

Description: Cartooning can be a lot more than just having fun drawing and creating jokes; it can also be a means for creative self-discovery, the exploration of ideas, and social and political commentary. The emphasis in this class will be on cartoon humor, but you will also explore the many other dimensions of cartooning. Participants will learn to develop material for cartoons by keeping a sketchbook that will serve as a journal for notes, observations, experiences, memories, and anecdotes. You will then translate this material into various cartoon narratives, ranging from the simple construction of one-panel "gag" cartoons to full-fledged multiple-panel stories. The class will explore the various rhythms of storytelling inherent in the cartoon language with a focus on honing down the material in the sketchbooks into finished pieces through critiques and class discussions. We will discuss the process of designing cartoon characters as well how to use comic timing within the cartoon form. We will also discuss the wide variety of possible tools and media that can be used to draw cartoons. The goal will be to move from rough ideas to initial sketches and then to use the workshop to refine those sketches into finished pieces. By the end of the class, participants will put together a small portfolio of cartoons that can be submitted to magazines and newspapers. The class will focus as much on storytelling, using the iconic language of cartoons, as on developing ability in drawing.

Prerequisites: none

EVERY STUDENT WILL BE EXPECTED TO KEEP A SKETCHBOOK (OR NOTEBOOK OF SOME KIND) AND BRING IT TO CLASS EACH WEEK.

Homework each week will be to draw and/or write in sketchbook, preferably every day. Material from these sketchbooks will be used in class critiques and discussions.

Week 1 – June 11

- The fundament of cartooning: the doodle.
- Basic discussion of tools, methods, media, and genres.
- Drawing from life, memory, and imagination: similarities and differences.
- Assignment: series of self-portraits, rough drawings (of varying complexity and degree of "finish") of people, objects, famous characters; comparing the qualities of the more detailed drawings versus the quick doodles.

Students introduce themselves; their aesthetic interests, ambitions and experience with cartooning.

Discussions:

- Tools, methods, media, available; use whatever is comfortable for you.
 - The fundament of cartooning: the doodle.
 - The importance of consistency in levels of naturalism and detail within a cartoon drawing (finding your own cartoon voice through a consistent and recognizable "language" of pictograms).
 - The spectrum from naturalistic rendering of a thing to the quick doodle (which is more like handwriting). Your style, your individual voice, will be close to that doodle.
 - Common signifiers, cartooning tropes.
 - Drawing from life, memory, and imagination: similarities and differences.
 - What makes a recognizable cartoon character? How much can you distort a (famous) character before it's not recognizable anymore? What are the essential components that signify that character? (Examples: Mickey Mouse, Charlie Brown, Nancy.)
 - Picasso's quote: "Style is the difference between a circle and the way YOU draw it."
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Assignments: Careful Drawings vs. Doodling.

- Draw a self-portrait (5 minutes)

- Spend a few minutes per drawing: draw a car, cat, castle, airplane, nude. Follow each by quick doodle (15–30 seconds) of that same thing.
- Draw another heliport (2 minutes)
- "Zen" exercise: Each person names something that everyone has to draw in a 15–30 seconds; go around room several times. Drawings could be of a person, place, thing, idea, concept, emotion, anything that comes to mind.
- Draw any 3 shapes, then fill them in however you'd like.
- Draw another heliport (15 seconds)
- Everyone calls out and draws famous cartoon character (10 seconds per drawing)

Compare the qualities of the more detailed drawings versus the quick doodles.

NOTE: Each exercise was meant to show that drawing something for a longer time doesn't necessarily make it a better cartoon; trying to be too exact or detailed often points out the flaws of a drawing, whereas doodling often brings out a more dynamic and clearer drawing.

Allowing the doodle to come out without thinking too much gets students closer to the "idea" of the thing, i.e., the universal, latent, symbolic language of comics. Students explored surprising combinations of line and simplified iconic drawings that still conveyed the necessary information.

The exercises should stress minimalism, dynamic drawing, simplification, and clarity of line.

Homework: Doodle in your sketchbooks. Concentrate on spontaneity and on line.

