



Images courtesy Society of Illustrators

A Retrospective: Ralph Steadman

Society of Illustrators
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▼ Art

Id on His Sleeve

Ralph Steadman is still spitting mad, but having a great time

BY R.C. BAKER

Former Alabama Governor George Wallace's rallying cry, "Segregation now, segregation tomorrow, segregation forever," fueled hatred and violence across America during the Sixties and Seventies. While running for president, Wallace drew overflow crowds of disaffected working-class voters, whom he would whip into howling frenzies by promising to lock up all the uppity blacks and smelly longhairs agitating for civil rights. But when an assassination attempt during the 1972 presidential primaries left Wallace wheelchair-bound, one might have thought even political caricaturists would find a hint of sympathy for the crippled politician. Not the English artist Ralph Steadman, who in 1976 portrayed the fiery demagogue

with a gaping, spittle-flecked mouth, the bent rims and wrenched axles of his wheelchair as mangled as his soul. Four decades later, Steadman has zeroed in on another American presidential wannabe and, inspired by the term *porcky pie* — Cockney rhyming slang for *lie* — envisioned Donald Trump as a pink-eared porker wearing only star-spangled tighty whities.

The Society of Illustrators retrospective of Steadman's work includes more than a hundred original drawings, paintings, and photos, along with some ink-encrusted pens and a broken palette plate. These relics speak to a volatile style: paint-handling influenced by the likes of Bacon, Pollock, and Goya combined with political polemics in the tradition of William Hogarth and George Grosz. In the early Six-

ties, Steadman began selling barbed cartoons to London's *Private Eye* magazine, including a series based on Hogarth's eighteenth-century "Marriage à-la-Mode" paintings, which satirized the upper class's penchant for loveless marriages of convenience. Steadman's 1965 update portrays a slovenly lord in biker regalia alongside his pregnant wife, dressed in beatnik toggery — each of them too self-absorbed to feed their drooling pooch. Volumetric cross-hatching and swirling patterns enliven this mordantly funny portrait of aristos on the skids. During this period Steadman would work on scabrous satires by day and spend evenings sketching from life; the exhibition includes an evocative view of the cavernous interior of London's Victoria and Albert Museum, lithe

sketches of pub patrons, and a breakneck rendering of a fish skeleton.

Throughout the decades, Steadman has deployed a sumptuous array of mediums, combining tautly ruled geometries with witty collage and splattered inks. *Hunter's Liver on Holiday, Liverpool, England* (1996) features a cut-out medical illustration of the organ lounging in a striped beach chair, accompanied by dancing inkblots. The abused liver belongs to Hunter S. Thompson, whose book-length masterpieces of gonzo journalism in collaboration with Steadman — *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas* and *Fear and Loathing on the Campaign Trail '72* — set the standard for illuminated spleen-venting. The first attacked America's hypocritical war on drugs, as well as the bartering of the American Dream for plastic prosperity; the second dissected the Machiavellian subterfuges of a presidential campaign. Both books allowed Steadman to portray America's id as if it were a cloak of bloody nerve endings and quivering ganglia worn on the outside. "Lizard Lounge," from *Las Vegas*, features reptilian casino patrons clawing a carpet of sanguinary muck while nipping and hissing at each other like drunken pterodactyls.

Center stage in *Campaign Trail* is Richard M. Nixon, to whom Steadman ascribed "the

hangdog look of a creature made for the cut and thrust of dirty infighting.” Deploying his usual panoply of vicious tactics, Tricky Dick won reelection in 1972, defeating George McGovern in a landslide. McGovern’s campaign manager, Frank Mankiewicz, described Thompson’s book as “the least factual, most accurate account” of the contest. The same could be said of Steadman’s illustrations: Nixon did not have Vice President Spiro Agnew growing out of his anus, but the administration’s designated hatchet man became infamous for attacking political enemies as “pusillanimous pussyfooters” and “nattering nabobs of negativism” before resigning in disgrace after taking cash bribes from government contractors.

In his vision of a dual-headed monster, Steadman replaced Agnew’s inflammatory oratory with projectile vomit, the ink seemingly more coagulated than dried. A photograph in the exhibition reveals one of Steadman’s techniques for achieving such visual invective: blowing into a tube to send ink splattering across the page. It could be said that Steadman has been spitting mad his entire professional life, as is reflected in his 2006 memoir, *The Joke’s Over*. The artist — a foreigner, after all — recounts frantically scribbling in his sketchbook during the 1972 Democratic convention in Miami, at the height of the Vietnam war: “People in America don’t want peace. They just enjoy a screaming lifestyle.” Farther down the page, he notes, “I dragged myself over to Flamingo Park to see the protesters, the Vietnam vets in wheelchairs — the survivors of another war gone wrong. Don’t they all!”

Some might accuse Steadman of a one-note sensibility, but in illustrations for literary classics like *Through the Looking-Glass* and *What Alice Found There*, he charmingly delineates a rowboat’s graceful curves and Alice’s luxuriant blonde

ther gonzo exuberance, the exhibition also includes details of a 2011 First Amendment court challenge to a Michigan ban on Flying Dog Brewery’s Raging Bitch pale ale, which was graced with a Steadman-designed label. (The brewery won the case and Raging Bitch has since become its most popular beer.)

In a three-foot-wide colored-ink drawing, Steadman takes a gonzoid’s view of art history, envisioning Michelangelo and Leonardo screaming tongue-torquing curses at each other from opposing painting scaffolds. But he slyly ruptures the ordered perspective of yore with an abstract-expressionist blot exploding on one wall, and gives the young Michelan-



**Wool and Water (1972);
‘Don’t Draw, Ralph! It’s a filthy habit...’
- HST. Self-portrait (sic) (2006);
Richard Nixon and Spiro Agnew (1969)**



locks reflected in a dark pond; in “The White Knight and the Red Knight,” he pairs filigreed pen work with a photographic negative to create another playful variation on the mirror concept. And in recent years, Steadman has used atomized inks to convey mists over a Scottish distillery and translucent drips to capture vineyards in Chile. But lest one think such late-life pleasure romps preclude any fur-

gelo the outstretched, outsize hand that would later belong to God on the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel.

Amid Steadman’s flayed flesh, gaping gullets, and bursting eyes can be discerned a born satirist’s belief that life may at times be grotesque, but it’s all we’ve got. Or, as his co-conspirator Thompson once put it: “No sympathy for the devil; keep that in mind. Buy the ticket, take the ride.”