

WHEN HIS WIFE'S NAME IS MENTIONED IN CASUAL CONVERSATION...

AND HOW IS EVA FLOYM DOING?



MR. FLOYM RAISES HIS EYES UPWARD.

OH, I'M SORRY, I HADN'T HEARD. WAS SHE ILL FOR LONG?



NO, SHE ISN'T DEAD; SHE LIVES IN HER OWN APARTMENT ON THE 14th FLOOR.



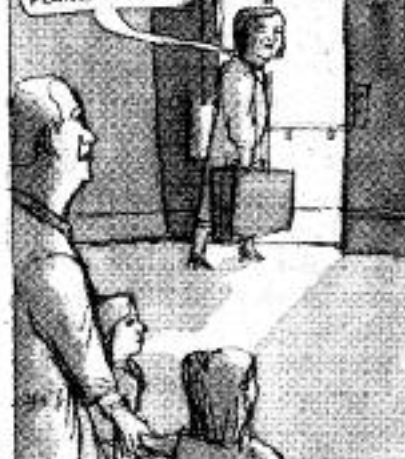
FOR THE PAST TWENTY YEARS, THE FLOYMS HAVE LIVED "IN SEPARATION."

SHE CAN NOT BEAR THE SIGHT OF HER OWN PROGENY

MY GRANDMOTHER'S NOSE RESEMBLED THROUGH YOUR FAMILY'S MURKY GENE POOL. IT'S LIKE LOOKING IN A FUN-HOUSE MIRROR.



I MIGHT HAVE DIED IN CHILD-BIRTH OR BEEN KILLED IN A PLANE CRASH



THE ONLY SIGNS OF HER EXISTENCE ARE THE CASHED CHECKS FROM A JOINT BANK ACCOUNT.

\$217.00 TO SYLVAN TONGUE CLEANING SERVICE



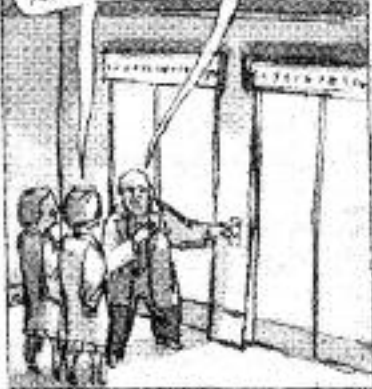
THEY NEVER MEET IN THE ELEVATOR.

SHE GODS ARE TWO HUNDRED THOUSAND



DAD, WHY DON'T YOU ARRANGE AN AMICABLE DIVORCE AND GO ON WITH YOUR LIFE?

I'M NOT READY TO GIVE UP ON YOUR MOTHER.



I BELIEVE THAT ONE DAY SHE WILL COME TO HER SENSES AND OUR FAMILY WILL BE HAPPILY REUNITED.



Tightrope Walking and The Drawn Line

An Interview with Ben Katchor

LAREN McCLUNG

Ben Katchor's picture stories include Julius Knipf, Real Estate Photographer; The Jew of New York; The Cardboard Valise; Hotel & Farm; and Shoehorn Technique. He regularly contributes comics and drawings to The New Yorker, The New York Times, Metropolis magazine and The Forward. Katchor is the recipient of a Guggenheim Fellowship and is a fellow of the American Academy in Berlin. He is the first cartoonist to ever receive the MacArthur Foundation Fellowship, also known as the "genius grant." Katchor also creates theatrical performances and delivers "illustrated lectures" at colleges and museums. He currently teaches a course in visual narrative at The New School. The following interview by Laren McClung took place in New York City on April 30 in Katchor's office at the New School.



Laren McClung: It's interesting to see that there's a growing attention to graphic writing, or work combining word and image.

Ben Katchor: It's a time when a lot of people are doing this kind of work. Not just screenwriters, but people who want to find their own imagery. The person who just wants to use words seems to be in this strange modernist position, like they don't want to sully their own thought. But people still want to go to readings and hear the voice, and see what the writer looks like and see what [his or her] posture is like. There's no such thing as pure prose.

LM: I'm interested in what you tell writers who don't draw.