Week 2 – June 18

- Caricature, iconic language, cartooning tropes, creating single-panel gag cartoons.
- Discussion: using and defining cartoon archetypes and symbols, conveying the most amount of information with the minimum amount of lines.
- Assignments: creating a silent gag panel, drawing faces from random shapes, drawing archetypes and discussing what makes them work, drawing several self-portraits (each in less time than the previous), creating drawings based on a particular emotional quality, then turning each into a gag cartoon with the addition of a caption.

1. Review of sketchbook doodles: discuss/critique.

2. Exercise: Draw a quick caricature of the teacher (in order to lose inhibitions and recapture the fun sense of cartooning we had in our youth)

3. Exercise: Draw some cartoon archetypes, 15–20 seconds each; try to use as few lines as possible. Don't sketch, just doodle; use quick, continuous stroke(s). Identify and discuss what makes each archetype function; students suggest elements that could be used to define and refine each symbol.

Some examples: snooty waiter, mischievous little kid, ghost, mad scientist, castaway.

NOTE: Some archetypes use quite similar elements; students discussed how to best clarify and differentiate each archetype.

4. Exercise: One student leaves the room, while the rest discuss a cliché silent/wordless gag cartoon scenario (provided by instructor) for 5 minutes; verbal discussion only (no drawing or doodling allowed). One of the students then draws the

scenario in 60 seconds (sharpie marker on 8.5 X 11 sheet of paper). The first student returns to the room and tries to describe the gag scenario.

NOTE: Students were split into 2 groups

Scenarios:

- Hippie fish protesting polluted lake
 - Tinman, Dorothy, Scarecrow, and The Lion playing strip poker
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5. Exercise: Each student is randomly assigned to draw one of the following wordless scenarios (note: students are not aware of what the others are assigned to draw). Then, students have to identify which drawing was meant to convey which quality.

Draw something that is:

- funny
- sad
- scary
- sexy
- abstract

NOTE: We then add captions to these and switch captions around, trying to tweak the most humor from each drawing. The "funny" drawing is not necessarily the funniest drawing. Captions can also be moved from one drawing to the other to see if they are funnier in a different context.

IRONY works when there is a tension of "opposites" to play off.

6. Exercise: Each student draws a scene from their day, not necessarily something funny, just trying to capture a moment in time. Then, the drawings are randomly traded around the room. Each student now writes one or more captions for the drawing he/she has received. We then reviewed them together, created some new captions, and moved some captions from one drawing to another.

7. Discuss some tricks to use when creating gag panels:

- Randomly switch captions from one cartoon to the other; try using disparate sources if necessary.
 - Unity of opposites: tone down captions for the outrageous images and vice versa.
 - Non sequiturs (make random charts, mix and match).
 - Try to capture a real reaction someone might have to a strange situation.
 - Use a catch phrase, cliché, or slogan in an unlikely circumstance.
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8. Students discussed how to draw the following gag scenario, thinking about character placement, composition, signifiers, and conveying a clear and concise narrative within a single panel.

- A fortune-telling cowboy giving his horse a glimpse into its future
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9. Exercise to think about/take home: Sketch out some gag cartoon; could be single panels or silent sequences:

- something you saw or heard or experienced

- some random combination of archetypes; mix and match various characters, verbs, places, etc.
- accidents, doodles; draw some shapes without thinking, and then see what might be suggested by them.
- start drawing something difficult or "not funny," abandon it, and make it something else; let the drawing suggest something.

Try to do 3 by next week.

Week 3 – June 25

- The art of the one-panel gag cartoon;
- Discussion: refining composition; creating narrative within a limited space; tweaking the humor to its maximum potential; basing the drawings on some underlying emotion.
- Assignment: creating and refining rough sketches of one panel cartoons. Adapting various stories (e.g., famous book, movie, song, etc) into a four-panel format; variations on a theme.

1. Exercise: Imagine and draw a cube in the desert. Think of its physical properties, size, texture, relation to surroundings; imagine what you do and feel upon seeing it.

(Later, discuss it as a subconscious self-portrait.)

