

On the wall of Gerard DuBois's Montréal home and office is an illustration of a black rabbit—an Easter Bunny, to be precise—titled *Le Lapin Noir du Chevalier Noir* (The Black Rabbit of the Black Knight). Like many of the drawings and paintings that grace the walls of the DuBois home, the work is not Gerard's.

In fact, you won't find any of his own work in the public areas of his house. The work you see is by renowned illustrator friends and acquaintances DuBois loves and admires, including the late Thierry Martin Matje of Paris, François Avril of Paris, Greg Clark of Los Angeles,

Alain Pilon of Montréal, Jeffrey Fisher, an Australian working in Paris, Christian Northeast of Toronto and Nathalie L'ete of Paris. But the black Easter Bunny is particularly special to Gerard: it's by his son, an effervescent, dark-eyed, black headed five-year-old boy named Thomas.

"The teachers at Thomas's kindergarten asked the children to create nice pictures to celebrate the coming Easter," Gerard explains. "This was my son's interpretation of the Easter Bunny, this rather wild looking black knight rabbit. When the teacher saw it, she asked him if he could change it to something sweeter, pinker, I suppose. He told her, essentially, another interpretation, for him, would be impossible ('C'est nul!' he replied)."

Thomas is not a dark spirit nor is his dad. They revel in the beauty and wonder of life, but view both differently. To both, a black Easter bunny is beautiful and funny. To Gerard DuBois the world isn't dark, but it is filled with irony hypocrisy, clichés, tragedies and mankind's folly. "I can't help it," DuBois admits, "My work is not always so happy. But it is not deliberately or needlessly provocative either. It is what it is; I only hope that the viewer understands what I am trying to express."

A Gerard DuBois 2003 cover for the Paris monthly *La Vie* is a good case in point. The editor was familiar with DuBois's work but decided, rather inexplicably, that he wanted a DuBois Christmas cover. The illustration Gerard completed is a doll-faced disembodied head sprouting a wing. This disembodied angel is set against a dark red field. At a glance it appears sweet; upon closer inspection it is disquieting. Disembodied angels? Merry Christmas? Hmm. Have a scotch and think about that one.

"The client was surprised, but, yes, he accepted it," says Gerard with a shrug and a wave of his hand. "It was my interpretation of the holiday on one particular day. For me, it could not be any other way." C'est nul, indeed.

Paris sans tourists

Gerard DuBois, an only child, grew up in Argenteuil, a suburban town north of Paris, a lone French-born boy among many foreign-born children.

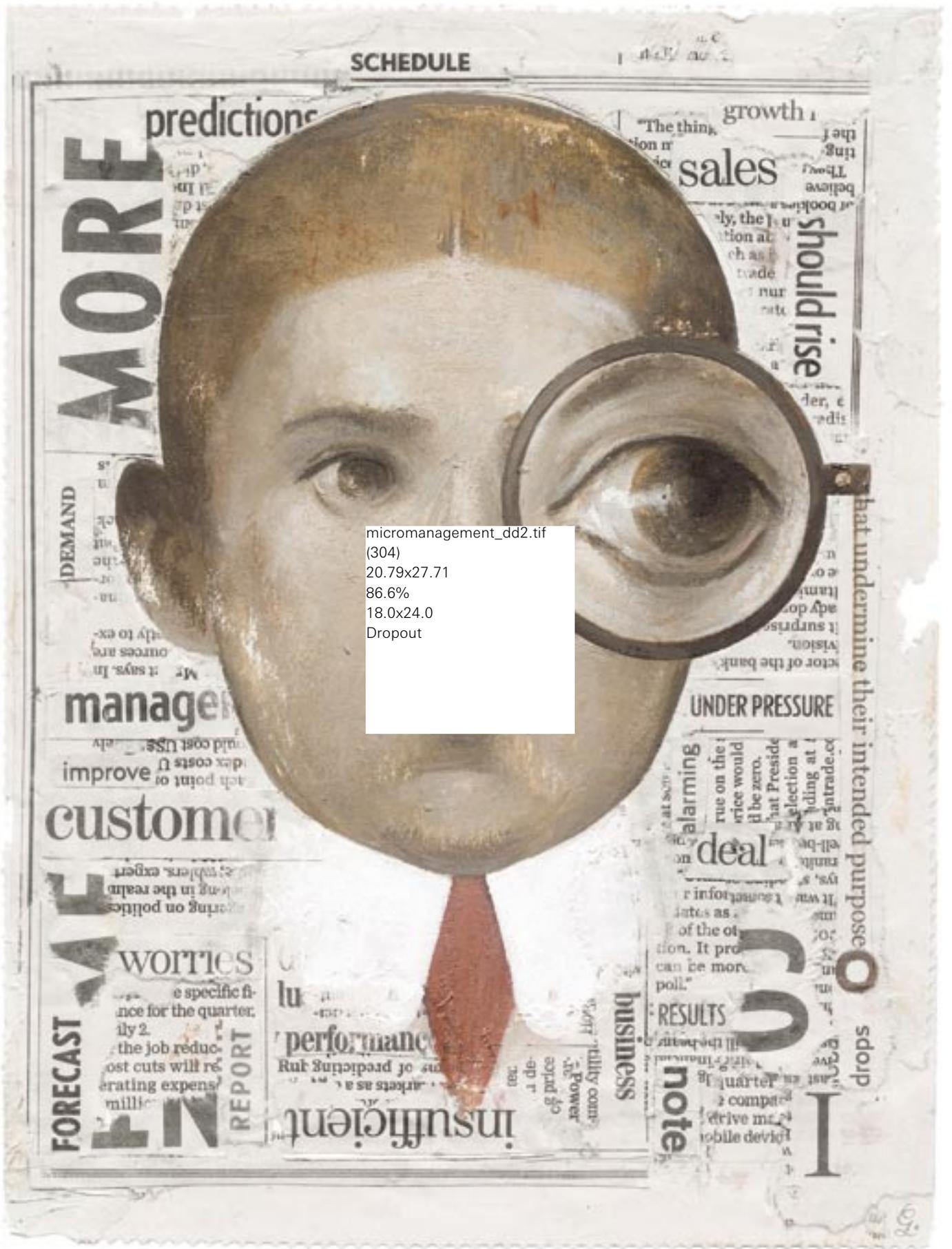
DuBois says that his youth was full, if not rich. He adds, "My youth was normal but not easy—my parents divorced when I was eleven, my mother raised me alone for a time in an uninspiring four-building apartment block working hard to support both of us. I spent much time alone, but I had friends, a mongrel crowd of about twenty kids. We never did things that got us in serious trouble with the police. But to say, as many do, that their youth was painful, maiming or scarring would be inaccurate. My life was normal, quiet, anonymous and off the tourist route."

