

Travis Millard on putting your work into the world



January 9, 2017 - Travis Millard is an artist, illustrator and zine enthusiast based in Los Angeles. He recently contributed visuals for the soundtrack to Paul Thomas Anderson's *Inherent Vice* and makes lots of drawings of dogs.

As told to T. Cole Rachel, 3698 words.

Tags: [Art](#), [Beginnings](#), [Inspiration](#), [Promotion](#).

What are the origins of your artmaking?

Well, let's see. For me, I have to attribute an obsession with drawing to my mom because she was a craft-maker and was always just really handy, whether it be building us forts or painting things. She never went to school for it or tried to make a living from it or tried to sell anything, but she would give the things she made as gifts. She would just keep a pen and paper with her at all times and wherever we were she would always pull it out and put it in my hands or my brother's hands.

Growing up, I was always the kid who could draw. I remember being able to just draw things. I drew a Stay Puft Marshmallow Man that was really famous in my elementary school class. That was my social key, something that I was able to use to make friends with people. Even through high school there were some really tough asshole bully guys and I remember two of the toughest dudes cornering me one time in class and I was thinking I was going to get the shit kicked out of me, but instead they asked me if I could draw a really sick bulldog tattoo.

Anyway, that just kind of got me through everything, really. I would draw comics. I was able to draw things that would just make people laugh. I had a high school art teacher who really inspired me. His class lit a fire under me. It was like I really wanted to not suck at art in his class. There are a lot of students that came from his class that still continue to make art or that I'm still in touch with and were heavily influenced by him.







I went to KU, Kansas University, and a lot of friends of mine were going to art institutes. I never thought about college. I had no plan of what I was going to do. I was studying graphic design and illustration, but I still didn't really know what I was doing. I was good at drawing. My dad, a lifelong Wrangler jeans salesman, was always telling me I had to get a job. I figured, "Well, graphic design, illustration, I guess that means job." Then I got in there and all I was doing was being terrible at the computer. I wasn't really drawing. I wasn't really utilizing what I was good at.

Then I had a printmaking class with the artist Michael Krueger, who I'm still in touch with today and whose work I very much admire. We're just like kindred spirits, I think. It was his first year of teaching. I would get to his class and I just really took to printmaking. I wouldn't think about illustration concepts or computer programs or these vice grips that they put on your head to make sure that you're getting the concepts right. School taught me critical thinking and why, in some ways, it's important to be your own worst critic and to always question what it is that you are doing and if there's a better way. I realize now that I really owe a lot to some of the graphic design and typography and illustration teachers that I had. Still, it was Michael Krueger who was really my mentor. I remember that he came up to me one day and was like, "Did you ever just think you could be an artist?" That totally cracked my head open. I didn't even really know what that meant at all. He introduced me to Barry McGee's work and Margaret Kilgallen. I started looking up more contemporary artists and realized that a lot of them were not that much older than me. I really had no idea.

Growing up, what I thought of as "art" were skateboard graphics and heavy metal record covers and horror movie VHS tape covers. There are still echoes in my head from seeing that kind of stuff for the first time. What really triggered me I think were things like Jim Phillips and '70s *MAD* magazines. Mort Drucker. Finding that stuff in my uncle's drawer was a huge influence on me. I could not get enough of that era of *MAD* magazine. He had some *Freak Brothers* comics. That was my first experience seeing nudity and drugs in comics, which I probably saw for the first time when I was 11 or 12. It was a new world for me.

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When people ask you what you do, how do you answer them?

Oh, man. I answer it differently almost every time. I always mess it up. One of the worst things I said was, "I'm a drawer." The other version is like, "You're a drawer? Like, a drawer you pull out from a cabinet. Like what is that, dude?" You know, I say all kinds of things. I still say I draw, I'm a cartoonist, I say I'm an illustrator, I'll say I'm an artist if people still don't understand what those things mean. Actually, I have to say I almost *never* say I'm an artist. How would I say that? Just rare situations. I don't know. It even depends on the way things are going in my life if I even feel like I'm able to say that. It ebbs and flows. Maybe it's because of how I grew up, but saying "I'm an artist" just always feels weird. Instead I will say, "I'm an illustrator," or "I draw stuff." "Oh, really? What kind of art do you make?" I usually say, "I just draw weird shit." I draw different kinds of weird shit. That usually sums it up.



