

INTERVIEW WITH
MAX SCRACHMANN

Suzy Cohen Meets the Author

SC: So why the new edition, Max?

MS: Quite simply, demand. I originally put this book together in 1999 from my notes from a seminar I was teaching in the North West in the late 1990s. I had taken a mad turn and moved to the Orkney Islands in 1999, which effectively put an end to my speaking work, but I was still getting requests to teach the seminar so I published it as a book instead. And it just kept selling and selling. It was promoted a bit in 1999 but by 2006 it hadn't had a review or an advert for about four years and it was still selling every month and I was having guilt trips.

SC: Guilt trips?

MS: Yeah, whereas most of the book was timeless a lot of material things it discussed had changed in seven years. Email was still an amusing novelty in 1999 and the section on the internet was out of the stone age. Plus new players have raised their ugly heads in the illustration game, like stock libraries who are doing a lot of artists out of commissioned work, so it was killing me that I was sending out a flawed book so I eventually tied myself to my desk and revised the whole thing! On top of which, Poison Pixie Publishing – of which I'm a director – wanted to branch into non-fiction so they, in effect, bought me out and turned me into an imprint and footed the set-up costs for transforming the book from an e-book to a proper ink-and-paper edition.

SC: And is it important to be in print rather than in electronic format? Isn't the e-book the future, the way ahead?

MS: Give me a break, will you! Ink-and-paper is still the superior medium. What if you want to read in the bath, you gonna take a laptop with you? Of course not.

SC: So you're an old dog?

MS: Yep, but I'm capable of learning new tricks. You have to, if you want to survive. But there's too much fuss about computers. Yes, they're great and they make things like desk-top publishing a breeze – I typeset and laid the whole book out myself on my Mac, for example – but that doesn't mean that traditional skills are obsolete. And, at the end of the day, it's still your face-to-face skills that count in an industry like illustration.

SC: Go on...

MS: Well, let's go back in time to when the dinosaurs still walked and I was a kid trying to get into art school. I'd applied to the Central School in London [now Central St Martin's] and I went down for an interview with them and totally cocked it up. I was a kid from a small town in Scotland and I spoke a totally different language from these people. I didn't have any contacts in the art world, I didn't know how to present

my work or discuss it, and certainly didn't know how to handle criticism. I blew the interview, and not because my work wasn't good enough, but simply because no one had taught me how to handle a face-to-face situation.

SC: So you're saying that talent isn't enough?

MS: Yep, that's exactly what I'm saying. If you don't know how to talk to a client you'll be walked all over, and, even if you do manage to land a commission, they'll pay you a fraction of what you're worth because you'll have no idea how to ask them for more.

SC: But surely school and art school should be teaching you how to cope with that?

MS: Yes, they should, but most of them don't. My school art teacher couldn't be bothered to tell any of us what we'd have to do when it came to a face-to-face situation, something I found out to my cost. Actually, he was a terrible art snob and thought that illustration was some inferior form of art, he was always belittling my early attempts at posters and book covers.

SC: You found you wanted to do 'commercial' work even then?

MS: Oh yeah, I've always loved it. It's only now that I'm ancient that I'm starting to delve into film and the fine art side of things.

SC: So, if you cocked up your art school interview how did you manage to become an illustrator?

MS: Through the back door. My English teacher twisted my arm into going to University to study English Lit (you could get into Uni by just filling out the forms!) and, after doing lots of jobs, mainly in sales, I ended up freelancing as a journalist and was asked to provide some photographs for an article I was working on. I didn't have any so I drew some illustrations instead which the editor really liked and asked me for more. So I sort of backed into illustration.

SC: So there was a happy end?

MS: Yeah, but I could have been doing what I loved from my twenties rather than from my thirties. However, I served an apprenticeship in the art of selling which proved invaluable when I started freelancing. I already knew how to get past the secretary!