2. HANDOUT. Show and discuss samples by James Thurber: explain genesis of each, i.e., overheard conversations, accidents that turned out better than original idea, inexplicable doodles.

3. HANDOUT. Show and discuss other samples by:

- Jim Crane (crude, yet effective drawing)
- William Steig (psychological truth as humor)
- Charles Addams (humor or tragedy? choosing the exact moment to depict in the panel)
- Abner Dean (bleak, almost nihilistic, very internal humor)
- George Grosz (compare with the above 4 cartoonists)
- Bil Keane (idiosyncratic world-view, as bleak as the previous drawings?)
- Peter Arno (very tight compositions)
- Otto Soglow (elegance of line and design in one panel and six panels)
- Gluyas Williams (sort of a combination of the above two cartoonists)
- Sam Henderson (goofy minimalism; modern sensibility)
- Mark Newgarden (postmodern approach; more personal, expressive use of gag format)

4. Each student picks one of their gag cartoons (from the homework assignment) and either refines or redraws it during class (about 15 minutes), taking the previous discussion into consideration. Concentrate on clarifying and refining composition.

Review all gag cartoons from sketchbooks (both from the homework assignment and the one redrawn/refined in class): discuss/critique.

5. Discussion: Why we doodle in the first place; the impulse to draw. Relate to previous session.

- to relieve anger, anxiety, fear
- to make ourselves laugh
- to soothe sadness or depression
- to express sexual frustration or arousal

- to relieve boredom
- to meander mentally, e.g., drawing abstract shapes, etc.

Every drawing, every doodle has some underlying emotional base. Use that base as the root of the cartoon and explore that emotion. You don't necessarily have to start with a drawing that was trying to be "funny."

6.. Exercise: Students name famous books, movies, and a piece of music. They then pick one of each and discuss how they would draw it in one panel: what is best approach? (a summary? metaphor? non-narrative?) Use these ideas as springboards, and allow free-association to occur. the final gags can be quite different from the first ones that were envisioned.

7 . Exercise: Students create a one-page comic, using no words, that explains to a reader how to tie a shoelace. Imagine giving this comic to an alien that speaks no earth language (but needs its laces tied!).

Try to think like a graphic designer. Focus on the information that needs to be conveyed and make sure that it foremost. This assignment shows how difficult it is to convey information visually even when you have a clear objective. Without a clear sense of where you are going, the task is that much harder.

8. Exercises to think about/take home:

- Read the "How to Read Nancy" handout; pay particular attention to the last section, where one gag is dissected.
 - Read the short article by Charles Schulz.
 - HANDOUT. Using the first *Peanuts* strip as a starting point, create a whole new strip. No redrawing or relettering allowed, but can be as many (or few) panels as the student wishes. Feel free to change sizes and proportions via photocopier, and cut and paste at will. Explore different visual and verbal rhythms and how they affect the emotional tone of the strip.
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Week 4 – July 2

- The "classic" four-panel structure
- Discussion: introduction to the three- and four-panel sequence. Formal elements; composition and continuity; panel-to-panel transitions; controlling structure, timing, and emotional timbre. *Peanuts* and *Nancy*: the quintessential comic strips.
- Assignment: Create four-panel mini-narratives.

Discussion: *How to Read Nancy*.

Focus on textures; graphic devices such as patterns; composition and placement of blacks; line weight and quality of line (organic vs. rectilinear); when to change scale; consistency of visual language; other formal elements; continuity; panel-to-panel transitions; comic timing.

Discussion: Never stipple if you can hatch, better yet, use black.

Also discussed: using hatching and gray "patterns" to balance compositions and create spatial relationships, in relation to the flattened perspective of comic strips.

We will look at more *Nancy* samples and discuss the strip again next week.

Short discussion: 70s *Doonesbury* vs. 80s *Doonesbury*; illustrates how a strip best served by simple, clear visuals, even if slightly crude, can be ruined when made more complicated and needlessly "fancy" visually.

Discussion: The Schulz handout. Examine the particular strips.

We will look at more *Peanuts* samples and discuss the strip again next week

Review and discuss students' attempts at PEANUTS EXERCISE from previous week (i.e., using the first *Peanuts* strip as a starting point, create a whole new strip, as many or few panels as you like, but avoid redrawing).