Drawing was always a passion of Gerard's. An avid comic reader since he was eight, he was drawing even before that. But the first time the idea of "art" as a career choice occurred to him was at the age of fourteen, when the headmistress of his public school encouraged him to apply for advanced study at an art school in the heart of Paris. She had been made aware of

All illustrations are acrylic on paper or canvas.

Right: *Micromanagement*, 2004. 7 1/8 × 9 1/2. Tarver Harris, art director; SellingPower magazine, client.

Gerard Joie de Vivre *The Noire Version* DuBois



micromanagement_dd2.tif
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86.6%
18.0x24.0
Dropout

Gerard DuBois

some of his cartoons and rambling doodling in his notebooks. Aptitude tests were required for admission. Gerard passed and entered the school, a century-old institute in St. Germain des Prés, known to most as Rue Madame.

Left Bank sponge

St. Germain in Paris' 6th arrondissement opened DuBois's eyes. The historical center of Paris' Left, intelligentsia and artists' community, St. Germain now is more the lucky heir of a dead aunt's mansion, once in a formerly shabby part of town now gone upscale. It isn't just up and coming, it's up and over the top. Shabby and artsy it isn't, but it remains a pulsating, exhilarating intersection of Paris life. Gerard DuBois's life as an artist began.

"There, I became a sponge," he recalls. "I began to discover and I began to grow. I became fascinated by culture. I began to notice how people dressed. How they carried themselves. How some stood apart. I saw television in a different way and I began a passionate regard for books, language and the varieties of music."

Upon completion of his studies at Rue Madame, he enrolled for an advanced degree at l'École Supérieure des Arts Estienne, also in Paris. As before, entrance required testing to separate those with true potential.

After completing study at Estienne, DuBois was obliged to serve France for two years. Besides the military option, some lucky ones opt for Foreign Service assignment. So in the name of the preservation and/or projection of French culture and heritage, good fortune again appeared in the form of the former head mistress of Gerard's primary school, then ensconced in some bureaucratic capacity to assist potential young artists to avoid getting shot in the Balkans. She offered Gerard an opportunity in the Canadian Maritimes, fighting the noble war to preserve Acadian language and customs. In 1989 into battle Gerard leapt.

Frozen assets for France

While service to the French Ministry of foreign affairs is not as dangerous as, say, serving as peacekeeper in Macedonia, it's not as cushy as it sounds either. There *are* hardships to endure. Like freezing your ass off, for example.

A large portion of Canadian Maritimes are cold, isolated places. Over the course of the next fourteen months, DuBois took on heroic assignments at various magazines and small newspapers in four different towns, most comprised of little more than a few buildings, a generator and some power lines. Petit

Rocher, New Brunswick, Yarmouth, Nova Scotia, Caraquet, New Brunswick or Summerside, Prince Edward Island, offer no lines, no traffic and a great deal of free time to think. Student-soldier Gerard DuBois of France certainly did, exposing himself to Canadian culture, Acadian culture, frigid weather and a whole lot of free time to hone his craft.

