

# Communication Arts



May/June 1997  
Eight Dollars

# Mark Ulriksen

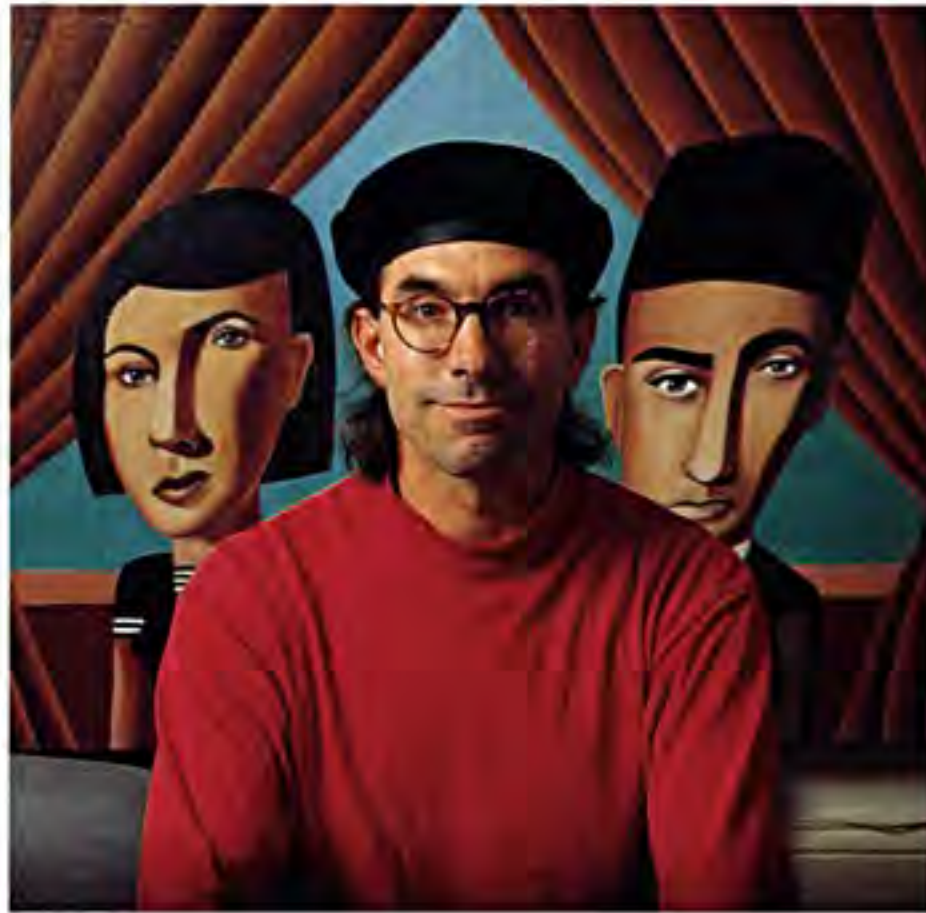
BY ANNE TELFORD

Some might say that he leads a charmed life. After all, an art director at the *New Yorker* called him at home on a Saturday for his first assignment (after just sending his book in). In less than three years after making a career switch from art director to illustrator, he's logged ten *New Yorker* covers, as well as assignments for *GQ*, *Esquire* and *Newsweek*, among others. All this, and Mark Ulriksen is only 40 and doing precisely what he wants to be doing—observing life, making art and getting paid for it.

Although he drew as a child, he never considered it a career possibility. He thought he'd be a baseball player until he discovered he couldn't hit. Then he thought he'd be a sports statistician, until he realized there was a lot of math involved. Ulriksen began studying journalism at California State University, Chico, and then went into graphic design/visual communication on the advice of his journalism professor who asked if he knew about graphic design. He remembers thinking, "That's cool, it's kind of art and commerce, I like that." Even then, discounting the plaudits of friends, he never took his own art seriously.

Ulriksen lives with his wife, photographer Leslie Flores, and their two young daughters in San Francisco's Haight Ashbury district, and works out of a studio in their modest two-story Victorian house. After six months of renovations, his studio was still largely uninhabitable so we walked to a nearby coffee house where we talked about art, life and creativity over low-fat lattes.