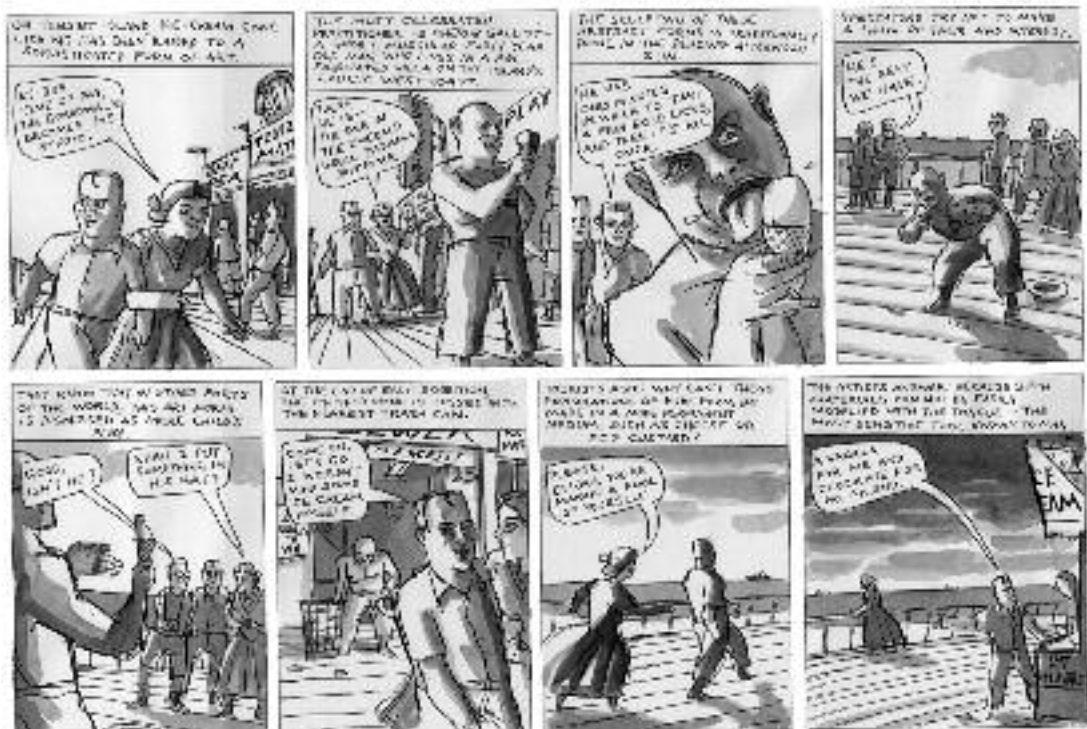
Laren McClung is currently studying in the graduate Creative Writing Program at New York University. She has taught at colleges and universities, including Penn State University, Arcadia University, and Bucks County Community College; and has served fellowships with Teachers & Writers Collaborative and with the Goldwater Writing Project at Goldwater Memorial Hospital.

BK: People say that they can write but can't draw, that the brain is wired in such a way that they're only good with words. I just think that's training. I think everybody can use this whole spectrum of meaning if they try. They just haven't been asked to do it. Most people can't do tightrope walking either! They don't teach it in school.

The thing is most people's art education is non-existent. So, when you start drawing at eighteen or twenty years old, you have the technique of a child because that's where you still are. It just means you don't have all of the conventions and mannerisms that art students pick up, which they then have to spend years getting rid of. You are, in a way, in a better place.

Basically what the image can do is give a spatial dimension to text. Text deals with ideas and time. If you make a drawing, you can add all kinds of other non-verbal description. And the drawn line is your autographic personality, something you can't see through a keyboard because your hands are working through a machine. When you draw with your hand, there's a physical connection between your brain and your hand, and these psycho-motor connections give everyone this unique handwriting. In my class I like everyone to think about how they can clarify or correct their own text with an image, with their own ideas and inventions. Basically, this means getting in touch with their handwriting again, and that's the beginning. From there, people go off in different directions.

LM: Are there students you find it difficult to teach how to draw?



An episode of Ben Katchor's "The Cardboard Valise." ©2008 Ben Katchor.

BK: People made pictures before there was written language, so I don't think there's too much to say except don't be embarrassed to draw like a child or a caveman. Those are some of the best drawings in the world. Use your lack of technique to make something exciting. It's not about what you can't draw, it's how to use what you *can* draw.

LM: What kind of exercises do you give your students?

BK: The students usually start with an essay, a written exercise, because they can all write in a sophisticated way compared to their drawing. Writing is just an easier way to juggle ideas. That's the power of language—it lets you juggle ideas with very little effort—you're just juggling symbols. So we start with essay exercises, all sorts of strange essays. They're all based on memory or personal experience, so they are rooted in observational things. Sometimes it's something as simple as a list of things you saw on the way to school on the street; why these things? Why do you think you notice these things of all the things you could possibly notice? The essays are done in class—really quickly in about fifteen minutes—so there's no time to procrastinate. And then we try to look at some of the places that are described in the essay, because everything takes place somewhere. We start analyzing the place as a physical space: how you can represent that, and what it adds to the story. We analyze the drama of the space, just like a set in a play.

There's a lot of resistance to adding drawing to text. People are happy with their specialized ability. They say, "I can't draw" as if they could write when they were babies. They couldn't write either.

LM: Do you deal with metaphor within the images at all?