Show instructor's examples and discuss:

- Samples 1–4
- Sample 5a
- Sample 5b
- Sample 6
- Sample 7
- Sample 8
- Sample 9

Discussion that ensued:

- treating the grid as an invisible template over reality; the democratic nature of equal size rectangles
 - varying panel sizes and widths, structuring the reading experience to correspond with the actual experience of the events depicted
 - treating the panels more as a continuous visual unit in either case (pitfalls and advantages of each method)
 - starting with equal grid, then changing sizes to accommodate the visual
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Hand out 12 index cards per student.

Exercise: Draw one panel per card. OK to use captions and/or word balloons.

Draw the following scenarios:

1. The beginning of the universe.
 2. The end of the Universe.
 3. Self–portrait (draw your entire body),
 4. Something that happened at lunchtime.
 5. A dream image, from a dream you had recently.
 6. Something that happened in the middle of the universe's existence (i.e., between drawings 1 and 2).
 7. What happened right after that?
 8. Something that happened this morning.
 9. something that happened just before class.
 10. Pick any of the above panels and draw something that happened immediately afterward.
 11. Draw a different aspect of the last panel, for example, a different perspective, camera angle, another character's viewpoint, something that happened off–panel, or focus in on some detail or other aspect of the drawing.
 12. Non sequitur: something that has nothing to do with anything else you've drawn in the other panels.
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10 minute break

Review the strips at front of class. Try to create a four–panel strip by choosing four panels from the 12. Mix and match the panels however you wish. See if the emotional rhythms or comic timing change/improve if something is moved,

removed, or duplicated.

Homework:

Draw at least 3 strips as a diary. Make them 4 panels each. They can be drawn loosely, but make sure they are clear and legible.

Play around with the 12 panels drawn in class, see if you can make a 12-panel story out of them.

Week 5 – July 9

- Composing a simple page
- Discussion: composition and continuity; panel-to-panel transitions; controlling timing; treating the page as a unit
- Assignment: create multi-panel pages, using panels of the same size.

Review and discuss the sketchbook diaries students drew over the week. Focus on the rhythms of the strips, comic timing, compositions within the panels, and the flow from panel to panel.

Discussion: The timing and rhythms of some *Nancy* daily strip and Sunday samples.

Recap from last week: focus on textures; composition and placement of blacks; line weight and quality of line (organic vs. rectilinear); when to change scale; consistency of visual language; other formal elements; continuity; panel-to-panel transitions; comic timing.

The timing and rhythms of *Peanuts* strips (dailies and Sundays).

- samples of early *Peanuts* dailies
- flexible layout of four-panel grid
- short narrative sequence of strips
- Sunday sample 1 (redefining the idea of "punch line")
- Sunday sample 2 (subtle timing)

The "music" of the four panel strip. Think of comic timing as a musical rhythm. Illustrate with examples: reduce each strip to a short "melody."

Recap of last week's discussion:

- treating the grid as an invisible template over reality; the democratic nature of equal size rectangles
 - varying panel sizes and widths, structuring the reading experience to correspond with the actual experience of the events depicted
 - treating the panels more as a continuous visual unit in either case (pitfalls and advantages of each method)
 - starting with equal grid, then changing sizes to accommodate the visual information needed inside the panel, or giving one panel more weight or importance than others
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More on *Peanuts*:

- discuss the Seth strip ("Good Grief!"), which combines both approaches: equal grid and varied layout
- the haiku metaphor for the rigid four-panel structure of early *Peanuts*; the rigid structure as (ironically) a flexible starting point

Discuss: James Kochalka's unexpected (i.e., not in a daily newspaper) and expressive use of the 4-panel format, from his "Sketchbook Diaries" series:

- Sample 1
- Sample 2

Also Discuss: Kaz's *Underworld* as a modern, dark take on the gag-a-day format.

EXERCISES:

Use 3 circles as the basis for constructing a simple character and moving the figure through space (and time). Think of a quarter, dime, and penny to create a figure with 3 different-size circles. Move the circles around so that are 3 different figures, and then draw a fourth figure with 3 equal-size circles.

