

## Bad Co. a 12 part comic strip for Prawn's Pee Newspaper at Glasgow International Festival 2012.

Prawn's Pee was a daily newspaper published for the duration of the 2012 GI Festival (<http://www.glasgowinternational.org>). Edited by Rob Churm and Rebecca Wilcox, the publication included contributions from well established artists associated with Glasgow such as Michael Fullerton, Alex Frost and Raydale Dower. My contribution was an experimental comic strip serialised over 12 editions and subsequently collected into a boxed set.

### The Background

Several years ago I was asked to contribute to a group show entitled Collecting Mud at the Project Room Gallery in Glasgow. My practice involves illustration, print-making and predominantly comics. I thought about how comics were generally perceived in the domain of fine art. Australian art critic had declared Robert Crumb the "Bruegel of America" and cartoonists like Chris Ware were beginning to appear in spaces like the Whitney Biennial but comics and art in the same sentence to most still meant pop art and particularly Roy Lichtenstein. Roy Lichtenstein's appropriation and exsanguination of the work of cartoonists such as Irv Norvick and Jack Kirby presented an inflated, garish and sanitised stereotype of comics visual appeal. In fact comics of the time (the late 1950s and 1960s) often had a print quality closer to a printmaker's lithographic proofs, printed on newsprint with muted colours, misregistration and an energy born of work paid by the page. Jack Kirby (1917-1994) was one of the most prolific and one of the most dynamic cartoonists who created many of the characters and concepts that continue to sustain the comics industry in the USA today (last years Avengers film features characters and scenes created or co-created by Kirby fifty years ago.)

Such a prolific commercial artist developed certain tropes that reappeared in his work over the course of many years and one of those that I had noticed and which held a fascination for me were scenes of people plunging down into deep water. I found examples in 8 or 9 stories stretching over a period of twenty years and these images not only held an element of danger - a danger of drowning - and struggle but also embodied the Jungian aspect of a representation of the unconscious.

Seen together these images lent each other a powerful emotional impact but the captions, removed from the context of the original stories, were somewhat distracting. I thought about Kirby's struggle with the comics industry, his work-for-hire contract had denied him a share of the huge profits made from the characters he had created and breathed life into and now, almost twenty years after his death his family are still involved in court cases attempting to receive both financial settlement and recognition for Kirby's achievements.

With water in mind I also thought about songwriter Brian Wilson, whose artistic peak was roughly in the same period as the older Kirby, and who similarly had struggled within the industry built around his profession. His father had, without his permission, sold the rights to his songs for well below market value and his former group the Beach Boys, from which he had been excluded, had been touring with a set made up primarily of Wilson's songs. 'Til I Die' is a particularly poignant song that appeared on the Beach Boys Surf's Up album, it is both a well beloved song and one that seemed appropriate for the ideas I had been playing with around these images.

I wanted to retain the physical qualities of the comics images so rather than relettering the pages myself I went about an almost absurdly meticulous sampling of individual letters to detourn the images to contain the lyrics from Wilson's song. I was pleased with the way the piece worked in the gallery, I found it much more affecting than I had expected and was interested too in what it said about the subtle relationship between text and image in a comics story.

These ideas crossed over into my own comics practice and, having considered comics relationship with fine art, I went on to consider comics and folk music in the story 'Two Sisters,' comics and TV situation comedies (particularly the writing of Nat Hiken) in 'Romans In Britain' and comics and the punk sensibility, touching also on satire/hoax autobiographical comics, with 'The Hissterics.'

Upon being asked to contribute to the daily art newspaper Prawn's Pee, I was looking at strategies to generate text and image that again explored the unconscious. I wanted to take two random elements, set myself a strict set of rules to adhere to and attempt, under these restrictions, to create a coherent narrative.

### The Territory

Experimental comics are still relatively rare. Many comics that have surfaced in the art world are dry and show little understanding of the mechanics or subtleties of the form. The 2009 anthology *Abstract Comics* is more interesting than many, it features a collection of mostly text free comics, series' of non representational images that create or suggest some kind of narrative. Very few of these I found to be engaging however,

I am more interested in the possibilities of the interplay between word and image. Far more interesting to me was something like Woodrow Phoenix's *Rumble Strip*, a book subtitled *If You Want To Get Away With Murder Buy A Car*. *Rumble Strip* is an essay on the power of the motor industry, the car lobby and the complex relationship between road safety, our love of cars and the law, told over the span of 200 pages with a series of images free from representations of people. The restrictions Phoenix set himself very much adding to the power of the work.

