Their function is to communicate what cannot be expressed with written or spoken language. This non-linear narrative framework should always remain concealed within the image. My intention is for the viewer to interpret images without any explanations. Their understanding of the illustrations should always be exclusively based on their personal experience and knowledge. It is in the viewer that the meaning should start to take shape and the narrative acquires its purpose.

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IMAGE LIST

1. Walter Crane, *The Mouse, the Bird, and the Sausage*, 1882, in Jacob and Wilhelm Grimm, “Grimm’s Fairy Tales.” Translated by Lucy Crane; illustrated by Walter Crane (London: Hurst & Co, 1882), 127. <https://archive.org/details/grimmsfairyta100grim/page/8/mode/2up>. Public domain.
2. Bell Robert Anning, *The Mouse, the Bird, and the Sausage*, 1912, in Jacob and Wilhelm Grimm, “Grimm’s Household Tales.” Translated by Marian Edwardes; illustrated by Robert Anning Bell (London: J.M. Dent & Sons Ltd., 1912), 24. <https://archive.org/details/grimmshouseholdt00grim/page/n5/mode/2up>. Public domain.
3. *Eye Around My Head*, 2020, mixed media. 11"×14.4". p. 4.
4. *Princess*, 2020, mixed media. 11"×14.4". p. 5.
5. *Galaxy*, 2020, ink pen and digital collage, 11"×14.4". p. 5.
6. *Cover for The Mouse, the Bird, and the Sausage*, 2020, mixed media, 8"×10". p. 6.
7. *Galaxy* from *The Mouse, the Bird, and the Sausage*, 2020, mixed media, 8"×10". p. 6.
8. *Eye Around My Head* from *The Mouse, the Bird, and the Sausage*, 2020, mixed media, 8"×10". p. 7.
9. *Dusk* from *The Mouse the Bird, and the Sausage*, 2020, mixed media, 8"×10". p. 7.
10. *Desert* from *The Mouse the Bird, and the Sausage*, 2020, mixed media, 8"×10". p. 8.
11. *Manna* from *The Mouse the Bird, and the Sausage*, 2020, mixed media, 8"×10". p. 8.
12. *The Last Supper* from *The Mouse, the Bird, and the Sausage*, 2020, mixed media, 8"×10". p. 9.
13. *Black Sun* from *The Mouse, the Bird, and the Sausage*, 2020, mixed media, 8"×10". p. 9.
14. *Saints* from *The Mouse, the Bird, and the Sausage*, 2020, mixed media, 8"×10". p. 10.
15. *Dancer* from *The Mouse, the Bird, and the Sausage*, 2020, mixed media, 8"×10". p. 10.
16. *Ready* from *The Mouse, the Bird, and the Sausage*, 2020, mixed media, 8"×10". p. 11.
17. *Prediction* from *The Mouse, the Bird, and the Sausage*, 2020, mixed media, 8"×10". p. 11.
18. *Princess* from *The Mouse, the Bird, and the Sausage*, 2020, mixed media, 8"×10". p. 12.
19. *Must* from *The Mouse, the Bird, and the Sausage*, 2020, mixed media, 8"×10". p. 12.
20. *Duality* from *The Drawing Book*, 2019, mixed media, 13"×11". p. 13.
21. *Cover* from *The Drawing Book*, 2019, mixed media, 13"×11". p. 15.
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24. *Ribbons* from *The Drawing Book*, 2019, mixed media, 13"×11". p. 16.
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