It is a rare occasion today to open an illustration annual and not see the work of Edel Rodriguez. Edel's ability to visually communicate ideas, think conceptually, and work in many different yet equally beautiful illustration styles has earned him a place at the top of the illustration world. So it was no surprise that he was asked to create the poster for ICON5, the fifth installment of the illustration conference. It is no small task to make an image that represents the entire illustration world without representing individual illustrators or their styles. We often wonder what these people are thinking when they take on such an exciting yet daunting task. Edel has been kind enough to allow us a behind-the-scenes look into the process and creation of this piece. From conception to production, it gives us a rare look at how one of the great illustrators of today works.
CREATIVE PROCESS: 
THE ICON5 POSTER 
BY EDEL RODRIGUEZ

It was with excitement and trepidation that I took on the assignment of creating the poster for ICON5, the fifth installment of the Illustration Conference, which was to take place in New York City in the summer of 2008. I knew that the poster would be seen by thousands of talented peers, many of whom could have done a memorable poster themselves. The president of ICON5 was Whitney Sherman, the head of the Illustration program at MICA (Maryland Institute College of Art). She got in touch with me in early 2007 and asked if I had interest in creating the art for the conference. The art was to appear on the conference website and all promotional materials, as well as the poster. Since the art was not due until the fall, there was plenty of time to conceptualize, stress, and procrastinate, which I often tend to do on long-term projects. When I first found out that the conference was being held in New York City, I immediately seized on the city as an inspiration. It had been about six years after 9/11 and the city had finally gotten back to its old routine. I remembered how New York was for months after 9/11 and was happy to see it coming back again. I also wanted to celebrate illustration for the unique art form that it is. Illustration is everywhere in the culture at large and many times people don’t realize it’s right in front of them. I wanted to find a way to show this, to intermix illustration and New York City. The question was how exactly to do this. There was absolutely no direction from the ICON board. I was simply asked to do what I wanted to do. This, of course, is a dream for an artist, but can also lead one in endless paths. The main problem with illustrating New York City is that there are so many oft-repeated visual cliches—the Statue of Liberty, the Chrysler Building, yellow cabs, etc. In my initial sketches I went back and forth between drawings of things in the city and drawings about art. My sketchbook from the time is filled with doodles of characters like street dancers, King Kong, subway trains, subway maps, and taxis. Intermixed are sketches of pencils, brushes, and other tools of the trade. Much of it just felt very simplistic and lacking a unique conceptual angle. On several assignments for clients...
stand for the entire community. This was for an illustration conference, after all, so I wanted it to be as much about other artists’ work as my own. For a while, I contemplated the idea of having a lot of different artists work on the poster together in their various styles, but I thought it might be more interesting and logistically possible to have all of these various characters drawn in my own hand and put through my particular filter. This, I thought, would create a more cohesive final image. Summer had arrived and I got the call from Whitney Sherman, the conference president, asking me how the sketches were coming along. I had filled up dozens of pages with ideas and still had no clue which direction was best. Since Whitney and I had developed a trusting working relationship, I simply took photos of all the pages in my sketchbook and sent all of them to her. David Plunkert from Spur Design was designing and producing the posters, so I sent the large batch of ideas to him as well. There were some great conversations back and forth. Whitney pointed out a number of things that she liked in my sketchbook but left it up to me to decide on the direction in which to move forward. She really wanted me to be happy with the final artwork. That summer, the board was meeting and wanted to see some of the progress. I worked up two directions as color sketches and sent them off. One poster design was a bolder image of a face yelling out the conference title and information, with all the type being hand-lettered by me. The second option was a group of illustration characters walking around a New York City subway, with a subway sign at the top containing all of the conference information, mimicking the well-known design of the transit system. After looking at both directions, the board was undecided and left it up to me to pick what I wanted to do and I decided to go with the subway theme. I felt it would give the viewer more of a narrative and would cause them to spend more time engaging with the poster—looking around, finding clues, and laughing at themselves. In addition, some of the details of such a complex image could be used on collateral material such as the conference program and website. Once the direction was established, the next step was to move forward with a thoroughly detailed pencil study. Often, this is the part of the process that consumes most of my time. I like to get things just right on the pencil study and then start breaking it down when I do the final artwork. I can add layers and break the structure of the image apart, but there’s a solid foundation underneath it all. Lately I’ve been studying more and more reference works when doing my drawings. Instead of looking for an online reference for this project, I decided to wander around New York City for a day and photograph my own references. I wanted to get a direct experience of the people and personalities that would fill the poster. I shot a couple hundred photographs, printed them out, and began to pick and choose my favorite people back in the studio. I would draw some of them into the picture and then take them out, back and forth, trying to find the right balance of the overall image. The negative spaces and background activity in a composition like this are as important as the main characters. Developing the look of the large illustrated characters was also a bit of a challenge. I wanted to point to some of the characters that make up the visual language of contemporary illustration but obviously did not want to copy them. I had a lot of fun putting my own twist on them.
After my final study was finished, I proceeded to make a monoprint. Over the years I’ve experimented with a number of processes. The standard way of making a monoprint is to roll out woodblock ink onto a piece of plexiglass, place a sheet of paper on top and draw on the piece of paper. You then lift the paper and the impressions show up on the other side. The image, however, prints backwards from how it is initially drawn. I developed a different way of making monoprints which does not flip the image. I make photocopies of my pencil study, tape them together to make the full image, and tape the top to a piece of white board or thick paper. I roll woodblock ink onto the back of the drawing and lay it down over the white board.

By pushing a pencil over the lines of the study, I create the monoprint underneath. This process takes a long time and I experiment with textures as I go along. The thickness of the line varies according to how hard I press down and the results I get. I make my own fingerprints or knuckles show up underneath. After all the line is finished, I lay down a piece of transparent frisket over the image. I cut out the areas that I would like to fill in with black and roll woodblock ink through the stencil. At the end of this process I have the basic black-and-white foundation of the final image. To create the color structure of the image, I make a similar copy of my pencil study and place it underneath another piece of white paper. After sanding down the paper to get some texture on the ground, I place it on a light table and fill the areas of color with pastel. I use the edges of the paper as a blocking tool to get sharp lines with the pastel, which is generally a soft medium.

To finish off the image, I scanned into Photoshop the two separate 18" x 24" pieces, the black monoprint image, and the color pastel blocks. I also scanned a separate piece of chipboard and used that as the base layer of the final image. I converted the black linework to a brown tone to soften the palette and add to the overall aged quality of the poster. I placed the pastel color underneath the linework, selected colors, and added in some of the details. This creates many dozens of color layers which I start working with and moving around intuitively in Photoshop. I make other separate textures and begin adding and subtracting from the color shapes. This playing and experimenting goes on for a long time until I feel the image has the right balance of detail and spontaneity. The final image is usually several gigabytes in size. The poster ended up being very well received by my peers in the industry. A limited-edition set of prints was made on fine Mohawk paper to hand out on the first day of the conference. The image even popped up on street banners around Manhattan. Many of the other sketches from my sketchbook were used on some of the collateral material, the conference bag, and a number of pages in the conference booklet. Looking back, the whole experience was exhausting but very rewarding. The best part of the project was to be left alone; there wasn’t any of the usual back and forth or requests for unnecessary changes that have become standard with clients nowadays. The image was seen as I intended it to be seen. It was wonderful to see people’s reaction to the poster and to have the concept communicate directly with my peers at the conference. I was not sure how people would react to my take on their work, but the great responses definitely made the process a very worthy endeavor.

I’D DO IT AGAIN ... MAYBE.