

Scavenging: The Art of Pop Culture Caricature

by John Kascht

For almost twenty years I lived and worked in Washington, D.C. From my studio window I could see the very tip of the U.S. Capitol dome. Every morning—and all day long in chilly weather—a helix of white gulls circled over it like an anemic but persistent tornado. I read somewhere that as sunlight warms the Capitol dome it creates an updraft that the gulls ride. But I know better: the sun has nothing at all to do with it. No, when Congress is in session the gulls are riding hot air, plain and simple.

At least that's how it looks from my drawing board. I'm a satirist. I make a living drawing caricatures and cartoons for newspapers and magazines.

Watching the gulls became part of my daily work routine. I'd sharpen my pencils, drink some strong coffee, stare at a blank sheet of paper. And in my peripheral vision, the gulls would go around and around and around and...

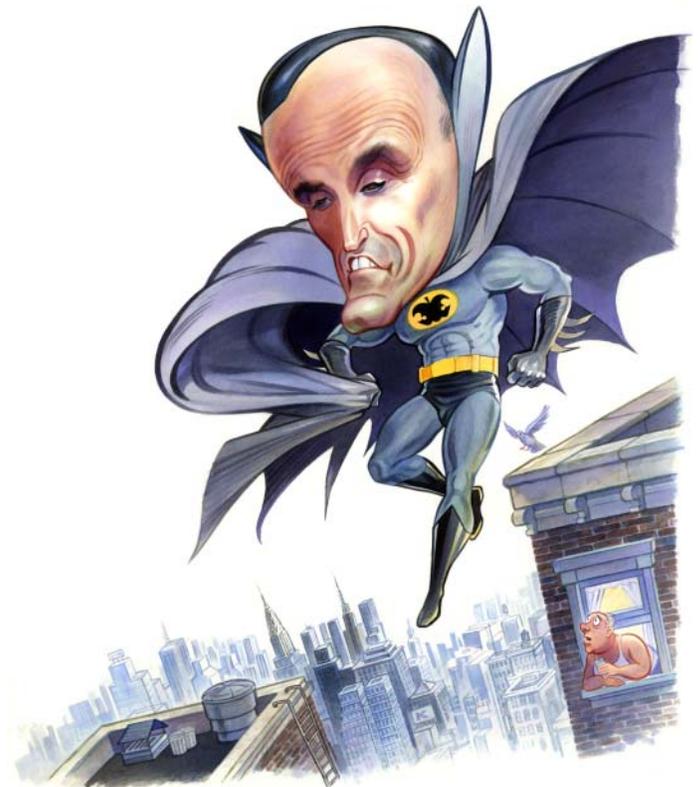
eventually I'd stop thinking so hard and ideas would float to the surface.

Recently I traded city for country; my view of the Capitol for one of maple trees along a rocky cliff in Nowhere, Pennsylvania. Though the scenery has changed, circling birds remain a daily feature of the landscape, and of my work routine. Not gulls now, but vultures. Every day, dozens of them ride the thermals along our ridge, majestic and ominous. I sharpen my pencils, drink some strong coffee, stare at a blank sheet of paper. And in my peripheral vision...



'Bill Gates.'

Published in Esquire. Watercolor and colored ink on 4-ply Strathmore series 500 bristol. ©John Kascht



'Rudy Giuliani: The Dark Crusader of Gotham.'

Published in Esquire. Watercolor and colored ink on 4-ply Strathmore series 500 bristol. ©John Kascht

It seems fitting to have vultures circling on the periphery of each assignment. It really punctuates the fact that I'm always working against a deadline. It also occurs to me that my artistic process itself is vulture-like, especially the going around in circles part...looking for some tasty scandal here, a fresh carcass there. I follow the currents that billow out of Washington and Hollywood, and those that rise less dramatically from countless odd hotspots in between. Sometimes I fancy myself a bird of prey, but the truth is I'm more of a gull or a buzzard. I don't attack; I scavenge.

My work begins with something like ambulance chasing. A magazine calls to say "have you heard about...?" and I follow the sirens to the site of fresh carnage. Some person, some group, some agenda has been bloodied and spilled out into the streets of our communal awareness. Usually it's a self-inflicted wound that sounds the alarm;

a private peccadillo gone embarrassingly public like a lurid episode of "COPS." Clinton and Lewinsky and their White House trailer trysts comes to mind, even years after the fact. Sometimes it's more like a disturbance of the peace: Michael Jackson has wandered out of his compound again. People are frightened, still a large crowd has gathered.



'King Kong Clinton.'

Published in Esquire. Watercolor and colored ink on 4-ply Strathmore series 500 bristol. ©John Kascht

There is no shortage of subject matter.

The metaphorical ambulance arrives and all kinds of people come out for a look. When I'm caricaturing, I'm part medical examiner, part journalist, part psychologist. Mostly, I'm the person who heard a shriek and wandered outside in pajamas to see what the hell happened this time. When I draw, I'm a witness, a bystander—and not necessarily innocent. After all, I'm usually able to recognize in myself even the most undesirable qualities that I lampoon in others.