"Petit Rocher has—or had—five buildings," Gerard recalls. "There was nothing to do but work and eat; my boss made a great lobster fondue. Bidding him farewell, it was off to Yarmouth, Nova Scotia, a little bigger but somehow more lonely, cold, depressing and wet (see *Shipping News*). We didn't even get TV. So I just sat in my little cubicle drawing, drawing, drawing. When I could, I'd sneak over to Montréal for some civilization. This was against the rules of my service which saw our cultural preservation duties as a full-time job."

But those smarts earned in the streets of Argenteuil paid off: he didn't get caught and Acadian culture staggers on to this day. But those clandestine visits to Montréal convinced Gerard that it was a place he could live in. There, too, in 1991 he met and fell in love with a shy young woman, Stephanie, his wife since 1997 and mother of his two children, Thomas and Nathan, not quite one-year-old at publication. At the conclusion of his national service obligation, Gerard returned home for two months—but would soon return to Canada and Stephanie. He's been making a living at illustration ever since.

"I noticed early that the market for illustration in England and North America was much greater than its demand in France," he says. "I didn't have a Stephanie in England. Therefore my reasons for making Montréal my home were both romantic and practical."

Gerard DuBois—the world's first practical romantic.

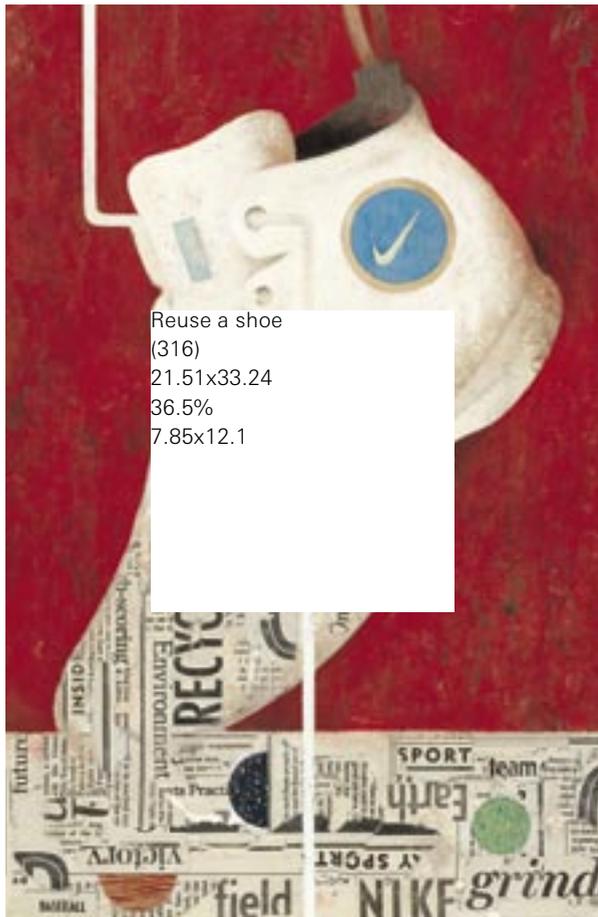
Trash bag valise

Those familiar with Gerard's work will note little similarity between his early work and his work today. At the beginning of his career he built elaborate collages and three-dimensional forms from painted cardboard and found objects, some as large as one square meter. He painted elaborate textures, outlined everything and woodcut stamps. Because of their size, Gerard had to transport them in plastic garbage bags, making quite an impression at new business presentations. The sad garbage bag look must have induced sympathy among some of his first clients: many bought pieces right out of the trash bag as artwork for homes and offices. "I sold a lot of work this way," he recalls drolly.

Right: "*Reuse a shoe*, 2002. Brochure cover and poster for a shoe recycling program in the USA." 9½ × 14½. Gretchen Leary, art director; Nike Inc., client.

"*Women in Motion*, 2003. From *Luna Park*, short plays and monologues by Donald Marguiles." Tim Hussey, art director; Weston magazine, client.

The Quest, 2003. 7⅛ × 4½. Jemal Hamilton, art director; Maclean's, client.



