The illustrator is on the phone…

If Jorge Colombo bypasses traditional approaches to creating magazine covers, it’s because he’s a restless soul who has resisted being pigeonholed.

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In mid-January this year, Jorge Colombo had yet another painted cityscape grace the cover of *The New Yorker*. In a fluid, casually confident style that looks for all the world like watercolor, he rendered winter tree branches in the foreground with the iconic ghosted shape of the Flatiron Building’s gray silhouette just visible behind them. The contents page identifies the piece as “Sunlight on 23rd Street.”

But Colombo’s work is not watercolor. He’s done it entirely on his iPhone with the Brushes application. Late last year the 48-year-old Portuguese-born artist (in Portuguese his first name is pronounced the same as our anglicized George) published a book of 100 scenes, *Finger Paintings*. His first digital cover for *The New Yorker* appeared in 2009, and the magazine still proudly displays on its website the time-lapsed video of his creation taking shape (done with a companion app called Brushes Viewer): http://www.newyorker.com/online/blogs/tny/2009/05/jorge-colombo-iphone-cover.html In a handful of strokes on the phone, the plein air painting strategy of the Impressionists was adapted to the digital era and recorded to be broadcast later over the Web as entertainment.

Since then, other artists have taken up the pixel-based Brushes app, including the venerable 76-year-old David Hockney, who has contributed still-life covers to *The New Yorker* in this medium.

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Colombo is a restless artist who has moved from one medium to another. He is also a tireless traveler who has seen more of the U.S. than have many of its own native born. And although he owns an iPad, he still likes the discreet scale of working on his iPhone, in part because it is less likely to draw attention as he works on the sidewalks or in parks rendering urban landscapes. “People just think I’m retrieving an email,” he says. His illustrations serve as covers for books and magazines, but they also function as fine art for sale as limited edition prints on sites like 20x200.

**Your work on the iPhone for *The New Yorker*—were you surprised at the notoriety it attracted?**

I guess I wasn’t surprised. It wasn’t part of the plan. I was ready for this to be one more experiment, but it hit the right spot at the right time, and it was properly engineered.

**With the video?**

The video, the PR, the fact that it was in the publication—that by its own nature established an interesting contrast to what would be expected. This would have definitely not been a story if it had been a *Wired* magazine cover. You know, what’s interesting is that it would be almost expected there. What was interesting was that it could happen in the least expected place.

**The style in which you execute these *New Yorker* cover paintings is so compatible with the fluid watercolor kind of technique.**

Which I did in the past. And I am systematic: Whenever I’m talking shop with my colleagues, I systematically guess wrongly their medium.

I ask if they did it with woodcuts, and they tell me they did it in Photoshop. I ask them if they did it in Photoshop, and they say, no, they did it the hard way. They actually carved it and glued it on top or did a silk screen.

The same thing happened to music. Stuff, especially from the seventies, that I suspect would be a lot of computer tricks was, in fact, done with very simple acoustics. In fact, people like Brian Eno and Pink Floyd were doing things like that, very analog...
It’s very engineered.

The stigma of the computer look or feel is gone. People are past that. At this point asking artists if they work digital or analog is like asking them if they work sitting or standing or if they work with the art canvas vertical or horizontal or with artificial light or natural light. Are those exact things sort of relevant? Yes, but ultimately it doesn’t matter; it’s just a little technicality. And it has more to do with correction than with results.

Tell me about your evolution as an artist as a young man.

It helps having a very drastically different culture from yours. It’s not the same difference as between Texas and Louisiana. I mean it’s a little more discrete, the difference, but also the general awareness of other things. I feel, in general, my experience in Europe is that people I socialize with tend to be more culturally gourmets. They sample more plates, they sample more cuisines. One thing that sticks with me when I moved to the States 22 years ago: Ties were stronger and more uniform [within occupations]. Artists hung out with artists. Doctors hung out with doctors. Actors hung out with actors and so on. And it was a bit easier in the European context to have a lot of different people in your everyday world.

And being able to speak other languages, which is still kind of a bit of an exception here, right?

Oh, yeah.

I take note when I find somebody who can speak more than English, you know. It is an exception. And, of course, it’s great because translations don’t work. Besides Portuguese, I can speak and read English and French. I can read well and express myself poorly in Spanish. And I can squeeze some stuff out of Italian.
So what brought you here 22 years ago?

