

A Figurative Language

By Margaret Richardson

Gerald Thomas, at 28, is an artist who moves from his studio paintings to illustrations on the printed page without any shift at all in thematic gears. He manages to interpret specific editorial statements with the same ideas and images that he paints almost obsessively.

For example, Thomas paints hands. In his paintings the hand looms symbolically again and again. In his illustrations the same hand appears (it is the hand of his wife, Daniela). It may be disembodied and withering to portray the withdrawal of an anti-arthritis drug. Or it may be manipulating tiny figures trudging across a map to highlight the outlook for unemployment. Or, in a drawing that illustrates the European influences on American cities, a hand bears the weight of a London bridge in a complex rendering that has an architectural feel and that captures London, a city Thomas knows well.



Photo: Lana Freccia

Gerald Thomas (painter, illustrator, set designer, playwright, director) brings his obsessive metaphors to bear on whatever the creative task at hand.

Other images which appear in Thomas' painting have found their way into his illustrations. He uses clouds a good deal, often laden with fine lines and doom. A torn sheet of paper weeps or bleeds onto the page. An umbrella contorts to reflect the dissembling of the world. A table-top becomes the world.

Although editorial deadlines add pressure to Thomas' development of an idea, he feels that his own personal subject matter can be suited to editorial content. He states, "I tend to start from the principle that a table with objects can represent

almost anything that is going on in the world. All the ingredients that I have been working on for days usually find their way into the illustrations."

Jerelle Kraus, art director of the Op-Ed page of the New York Times, comments about Thomas: "He has developed a figurative language of his own. We have a discussion about the article and what he produces is at once his own and works with the article. He is making a visible statement that is tangible but not obvious. He tries to make a piece of art as an analog of the text."

There does seem to be a unity of purpose in the collaboration between Thomas and Kraus. Thomas points out that often there is almost telepathic communication between them. He says he is often working on an idea which can readily be adapted to meet the requirements of the illustration. There have even been times when a completed work has been perfectly suited to an Op-Ed article.

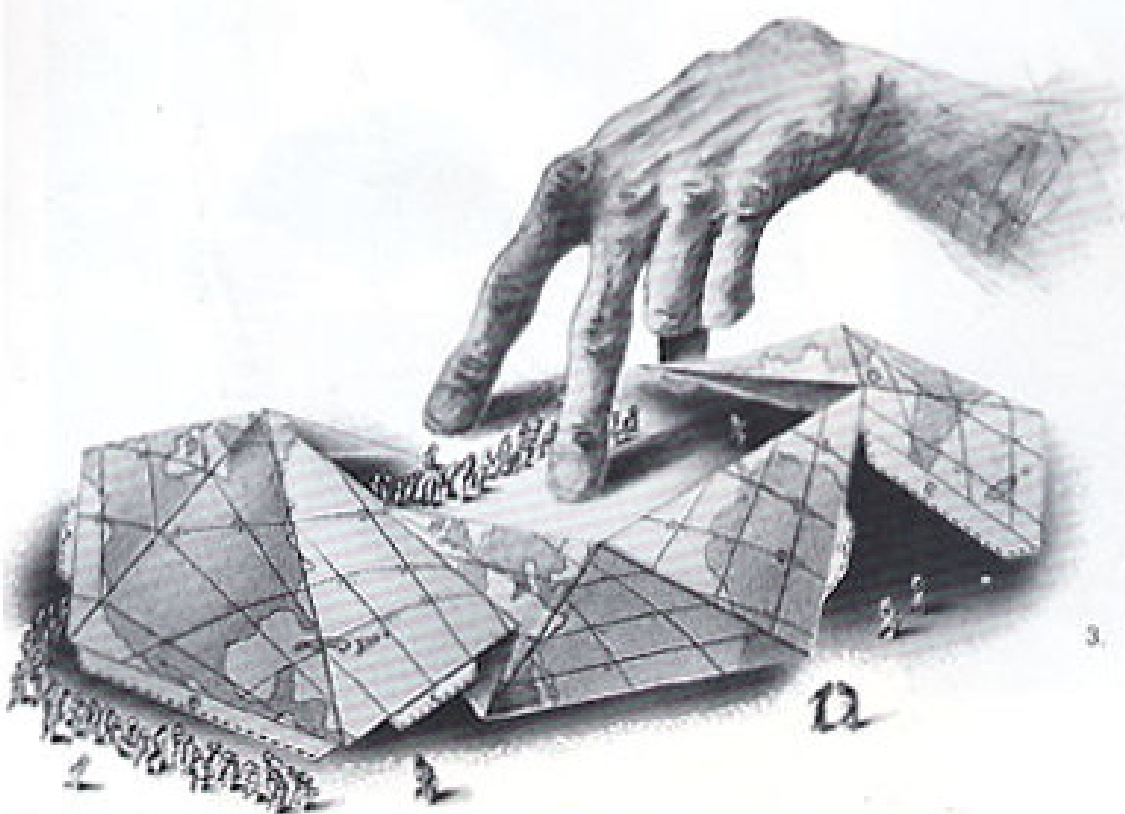
His personal obsessions have also effectively served as illustrations for the Boston Globe, Atlantic Monthly, and Vanity Fair.

