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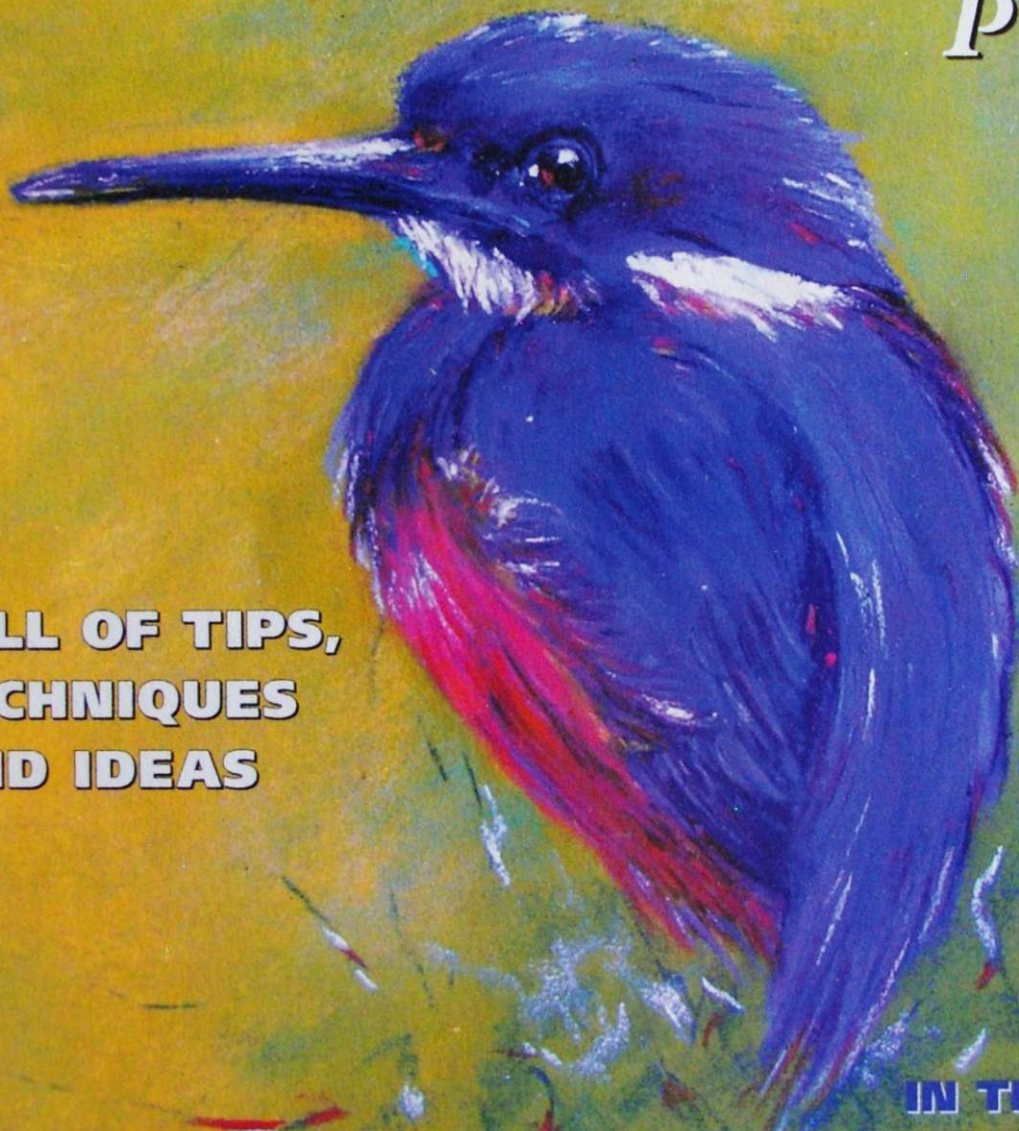
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EXCITING ARTISTS' DEMONSTRATIONS

WHITEKNUCKLE RIDE: "YOU WANT ME TO DESIGN WHAT?"

Queensland Artist/Illustrator Brett A. Jones was recently presented with an unexpected challenge; a task which would test his skills, his imagination and his endurance. Here in his own words he describes a truly unusual commission ...

A couple of years ago, I was asked if I thought I could improve on standard playing cards. I thought about it as I hunted around the studio for some to look at. Even though I had never been a card player, I was sure I'd find some; and I did. I saw three things straight away. Playing cards must have a huge market; there was vast untapped room for improvement with the design (from what I could see); and it would be a monumental undertaking to do anything about it.

I started to research the traditional designs and realised there were features and symbols common to all English court cards that went back hundreds of years and that (in some cases) had been edited, chopped, changed and re-interpreted to the point of absolute abstraction. Every question my searching answered also created more questions. Before I knew it I had flown into a perfect storm of obsession, inspiration, frustration and fascination. So many aspects of this project suited the strange way my brain is wired, and so many times during the course of the campaign I consciously felt myself standing in the footprints of unknown numbers of artists before me ... faced with

all the same design problems they must have faced trying to improve on the old geometric woodcut layouts.