Well, my girlfriend, to whom I’m now married. She’s from Texas, and she was doing a show. She’s a visual artist. I came to visit her in Chicago actually. At the time I thought I was going to be there for a couple of months. Ended up just quitting my job and staying for good.

And I had never thought I would be moving to the States. But I integrated myself pretty well, and at any rate I like the idea of relocation anyway. I like being wherever I am, but I’m always thinking, hmmm, it would be great to be elsewhere, so…

Where did this notion come from that at your core you’re an artist, no matter what you do? You’re not defined by a medium.

No art school at all. No career, no degree, nothing. I started art school (in Portugal), which at the time was geared mostly to painting and was not at all what I needed. I didn’t like the teachers. I knew their work, and I didn’t like it, so I started with a sense of hostility. And I wasn’t quite sure what I wanted to do. I had a few classes, but I never got anywhere. After a very short period, I dropped out and went professional. And then, yes, I worked as a graphic designer. I worked as an illustrator. I did artistic photography, and then I started playing with the movies. And everything interests me. And there are even other things that I still want to do that I still haven’t done. If you want to be nice about it, you say the words “multitalented Renaissance man,” etcetera. If you don’t want to be nice about it, you can say “dabbler,” you can say “inconsistent,” you can say…

Dilettante?

Dilettante, exactly. Those are the words. And, of course, I mean you can always say that he’s good at illustration and he’s also a great photographer. You can also say he’s a photographer or, no, he’s an illustrator who’s trying to do some photography. But they usually will say no, he’s making a living as a designer, but sometimes he draws. But does he really design, though? No, not really, because he was interrupted and is making a movie. What gives? And it’s great. I don’t regret doing this, because ultimately I would hate not having tried it. So that is the most important part. The bad side is that it sort of interrupts the natural flow of your career arc.

I look at obituaries of people who’ve had long careers. People in their 80s and 90s. They talk about how this one was a terrific photographer or this one a terrific artist. It’s easy, I think, to become a specialist in just one kind of thing, but you’ve pretty easily moved back and forth.

It’s funny that you mention the obituary, because that’s something I think about often. But, and this is so important—not to be misquoted: The point about thinking about your own obituary is not a vanity issue of “What will posterity think of me?” Because, ultimately, who cares? It’s more as if I got abruptly interrupted now, would I myself like to read what the obituary says? Or would I be disappointed because some crucial aspects weren’t in it? And if
that’s the case, better get busy right now, because I really would like the obituary to encompass all those things.

And, for a long time, one of the main flaws in my career management was that I went into whatever opportunities were offered to me as opposed to generating my own opportunities. Now, by design, since I force myself to do things, or by chance, since sometimes I don’t get other work, I use my free time to actually do what I really want to do anyway. And also the awareness of time going by and that life is not unlimited.

You know, no matter what age you are, you think, “Oh, shit, I only have ‘x’ decades of activity before senility.” Of course, some people get that awareness when they are 30. Some people get the awareness when they are 70. But it’s also always interesting, too, when somebody dies to think, “Okay, let’s think back to the middle of their life.” When somebody dies at 80, okay, what were they doing at 40? And it’s interesting to sort of find what is [accomplished] within a life.

At what point did the light go on for you?

In my case, when I turned 30-something, I got nervous.

Did the evolution into digital artistry come from just experimenting and curiosity?

In the eighties, mid-nineties, I was doing stuff in watercolor. And if I needed something to complete any of them, I was running them through a color Xerox, but there was no World Wide Web. I was in Chicago, just making little books, Xeroxing stuff, but certainly not using computers. In the eighties I was in Lisbon doing watercolors. Those were done the classic way—line-work with ink and watercolor but on paper and then painting them. That went on well into the 21st century. I didn’t really change very much. At the same time in the eighties, I was doing some photography and using film, of course, and 35 millimeter and being persistent, even doing some darkroom myself. And I hated the whole process. Just…

Painted in 1994, this view of rooftops on West Broadway in New York City is an example of the artist’s earlier “analog” style of watercolor. “By the time I added color,” he said, “it was just a memory.”
Cumbersome?

Cumbersome and slow. And I was also designing. In Portugal I was the art director of a publication, and this was in the pre-desktop publishing era, which was hell to me.