Reuse a shoe
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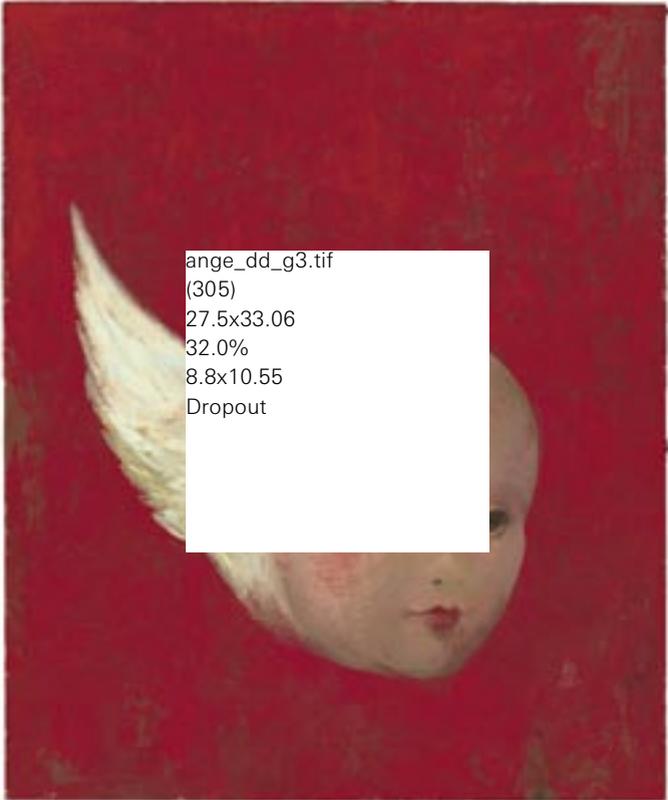
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Over a quiet lunch at home and in St. Lambert, a mid-century neighborhood across the St. Lawrence River from Montréal, Gerard discussed the stylistic changes he had made over his career. “One day I awoke and I said to myself ‘I quit cardboard, that’s it!’ I was not evolving my work. I just wanted to do something different. For me, change is a challenge and challenges are necessary to keep the work fresh. I am sure that some years from now, the work will again look completely different—and will drive my rep crazy.”

Moving towards a more painterly style, less naïve, less comical, Gerard’s work has evolved into the series seen today. This often features button-eyed human figures with painted on doll-like faces and limbs. All of this is tinted with that *souçon* of darkness that, in this writer’s opinion, marks his work. Again, the darkness isn’t gloomy or sad; it’s ironic and knowing, revealing mankind for what it is, both heroic and cowardly.

Compliments are for eulogies

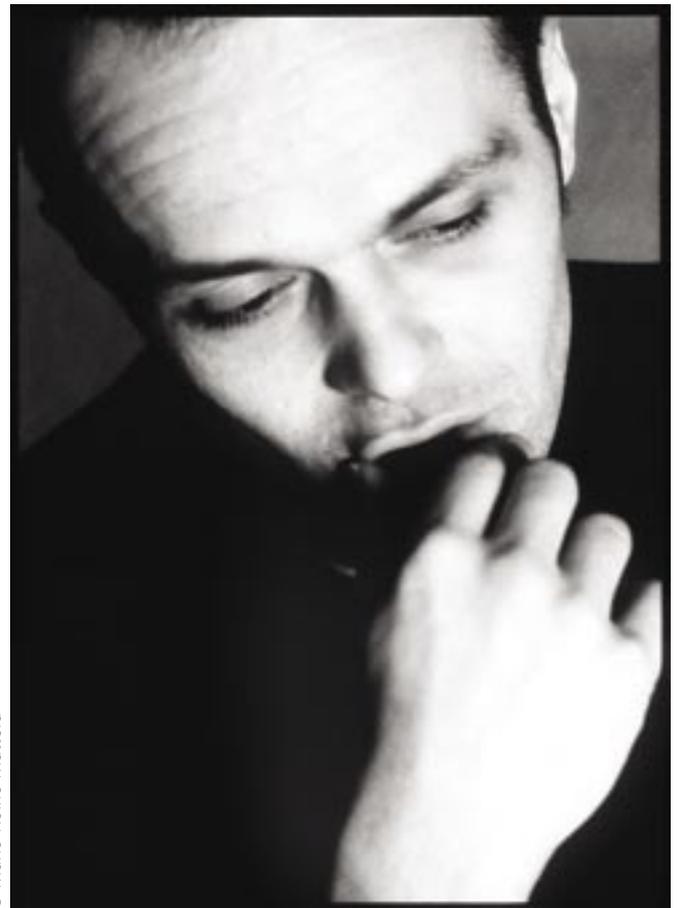
“I think the goal of any artist is to make art for themselves, work that pleases them first and others second,” DuBois offers. “I am a commercial artist. I am careful in my choices in whom I work for and the type of projects I take. This gives me near full artistic freedom—but not the kind of freedom a fine arts painter has.

“But I am not a painter,” he continues. “Some think painting is merely illustration writ large. This is fallacy. If I could create artwork full time, I would. But at this moment in my life, I cannot. I have a young family.”