His eight-year stint as associate art director and then art director at *San Francisco Focus* magazine, the publishing arm of public television station KQED, prepared him with a behind-the-scenes look at what art directors really want—and how they think. He appears to like being at the drawing table a lot better than on the telephone with other illustrators, "I like to eschew that kind of responsibility and just be the creative person," Ulriksen explains. "As an art director you get more of the praise and more of the blame. I thought I'd be a good manager. I was a lousy manager; I didn't want to deal with everybody's problems,



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I just wanted to be creative."

Although he claims he "failed miserably" in his initial try at freelance illustration in 1985, he lists *Harper's* magazine, the *San Francisco Chronicle* and Tolleson Design as clients; not too shabby for a bad-luck year. He benefited from working at *Focus*, where he says he learned how to be a problem solver. "I think conceptualizing magazine covers helped with doing *New Yorker* covers."

Cultural trends dictate the *New Yorker's* covers which are a big part of the magazine's identity. "With the covers not being newsworthy

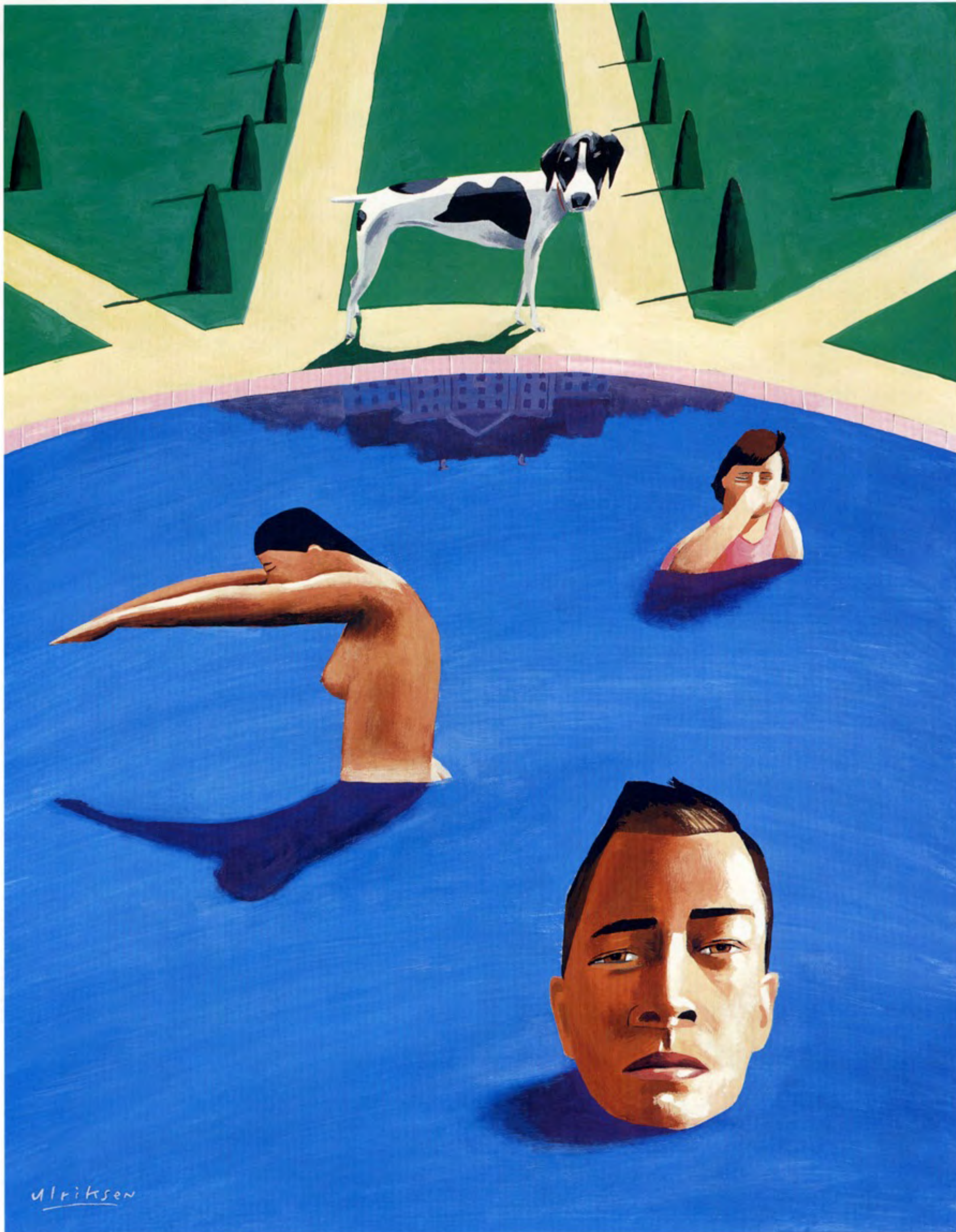
and yet weekly, they don't want you to concentrate on the front page news. Otherwise it's going to be old hat by the time you think of an idea, execute it and deliver it. Subjects range from controversial to sweet and light. Ulriksen says, "Tina Brown [editor-in-chief] wants to reflect the *New Yorker* of old." He feels the magazine had the strongest covers between the 1930s and the '50s, and aspires to emulate that level of quality. Two or three times a year he gets a calendar of events to draw on for inspiration, seasonal art themes for which he makes a list. "Summer could be these kinds of topics: kids frolicking; New Yorkers escaping the heat; tourists coming to New York; and then what's my take on that.

