
Joe Fenton

ALL ABOUT THE DETAIL

Surrealist, illustrator, monochromatic madman; pigeonhole Joe Fenton as you like but there is no denying he is a man with an unparalleled passion for what he does. Propelled to internet fame by the decision to work on one finely detailed and intricate work of art for 10 hours a day, every day over a 10-month period; his devotion to the project caught the attention of thousands. A year on we caught up with Joe to find out where his inspiration, design and patience come from.

Where did your desire to draw initially come from? Has it been something that's been with you since childhood?

I drew a lot when I was a child. I really enjoyed art when I was at school as it was the only thing that truly made me feel good about myself. I continued enjoying my art until about the age of 11 and then I completely lost interest. School was a difficult time for me. I found it hard to be artistically inspired.

I ended up getting kicked out of school due to general bad behaviour. I began to find escapism in other ways for the next 10 years or so, experimenting with drugs and alcohol. I also believed in the myth that you needed to be fucked up to create. The irony being that I was actually too fucked up to create anything! The lifestyle I was leading was taking me further away from my dream of being an artist. It wasn't until I was 26 I decided to give up everything and go back to education and pursue my art again. I get many remarks from people suggesting I must be off my head when creating my work. It makes me laugh considering it has now been over 14 years that I have had total abstinence from drugs and alcohol. My work for me now is about waking up in the morning, usually around five or six, and going to my studio. I get my most productive hours in before lunch.

You did a degree in sculpting, did the forms you created back then have any relation to the kind of things we see in your art now?

After leaving art school I went on to work for a few years in the film industry as a film concept designer and sculptor. I found working on films to be limiting though, in terms of personal expression as an artist. You will see some resemblance with the character designs that I create now and some of my drawings and sculptures in the film 'Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy', which I worked on. I was given a little more free rein on that project and created some really interesting props. Working in 3D has helped my draftsman skills as one informs the other. When I eventually started to work in 2D again, I found my sense of form had become much stronger. Also my ability to use light and shade to create depth in my work had really improved as a direct result of working in 3D.

You're originally from the UK, what spurred you to move to the US?

My wife is originally from NY. I moved to Brooklyn because of her. As someone who has always been based in the UK it was a huge move; I am a creature of habit and change has always been a difficult thing for me. Even though it was my circumstances that forced me to do this it was ultimately the best thing that could have happened to me. It was great being in New York as it psychologically gave me an opportunity to have a fresh start and reinvent myself in a way that might have been harder for me to do in the UK. Funnily enough we have only just relocated back to London again after being away for several years.

Do you think there is more opportunity in New York for artists and illustrators than in London?

I think it depends on the type of art and where the market is for it, so I personally don't know whether it is easier to find opportunities and support here or over in the US. But does it really matter now that we have the internet? I can only go by my personal experience, and that was the internet launching me and that had nothing to do with my location. To my great surprise, besides the US, the interest in my work has come from places such as Brazil, Spain, Australia, China and India, among others. As I think people are not sure how to categorise my work; many labels have been thrown around such as pop surrealism, surrealism, modern contemporary, low brow, illustration and cartooning, this supports that it does not matter the location of the artist as there are no local tastes, expertise or critics to contend with and/or depend on. But, it's still early days for me, so location may end up mattering.

Your drawings are stories in themselves, yet you took it a step further and created two children's books. The themes in your work are usually quite dark and nightmarish, how did you adapt them for children?

The children's books were created before I started my current work. When creating the books, I always felt I had to pull back and not go too dark. Although I feel my first book was quite tame, I think I might have scared a few mothers rather than the toddlers with 'What's Under the Bed?'. The fantasy elements in my current work mostly come from my childhood experiences

reading books with amazing art. I have to give a shout out to one of my biggest influences – Wayne Anderson, who was a fantastic illustrator. Books like 'Rat's Magic' and the 'Magic Circus' were two of my favourites. His work would scare me and yet fill me with wonder at the same time. On the one hand his characters are scary, yet they have a charm about them that is not really threatening – some people have said that about my work. I feel that my characters connect with the child and the adult within us.

Was this something you enjoyed doing? Your last book was published in 2010 – is there anything else in the pipeline?