I wanted to use real models with facial features and bone structures suited to the personality of each court card. After my 'no holding back' dive into the known origins, symbolism, legends, and general history of all the different face cards, I picked not only the shape of the face but also the type of demeanour suited best to each character in the deck.

European court cards have always been more lifelike than their English counterparts, but they are really just two identical pictures divided by a straight or oblique line with no attempt to make the dividing point part of the overall design. The faces on European cards are smaller than the English ones as well, to fit more of the body of the character into one half of the card. English cards on the other hand have got relatively larger faces and the design blends from one end to the other using mostly abstract geometric shapes to vaguely suggest the body – but they suffer from the anatomical compromises necessary for this to make any sense at all.

It was a huge challenge to get past this design obstacle, but an equally huge opportunity. The solution was to give each end three-quarters of the card instead of half; and organise the designs to not just hide the halfway mark, but remove it altogether. It was the hardest part of the whole deal, and it was not lost on me that if I got it right no-one would even notice. It created a whole new series of problems that I hammered into more opportunities to add to the design. I wanted to make every single card in the deck a work of art that could stand in its own right, but at the same time be an obvious part of the rest of the designs including the Joker and the card backs.

Every single card has a design unique to it, with a careful choice of colours used to tie the suits (and entire deck) together. The whole colour thing was something I had wanted to play with for a long time – probably made worse by the last few years of endless monochrome chiaroscuro. Standard playing cards are red and black, and always have been. I wanted to fit the entire colour wheel of primary and secondary colours in

without losing the black Spade/Club and the red Heart/Diamond thing that is so familiar. This was a chance to directly connect the number cards, face cards, Jokers, Aces, and the card backs with colour for the first time in history (except for an attempt to make the four suits bright red, blue, green and yellow which never really caught on). At card size they still look black or red, but with two intertwined threads of colour inside the suit symbols the Spades look black with a blue tint, the Clubs look black with a green tint, the Hearts appear red with a purple tint and the Diamonds look red with an orange tint. It's very subtle ... a Heart just looks red until you lay a Diamond next to it, for example. The thought that people playing will identify the suits with colour during the course of a game, without even realising they are doing it, appeals to me a lot. It adds a whole new dimension for me.

Apart from the 'colour wheel' thing, I decided to use the shapes of the suit symbols themselves as much as I could as the overriding theme in all the scrollwork on the engraved weapons, helmets and armour, crown construction, clothing and jewellery (also with the Aces), to give each suit its own identifiable design characteristics in shape as well as colour. I used either the whole suit symbol, multiple intertwined symbols or different parts of the symbols everywhere I could.

The Whiteknuckle Aces bring together all the design characteristics onto what (for me) were bafflingly empty spaces with endless mind-bending possibilities to go sick on. The Ace of Spades has traditionally been the title card of the deck. People financed wars with the taxes collected from playing card sales hundreds of years ago. It warranted a death sentence to sell a deck of cards without the official tax stamp on the Ace of Spades – which had to be the top card on decks for sale – so I made it the most imposing card in the deck, but I definitely left no room for a tax stamp although they were still using one in England until the 1960s.

At the point in playing card evolution when the characters on the royal cards lost their legs and became reversible, they also lost a hand and half their weapon (in some cases) when a thick white border appeared around





the edge to display a standardised index in the top left/bottom right corners. The existing designs were not shrunk to suit, but cropped. The card tax became so ridiculously high that the actual quality of the cards and the standard of the designs dramatically declined, leading to much loss of detail and clarity.

After a lot of research and then a lot more research, I gave all the characters their hands back, together with the weaponry they used to have in the misty beginning. I gave the King of Hearts his battleaxe back, for example ... for many years he has been known as 'The Suicide King' because he looked like he'd stuck his own sword in his ear. In reality, he lost his axe head when his suit symbol (Heart) migrated from right to left a long time ago; and covered it when all the suit symbol positions became standardised. The remainder of the axe handle became a sword hilt in the following years, and has stayed that way ever since. It's bound to cause controversy as the traditional name for the other red King, the Diamond, is 'The Man with the Axe'. Similarly, the King of Clubs has got a firm grip on his royal orb again; the Queen of Spades is armed again as she should be; and the Blackjack has finally regained his sword and war hammer/pike. They are all doing something symbolic that goes back a long way – so I put it all back in the way it used to be, as well as obviously making them stand in their traditional poses (even this aspect has evolved over the years to some extent). A couple have actually got their backs to you; all Queens are holding their flowers in a particular way; and they are all using their other hands in the same particular way (right back through history), as are the Kings and Jacks.

I made the Jokers the only asymmetrical face cards in the deck. I wanted to really make them wild cards, and make them the opposite to all the other face cards but unmistakably tied in with the overall deck design. The nothingness and everythingness of the Joker appeals to me a lot and it is partly the reason I used my own mug for it (partly because I couldn't expect anyone else to make a crook face like the one the cranky end is pulling). A particularly surreal moment came when I realised I'd never

drawn my own face before, and the first two times I did are both on the same picture and might end up being printed millions of times. There's a black (Spade/Club) Joker and a red (Heart/Diamond) Joker, so I gave them a box like the other face cards and a coloured background using the spiral thing.