Take each figure, and draw it in four poses: standing, walking, running, sitting. Keep the proportions consistent.

Now, take the figure you liked working with the best. Add face, stick-arms, and stick-legs (hands and feet optional). Add a graphic element, perhaps a shirt or a hat. Use black or a gray tone of some kind (such as a pattern). Draw some doodles of this figure in different poses; play with it, experimenting with the way its body bends and moves, how its weight shifts, etc.

Draw a four-panel fast-moving action sequence, which takes place outdoors (anywhere, as long as it's an open space, and not inside a room). Each panel must contain an action that is distinct (i.e., a different pose) from the other panels. An example could be: chasing a hat being blown by the wind. Draw the full figure in each panel. Use a few visual signifiers to establish the setting. the important thing is to use action poses.

Next, draw a four panel slow-moving sequence (indoors). Try to limit it to the same room. Compose a clear setting for the action, a real space in which it takes place. We should have a clear sense of the room. Concentrate on slow movements of the body, or still poses (e.g., sitting, lying down, standing).

Students look at their four-panel diary strips again.

- do they add up to a story of some kind?
- are there repeating rhythms?
- can some of these sequences be combined?
- can some entries be reduced to shorter sequences?

Question for Students: in what ways can you combine and/or edit these stories to make a full-page story (using the equal-size-panel grid or other layouts)?

HOMEWORK:

Draw a rough version of a full-page strip. Simply start sketching out the rhythm and composition; use the diary strips from the sketchbooks (last week's assignment) as a possible basis for a strip. Combine, reduce, expand, or repeat elements from these strips to create a new page of comics.

Another option is to use the 3-circle character we made up in the exercises. And yet another option is to combine both the diary and the exercise, simplifying your self-portrait to 3 circles.

(Note: page must be 8–16 panels, not counting title panel.)

Create an attractive title panel as well (could be a different size, to balance out composition).

Use whatever tools you desire, which can include a xerox machine (and scissors and glue). You must use the same size panels only, unless absolutely necessary to break pattern. Feel free to add or delete drawings if you wish; redraw panels if necessary. Tighten your compositions and figure placement using what we have learned in the exercises.!

Concentrate on dividing the material into some cohesive set of panels.

Week 6 – July 16

- Composing more complex pages
- Discussion: Varying panel sizes and layouts for the page. Also: using color; exploring how this affects the reader's experience.
- Assignment: begin to compose multi-panel pages, using panels of varying size and within different layouts.

REVIEW HOMEWORK:

Review, discuss, and critique full-page strips (8–16 panels, not counting title panel.)

HANDOUT:

Sam Henderson, from *Humor Can Be Funny*)

Discuss the different types of comic rhythms and narrative structures in these strips.

Otto Soglow's *Little King*

Discuss the comic timing and how it is served by the composition of the strip; note how only the barest amount of detail is necessary to establish time, place, and character.

Frank King's *Gasoline Alley* (samples >1 and 2)

Cliff Sterrett's *Polly & Her Pals* (samples 1 and 2)

Study and discuss the timing, rhythms, composition, and the stylistic playfulness of these strips.

Ron Rege (sequence from *Skibber–Bee–Bye*)

Discuss the simplicity and clarity of line in these drawings; the consistency of line and a few parameters creates a convincing world/reality.

Mark Beyer, excerpt from *Agony*

Discuss how even these primitive-looking drawings adhere to a consistent set of principles (line, shading, lettering, etc.) and thus create their own little universe.

Jeffrey Brown, excerpt from *Clumsy*

Short sketchbook strips can add up to a story when the sequences are put together and maybe (re)arranged in a particular order; the economy of this method.

Chris Onstad, *Achewood*

Using the web as an inexpensive and flexible forum to experiment with form and slowly develop characters.

EXERCISE 1:

The class adapts the story of the "Frog Prince" into a comic strip. We discuss the best way to do it, and the instructor takes their suggestions and creates the strip on the chalkboard. Go through entire process of creating characters, setting, laying out the grid, deciding how many panels are necessary and how many are best for the pacing we want to convey.