Thomas began painting at an early age. By the time he was nine, he was painting "seriously." He spent his early years commuting between England and Brazil (where he was born), and spending six months each year in these two very different societies had a profound effect on his intellectual development. By 13, he had left formal education and continued his own learning process in a singularly precocious way. For example, he read volume after volume in the British Library of the British Museum. He also, as a child, attended the classes of Serpa, a painter and founder of Brazil's avant-garde movement. His first involvement with his great love, the theater, was at 15, when he co-directed Brazil's premiere production of Genet's *The Balcony*.

Although deeply involved in painting, Thomas does not consider himself primarily a painter, but rather a thinker who manifests his thinking in various ways. At the moment, as well as painting and illustrating, he is forming a company at La Mama, a highly regarded avant-garde theater in Manhattan. He is deep into directing the world premiere of Samuel Beckett's *All Strange Away* at La Mama in January 1984. His own play, *The Hunting Season*, he describes as a "Shakespearean metaphor": it incorporates 17 forms of theater from Shakespeare



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1, 2. Drawing for article on Op-Ed page
 York Times. Art director: Jereffe Krau
 3, 4. Drawing for article on Op-Ed page
 York Times. Art director: Jereffe Krau

through Artaud to Beckett. He has completed a film based on a Jorge Luis Borges' novella, which is scheduled to be screened by PBS. He also designs stage sets and seems to be able to turn his mind and hand to virtually any artistic form.

The influences on his thinking, his work and his art are many. In conversation, Thomas frequently mentions his favorite authors, especially Beckett, Arbal and Joyce. He says that when he paints he often thinks of contemporary music, especially that of John Cage and Edgard Varèse. He pays special tribute to Marcel Duchamp, Saul Steinberg and Max Ernst as artists who have inspired and influenced him. He discusses politics and philosophy with insight and precision and virtually a world-view since he has lived and worked in so many different places around the globe.

Thomas, although always painting and drawing, feels they are just aspects of a process to help explore, define and mine his thinking. "I want to chronicle, be an archivist. Rather than be considered a painter or director, I prefer to think of myself as an archeologist of contemporary culture."

A painting which Thomas completed at 16 manifests many of the elements which are in his mature work. The paintings often appear stark at first viewing, with one image dominating. The image (whether it be an umbrella, hand or cloud) predominates and hovers. The meticulousness of fine lines exquisitely drawn pulls the viewer into the painting. The ideas are complex and challenging, with the world as the forum and thought at the center. The detail in the paintings is precise, masterly and wrought with a sense of European drawing. The use of color is subtle and adds to the intensity of the piece.

Thomas uses his pen and his brush as weapons. Although beautiful, the paintings are not "comfortable." He describes his approach to his art as "archeological," seeking out what is below the surface and attempting to reinterpret or "re-contextualize" his ideas. This process, which he also says is "developing a metaphor," means that he constantly reworks his themes. "It takes years for a work to come out. I'll have an idea today, but I probably won't put it down on paper for quite a while. I live with it for a long time and try to prove it right or wrong as the days go by."