In the early days, the Joker was 'il Matto' (the Madman). Every village had one, apparently – wandering naked in the mud, having huge mood swings, living with one foot in the half-light of the spirit world, and screaming incoherent imprecations at folk from time to time. The longer this tortuously huge job dragged on, the more I felt I understood him.

He was missing from the pack for hundreds of years and only emerged in the late nineteenth century in North America as a 'Joker' – the top trump in Euchre (apparently, I'm no card player); but of course in those days he sat on a horse with a cowboy hat on. Court jesters and any number of other things came later. I used the Madman as he was the oldest example I could find ... and he seemed much more appropriate for a wild card. The calm end of the Joker is the only one looking back at the viewer in the whole deck, and he's picking a card without looking even though they are facing him (blind faith). The cranky end doesn't like the choice his other side has made. He has chosen a Joker which would be calmly looking back at his own rage – only the other end of the card he's picked is looking at another Joker, and so on. The spiral background fits well. I could write a book about all the subtleties and details that went into the design, but space fills fast and I want to explain my technique: The 'Flying by the Seat of the Pants up a Steep Learning Curve against the Wind' method.

This was an insanely massive undertaking.

I drew all the coloured Celtic designs for the suit symbols first (over 80, all completely different) on A4 paper, exactly three times bigger than actual playing card size. All the freehand layouts I drew in the studio were this size too, as a playing card three times bigger is serendipitously just a bit smaller than A4, and easy to scan onto the computer for a further flogging with the Photoshop stick.

By then I had worked out whose faces I wanted to use for the court cards (out of all the people I knew) so I went out and collected dozens of photographs of their faces and hands – up close and further back for scaling decisions later – then went back to the studio and drew freehand A3 linework portraits of them all. I scaled the portraits down onto the A4 face card layouts and drew the scaled down hands where my imagination told me they would fit, on both ends at once, to make the whole design blend past the halfway mark from either way up. This taught me a lot ... and I then had to change the scale and position of a lot of the faces and nearly all of the hands (two or three times in some cases) to make the compositions work anatomically.

The next stage was to decide how the bodies, shoulders and arms were to be arranged to maintain their traditional stance while merging seamlessly in the middle. After that came the crowns, battle helmets, weapons and flower designs (the petals are all suit symbols). Then the clothing and armour; hair and jewellery. The next stage was the actual patterns on the clothes and weapons themselves – sticking as much as I could to the suit symbol shape theme.

I was bringing up the back design at the same time, incorporating all the suit symbols

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with their colour schemes overlapping into each other's territories with an even deeper theme of coloured spiral underlaying it all – with an uppermost layer of white Celtic banding involving two of each suit symbol intertwined in a perfect Celtic knot (they don't all work out perfect). There are 32 suit symbols in three layers in the back design and they are all intertwined. It's the only design where all the colour schemes appear together. It had to be diagonally symmetrical; include every colour in the wheel; bring all the features of the design together in one place; and look like the back of a playing card. I did it completely freehand in graphite and coloured pencil before scanning it into Photoshop for cleaning up into a digital file.

I designed the Aces then, involving the suit symbol based Celtic knotwork like the card back and underlaying it in coloured pencil with the coloured spiral thing in the colours of each suit. A further layer of suit symbols was hidden in the spiral itself. These too were then scanned onto the

computer in Photoshop format, and I used a graphics tablet and pen to go over every single millimetre of the entire design (still completely freehand) on a large monitor to make it as clear, precise, and vibrant as I could – never losing sight of the fact that playing cards are small and the clearer and bolder the designs were, the better the cards would look. I wanted to give them an illuminated script/leadlight sort of feel.

The cards themselves have been produced in Poker size, to the best quality standards in the world.

An entire individually framed deck of full colour prints including the number cards, all the framed original pencil layouts, and display books with over 800 prints showing the visual progress of the entire deck from start to finish, are the subject of my next solo exhibition to be held at the Maryborough Art Gallery in Kent Street, Maryborough (in Queensland). Opening night will be 24 April 2010. Admission is free, all are welcome, and the exhibition will run for four weeks.

Opening night will be the first time (and probably the only time) every model used in the pack will be in the same room, with the entire framed A4 deck mounted on the wall behind them. It's bound to be a surreal and extraordinary setting to launch Whiteknuckle New Standard playing cards into an unsuspecting world.

Whiteknuckle cards will be available for purchase at the gallery during the four weeks of the exhibition.

If you'd like to see more of the designs, or order a pack of Whiteknuckle playing cards (\$12 including postage), please go to www.whiteknucklecards.com. To view more of Brett A. Jones' art, including Whiteknuckle signed prints for sale, please go to www.seaofpain.com or telephone the artist on 07 4128 7682 at the Sea of Pain Fine Art Production Studio.