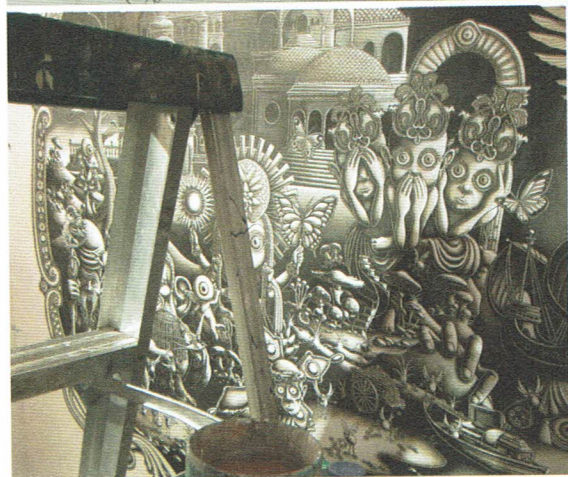
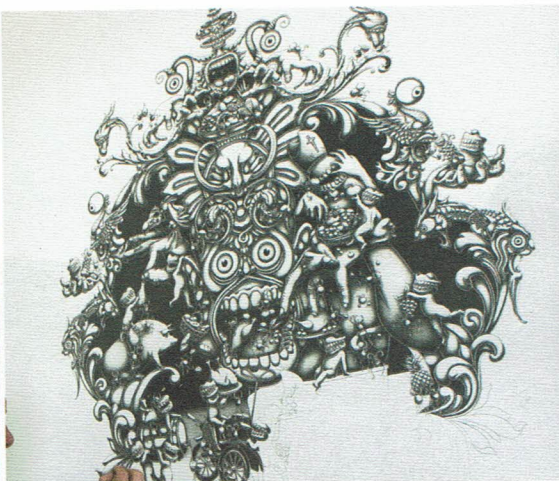
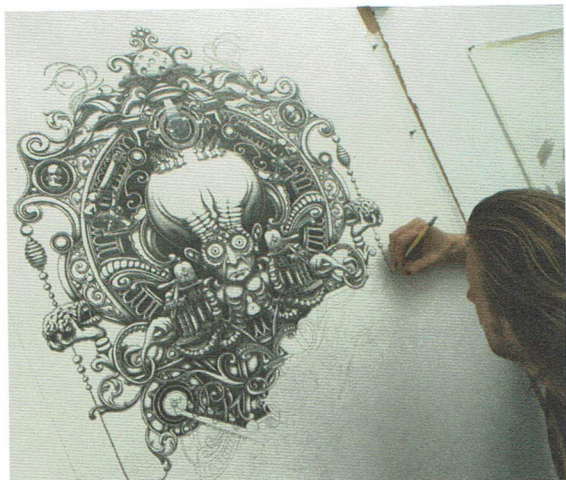
I enjoyed doing the children's books at the time, but I still felt I had not found my true voice that really expressed who I am as an artist. I feel the work I am doing today does speak to who I am. I feel I have now moved into new territory with my work and I have no intention of looking back. For my next book, I think I would like to do a graphic novel. I have had a few ideas germinating for a while.

One thing you immediately pick up from looking at your work is the recurrence of eyes, is there a reason behind this?

It's been said the eye is the window to the soul, which may explain why the symbolic meaning of eyes tends to be of a spiritual nature. In dreams the meaning of eyes indicates an opening into a new dimension. This is symbolic of your vision clearing and focusing in a new direction. The symbolic meaning of eyes also carries a message of prophecy – literally seeing 'a vision of the future.' All these examples are present in my work. The eyes that recur in my drawings often symbolise my acute anxiety and awareness of my limited time on this earth. At the same time they also represent my constant desire and struggle to find a spiritual solution to give meaning to my life.

You've mentioned spirituality but there is a lot of religious imagery and iconography in your work that is often presented with darker images of skulls and skeletons – can you talk a little bit about this?

There are many religious references in my work, whether it's a Ganesh-like character, a grinning Buddha, or a faint crucifix adorning a rooftop in the



far distance. This might seem strange as I am not a religious person. I'm not sure if I am being critical of religion by having references to it in my work or whether it comes from having a deep desire to experience some of what it has to offer. One of the reasons I often combine religious imagery with darker and more macabre subject matter is because I feel religion is mostly used as a coping mechanism for people to deal with their inevitable demise. Having said that, I also feel that spiritual teachings can offer us a bridge to healthier lifestyles in terms of our attitude and approach to life. You will see deities and religious icons from many faiths as this also represents my belief that when one strips away the politics of religion and the varied cultural differences and beliefs, I feel that they ultimately have the same spiritual goals.

Some of your work is also reminiscent of the moral and

religious concepts in the work of Hieronymus Bosch, specifically his depictions of hell. Do you take much inspiration from his work?

Absolutely. I first discovered the works of Hieronymus Bosch and other artists from that period such as Pieter Bruegel when I was at art school. The seven deadly sins are prominent in much of their work. I loved the way they would use such expansive landscapes filled with so many details to present us with the depiction of man's folly along with the consequences of their actions. Their art was created to teach specific moral and spiritual truths. You will see this subject matter occurring throughout most of my work. I would also like to mention that my work is very much influenced by many early black-and-white engravings dating back as far as 1450 by artists such as Durer, Versalius and Dore's magnificent illustrations of Dante's

Inferno and Paradise Lost. One theme in all these works which recurs again and again is that of death and of the fear of death. The artists constantly reminded us how precarious the life of our ancestors was and how obsessed they were with their own mortality. The fanciful and even freakish nature of these images seem to spring from the need to distance fear, while at the same time acknowledging it.