So, don’t call Gerard a painter. But do call him an artist of extraordinary sensitivity born of empathy for normal lives. So whether the subject is the effect of materialism on children, the separation of the self from the body in Alzheimer’s, preparing for death, school boy bullies or the clownishness deceits of the executive class, Gerard DuBois draws from his perspective as common man among common people. He is an artist, but he is not an elitist. His work is accessible, but it is not facile. It has depth but it is not ponderous. It resonates but it does not use gimmicks to make statements. It is quiet, stealthy and a little mischievous. Like the beheaded Christmas Angel for *La Vie* magazine, it sort of sneaks up behind you and whispers, “Merry Christmas, now where’s the body?”

Last January, Gerard DuBois turned 37. He has many years ahead of him. Yet, by most measure, he is already considered a highly successful illustrator and artist. Hell, anyone who can make a living wage as an illustrator may be considered a success. But Gerard DuBois is uncommonly good. Just don’t ask him to agree with you.

“Success? Success is a kind of compliment, not something one can really achieve in any real or lasting way. I have a wonderful older gay intellectual friend in Paris—everyone should



© Marie-Reine Mattera

have at least one—who once said to me, ‘A compliment is like a cigarette, you inhale it deeply, get a little rush then it’s up in smoke. All you’re left with is the stale air and the memory of a drag.’”

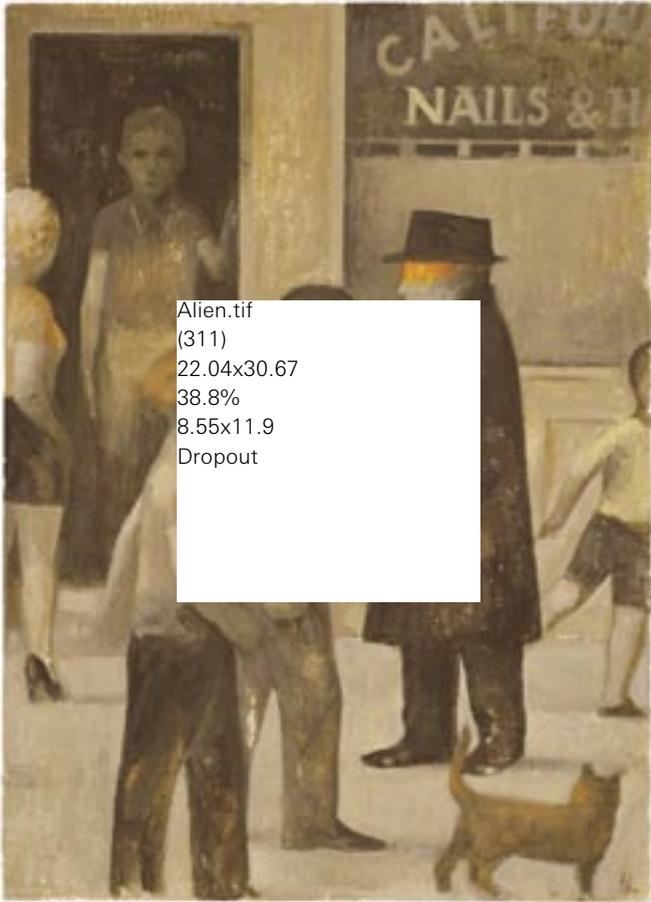
So if you live by compliments, you’ll die by them. Feature stories are huge compliments. But only fools take them to heart. After all, Gerard DuBois has 40 more years of illustration left in him. He will not take today’s triumphs to his head: “I don’t want to one day find myself staring at a blank page, with no hope of new ideas thinking about how ‘great’ I used to be.”

And that, dear reader, is the takeaway: compliments are for headstones, you’re only as good as your last job and, oh yeah, quit smoking, it doesn’t compliment you one bit. Back to work! **CA**