What is your work life like? And how do you differentiate your professional illustration work from your own personal creative work?

Gosh, I wish I had an easier answer. Work is very... I don't know. Sometimes it's really busy, sometimes I'm turning down work because I have too much coming at me. Then there will be these long dry spells when my email seems broken and I'm not getting any professional jobs. It seems like my name is on a list for a little while and then I'm getting these calls from ad agencies and design firms and

magazines or things like that from around the world. I've never solicited myself as a professional illustrator in that way. I don't have that kind of thing built in, I guess.

A friend built me a website in '97 and I made comics under the name Fudge Factory. I was very, very late to the game. I didn't have an email address until I was out of school in my mid-20s. Somebody had to explain the concept of an email to me. Like, why it would be useful. I was also very, very late to social media too. I didn't get onboard with that for quite a while. Social media has always kind of freaked me out. I never thought anybody would really care about what I'm doing or if I myself even really care about what I'm doing in my day-to-day life. Art is how I want to present myself to the world. I would just put drawings up online. I was kind of early on Instagram, however. I just started putting drawings up. I don't know where these people came from. They just started getting onboard and following and I would just continue to put stuff up on the web and then it would just bring in work.



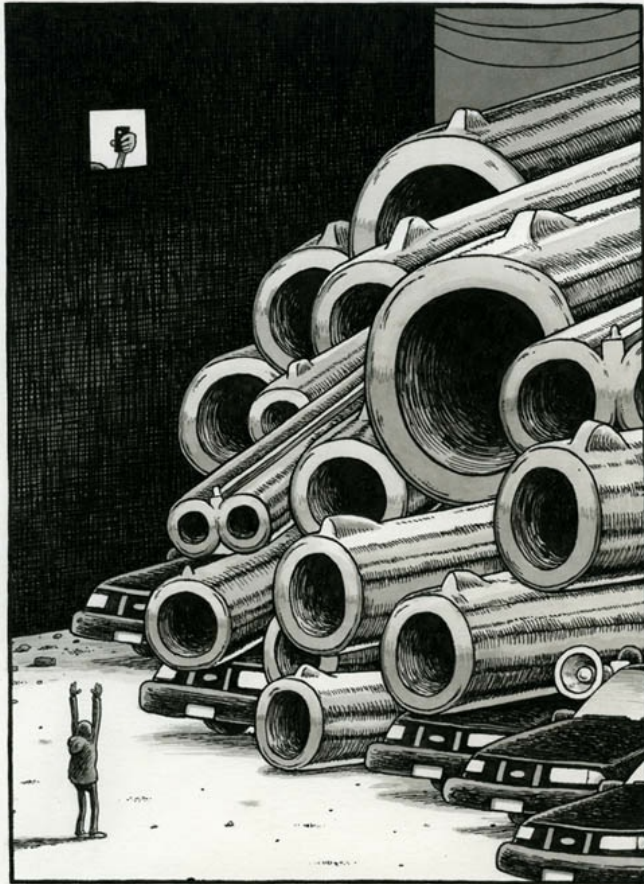
Also, I can't ignore zine-making as really being like my social media before anything digital existed. That's how I would get myself into the world. I started making zines in the early '90s and just passing them around to my friends. Doing the cover for that Get Up Kids record in '99, *Something to Write Home About*, was probably the most pivotal thing that got my work out. I started actually getting emails into my dead account. People writing to ask me questions or something. That started to turn into a thing. I just became focused on trying to get my stuff around, so I mailed zines out to the places I was interested in seeing it. Since then I feel like stuff comes in to me and if it seems interesting then I'll get onboard with it. It's pretty simple.

What do I do on the day-to-day? I usually have so many overlapping projects—things of my own, things that come in for work, and personal commissions. One thing I started doing totally as a favor to a random kid—I drew his dog for him. Then somebody else saw that and asked me if I'd draw their dog. I charged a little bit of money for it. Now I feel like there's not enough time for me to draw dogs. There's too many dogs that want to be drawn now. I enjoy drawing dogs. I love drawing dogs. I love dogs. Still, at first, this whole "dog drawing" thing felt like something maybe I didn't want to get too carried away with. I wanted to do more important work or something. But now it makes me really happy to make these drawings and you would not believe how happy it makes the people who get them. Even people whose dog it doesn't belong to will just light up over it. Now I think of them as a way to sort of unravel my head a little bit and feel like I'm doing something that makes somebody else happy and makes me a little happy at the same time.



