

Good Habits Pay Off

For **Tom Christopher**, a disciplined career in illustration paved the road to success in the world of fine art.

BY Daniel Grant

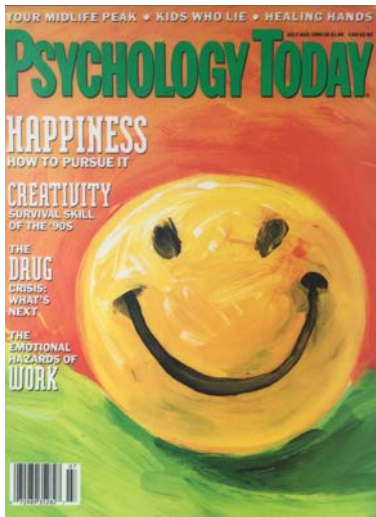


Tom Christopher was walking down an ordinary street in Manhattan on an overcast day in the late 1980s when he experienced an epiphany. As he describes it, “The sun came out from behind the clouds, and you could see everything:

homeless guys in stairwells, lurkers in doorways, women with high-heeled shoes, clowns, deliverymen pushing dollies, taxis and buses inching their way along, the bright lights of Broadway. I thought, ‘I’ve got to paint this!’”

In fact, Christopher decided that scenes like this were all he ever wanted to paint again. More than 30 years later, he’s still painting New York City’s street life—large-scale

Once That Shimmering, Get Even Light Comes On, There Is Nothing Like It
acrylic on canvas, 52x60
COURTESY GALERIE
TAMENAGA, PARIS



works (5x5 feet or larger) with lots of color and splashy brushstrokes that straddle the line between abstract and representational—but let’s not get ahead of ourselves. The point here isn’t that Christopher has a particular subject for his paintings or that he has followed this path to considerable esteem and financial success, but the fact that he is a fine artist at all.

ILLUSTRATION FOR FUN AND PROFIT

Christopher studied at the Art Center College of Design, in Pasadena, Calif., to become an illustrator. “I wanted to be a painter, but what I really was looking for was a way to make a living, and illustration was the way to do that,” he says. And make a living is what he did. Working for CBS records, he painted album covers for jazz musicians Count Basie, Ella Fitzgerald, Bill Evans (top left) and Sonny Rollins (top right), as well as posters for Elvis Costello and t-shirt designs for Bruce Springsteen. He also drew and painted automobiles

for *Motor Trend* magazine, a smiley face for a *Psychology Today* magazine cover (above left), spot images for *The Wall Street Journal* and *The New York Times* and even produced courtroom sketches for both CBS and NBC news (see *On Trial*, above).

Full-time illustration was fun—always different, always challenging. “Edward Hopper and Andy Warhol, who both started out as illustrators, later put it down,” says Christopher, “but I liked it.” He describes the work in terms of problem-solving. When working for a book publisher, for example, he found satisfaction in “distilling an entire book into one image.” Illustration also proved to be a cure for restlessness. “I would get bored being in a studio all day just

CLOCKWISE
FROM TOP LEFT
Bill Evans
(on album cover)
acrylic on canvas,
52x60

Sonny Rollins
(on album cover)
acrylic on board,
14x18

A Happy Face
(on *Psychology Today*
magazine cover)
acrylic on canvas,
52x60

On Trial:
Christopher created
this courtroom sketch
of actor Lee Marvin
for NBC News when
covering the landmark
1979 palimony lawsuit
between Marvin and
his former girlfriend
Michelle Triola Marvin.

painting, so I welcomed the job of looking for work because it gave me a reason to get out of the studio.”

From 1980 to 1990, the full-time illustration years, Christopher earned a substantial income, but in spite of this success, the work started to pall after a while. “I got tired of doing illustrations,” says Christopher. That feeling hit him most strongly when he had his epiphany—his Aha! moment—while walking in Manhattan.

Around this time, Christopher could also see that the illustration industry was undergoing a significant change as one magazine after another folded due to declining profits. In addition, more and more illustration jobs were assigned to be done on a computer rather than at a drawing board or easel. He could still find jobs, and he’d learned how to create on

a computer, but the sun coming out from behind the clouds on that day in the late 1980s seemed to symbolize a new dawn in Christopher’s career. It was time to transition to fine art.

TRANSITIONAL TRIBULATIONS

Many people undoubtedly, see themselves as novelists or songwriters or actors or fine artists who just need a break to let them leave their day jobs for good and become who they truly are. It does happen, and the past 100-plus years have produced many artists who held jobs outside the field until they could afford to do without them: Yves Tanguy was a wine merchant; Arnold Friedman was a postal employee; Sol Lewitt worked as a security guard at the Museum of Modern Art; Vassily Kandinsky was

a professor of law; Henri Rousseau was a customs agent; Julian Schnabel worked as a cook; Richard Serra was a man-with-van furniture mover (Serra claimed that he knew he could give up the moving jobs when one of his sculptures reached the sales price of \$5,000). Wayne Thiebaud called himself an “illustrator gone uppity.” Still, it’s the rare artist who can give up salaried, commercial or commissioned work for good, and art galleries are filled with work by artists who teach or do other work that brings in money on a reliable basis.