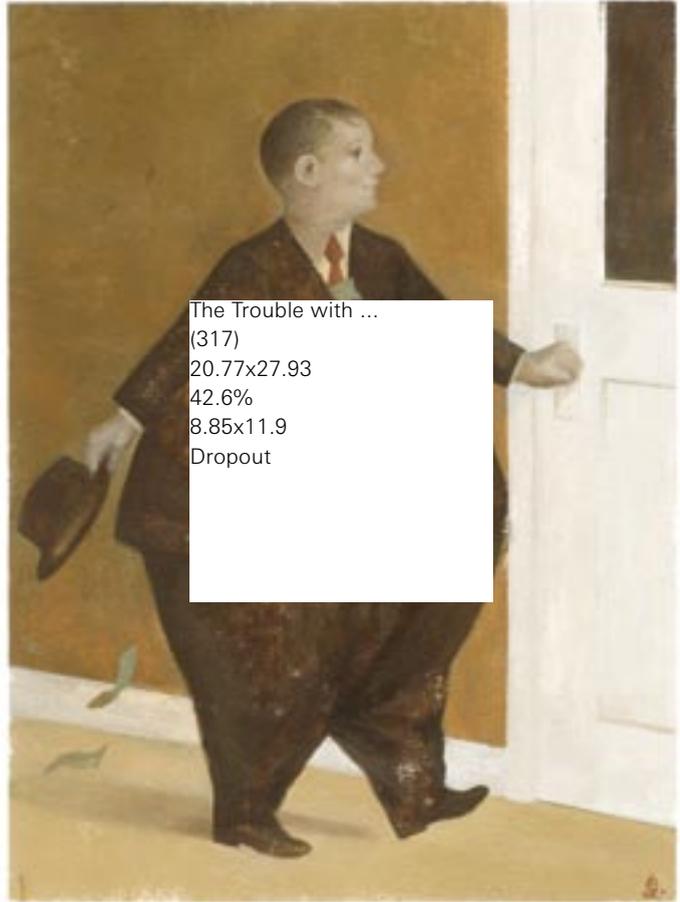
Left: “*We aren’t the champion*. A look at the futile but enduring passion of the true sports fans.” Holly Holliday, art director; US Airways Attaché magazine, client.

Angel, Christmas cover, 2004. 7⁷/₈ × 9⁵/₈. Bruno Houdou, art director; La Vie magazine, client.

Canada’s War on Terror, 2003. 7³/₄ × 9³/₄. Edel Rodriguez, art director; Time, client.



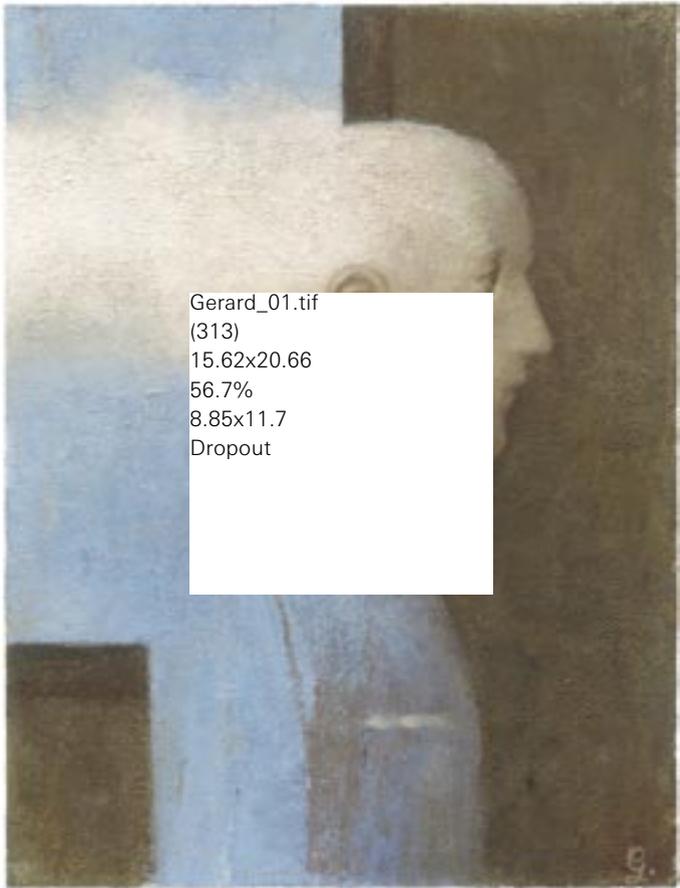
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The Trouble with ...
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Gerard DuBois