It could be said that you are a new breed of surrealist illustrator, but do you think: despite our modern society the themes of surrealist artists still stand strong?

I'm not going to pretend to know much about the surrealist art movement because I don't. What my work does have in common is the shared sense of humour and the lack of convention that much of surrealist art seems to offer. As long as artists are constantly challenging society's views and beliefs and pushing the

boundaries of their consciousness, surrealist art will continue to thrive. I feel my work is a combination of many different styles, surrealism being one of them.

A lot of people get your work tattooed on them. How do you feel about this? What about the ones that don't look great and don't really do your work justice?

For me personally, it's the greatest honour when someone wants to ink themselves with one of my designs. I generally like to be asked before

to NY for treatment after being diagnosed with terminal lung cancer and unfortunately passed away while undergoing treatment in NY. Witnessing the rapid decline and eventual death of someone changed the course of my life. As I mentioned before, I felt I had not created work that truly expressed who I was as an artist and it was watching someone die of cancer that gave me the sense of urgency to try find where I needed to get to as an artist – I'm now on that journey. Up until the death of my

the added financial pressures, as I had not been commissioned to do the piece, which meant no money coming in, there were occasions when I felt I had made a huge mistake committing to it. There were some really dark days on this project making it extremely hard to work on the piece at times. In the end, creating 'Solitude' ended up being the thing that launched my solo career as an artist. I have absolutely no regrets! It ended up being one of the most rewarding experiences in my life to date.

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someone uses my work. I have never personally tattooed before. I have only just started to pay more attention to the tattooing world as a result of the interest I have received. I get many, many emails from people asking me to either use existing designs or to have me create personal designs for individuals. Unfortunately I do not have the time to produce artwork purely for tattooing. It's never a pleasure to see a bad tattoo of one of my designs. I just wish they had found a better tattooist to do the job.

Would you ever consider taking it up as a career?

It's not something that really interests me. I enjoy the process of tattooing from afar. Dealing with too many body parts does not really appeal to me. I think I'm happy peacefully working in my studio. Having said that, if a great tattoo artist was to approach me to create a custom design for a client, I might consider it. As I said before, I really appreciate good tattoo work. I also see the similarity in the processes used in tattooing in my own work. I think this is why tattoo enthusiasts often gravitate towards my work. The line work and the use of light and shade in my work is similar to that of a lot of tattoo designs.

Last year you created 'Solitude', a 5-by-2.5-metre-long piece of art that took you 10 months to complete. What drove you to take on such a massive, time-consuming project?

Events happen that can change the course of our lives. For me it was when a relative came from London

relative I was working through my second book and once I had completed the book in our tiny NY apartment it was my wife who suggested that I get a studio space so that I did not feel limited in the way I worked. In 2010, I found a studio in Redhook, Brooklyn and that combined with my experiences and finding a style, which was realised after I completed 'The Marauder's Banquet', led me to the creation of 'Solitude'.

I have always had the idea of doing large work of an expansive landscape filled with many characters and events. I have also recently come across an American artist called Todd Schorr and his work was also inspired by early surrealists like Bosch. Todd created some huge paintings filled with a plethora of characters, which also inspired me to commit to doing a huge drawing.

Do you think it was worth it? Were there moments where you thought 'what the hell am I doing'?

'Solitude' took me about two months just to work out the idea and then took me a further 10 months to complete. It was an emotional rollercoaster ride to say the least. For artists there are always highs and lows with every piece you work on. One day you think it looks fantastic, while on other days you think it looks shit. With experience, this emotional journey becomes a little easier to deal with. Because of a number of things like working with an unproven technique and taking into account the time it took to create 'Solitude' along with

What are you working on at the moment?

I am currently working on two pieces for a show in Berlin happening at the Strychnin Gallery in February 2013. It's a group show where selected artists have been asked to pay homage to some of the Sci-Fi films of the 1950s. I decided to do this as it's not something I would usually do. I thought I could have some fun with it. It is also nice to have a break as I am also currently working on another large drawing which is a triptych titled 'The Landing'. I'm also working with an artist and sculptor, Joshua Harker in Chicago. As my background is sculpting, I'm working with Joshua to bring some of my characters to life. It's slightly frustrating for me as I would like to be sculpting the characters myself. I just don't have the time to do this right now along with my other commitments. It's great to have found someone that has the ability to translate my drawings into three-dimensional characters in the same way I would. We will eventually be selling them as limited edition fine art sculptures.

And finally, what's next? What do you ultimately want to achieve?

My next goal is to have a solo show. It was initially going to happen this year in London but will now be pushed back to next year sometime. Apart from that it's just about creating more and getting my ideas out. I'm not sure what I want to ultimately achieve. I'm really just focused on creating more work and making up for the time I lost in my youth.