These restrictions can be seen in context of the Oubapo movement (<http://gciment.free.fr/bdoubapo.htm>), a comics related analogue to the Oulipo movement in literature. *Rumble Strip* adheres to the first principle of Generative Restraints classified by Thierry Groensteen in *Monitoires du Cymbalum Pataphysicum* 43 (L'Association 1997). My Kirby/Wilson strip outlined above is a variation on Transformative Restraint 1a whereby new texts are inserted into an existing strip, a practice most notably employed by the Situationists.

Groensteen's Transformative Restraint 1b whereby text is preserved and the images are replaced is taken a step further by Gary Panter whose often impenetrable narratives are also a rich and rewarding reading experience. His *Jimbo In Purgatory* takes as a starting point the first section of Dante Alighiere's *Divine Comedy* and rewrites the text, drawing in quotes and references from Shakespeare, Milton, the Bible, Blake, the Boccaccio, Chaucer, Lewis Carrol and Edward Lear.

The 33 nine and twelve panel pages are designed to act as a series of cantos and each has a distinctive rhythm so that the page can be viewed as a single image subdivided as well as as a series of panels. The classical allusions and references in the dialogue is complemented by references to pop cultural icons in the images who act as mouthpieces for the text. These include John Lennon and Yoko Ono, Elvis, the robot Maria from *Metropolis*, the Yul Brynner character from *Westworld*, etc.

### The Work

This idea of borrowing a framework that comes with restrictions but also helps to spark imaginative connections is probably closest to the approach I took to creating the *Bad Co* daily comic strip for Prawn's Pee. Rather than using literary reference as a starting point as Panter does I wanted to start with something almost nonsensical that I could shape into something that would become a more coherent narrative.

Film has been an abiding interest for me, *The Two Sisters*, my folk music related comic strip, explores the themes of deference and betrayal but is liberally littered with pop cultural references (other folk songs, pop songs, paintings, tv shows, fashion) and particularly makes reference, both veiled and overt, to feature films such as *Sunset Boulevard*, *The Night of The Hunter* and *Onibaba*.

Digital culture has in recent times made available at a click a great wealth of cultural material that previously would have been very difficult to access. Books, music and films out of circulation for years have become available again through both officially sanctioned and legally questionable avenues. Enthusiasm for the availability of obscure international films and easy access to software has resulted in a subculture of amateur film subtitling, sometimes with unintentionally comic or baffling results. A set of subtitles for the Jean Eustache short *Les Mauvaises Frequentations* (which roughly translates as *Bad Company*) originating in Japan fits the latter category and, having been thoroughly perplexed by it, I chose this as the text to be used in my new comic strip (appendix 1). My self imposed rule was that I had to use the text in the sequence in which it appears in the film's subtitling and with no edits or additional text.

This would generate the dialogue but I needed an additional framework to generate the characters and situations that would drive the narrative. Some weeks earlier, for an exercise in my sketchbook I had written a set of three words for each letter of the alphabet that could be used to stimulate image making (appendix 2). These were words I chose arbitrarily, mostly because I liked the sound of them. I decided these could be applied to shape the narrative of my comic book story and, again, I would have to follow this sequence of words in the order they originally appeared.

Other factors influenced the strip's final shape including the visual reference material I found online, in books or in my sketchbooks, and things I noticed on the day I was making the work - a piece of graffiti, architectural details, etc. In a final lease of control the strips were submitted in black and white in the knowledge they would be screen printed in different colours from day to day depending on which colours were being used for that day's edition (appendix 3).

LES MAUVAISES  
FRÉQUENTATIONS

FILM DE  
JEAN EUSTACHE

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**Friend not good**

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PARIS  
Paris

DU  
CÔTÉ DE  
ROBINSON

Mr. Robinson causes



ADENOIDAL AQUATIC APPROBATE  
BRUTISH BAROMETRIC BEEHIVE  
CATCALL CUBIST CLOCKWORK  
DERELICT DERMATITIS DEREGULATION  
EGREGIOUS EMPIRICAL ENDOCRINE  
FORTUITOUS FEBRILE FRACKING  
GARRULOUS GROAT GAUGE  
HARNESSED HARMELODIC HAGIOGRAPHY  
IRREDUCIBLE IMP[ISHISH IPSILON  
JAPING JOURNEYMAN JOTTINGS  
KIPPER KUDOS KINDLY  
LACHRYMOSE LEERY LANGOUR  
MONOCHORD MAWKISH MODAL  
NOCTURNAL NOGGIN NATURALISATION  
OLFACTORY OCTAGON OFFICIAL  
PERISTALTIC PEEPHOLE PURPOSE  
QUIESCENT QUINCE QUIP  
DENNET DETENTION DEPRORATE

Appendix 3

Prawn's Pee newspapers

