

# DRINKING & DRAWING WITH STEPHEN GARDNER

Knocking back a couple brews at Vazsac's Horshoe Bar, or simply 7B, in the East Village of New York City, spectating a soccer match, Stephen Gardner, calls one of the players in the game a "cheeky bastard." Eventually, Narciso Espiritu gets to asking him a few questions about art and technology, illustration, and how to keep yourself motivated.

**IZ:** How long have you been an illustrator?

**SG:** I left school in 1983. I went straight up to London. I cruised a few agencies, and I picked up one that was very easy to deal with. I was a technical illustrator, and there was a lot of work to be done. When I was at art school, they had opportunities in South Africa, Germany or British Aerospace, but there was always work. (More work than there is for illustrators today.) So since I favored myself as being a car buff, which I think everyone probably did, I got my agent and I started working.

**IZ:** Was art always a big focus in your life? Was there anything else you did professionally?

**SG:** No. I went through school and I was very good at technical drawing. I was interested in the idea that there was a future in this—that you could make a career from your art. In 1979, I went to this college where they were teaching technical illustration, and it blew my mind. There was something about the artistic drive, strong technical basis, learning to do something really creative—it absolutely fascinated me. Up til that point, going to school, I had no idea what I was going to do. I thought I was going to be a professional soccer player. Other than the fact that I was crap at soccer, I thought, "Well, I'll get better." But, when I started art school, and I saw that work, that was it. That was me. I would still be doing it today, if the computer hadn't come around and ripped that work out.

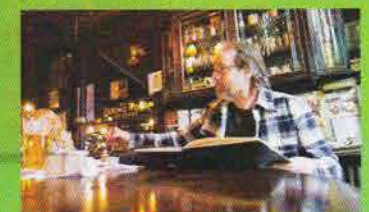
**IZ:** Do you feel that photography and the computer took technical illustration off the market?

**SG:** Yes, absolutely. When it was 1980, computers were huge. They were as big as a room! We had a computer visit—a computer came to visit the school. The computer was in an arctic truck, and it was all for the computer. There were three or four people manning the thing, and there was just a small screen for graphics. Computers at that point, weren't even been able to make an ellipse. So, our lecturers are going, "Don't worry, this thing won't compete with you during your lifetime. Don't worry about it. Yeah, it'll catch up, but it's nothing you have to worry about." Look at what happened next? I was nineteen; they were in their forties. The computer was more foreign to them than it was to us. So when they said, "Not in your lifetime," I'm sure they believed it. But, y'know, within five years, people were learning to use the computer to do all these drawings with it. When I started seeing it, you could build these three-dimensional drawings; put them in the computer, render them in space and you could flip them and twist them and change them. Had I been inclined, I would've dabbled in the computer back then, but I just fell in love with the romance of artwork. The brush and the surface. That's the way I've chosen to do it.