Thomas' visual art, whether painting or

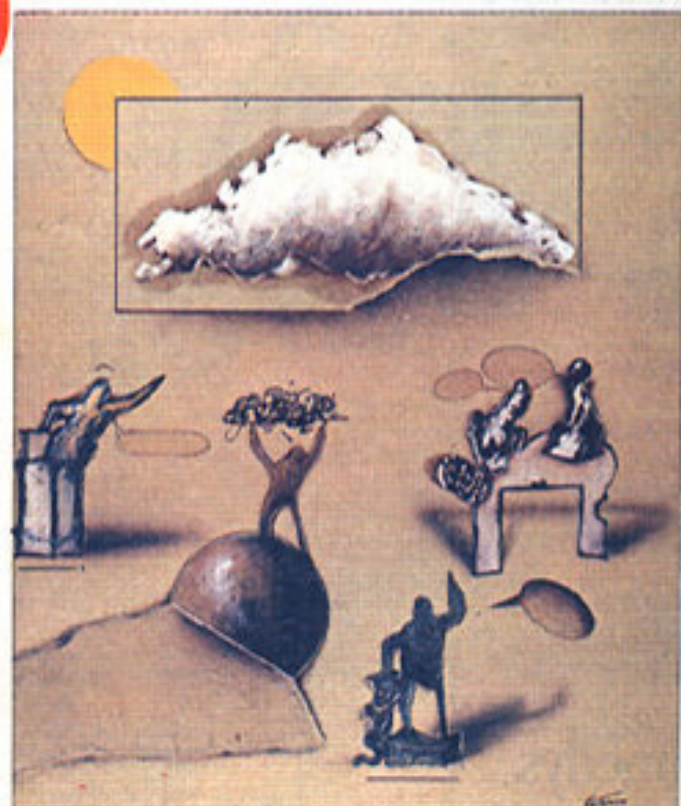
The Boston Globe Magazine

March 17, 1983

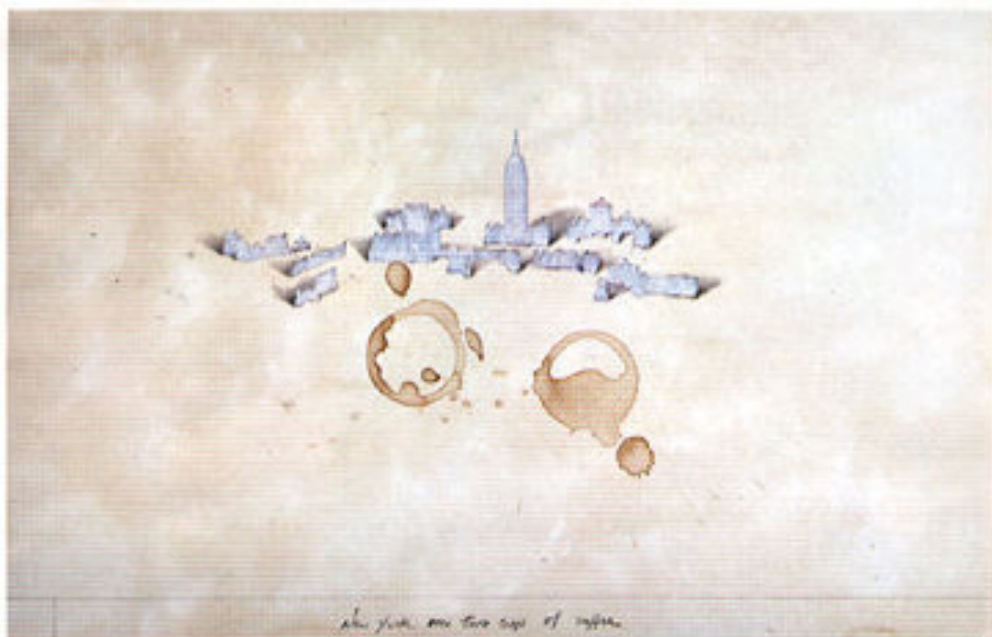
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illustrating, is detailed and filled with dissonance. Thomas thinks of himself, while painting or drawing, as a "revengist." "For what and against what I'm not sure. Maybe it's against man's always being so historically late. I'm trying to teach somebody a lesson in a very brutal way." He smiles while he says this, but he is profoundly serious. He adds, "I will always be terrorized by what I do. As a contradiction, this is very satisfying."

Margaret Richardson is a freelance writer and art publicist.



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10. Poster for retail sale.
11. Studio painting on corrugated board.
12. Sketch for cover of Vanity Fair.