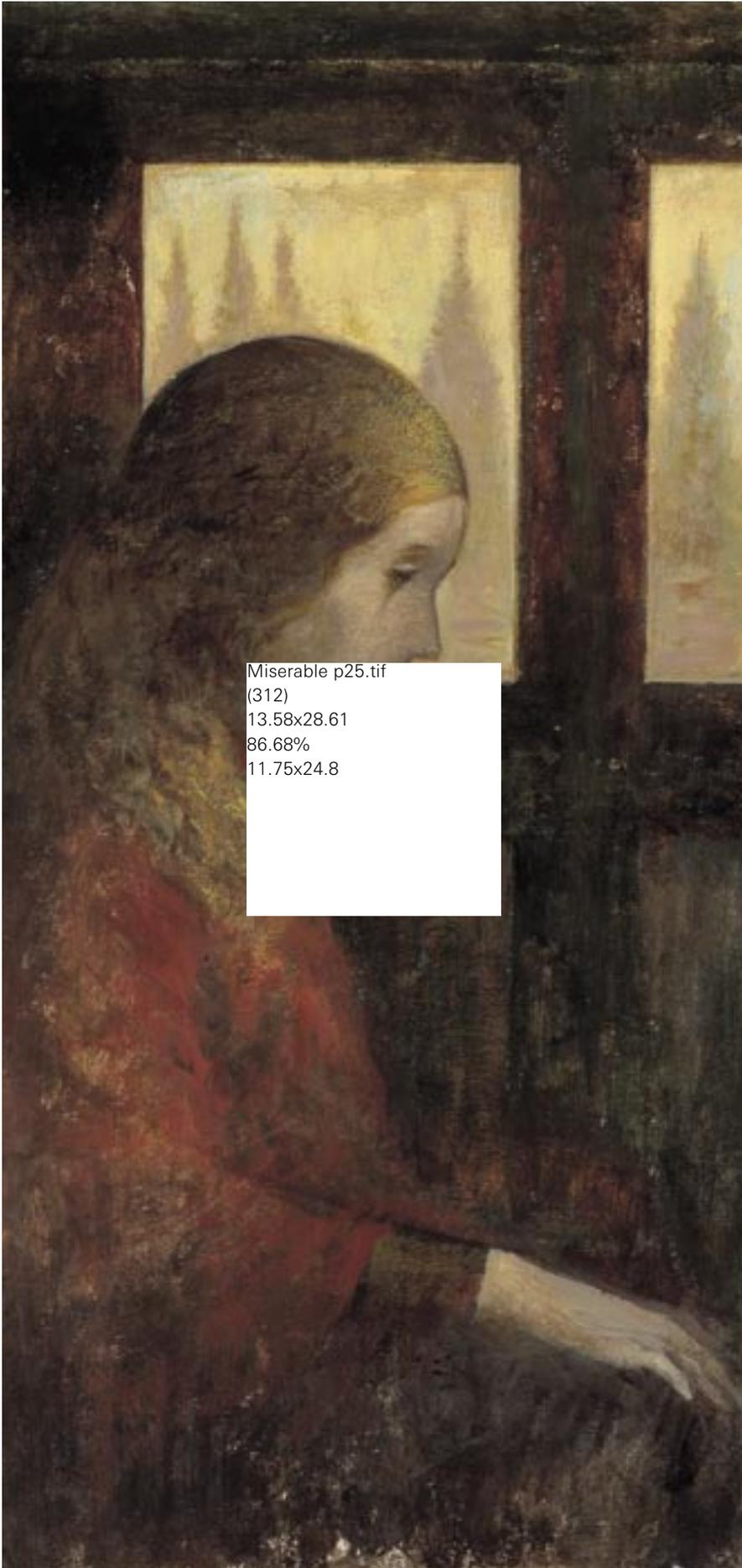
Left: **An Alien Among Us**, 2004. $7\frac{1}{2} \times 10\frac{1}{2}$. Etienne Gilfillan, art director; ForteanTimes magazine, client.

Canada's Pension Plan, 2004. 8×11 . Tim Davin, art director; Canadian Business magazine, client.

Yale, unpublished 2004. $6\frac{3}{8} \times 8\frac{3}{4}$. Robert Perrino, art director; New York magazine, client.

Laughter and Forgetting, 2003, about Alzheimer's disease. $6\frac{1}{8} \times 8\frac{1}{8}$. Arthur Hochstein, art director; Time, client.

This page: **Fanny**, 2002. One of 35 images for a book, **Les Misérables**. $5\frac{1}{2} \times 11\frac{3}{8}$. Franck Serac, art director; Nathan Publisher, client.



