



ILLUSTRATION BY VALERIA PETRONE

Welcome to 3x3 Annual 20 It's been twenty years of our bringing you the best of contemporary illustration from across the globe. Our first annual showcased a mere 100 illustrators, today it's five times that. We've gone from relative obscurity to being seen as one of the premier illustration competitions in the world. We received more than 5,000 entries from 54 countries and 173 schools this year. Our distinguished panel of international art directors and illustrators ultimately selected 512 winners representing 35 countries. Fifty-two percent of our medalist and merit winners were from outside the United States, verifying the scope of our shows. Congratulations to our Best of Show, the **Balbusso Twins**, Italy, and to our Gary Powell Student Illustrator honoree, **Siyin Chen**, China, and to all our winners. We're delighted to honor **Klaas Verplancke**, Belgium, as this year's Educator/Illustrator of the Year.



Klaas Verplancke is an internationally-acclaimed illustrator, animator, author, lecturer, educator and publisher of his personal BANG! magazine. He has been both author and illustrator of over 150 books published in 30 languages and 60 translations. And for this work he has won the prestigious Bologna Ragazzi Award, was a top-five finalist for the Hans Christian Andersen Awards and has received 15 consecutive nominations for the Astrid Lindgren Memorial Award. His range of books—for children and adults—include 'Magritte's Apple' commissioned by the Museum of Modern Art, New York and Centre Pompidou, Paris. In the editorial arena his talents have been commissioned by *The New Republic*, *The New Yorker*, *The New York Times*, *The Wall Street Journal*, as well as major publishers. His work has been awarded multiple times by *American Illustration*, *Society of Illustrators*, *AOI* and *3x3*. He is also a professor of Image Design at the Graphic Design Department of The Royal Academy of Fine Arts in Antwerp. It is with great delight that we name Klaas Verplancke our 3x3 Educator of the Year for 2023.

Q Tell us about your early schooling, did you always want to be an artist? Do you come from an artistic family?

A My grandfather was a professional portrait painter who did many commissioned works. He was also fascinated from an early age by photography, which was then, at the turn of the 19th to 20th centuries, still in full development.

His son, my grandfather, was an architect who did a lot of watercolor paintings of his designs, but also as a hobby painter. His brother was a hobby painter as well.

So the art genes are in the family. My parents were art-loving and always supported me in my artistic studies and my professional career.

As a child, I liked to draw but was also musical. I took care of all the family creative designs, was home illustrator for the local scout group and designed my first ideas for comic strips.

Q Where did you go to school? What was that experience like?

A I studied at LUCA School of Arts, Ghent, Belgium. I definitely wanted to study something creative. But a degree in illustration was not available at that time. For architecture, I wasn't good enough at math. A masters in graphic design and photography was a logical choice, and I am still happy with this formation.

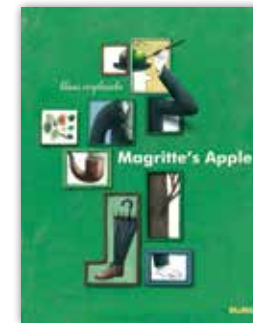
Illustration is never separated from graphic design or typography, and my experience with these disciplines is a special asset to my practice as an illustrator. It helps me evaluate my work through the eyes of the designer or art director as well.

Q What were your early impressions of illustration? Were there any particular artists who influenced your decision to become an illustrator?

A During my studies, I got my inspiration mainly from magazines such as *Graphis* and *U&Ic*. The most interesting picture books then came from the Netherlands but from my first visits to the Bologna Children's Book fair, the world opened up to me and I started collecting books from all over the world, including classics and works of many iconic artists. My library is now huge and still growing. It is a daily source of inspiration.

Q What happened after graduation?

A After my studies, my army service awaited. I ended up as





a designer for VOX, the weekly magazine of the Belgian army. I couldn't imagine a better scenario. Right out of school I found myself in a professional context. A gold mine of experience.

Mostly we worked with photographs but for articles where no images were available I made the illustrations. And that was actually the start of my career as an illustrator. Based on this experience, after my military service I applied to various publishing houses and was immediately able to start working for the then largest publisher of school magazines.

Q How did you get your first big break?

A In 2001 I won the Bologna Ragazzi Award for an illustrated anthology of 100 classic Flemish children's songs as well as a special mention for the first picture book for which I also wrote the text.

After my debut in 1992 as a children's book illustrator and nine years of patiently hammering away at my artistic career, this double award suddenly opened all doors to the press, to the professional public and especially to international productions and collaborations. It was a complete breakthrough and the beginning of ten particularly successful years.

Another milestone was my contribution to the New York City #combatcovid PSA campaign in the midst of the corona pandemic. For this, I created an animation that was featured on all the digital billboards and screens all over New York City, including Times Square. This animated poster is now included in the permanent collection of the Cooper Hewitt, Smithsonian Design Museum.

Q How has your work progressed, how is today's work different than when you were first starting out?

A Over the past 32 years one can clearly notice a shift from form to content. Where I used to focus primarily on showcasing my drawing skills, I now invest primarily in developing well thought-out concepts and surprising ideas. This is also one of the reasons why I produce fewer books, and why I have shifted my focus to editorial work.

As a result, my recent work is more intellectual and reasoned, less "illustrative" and "cute" than it used to be, but closer to my drive as a storyteller, as an idea man. Creating a smile in the mind, that's my thing.

Q Let's talk about your experiences as a teacher, how long have you been teaching? What do you feel the role of an instructor is?

A I have been teaching at the bachelor and masters levels for 13 years now. Initially, my assignments were result-oriented, with all criteria (e.g. format, form, technique, number of pages) determined in advance. Now I start more



from a problem statement—whether or not related to an experience from my daily practice—which I research together with the students, and where there are only a few criteria.

An example: in photography, blur is deliberately applied. In illustration less so. I devised an assignment where the interaction between sharp and out of focus was an essential part of the storytelling.



Q How are you able to juggle teaching and your work?

A To teach is to give, but I receive a lot in return. I always look for a connection to my professional experience and learn from my teaching practice and the fresh, sometimes rebellious students' visions how I can deal with that practice differently. Teaching is an external research laboratory that creates new insights, both for the students and for me.

Q Do you feel there is anything missing in today's education of an illustrator?

A In higher arts education, I note that academic research, artistic experimentation, is given particular weight. As a result, transposition to the professional field is in danger of being neglected.

However, I find that when I bring my practice into the classroom, the students hang on my every word. All are looking for a sure footing for an uncertain future.

I therefore find it essential to share my knowledge and experience as a professional illustrator with the students.

Q What is your advice to graduates entering the field today?

A Don't forget to invest in your communication and promotion. Be inventive and outstanding. Think about yourself as a unique brand.

Q Final words to teachers?

A Learn from your students.

Q Final words to practicing illustrators?

A Persistence is key.

Q And finally, what's in your future, personally and professionally?

A I am currently keeping four balls in the air: story writing and art direction for animations, editorial illustration, writing and illustrating picture books and teaching. In the near future, I definitely want to focus more on non-conceptual gallery work. Playing with forms and materials. I kind of lost this along the way due to practical circumstances. Currently I work on small formats, but one day I want to go back to drawing and painting from the shoulder.