Specing type?

Specing type.

Pasting things up?

Pasting, all that, and it was an imprecision and slowness that I did not grow with. Obviously some people made it sing, but I could not make it sing. And the graphic industry in Portugal was not as sophisticated as in New York, so that didn’t help. So, in general, I was completely praying for something that did not exist here.

It was Quark. In my mind I was waiting for something like Quark, and then suddenly, of course, Quark appeared. It was at the end of the eighties. I moved to Chicago, and I was there and San Francisco for most of the nineties. That was my computer era. I was doing desktop publishing working for publications, and Quark was my weapon of choice for many years. At some point I started up in Photoshop and InDesign and all that. Those were my tools, and I loved being able to create things that quickly.

Drawing? Still watercolor. But in the meantime, I started doing digital photography. First with very small cameras with very low resolution. The images could only be very small. The memory cards were very expensive. You know, all those problems. Still, it was great for me.

But it goes back to my poems. It has to do with the fact that I was doing both the poems and then the drawing and design. I was publishing but doing everything.

But your watercolors were still analog?

The last holdout was my watercolors. I was working as a photographer and still coming back to my watercolor painstakingly. By the way, it was very complicated to do. If I were to make
a mistake on my coloring, there was no way to correct. I had to go back to my original sketch, trace it over, and do it again. Usually it got better, but it was a big deal.

And, quite frankly, I felt that I was spending too much time on that, so I was working a little bit on digital. But my main subject was urban landscapes, which was the most important thing for me. I had to work from life. I really don’t like to work from photographs. It can be done, but I prefer to be there. I think that’s part of it—the pure part of the experience, just being there like a photo reporter. To do an image on location, it was getting a little bit hard to do with watercolors—the arduous process of going there and drawing and going back home and drawing and water coloring.

I accidently discovered Brushes, which I could do on my iPhone. I bought my iPhone only to read my emails on the go. I had been in Paris carrying around my computer. It was breaking my back, so I got an iPhone and started drawing. I felt that it was much easier. I could just get something done much quicker on the spot. However, in the original versions of Brushes and with my early sub-proficiency, I could not really do things exactly as I had done them before. All that contour line-work, all that precision was not possible. But to me, the process was more important than the result. I preferred to actually change the way I worked, and in a radical way to me, go to the brush stroke and shape instead of the line.

Sometimes when an artist moves to a new medium, the medium changes your thinking about how you approach a piece of art. Was that the case with Brushes?

Yes, because initially I would do a line-work. It might be hours or even days until I found myself blowing up my sketch into a Xerox of a certain size and tracing over it with my little bit of graphite on watercolor paper. By the time I was actually painting with watercolor, I might have a nice recollection of the color and the light that I saw in real life, but it might as well be so vague that it was purely fictional. Many of those pieces done in my watercolor era were in fact drawn during the day, because it could be a little hard to see the details at night. So, all my light and my colors were fictional, even if occasionally accurate. These days, I
finish most everything on the spot. I pay much more attention to my choice of a landscape for its color and its light, because I know I am going to be faithful to the reality as opposed to making that part correct afterward.

I have a book of a hundred of my drawings that were all done on the spot. Okay, maybe in some of them it started raining or I got cold or I got hungry or I had some pressing reason to leave.

So you just finished at home?

I may have taken some photograph with my camera and finished at home, but everything was started completely on location. The downside: Most artists don’t work like that. You know from Rockwell to Hopper, I mean, everybody, countless people. Hopper did a lot from photographs just as much as he did from life. The problem with working on location is that you are a hostage of whatever, of a minimum of comfort. You could not properly draw a storm in the middle of a storm. It’s a little too much. You cannot draw from a point of view that is in the traffic because you’ll get run over. You cannot draw things that move too fast. So your landscapes became ultimately as limited as the early station photographs of New York. There are no people because the exposure took five minutes, so everybody had moved away by the time the plate was completely exposed. So I’m trying to work a little more on photography. Basically, what comes in my book is absolutely done from live on the spot. The darkroom is about to be revised.

Well, it seems like your career is a succession of revisions. Is that fair to say?

Yes. I really don’t feel like I owe anything to anybody. It’s only about me. I mean it’s...

Well if YOU’RE not interested in what you’re doing, how can others be interested?

Exactly.