BK: That's easily done with words, so we tend to deal with physical descriptions and concrete placement of things, how to describe space. The more vividly they can describe space, the better their drawing. There's no other criteria. The students are coming at this with an adult understanding of stories and how things happen—so they find the technique. I think it would be boring to just say, "Well, now you have to study life drawing for five years and then we'll see." The whole world is about people hiring experts to invent visual corporate logos and visual identities hiding their own primitive visual identity. Most people have the visual identity of a child if they try to make images. So you just need to admit that that's the level this is all going to work on and see how to make a good image with your technique.

LM: So you're not trying to train your students to be skilled artists, but teaching them to use what they have to make a good story.

BK: I think it can be done. It has something to do with how connected you are to your handwriting. But there's a lot of resistance to adding drawing to text. People are happy with their specialized ability. They say, "I can't draw" as if they could write when they were babies. They couldn't write either. You can't do anything when you are in the crib. You can just play with things. Probably you're more likely to draw than to use language.

LM: What texts do you use in your classes?

BK: Sometimes we use a text as the basis of a story. What are our mental images as we read? But I don't think that's the most important thing to do. These students grew up watching TV and looking at comic strips and seem to know intuitively how it works. To show them models of great strips while they are making their first attempts would be sort of discouraging. It would be like saying, "Why can't you write like James Joyce? What's stopping you?" That's not the point.

I also think for people beginning to do something, theory is not of too much use. They don't have any practical ability yet. As they figure things out practically, then they can read about how this thing works theoretically, but I think that follows later.

I'm not really interested in the technical finish of a piece of drawing or writing as much as how you do it, and what happens by chance and what happens on paper and all of these things that happen through the process.

It's like reading about how to do a somersault; You have to try to do it and see what happens. I'm not really interested in the technical finish of a piece of drawing or writing as much as how you do it, and what happens by chance and what happens on paper and all of these things that happen through the process.

LM: Can you talk about your own process? How do you come to an idea?

BK: It's exactly like the process in these exercises. I think about things I've seen or know. It's good to have a physical root. An idea is a pretty barren thing without a physical component. When you do a weekly strip or a monthly strip you're always working. You need this inexhaustible drive. I don't think most people write thousands of stories in their lives. But if you do a weekly strip, you make up thousands of stories. You realize that there's a potential in everything for a story or some connection.

LM: Do you think that graphic writing can be used to create a sense of tone that writing alone doesn't create?

BK: That's the root of humor: ideas and material things are never in sync. Writers don't always have that problem because they are dealing in ideas, concepts, words. Once you start making an image of these, you realize you might be contradicting everything you said. The image changes the idea of the thing. That's how it works. It's a little messier. You can add, or, in the name of purifying, you can remove everything you don't think is part of the piece, but then you end up with minimalist art, minimalist writing. And I think that can be a dead end.

LM: Do you see your performance pieces as separate from your work on the page?

BK: They all start on the page and with drawings, and then I figure out how to make a longer story or a more complex story. My shows use my drawings as a setting. It's like there's another physical actor in the show besides the actors—there's my handwriting. And I don't think people consciously notice that, but they feel it. There's not

a set, there's not an object on the stage, but there's somebody's handwriting. And I think they feel that—the speed of it, all the qualities a line has. Theater is the first place where words and images were put together. There's a debate whether the text of a play can even exist without the staging, without being performed.

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I think this generation now growing up will think of this form as serious as writing or picture making.

LM: When did you start drawing and taking it seriously?

BK: Well, I drew as a child. I don't know about seriously. Making a living doing it? I was in my thirties by the time I could make a living. As a child I knew people made comic strips. I saw pictures of comic artists. I knew you could do that. Rather than being a baker, you could draw comic strips or paint. So I think very early on I knew this was something you could do as a job. And I saw the real world had all this other stuff going on—film and theater and comics—and I said, "I need to do that."

LM: Are there specific writers and comic artists or filmmakers that influenced how you approach your work?

BK: The good ones! I outgrew comics when I was in junior high school. I started getting bored with comic books. As there wasn't a more sophisticated form I could easily go to—there were people I thought did work that was more sophisticated, like Edward Gorey or Jules Feiffer—but there wasn't this large body of work that I could read. So I looked at painters who were involved in narrative, and I looked at writers who sometimes wrote film. I looked at a lot of film. I think there is beginning to be a body of work in this field that's not film, but handmade picture-stories. I think this generation now growing up will think of this form as serious as writing or picture making.

LM: Do you have any advice for a young writer who wants to make images?

BK: To make them! To get in touch with this primitive ability that people have to make images. They did it in the cave with no picture references. They just went out, looked at something, and went back into a cave. They projected images onto rocks. When you start drawing on a page, you start using all of the mistakes you made to project other images, and then you finally start controlling what happens. 