"They always want it to be a visual gag, it's almost like there should be a punch line but you don't provide it, it's just a visual one. I'm not necessarily that humorous," he says dryly. "I'm more whimsical. I like subtlety."

"I find him a wonderfully versatile artist," says Françoise Mouly, covers art director for the *New Yorker*. "His work is aesthetically

Portrait of Mark Ulriksen (flanked by Elizabeth Taylor and Kafka, from his painting *The Couple*).

Right: Cover for Vignette Books for one from a quarterly series of fiction anthologies. "The word to illustrate was 'home.' I imagined a wealthy, blasé Southern California family home for the weekend, in the pool and lost in their own separate worlds. The dog in this painting showed up later in the Alta Plaza Park painting [on the cover]—he gets around." Dawn Baillie, art director. Gouache, 9 × 16.



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accomplished, with a great sense of color and composition. He is one of those rare animals who can do portraiture but can also do idea drawings. He can walk that fine line between the general and the specific."

She adds, "He is someone who can meet deadlines, he is absolutely charming and extremely professional. We are not a typical case of commissioning an illustration for a piece, we need not just a hand, but the brain of the artist to really function."

Ulriksen delights in sneaking subtle and sometimes not-so-subtle cultural references and ironic statements about modern life into his paintings. Witness for example a *New Yorker* cover of Martin Luther King, Jr., with a man placing a piece of paper into a trash can, upon which those immortal words "I have a dream," are written.

People frequently comprise his subject matter, whether jazz luminaries such as Ella Fitzgerald and Chet Baker or characters from fiction. His flat perspective canvases are reminiscent of the pre-Renaissance Italian masters. Character and personality are subtly limned in the features of his subjects—both real and imaginary; he uses minimal detail for maximum richness. Like a sculptor, Ulriksen begins with armature upon which he builds his figures, typically starting with the face. "His talent is very unique. He is a great painter with an incredible sense of space," says Tony Lane, art director, *Forbes ASAP*. Of his identifiable portrait style, "His subjects have great character, an aliveness—they always appear to be unique individuals," Lane says.

Mark varies his medium between acrylic and gouache and has begun to paint with oils more frequently, now that his studio has the proper ventilation.

He heard David Levine speak once and remembers Levine saying, "The problem with all you contemporary illustrators is that you're trapped in the 20th century. If you're going to steal, steal from antiquity, go back in time." Ulriksen clarifies, "It's not really stealing, it's getting references." He uses photo references, tearing things out of magazines that catch his eye. "I have little categories I keep; files on portraits, body language, buildings, dogs, cool colors."

Ulriksen is decidedly not a *plein air* artist. No sketching in the local café or park for him. "I'm too lazy to go out and take pictures of people and I can't sketch outside for some reason. There are certain kinds of tools I need to use; I have to have my little electric pencil sharpener. I'm kind of a hermit," he explains. "I just work at home. I get inspiration by walking around or going for a run in the park or a car ride. I like to problem solve that way but as far as being an outdoor artist, I've tried it, it didn't work."