Having a foot in two careers—illustration and fine art or, really, anything else and fine art—isn’t easy, and the larger world often appears to demand that you decide whether you’re “in here” or “out there.” Christopher notes that many art

The Artist and the Newsguy
acrylic on canvas

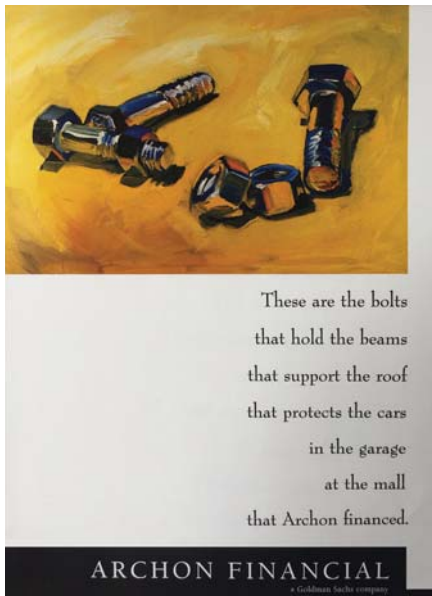


THE FINE ART OF ILLUSTRATION

The line between illustration and fine art is sometimes a matter of perception. Christopher created several paintings of tools that he licensed as illustrations for a series of ads for Archon Financial. He also exhibited the paintings successfully as fine art.

BELOW, LEFT TO RIGHT
On Archon Financial ad: **Nuts & Bolts**; acrylic on canvas, 32x40

Red Workers Hammer
acrylic on canvas, 30x42



directors look down on fine artists as being unreliable and lax. He explains, “Art directors have a living-in-a-cold-water-flat-and-chopping-off-your-ear conception of artists, and they looked at me and said, ‘Is that what you are these days?’” The problem is that there’s often a drop-everything aspect to commercial illustration assignments that may prove disruptive to the process of creating fine art. Christopher’s long-time illustration agent, Vicki Morgan, who has represented a number of illustrators who also exhibit their fine art in galleries, has little time for artists’ self-pity. “You can’t dabble in illustration,” she says. “You have to be committed to this work and not just do it when you need some money. You’re competing for every job against very talented illustrators who do nothing but illustration all day.” Nevertheless, even she understands that one career doesn’t always reflect everything about who you are; in 2001, she and her husband took a break from their careers to start Tuthilltown Spirits, a bourbon distillery.

BREAKING THROUGH

In spite of his epiphany, not to mention the difficulty of standing with a foot in two art careers, Christopher didn’t quit the illustration field all at once. Instead he started introducing himself to art galleries, where he presented his fine art as well as illustrations he’d done for commercial clients. “I probably went to 40 or 50 galleries before getting anyone to show interest,” he says. Interest sometimes was evidenced by a grunt or by not refusing to accept a sleeve of slides.

This is where Christopher’s experience as an illustrator kicked in. As a commercial artist always hustling for the next job, he was well accustomed to dealing with rejection in a positive way. “Many fine artists are afraid of being rejected, so they don’t show their work to anyone,” says Christopher, “If someone doesn’t like my work, I think, ‘Great, I don’t have to show you my work ever again.’” He was willing to work with people, whether an art director or a gallery director, showing up on time

and meeting deadlines, even when they seemed impossible. His first solo exhibition at an East Village art gallery came about because the artist who was slated to have an exhibition bailed on the gallery at the last minute. The gallery owner called Christopher, asking him to fill in. He asked when the show would take place, figuring he’d have a few months to prepare. The gallery owner answered, “Tomorrow.”

Most of Christopher’s first exhibitions were group shows in Lower East Side Manhattan galleries, where one of his works might be displayed amid many paintings by other artists. He had two bodies of work to show: There were his illustration images—cars, hiking apparel, surfing swimsuits, cowboy boots, tools (see *The Fine Art of Illustration*, above) and what-not—which he still owned, as he’d only licensed the use of the images. He also had the city-street-life paintings he increasingly pursued in the evenings after he decided his day job was done. Both types of work sold; Christopher estimated that approximately 100

paintings of one type or another were purchased by buyers before his work was represented by a New York City art gallery.

Christopher is currently represented by Gallery Tamenaga, in Paris, and shows his work regularly at Galerie Barbara von Stechow, in Frankfurt, Germany. Early this fall his work will appear in the exhibition “The New Yorkers,” at Laverdin Gallery, in New York. Interestingly, his paintings sell well in the European galleries even though his subject matter is largely centered in New York. Perhaps that’s not surprising, as people in other countries find the imagined Manhattan intriguing. “Henri Matisse said that he wanted

to create paintings that are like comfortable armchairs for businessmen, and I do, too,” says Christopher. “The difference is that in my paintings, there might be a pit bull underneath one of the cushions.” Many of his gallery shows now sell out, and his earnings have significantly surpassed what they were in his illustration days.

SECRET TO SUCCESS

As Christopher sees it, his illustration work was good training for his fine art career. “You learn that everything you do is not precious,” he says. “You don’t get so haughty that you get burned out. I’ve probably thrown away 200 paintings that didn’t seem to me to be good enough. I think the best purchases I ever made weren’t brushes and paint but a dumpster and a box cutter.”

That’s the point of this story. Sometimes fine artists hold grudges, believing that the outside world has to suit them rather than the other way around, and they’re careless about

OPPOSITE
The Chrysler Building, Now I Feel at Home
enamel on canvas

BELOW
Floating Around the Great Big City
acrylic on canvas,
64x82

COURTESY OF GALERIE
TAMENAGA, PARIS





their business practices. Sometimes people who quit one field to become a novelist or songwriter or actor or artist or another type of creative tend to adopt the assumed self-centered values of the arts rather than apply the customs of the working world to their new endeavors. Christopher's success as a fine artist is certainly due to the overall appeal of his artwork, but it's also related to the work ethic he established as an illustrator. Transitions are tough. They require extra hours, trade-offs and balancing acts, but they are possible. Tom Christopher—illustrator turned fine artist—is proof. 🍷

Daniel Grant has written six books on building a successful career as an artist, including [The Business of Being an Artist](#) (Allworth Press).

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