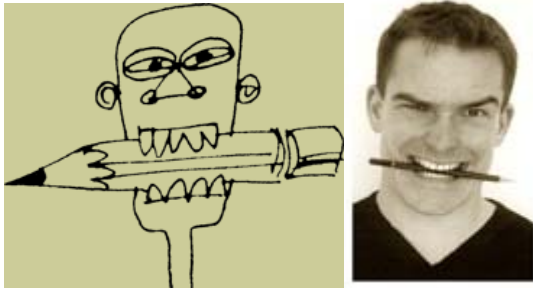


This month, we chat to Michel Streich, freelance illustrator and a man clearly comfortable with the pencil. Michel talks to Monica Davidson.



There's something vaguely surreal about catching the ferry to Sydney's Taronga Zoo with no intention of seeing the animals. I'm heading across the harbour to see an entirely different set of creatures altogether –illustrations created by artist Michel Streich.

Michel is a smiling man of 37, born and raised in Germany before moving to London, and then Australia, with his partner Lisa. His illustrations are predominantly ink-based, occasionally dark-humoured pieces that trigger serious thought. His work also has a lighter side, however, and much of it is simple and fun.

Sitting together on the tiny verandah of his immaculate apartment, Michel and I nibble chocolate biscuits and talk. On the pristine lawn below, a few water dragons hover near the fountain outside his apartment block, occasionally indulging in scaly turf wars over a patch of sun.

Michel studied visual communication after school, which included graphic design and illustration. Before he started he was vague about what illustration entailed. "I knew it was something artistic, but also something practical at the same time, something based in reality. From there, it just grew." Michel graduated with the German equivalent of a Master's degree.

Having picked up various illustration jobs throughout his studies, Michel stayed freelance after graduation and built on his small but existing clientele in Germany. He has never had a job as an employee. "It just happened like that," he explains. "With certain professions, I think, there just aren't many employed people... maybe on the newspapers but that's it, hardly anyone needs illustrations every day."

Michel is happy being freelance but his work choice was not necessarily deliberate. "After my studies, if someone had come along and said 'Here's a secure income', maybe I would have said yes, I'm not sure. Now that offer would have to be pretty good. I've been doing this for ten years, so I don't know now if I could work in a proper office."

Like so many freelancers, Michel didn't have a clue what he was doing at first, in a business sense, and had no solid plans. "I just basically started off showing people my work, and if they didn't have any work I'd ask them for advice. I'd find out what they thought was crap about my work and what they liked. It was trial and error rather than outlining a path and going along with it."

Michel fell in love with his Australian partner Lisa while she was travelling in Europe, and together they moved to London. In 2000 the couple had an opportunity to migrate to Australia and took it.

The move meant that Michel was again starting from scratch, unable to rely on word of mouth or a network of contacts. He took a few state-run courses in freelancing to see what different business techniques had to offer. He tried a few, including a business plan. "I wrote down my five year plan and stuck it on the wall, and after a month I tore it down and threw it in the bin. What kind of boring life is that, where you map out the next five years for yourself, and try to stick to it? Now I think, 'What would I like to do in the next year or two, what new things would I like to do, what would I like to change or get rid of?'"

Michel commands a rate of pay based on his years of experience, and he has an intense dislike of illustrators trying to undercut each other. "The race to the bottom, I just don't understand." He believes it's pointless if you want to sustain a career. "If you're undercutting people and they're undercutting you, then you may as well get another job, because you're destroying it for yourself and everyone else."

Having said that, of course, in an industry where your colleagues are also your competitors, it can be very difficult to work out what to charge. Michel's advice is to check professional organisations, talk to an agent, and get more experience in comparing what different jobs are worth.

Copyright is also an important topic for Michel. He has always been savvy about his creative rights. "I used to be very adamant about copyright and would fax people an acceptance of commission form that would state all the things we agreed on. Now, on the invoice I outline the copyright usage. For example, this amount covers the following usage, so there's no disagreement about it later on. I used to have a lot of paperwork, now not so much."

Michel is happier to teach his clients about what they can and can't do with his work, rather than sell his copyright completely. "If people have full copyright they can change things, they'll change colours and so on. I'm also not interested in image banks and so on because people could buy your image and then use it for a nuclear power plant or a political party. I like having some control."





Apart from his commissioned illustrations, Michel has always spent time on his personal work. “Even just from a commercial point of view, I find that clients will only ever hire you for something you have already done. They see that you can paint a piece of cheese, but can you paint butter?” Michel’s smile crinkles. “In order to expand your commissions you have to do personal work, otherwise you’ll just be repeating yourself. I’ve found it usually turns out well and it can take (your career) somewhere else.”

Michel was well mentored on the balance between paid and personal work by his illustration professor, who was wary of the commercial arts despite teaching in a design school. “He felt that you’d be a service provider in the end, rather than doing something worthwhile. I find that sustains me now - I have something solid behind me, like knowing how to draw properly, and when things get boring I have other things I can try and go back to.”

When I ask what he likes least about freelancing, Michel pauses for so long I almost repeat myself. It’s obvious that there’s nothing he dislikes, although the energy needed can be draining. “Everything has to come out of yourself, all your motivation. There’s nobody there on Monday morning to tell you what to do - I’m glad it isn’t like that, but it also takes more energy.” Of course, that’s a price Michel is happy to pay. He loves the freedom of being self-employed, of not having a boss around and being able to do things his own way.

Michel has trouble even defining success, let alone figuring out if he’s achieved it. “If a job doesn’t work financially, but is creatively successful - or the other way around when you think something is crap but you’ve been paid well for it, then is it a success or not?”

While success may be a puzzle yet to solve, one thing is certain – Michel’s trial and error approach is working. “What I’m happy with is that I’ve never done anything but drawing. I’ve always made a living from drawing. For me that’s a good thing.”

**For more information about Michel,
please visit www.michelstreich.com**

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