He works to the accompaniment of music and enjoys making tapes for different moods: "Music for Daly City, music for freeways, music for midnight or rainy days. Cirque du Soleil, Charlie Mingus and Tom Waits all together. That's probably my biggest hobby. I used to get to read back in the pre-kid days," he says, with a laugh.

Besides music, he loves movies. "I spend a lot of time watching movies and they really influence my work. I have a little TV on my desk so I can sometimes watch movies if I'm working late at night."

Ulriksen favors black-and-white films and is obsessed with two that frequently make their way into his art: *The Third Man* and "The Singing Detective" [a PBS TV series]. In fact, he claims *The Third Man* helped him realize something important about his art. "I usually watch it two or three times a year. I've probably seen it 25 times and one time I was pausing it at everything that I thought was a great visual, and I thought 'Why am I freeze-framing these certain frames?' I started analyzing, 'Well, this is about rejection, this is about loneliness, this is about fear of someone in power, this is about irrationality.' All these things that were fears of mine," Ulriksen says. "I realized that my subjects were my fears and my loves. Because I love music, and I love baseball and I love dogs and I love people and those are my subjects. I don't love computers and I don't paint computers."

In fact, he has no interest in using computers. "I think with everybody going electronic maybe painters will stand out even more because they aren't doing that. [CONTINUED ON PAGE 79]

**Right: Jeffrey Masson and Janet Malcolm from an unpublished spread for the *New Yorker*.** "Art director Chris Curry called and told me that the magazine was a defendant—along with Janet Malcolm—in a trial taking place in San Francisco. She asked me to attend the trial as a visual reporter and gave me six full pages to fill. I was flabbergasted by this great assignment but also a bit stressed; at the time I was working full-time as the art director of *Focus* magazine. This was to be the first spread but the pieces never ran, which is something you learn to anticipate with the *New Yorker*. I definitely appreciate it when my work does get published." Acrylic, 8 × 10.

**Cover illustration of a tourist couple for the *New Yorker*.** "Sometimes I get caught up thinking about Manhattan only as a setting for these covers—probably because I live in San Francisco. For a summer theme I thought about New Yorkers visiting foreign countries and the all-too-familiar circumstance of missing something that is right in front of you or, in this case, behind you. I thought of my own travels with my photographer wife and how I will often photograph something she's photographing." Françoise Mouly, art director. Acrylic, 12½ × 17.

**Cover for the *New Yorker*.** "Art director Françoise Mouly called me in April and said she had an idea for the cover of their October political issue—a parody of a *Vanity Fair* cover from 1985 with Ronald and Nancy Reagan waltzing. Only this version would be Clinton and Dole doing the tango. The challenge was making sure the cover didn't read as a romantic romp on the dance floor." Gouache, 9 × 12.

THE PLAINTIFF

Jeffrey Masson



U. Leibson

"THE BAD BOY OF PSYCHOANALYSIS IS A COMPLAINER AND HAS ALWAYS BEEN A COMPLAINER. HE REGRETS LATER WHAT HE SAID. AND HE FORGETS LATER WHAT HE SAID."

THE DEFENDANT

Janet Malcolm



U. Leibson

"EVERY JOURNALIST WHO IS NOT TOO STUPID OR FULL OF HIMSELF TO NOTICE WHAT IS GOING ON KNOWS THAT WHAT HE DOES IS MORALLY INDEFENSIBLE."