You created two illustrations this past year that I couldn't stop thinking about. One was a piece about guns, which ran in *Playboy*, and the other was a piece you posted in relation to World Mental Health day. Both pieces struck a nice balance between being both scary and sweet. How do you approach making pieces like this, which I'm assuming require making something that pleases a client but also please you?

Well, those two pieces both originated as totally personal pieces. They were not commissioned by anyone in particular. The police story drawing came about because I was invited to contribute a piece by Michael Krueger, my old printmaking professor. He was curating a zine that was a part of the Hippie Modernism show at the Walker Art Museum. He asked a small group of people to create an image that was rooted in social justice, current times, and just take a look at the news and talk to me about what's on your mind. At that time it was Michael Brown and Eric Garner in the news. It was around that time and Ferguson was happening. My thought behind that drawing was it talks about police brutality but I think the key focus of that image is the camera in the window. There's all these barrels pointed at this person and then you see there's this tiny opening with a camera aperture looking in. It's maybe the most powerful weapon of all. I made prints of that piece for another show and a few people saw it. Eventually *Playboy* got in touch and said that they wanted to print it. I'm so happy that they did.



I don't consider myself a political cartoonist. I say that because I don't want to offend the actual political cartoonists that are in the trenches drawing every day and commenting on things that are happening. I admire that so much and I wish I could work that way more, but I also want to find happiness too and not totally lose my center or something. I'm very aware of things that are happening in the world. Fuck. Sickened by the Trump election. Horrified, honestly, by it and the people that's he's bringing along. Still, it's honestly hard for me to find the words or find the imagery sometimes. I feel like it's been helpful to see how other people are handling it. I think that if I'm going to make a comment on something I feel like I have to soak it in for a minute. I worked with Shepard Fairey in the past and I admire what he does as a political artist and other political cartoonists that do what they do. At the same time, I also am interested in just making jokes and fucking off. It's getting harder and harder to keep that corner of my world peaceful. Drawing was always a way for me to escape the world, but that has become harder and harder to do.



It's a thing that lots of artists are contending with right now. When your livelihood is also wrapped up in your creative work which is also wrapped up in who you are and how you are as a person, it becomes very complicated.

You know, that World Mental Health Day drawing you're talking about that was also a very personal piece. It was something that I did in my sketchbook after the election, part of an experimental grouping of emotional self-portraits. It was just a little way to release some anxiety. I love that you describe it as scary and sweet, which are the two extremes that I sometimes feel like I'm being pulled between. It comes from a place of confusion and looking for a way to draw through it. I also don't want to just ignore how I'm feeling. I really can't quite put it into words, which is why I make the drawings.



Even when your work flirts with images and characters that border on being grotesque, there is always a very humane quality about them. There isn't any mean spiritedness in your work. It never feels grim.

I don't want to come from a place of bitterness and mean-spiritedness. I don't want to tell somebody, in this heavy-handed way, how they should be thinking or how they should be. It's important to find that grey area where there's room to wonder what it is that I'm talking about. It's giving them a feeling. I don't want to create propaganda or tell people that one way is better than another. That exhausts me. I personally don't like to look at that kind of work. There's a lack of curious spirit there or something.

One of the great things about visual arts is that you can just kind of jump in and do it. There's a self-starting aspect that comes with, say, making zines that you don't necessarily get if you're trying to do something like be an actor. Do you get a lot of kids seeking you out and asking for advice about stuff like that?

Definitely. Too much. (laughs) There was a time I used to write them all back and now I can't always do that. There's a lot of younger kids that engage with my work and it's always been important to me to have affordable stuff. If you want to be a first-time art collector and you can afford a \$20 print or a \$5 or zine, that's very accessible. You can also get in touch with me and I will respond. Maybe not the same day, but eventually.

I do get these emails that are like, "How do I do it? What do I start by doing?" To be honest, I really have no fucking idea. The internet wasn't around when I started doing this. I used to fucking carry a portfolio around to the *New York Times* and walk it in and knock on different doors and stuff. I was physically going around and meeting people face to face, but that was 20 years ago.