'Bill Murray.'
Published in Entertainment Weekly. Watercolor and colored ink on 4-ply Strathmore series 500 bristol. ©John Kascht

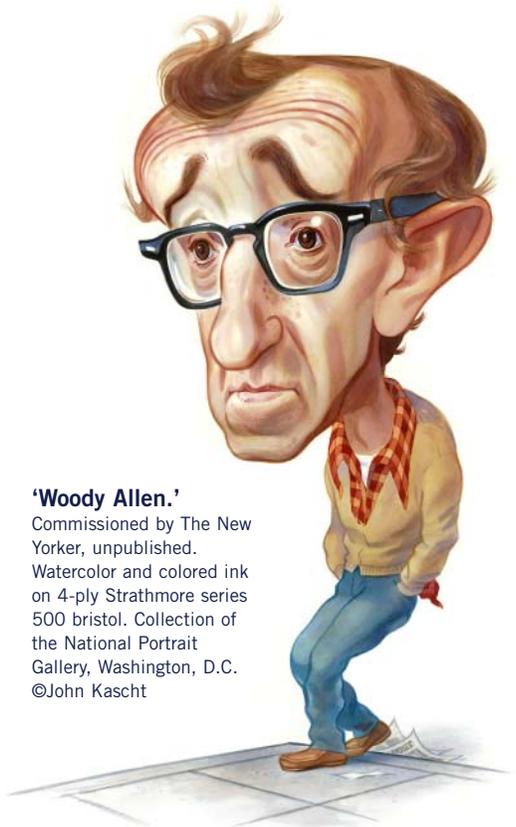


'Mick Jagger.'
Published in The Press. Watercolor and colored ink on 4-ply Strathmore series 500 bristol. ©John Kascht

“...my artistic process itself is vulture-like, especially the going around in circles part...looking for some tasty scandal here, a fresh carcass there.”



'Windbag Trump.'
Published in Entertainment Weekly. Watercolor and colored ink on 4-ply Strathmore series 500 bristol. ©John Kascht



'Woody Allen.'
Commissioned by The New Yorker, unpublished. Watercolor and colored ink on 4-ply Strathmore series 500 bristol. Collection of the National Portrait Gallery, Washington, D.C. ©John Kascht

Strange as it may sound coming from a caricaturist, I approach my subjects with a lot of compassion. I'm curious and hungry to know what makes us all tick. I am more interested in reporting than in editorializing, and I really believe that my drawings have little to do with my own opinions. As far as I can tell, I'm making observations, not judgments. What someone has to say about himself or herself is much more revealing than any opinion I might have. Besides, contemporary culture is so increasingly self-satirizing that nowadays 'parody' requires little more than taking a snapshot, no funhouse mirror necessary. How can you improve upon Bill Clinton's "It depends on what the meaning of is is", or make a more telling picture of Michael Jackson than the one that he has literally carved out of his own flesh?

Grotesque as caricatures may seem, they are portraits. What looks like distortion was mostly there already...before I swooped in and picked things over.

'Condi Rice.'

Published in The Wall Street Journal. Watercolor and colored ink on 4-ply Strathmore series 500 bristol. ©John Kascht

Preliminary study of Condi Rice.

Pencil on vellum. ©John Kascht



'Not a friend in the World.'

Published in Entertainment Weekly. Watercolor and colored ink on 4-ply Strathmore series 500 bristol. ©John Kascht

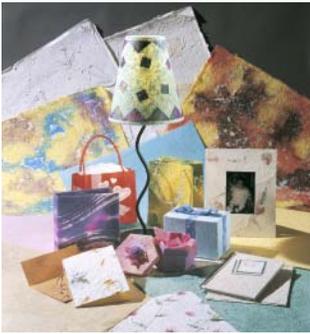
ABOUT THE ARTIST

John Kascht's caricatures and satirical illustrations have appeared on the pages or covers of Time, Newsweek, U.S. News and World Report, TV Guide, Rolling Stone, The New Yorker, Entertainment Weekly, Esquire, GQ, MAD, Reader's Digest, The New York Times, The Los Angeles Times, and The Village Voice. Kascht's illustrated short story "Drawing Miss Hepburn"—about two days he spent sketching Katharine Hepburn at her home—was recently published in the New York Times Magazine.

Buyers of his work include the Smithsonian's National Portrait Gallery, Stephen King, Sean Connery, Ray Romano, Joan Collins, Ted Turner, Rosie O'Donnell, John Travolta, Conan O'Brien, and Milton Berle.

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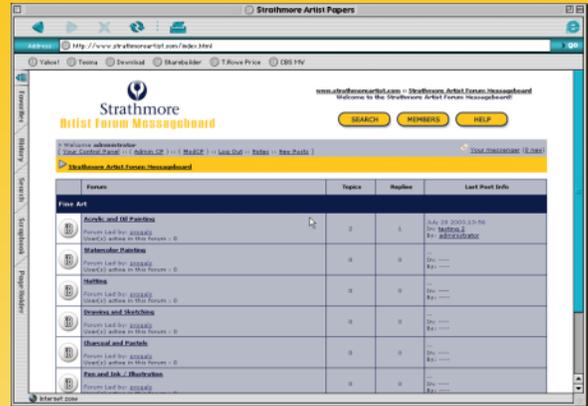
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