U. Leibson

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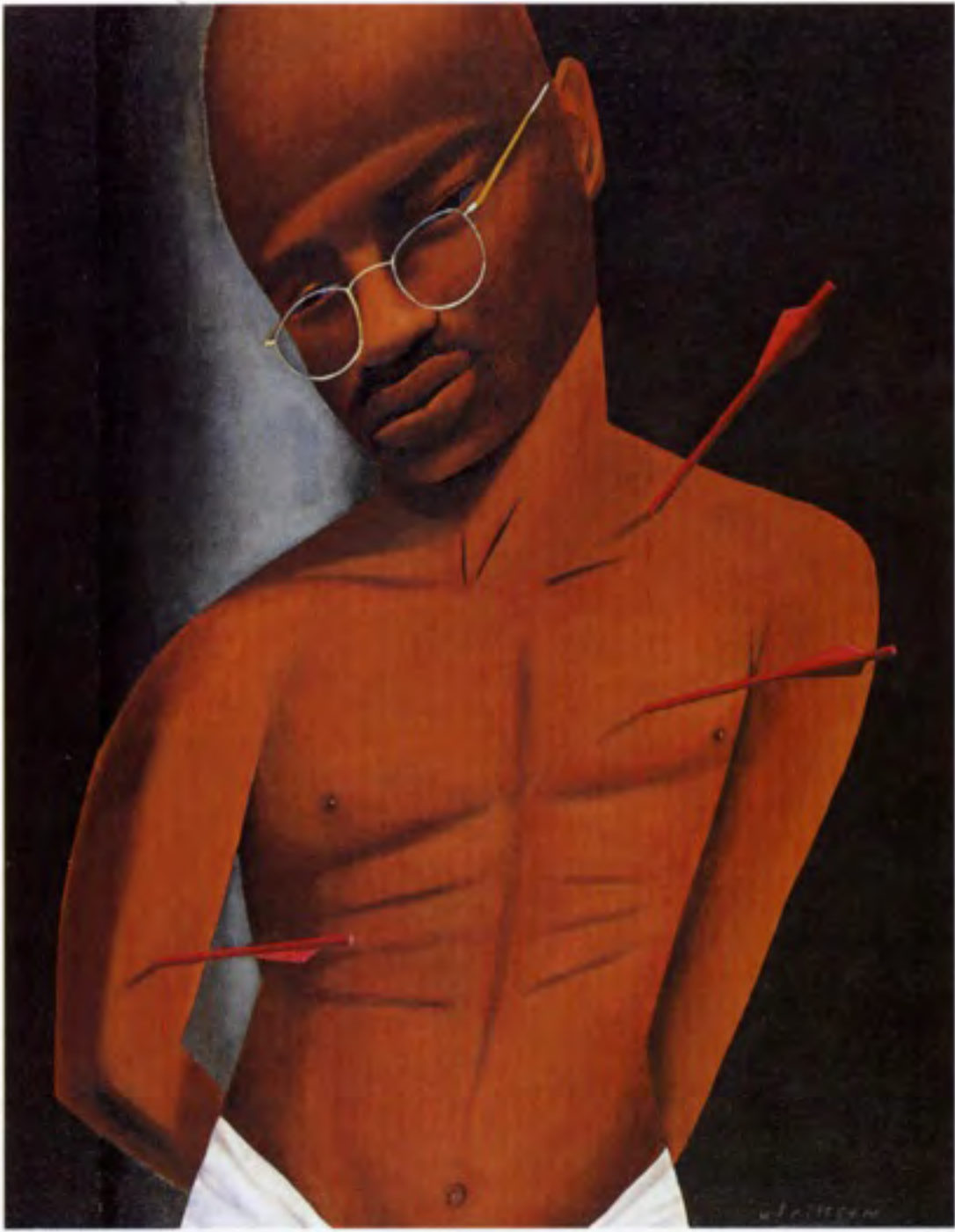
This page: Personal painting of Ella Fitzgerald. "I had my first one-person gallery show last fall. I did a series of paintings of some of my jazz heroes, but it was mostly an opportunity to try my portraiture on a larger scale." Thomas R. Reynolds Gallery, client. Acrylic on canvas, 24 × 36.

*The Couple*, personal work. "This was a real breakthrough piece for me; I had been struggling with a large (4' × 6'), acrylic painting and took a break to go to the de Young Museum for inspiration. I saw a Grant Wood painting and noticed the tiny little brush strokes so I decided to switch directions and try something small in oil. I had a picture of Kafka so I painted him without aiming for a likeness—I just liked his face. Next I painted Elizabeth Taylor and created a theatrical tableau (I love painting curtains). The painting is about that feeling of being alone together." Oil, 12 × 8.