**IZ:** When was it that you had all those baseball card jobs? Was it before or after this?

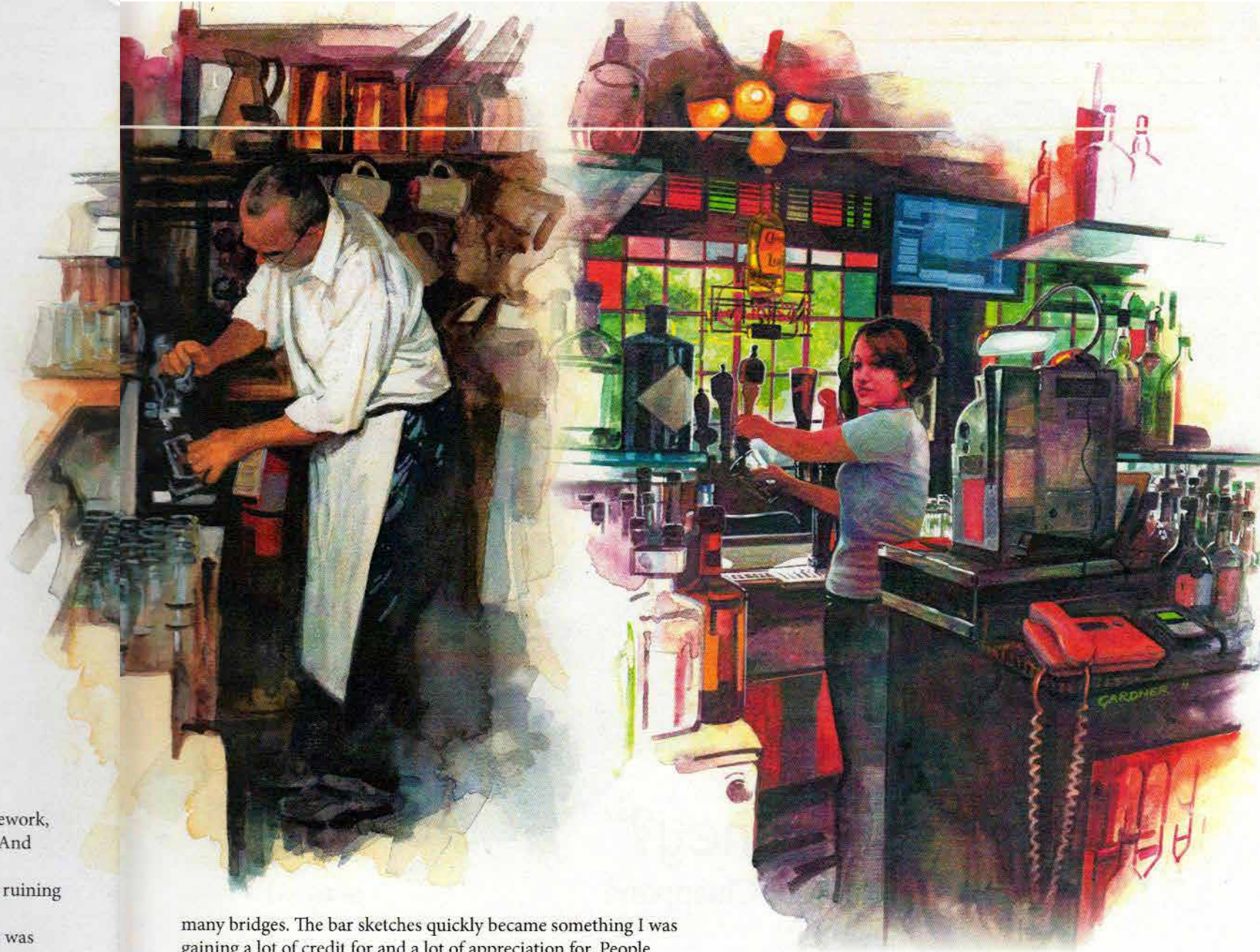
**SG:** After. My first batch of baseball cards came in, 2000-2001, working for Topps. That went on until 2003. Then I got picked up by Upper Deck in 2007 til 2009. But yeah, that was good work. That was super-rendering work. I knew that when it was over, it was over. Make the money, don't spend it.

This is like a cash cow. If I ever got a call from Upper Deck asking me to do it again, I would say, "Count me in." They offered me though, Upper Deck, maybe about a year ago to do a gig called "art cards."





cover "Vazac's Exit." Left to right "Fanelli" "Pepe" "Becka"



**IZ:** Art cards?

**SG:** Art cards. They wanted to put actual, original artwork in the trading cards. They wanted to pay me around \$25 a card to hand paint a card. They wanted me to do twenty identical cards. I figured each card was going to take me a couple of hours; so it went out as \$12.50 an hour. I was thinking, "How can you cut me \$12.50 an hour? When you used to pay me this much money over a reproduced card?"

