

INTERVIEW WITH BRIAN GRIMWOOD

(This interview was first published in Cassone online arts magazine in October 2012, as ‘Brian Grimwood: the man who changed the look of British illustration’

<http://www.cassone-art.com/magazine/article/2012/10/brian-grimwood-the-man-who-changed-the-look-of-british-illustration/?psrc=interviews&mdid=0 - page-media>

On 13 September 2012, a few hours before the official opening of British illustrator Brian Grimwood’s major retrospective, and book launch, at WORK gallery, London, we met to discuss his career, and how he became known as ‘*the man who changed the look of British illustration*’.

Rosalind Ormiston: When did you first know that you wanted to be an illustrator?

Brian Grimwood: I have always been mad on drawing. At three years of age I remember the first day at kindergarten, the teacher pinned a big piece of sugar paper on the easel, gave me some powder paint in primary colours, a big brush and water. The first thing I ever did was a clown. I never liked abstract. Over the years, at school, in art lessons, I only wanted to draw, other kids would do flick paintings but I was never interested in gimmicky stuff. It was quite serious for me; as an only child it was a way of creating my own world.

RO: Did your parents encourage you?

BG: Yes, very much so, certainly my Dad did, we would play a game, he would say ‘do a scribble’ and then he would turn it into something recognisable and then he would do a scribble and I would create something from it, in fact I almost do that today, it’s how it works for me.

RO: Looking for early influences on your artistic life, in your book, [*Brian Grimwood: the man who changed the look of British Illustration*] you mention Leonardo da Vinci. Was he an artist that influenced your style?

BG: No! He was too good for me. When I was 10 and 11 years old I used to go to the local library and look at the [art] reference books. I used to take Bronco toilet paper and a 2B pencil with me and put the paper over Leonardo da Vinci drawings, and trace round them just to feel like what it must have been to be that good.

RO: How did you become an illustrator?

BG: I didn’t pass my 11-plus exam; I went to a secondary modern school in Penge and because I was excelling in art they put me forward for a 13+ exam for an art course at Bromley Technical High School. It was 3-year course run by Owen Frampton; I started when I was thirteen. I was taught life drawing, painting, graphic design, typography.... It was unique course. There has been nothing like it since. From there I went to work as an illustrator at Carlton Artists Studios, a large studio in Marble Arch, London.

RO: Art critic Steven Heller in *Print* magazine wrote, ‘Brian Grimwood’s work has been both conceptual and decorative. It has echoed Matisse, Klee and Chwast. And it has changed the look of British illustration.’ How did you get the title ‘*the man who changed the look of British illustration*.’?

BG: In 1982, an art director Keith Abblet, of *Design* magazine, commissioned me to do a cover. At my studio he saw a rough drawing of mine for another job; he asked to see the rough of the *Design* cover and said why don't we print the rough? He preferred it to the linear finished drawing. I said yes. After that I was inundated with commissions for my new 'fluid brush style'. The first was for design group Smith & Milton. They were doing design packaging for Sharwoods; tins of different foods, food packs, it was a massive job. They had one idea but the client hated it. They quickly had to think in another direction. They had seen the *Design* cover, and had this idea about a loose fluid style like Matisse, which I did. No one was drawing like that or attempting to do it. The Sharwoods designs won awards [including a prestigious D&AD award] and it went mad after that. From there my style became more and more loose. My career took off. I have never looked back.

RO: In 1983 you created the CIA [Central Illustration Agency], an agency for illustrators, and today the CIA represents 90 artists across worldwide. How did it start?

BG: A photographer friend was breaking up with his wife; she was coming to London and he asked if I could help her get a job. I said she could come and work for me. At the time I was mainly working for magazines so I got her to take my portfolio of work around to big advertising agencies. After about a week friends who were illustrators asked if I could take their work too; they thought I had started an agency –which I hadn't - but after thinking about it I decided to form the CIA to represent illustrators.

RO: Your client list is enviable. Are there any commissions that stand out as favourites?

BG: I did some things for The Beatles. Not so much favourite as prestigious.

RO: I thought you were going to say something like Johnnie Walker whisky, the globally recognised brand logo.

BG: Johnnie Walker is tinged with, well, I can't think of the word. I was paid a rejection fee for that job; a year later I discovered that they used it! At the time I didn't have the energy to fight it. But it's well-documented as mine. And I am friends with John Heggarty of BBH advertising agency, who have the campaign account today.

RO: Your newly published book includes a phenomenal collection of your illustrations, and its publication coincides with your retrospective exhibition at WORK gallery, London. Who had the initial idea for it?

BG: Roger Walton of Duncan Baird Publishers approached me with the idea of a Q&A format, asking questions about my life as an illustrator, and this book is something I have always wanted to do; it's a picture book really, not a reading book. Jokingly I said to my wife it should be called, 'me, me, by me'.

RO: You embrace computer technology. In the exhibition with over 100 works on display, you have included artworks created on your iPad

BG: I draw on my iPad on the train on the way to work. I love it. I started off doing it for myself but many have been sold, one is now a poster for a French wine label.

RO: How big is your illustration studio now?

BG: I have just moved to a new studio in Shoreditch. I have four staff and we represent 90 illustrators worldwide, including Sir Peter Blake.

RO: Is there a next generation illustrator that has caught your attention?

BG: Yes. We have just signed Rose Blake, daughter of Sir Peter Blake.

RO: Do you get the same pleasure today working as an illustrator as when you first became successful?

BG: I love doing this. I eat and breathe it; and I would do it whether I was paid or not. I'm on a journey.

RO: Thank you so much for talking to *Cassone* magazine.

Rosalind Ormiston
September 2012

Editor's Note

Brian Grimwood was born in 1948 in Beckenham, Kent, England. His interest in art flourished from age of three. He has pursued a career in illustration since 1970 working at first for Carlton Artist Studios, London, before setting up his own studio in Covent Garden, where he was based for 30 years. His client list includes *Nova* magazine, Marks & Spencer, BBC Proms, *Marketing Week*, *Radio Times*, London Zoo, Johnnie Walker, WH Smith, London Olympic Bid 2012, *The Art Book*, and Edinburgh Festival. He has had five solo exhibitions. His work has appeared in almost every magazine published.

Website: www.briangrimwood.com

Facebook: <http://www.facebook.com/BrianGrimwood.Illustrator?ref=ts>

Blog: <http://www.briangrimwood.com/blog/>

Recent Articles: <http://www.designweek.co.uk/whats-on/brian-grimwood-the-man-who-changed-the-look-of-british-illustration/3035120.article>

AND <http://www.designweek.co.uk/industry-voice/teaching-david-bowie/3035125.article>

Book:

BRIAN GRIMWOOD: THE MAN WHO CHANGED THE LOOK OF BRITISH ILLUSTRATION

Black Dog Publishing, London, UK, September 2012

Paperback

224 pages; 238 colour and b/w illustrations

ISBN 978 1 907317 86 6

UK: £24.95; US: \$45.00

Exhibition:

'Brian Grimwood: The Man who changed the Look of British Illustration'

WORK Gallery

10A Acton Street, London WC1 X 9NG

14 September – 3 November 2012

http://workgallery.co.uk/WORK_2012-06-12/WORK_2012_Brian_Grimwood.html

The Waterfront Gallery

University Campus Suffolk

Waterfront Building, Neptune Quay,

Ipswich, Suffolk IP4 1QJ

14 November 2012 - 3 January 2013

<http://www.ucs.ac.uk/SchoolsAndNetwork/UCSSchools/SchoolofArtsandHumanities/gallery/Forthcomingexhibition.aspx>