Right: Cover for the *New Yorker*. "Art director Françoise Mouly asked me to think about Martin Luther King day and I wondered what he would think of the epidemic of homelessness and helplessness in American cities today. Personally, I think it's the best cover I've done for the *New Yorker*." Gouache and acrylic, 9 × 12.









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I like making one-of-a-kind things; physically making something that you can hold in your hand and there's only one of them.

"I like the fact that in a world that changes daily your painting doesn't change. It's going to look the same. I love the permanence of it if I'm doing it correctly."

Ulriksen is proud of the fact that he's not afraid to experiment. "I used to think everything was kind of precious—'Ooh, you're doing something for *Newsweek* and you've got to really make sure it's great.' Now it's more, 'I haven't tried this medium before, it feels right and I'm going to do it.' There'll always be another assignment—I hope." At this point in his career, it's doubtful that wishful thinking has much place in his thoughts. ■

**Left: *St. Sebastian*, for *Los Angeles* magazine.** "I had just returned from a vacation in Italy when art director Rip Georges called me with this assignment. I was able to try my version of a Renaissance portrait. I know Christopher Darden related to the portrayal because he bought the original." Acrylic on canvas, 14 × 18.

**Cover for Vignette Books for one from a quarterly series of fiction anthologies.** "Writers would submit manuscripts based on a single word, in this case the word was 'alien,' and I would have carte blanche to illustrate the word. Instead of thinking of extraterrestrials or strangers in strange lands I decided to explore an alien emotion—the feeling that somewhere there is someone who finds funny what you find frightening. I got the reference for the laughing faces from a scene from "The Singing Detective," a BBC TV series that sort of haunts me." Dawn Baillie, art director. Acrylic, 9 × 16.

**Cover for Vignette Books.** "For this subject, 'lyric,' I was a bit stuck for an idea. The art director told me one of the manuscripts she received was about a family that all listened to Frank Sinatra so..." Dawn Baillie, art director. Gouache, 9 × 14.

**For *Scenario* magazine from a series of four illustrations.** "*Scenario* publishes screenplays and asks the artist to select three or four scenes to illustrate; I love the freedom of assignments like that. The lead character in the film, *Citizen Ruth*, is a pawn of both pro-life and pro-choice activists. She is a drug addict with a taste for inhaling spray paint and she listens to her Walkman a lot. I modeled her pose on a Flemish madonna with colors borrowed from Musaccio. I like how her earphones create a halo and I also like the cross created in the window." Andrew Kner, art director. Acrylic, 19 × 22½.

**This page: Pro bono portrait of Pat Riley from the cookbook *Feast for Life* to benefit pediatric AIDS patients.** Chester, art director; Thirst Design (Chicago), client. Acrylic, 6 × 22.



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Left: Spread from *Scenario* magazine on the film *Citizen Ruth*. "This illustration is supposed to show Ruth's point of view as she stumbles onto a living room sermon in session. I modeled the main 'Right to Lifer' on Ralph Reed, and I enjoyed throwing in little details like a tie pattern made of life preservers and his pose which is modeled after Christ on the cross." Andrew Kner, art director. Acrylic, 26 × 15.

*Bad Dog with Shoe*, auction painting for a Cole Haan shoe store. "They were opening a new store in downtown San Francisco and the Richards Group asked half-a-dozen San Francisco illustrators to contribute a painting for the opening. The only stipulation was that the painting had to have a Cole Haan shoe in it." Vicky Brewster, art director; The Richards Group (Dallas), client. Acrylic on canvas, 36 × 24.

This page: "Nat King Cole, from a series of my jazz heroes for a gallery show. I tried to paint all the musicians from the time in their career that resonates most for me—I like Nat's jazz trio stuff as well as his vocal period." Thomas R. Reynolds Gallery, client. Acrylic on canvas, 24 × 36.

*Sammy Glick* for *GQ* magazine. "This is one of my first published pieces after I started painting small and with oils. *GQ* would reprint a paragraph from a literary classic, in this case *What Makes Sammy Run*, that described the character's attire and the illustrator's job would be to capture the character's appearance and personality. I loved illustrating this character—he was so conceited and pretentious—because I dislike the traits so much." Charlene Benson, art director. Oil, 6 × 6.