(NOTE: OK for students to doodle and sketch during the discussion)

BREAK for 10 minute

EXERCISE 2:

Each student adapts the "Tortoise and the Hare" fable into a comic strip. Any number of panels and any approach they desire is OK.

Review and discuss the comics during class.

EXERCISE 3:

Draw a vivid memory, real or imagined, from your childhood; just start drawing the first thing that come to mind, one image/one panel, and let it lead you wherever it may, without planning too much. What associations pop back into mind? What details do you remember?

Discuss and flesh it out a bit more; think about structuring a short comic strip story.

NOTE: Start with a one-panel distillation if necessary; then try breaking things down into four-panel sequences to structure the pacing and rhythm.

HOMEWORK:

- Create a single-page story; draw a sketch/draft of a story that is a memory from childhood (i.e., the one started in class). Any number of panels, any type of layout is OK.
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Week 7 – July 23

- Continue: Composing more complex pages
- Discussion: Expand on previous week: Varying panel sizes and layouts for the page.
- Assignment: continue working on multi-panel pages, using panels of varying size and within different layouts.
- Composing more complex pages.
- Discussion: Varying panel sizes and layouts for the page; treating the page as a unified whole.

- Assignment: Work on FINAL PROJECT
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REVIEW homework assignment (i.e., childhood stories).

HANDOUT:

- Winsor McCay
 - Charles Forbell
 - Krazy Kat (sample 1 and sample 2)
 - Chris Ware:
 - ◆ "Potato Man" (using varying idioms for "tonal" shifts)
 - ◆ Quimby the Mouse (B/W strip; using different inking styles)
 - ◆ Quimby the Mouse (color strip, using words as pictures)
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CLASS TAKES A BREAK (10 minutes)

EXERCISE 1:

The class improvises a short comic strip (a title panel plus 5 panels of a story) that the instructor draws on the board. Engage each student in the creative process; everyone should suggest ideas for the characters, plot, etc..

EXERCISE 2:

Class makes minicomics together (using one sheet divided into 8 sections). each student starts one. Spend about 5–6 minutes on the cover and then a maximum of 4 minutes per page.

HOMEWORK:

Pick which assignment you liked doing best, and then hand in finished art:

- One–panel gags (draw 6)
- Four–panel strips (draw 3)
- Single page strip with title panel of some kind (must be at least 8 panels, not including title, and strip must fit on one page). NOTE: Panels don't necessarily have to be of equal size.

1. Bring your FINAL PROJECT next week. Make sure you can fit ALL the artwork onto ONE 8 1/2 X 11 sheet of paper.

2. Also xerox one other page from your sketchbooks. Anything that you liked. (OK to combine material from several sketchbook pages, but fit it all onto one page). Bring in only ONE xeroxed page.

3. Finally, bring a xerox copy of a self–portrait (one of the ones we drew in class). Keep in mind that this will be reduced to about 2 or 3 inches square.

That's THREE pages total.

Week 8 – July 30

- Handing in finished work/final project; final critiques; open discussion and question–and–answer session.

Class Synopsis

Recommended Reading:

- "How to Draw Cartoons" by Ivan Brunetti
- *The Smithsonian Collection of Newspaper Comics* (ed. Bill Blackbeard)
- *The New Yorker 25th Anniversary Album, 1925–1950*
- *The Art of Charles M. Schulz* (ed. Chip Kidd)
- "How to Read Nancy" by Mark Newgarden and Paul Karasik (PDF available here)
- "The Stroll" by Daniel Clowes (reprinted in *20th Century Eightball*)
- "Modern Cartoonist" (pamphlet inside *Eightball* No. 18) by Daniel Clowes
- "Uncle Bob's Midlife Crisis" by Robert Crumb (reprinted in *The Complete Crumb Comics*, Vol. 14)
- "Thrilling Adventure Stories" (aka "I Guess") by Chris Ware (from *Raw*, Vol. 2, No. 3)
- *Acme Novelty Library*, No.15 by Chris Ware