

Wee worlds, big impact

Megan Berkheiser's conceptual assemblage

So many good books, so little time. Megan Berkheiser's illustration in *O, The Oprah Magazine* fairly screamed the message. That's what all good illustrations do, of course. But there was a fey something about this three-dimensional image that begged an explanation—*How did she do that?*

Bit by bit and piece by piece, as it turns out, in a style Berkheiser, an M.F.A. and a senior lecturer at The University of the Arts, Philadelphia, calls "conceptual assemblage." It's her own completely unique blend of hand-drawn illustration, photography, digital imaging, and installation art (which she also creates on a larger scale for exhibition).

Berkheiser's commissioned illustrations actually are 3D tabletop sets, which she builds with an eclectic array of photos, handmade elements, and found objects. She photographs the completed sets with a 4x5 Cambo view camera and delivers the illustrations as 4x5-inch transparencies. She and artist/photographer Michael Liddy, her husband, pool resources to promote their individual commercial work in a venture they named Pushart—as in pushing the boundaries of traditional art (www.pushart.com).

Berkheiser enjoys collaborating with art directors on commissioned

Gear

Computer: Power Mac G4

Scanners: UMAX Astra 650, Epson Expression 836XL

Printers: Epson Photo Stylus 780; HP 1200 black and white laser printer

Cameras: Cambo SC 4x5 view camera; Canon PowerShot A70 (digital); Yashica 35mm

Left: Created for, *O, The Oprah Magazine* (revised from an earlier image that appeared in *AARP* magazine)
Right: Created for *The Village Voice*.

**“I’d love to be able to hand-make every
element in my illustrations,
but there aren’t enough hours in the day.”**



illustrations for editorial and advertising assignments. After discussing the project, she hand-sketches her ideas, plotting the elements that will go into the composition. With the client's sign-off on the sketch, it becomes a kind of blueprint for construction.

"I think being able to create an environment is amazing," says Berkheiser, who cites, among others, contemporary sculptors/installation artists Rachael Whiteread, Sandy Skoglund and Andy Goldsworthy as influences.

If an element she needs doesn't exist, she will model it. If the objects or images at hand are too large or too small, she will photograph or scan them, and digitally re-scale them in the computer. She will output the resized elements on a color printer or black-and-white laser printer,

clip them out, mount them on sturdy Oaktag stock, and hand-color as needed.

"I'd love to be able to hand-make every element in my illustrations, but there aren't enough hours in the day," sighs the artist.

Other than the rescaling, very little digital image manipulation goes into Berkheiser's illustrations. The shadows that give her images such depth come directly from the lighting of the set.

There's such vivacity and joy in Berkheiser's mini vignettes—what becomes of them when the job is done? Some of them have been auctioned off on Artlink.com. But like joy itself, these creations aren't meant to be permanent. "You know, I just need them to stay together until I take the picture," says Berkheiser. In a way, that's just perfect. ■



Above: Created for *The Pennsylvania Gazette* to illustrate a feature by Nick Lyons about relinquishing his book publishing business to his son Below: Created for *AARP* magazine to illustrate a feature on executives quitting the corporate life to become teachers

"You know, I just need them to stay together until I take the picture."