If you were to ask me how I do it now I still don't even know. I don't usually know how people know my work. It's just kind of in the world now. I am continually arriving. I realize I'm not that well-known across the world. I don't know it well enough to tell you how to do it. It's still a mystery for me. Just figure out a way to make things and show it to people, whatever that means. Working as a

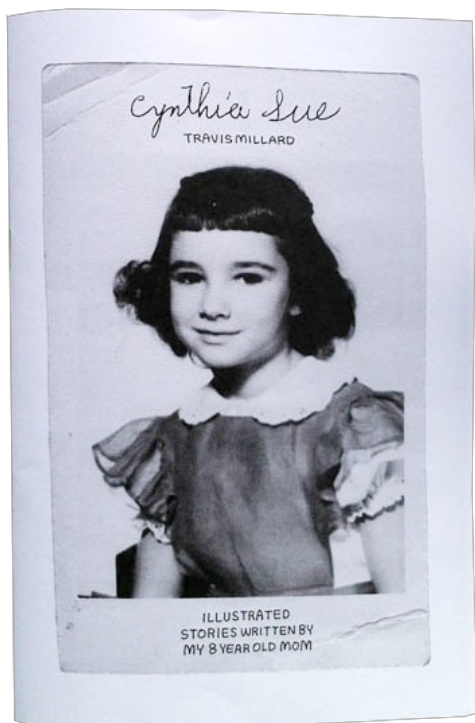
professional illustrator is not my ultimate goal... I think my goal has changed or something. I want to work on interesting illustration projects. The commercial work isn't my focus.



Your drawings often feel like an illustrative way of working things out, unpacking complicated ideas and feelings...

Geez, this maybe gets a little personal but my mom was diagnosed with early-onset Alzheimer's at age 52. She battled it for 10 years. I watched her just become a shell of herself at way too young of an age. What I learned from that is you really have to appreciate somebody in the moment and be happy with what you have and try to find happiness day-to-day in some ways. She passed away in 2014. I would say maybe like halfway into her diagnosis my aunt came across these stories she wrote when she was six and eight years old. There's a couple little essays she wrote in 1955 and then a couple longer creative writing stories she wrote in 1957.

With her being in Kansas City and me being in LA, I didn't get back as often as I could. It was becoming increasingly difficult to have a telephone conversation with her. For me, those stories became a way to communicate with her at a time when I couldn't. Also, it was interesting to me because it was folding time in a way and collaborating with my mom as a little girl. Also, with Alzheimer's you regress to your childhood in a way. Over the course of three years I slowly illustrated the stories. I made it into a little small zine and shared them with people. I would hand them out to friends and strangers sometimes and family. When she did pass away I was really surprised. I finished the zine while she was still living but it was maybe months before she passed away and she was not aware of what it was at all. What I was really struck by was how it became this kind of really beautiful tribute to her and it made people laugh at a time when they wanted to just cry. She was cremated with a copy. It's just very much a part of her.



It was such an important and very accidental project and It became this therapeutic thing for me. What surprised me was how much it struck other people and helped them cope with her passing too and be able to laugh and put a smile on their face or something. It's a totally joyful, very funny little zine. I just didn't want to pull a string at the end where I was like, "This is based off my mom's stories and she just died from..." I struggled with it but ultimately I felt like I didn't want to take that joy out of it. I didn't include that in there. I don't know. I still wonder if I should or not. That's why I talk about it.

It's nice whenever the work that you do can help you process something or dovetails in a real, genuine, emotional way with this thing that is happening in your life. It doesn't always happen.

I guess it gets back around to illustration and how you balance what's considered "professional work" and what is considered "personal work." For me, the line is kind of blurred. I feel like I don't have another style that I work in, I just have this one style that kind of encompasses everything. I feel like if I can just make something honest and just be my best self as a creator then the kind of professional work that I hope my art would jive with comes along and it doesn't feel like work necessarily.

Also, I like to feel like I'm working. I want to feel needed and like my stuff has a place. When you get the right client that comes in it seems to validate that. If I've taken work on that doesn't do that for me it feels like I'm grinding the gears. I feel like if nothing else one of the most valuable lessons I've had to learn is how and when to say no. It's a harder road in some ways. I feel like I've been able to do some work with people that I really respect and whom I am very grateful to be working with and I think that has all come from just doing what I do kind of naturally and then waiting to see who is going to pick up on that. I feel like any good thing that's ever happened to me in my life has been a result of making and sharing a zine and just letting it travel where it goes.