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Gerard DuBois

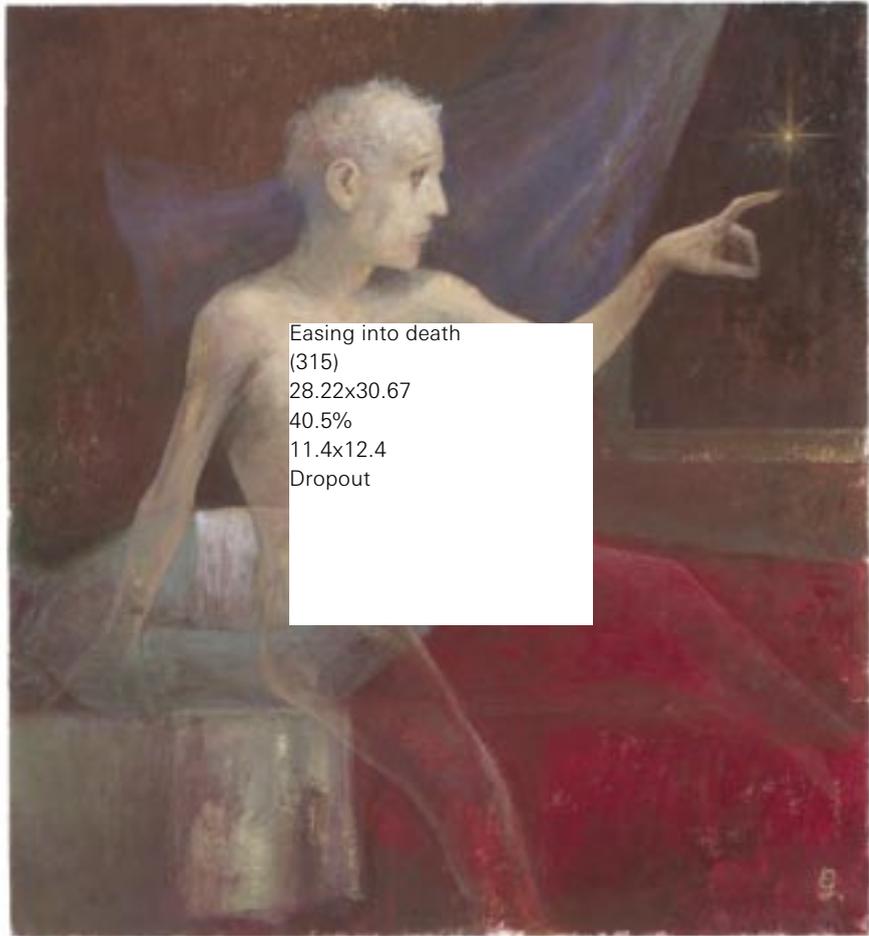
This page: **Easing into Death**, 2003 cover. 11 × 12. Blake Dinsdale, art director; Illumination magazine, client.

Emperor's New Clothes, 1999. 12 $\frac{5}{8}$ × 12 $\frac{5}{8}$. Brent Hatcher, art director; Red Herring magazine, client.

Right: "**Les Exclus**, 2002. Book cover for a novel by the Nobel Prize of Literature recipient Elfriede Jelinek." 9 $\frac{1}{2}$ × 15. Benedicte Roscot, art director; Elfriede Jelinek, writer; Seuil Publisher, client.

Bullying, 2001. 11 $\frac{3}{8}$ × 13. Michel Rousseau, art director; Reader's Digest, client.

1889, a play. 18 $\frac{3}{4}$ × 10. Owen Phillips, art director; The New Yorker, client.



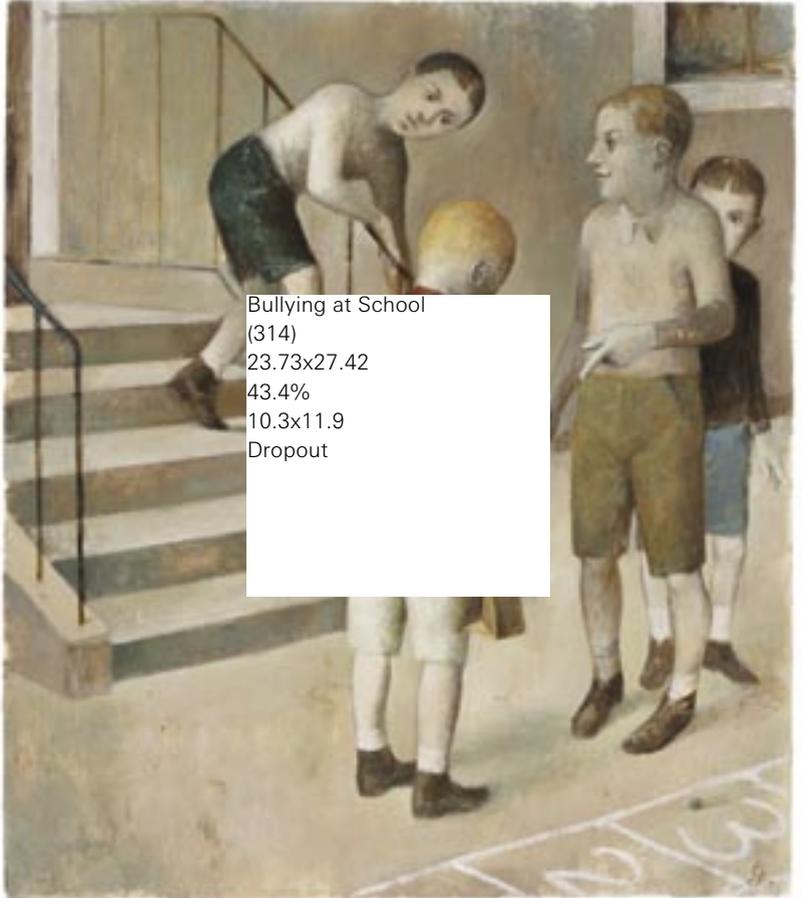
Easing into death
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Les exclus_3.tif
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Bullying at School
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