**IZ:** Yeah, why would the printed work cost so much more than an original?

**SG:** Yeah! I spoke to the art director and I told him, "I cannot work, living in New York City, work for \$12.50 an hour. It's not possible. If you can find people who can do it, God bless you, but you're ruining perfectly good people." It was probably the worst gig I've ever been offered. To do something again and again and again and provide someone an original piece of art. It was the worst gig, and previously, they had offered me the best. When I started working for Topps, and I was making \$600 a card and doing ten of them a week, someone else turned that down. I wasn't the first person they contacted. I'm thinking, "Six grand a week? Buy me for that. Absolutely." But I was not the first name on the list; I was the first one to say yes. I feel like I'd rather wash dishes, I think. I mean, I love painting, but in this method, it's like factory work. Actually, the fact that they were able to find people to do it was shocking. Then I heard stories from other companies, like Marvel, for example, in one case, they were

paying an artist \$3 a card. I mean, we're talking about linework, but even so, that's bullshit! No one should be doing that. And yet, to someone else, that's a good gig.

**IZ:** Do you think that artists who take the job for less are ruining the industry, based on your experience?

**SG:** Well, I took it for less. I took it for \$600 a card, and it was a buyout. People always say never to do a buyout, because you give up all the rights and the artwork, but it was the best job I've ever had. So, someone else might have thought that I was selling artists short. I think that if you can do it and make it work for you--fine. Certainly, as you get older and more experienced, you expect more. There's a limit.

**IZ:** Moving on to your bar art, why specifically pubs? Is there something romantic about it?

**SG:** I can tell you very specifically. It started in 2005, when I went to FIT for my MFA, we were given an assignment by Melanie Reim. The assignment was, choose a subject and draw. Straightaway, I thought, "I'm gonna draw bars!" I come from England, and England's a drinking country. I spent a lot of time in bars. It's where I feel comfortable. So, what it meant was, very quickly, in one semester, I had a whole sketchbook full. This is because I was in bars everywhere! I would be waiting for my wife; I'm in a pub, drawing. Got some homework to do? Hangout in the bar. Meanwhile, everyone else struggled. There was another student who had the idea to draw bridges. That was fine in September, but come November, he wasn't out drawing

many bridges. The bar sketches quickly became something I was gaining a lot of credit for and a lot of appreciation for. People would say, "This should be a book!" What I realized is, this is something I had a real simpatico for and that I'm very passionate about. There's a rich history to New York bars, something very compelling to me. If you can find something, that, as an artist, that speaks to you, then that's half the battle.

**IZ:** Do you think that there could ever be a fast and easy way to becoming a good artist?

**SG:** I have two answers. My first one is: No. Because you really have to navigate your way through. There are some people who win the "artistic lottery" or the "showbiz lottery," where they suddenly become the "it" person. For reasons beyond their control, everything focuses on them.

**IZ:** Like Justin Bieber.

**SG:** Right. He can't believe it. There's not room in this world for two Justin Biebers. I think there are some people who get lucky and unlucky at the same time. Someone told me once that, people who are young, and gain success early, endure a kind of arrested development. Because a person will think that's what they should be. They don't evolve. They're always looking back. They could be 45 years-old, and they'd still be trying to do things they did

when they were young. You see it now; there's a guy with a pot-belly, wearing skinny jeans with a receding hairline. They were caught in success that didn't allow them to develop as an artist. You can be the right person, in the right place, at the right time, but there's no quick form of success. It's damaging in the long-run. If you're smart, you've got a commitment to your craft. You can't rest on your laurels. You never, as an artist, finish developing. You're never done. It goes beyond the job. It's a lifestyle. I used to think that you'd get to a level and you'd sit back and relax. That's not right. Art is a constant striving for the next thing. If you're just getting into the arts looking for an easy life--you chose the wrong life. There are plenty of jobs you can learn in a month, and do it until you're sixty-five. You never have to evolve. For some people, those brain-dead jobs, working on a machine, that's fine; for others, it's suicide. There are good years and there are bad years, but you'll never be done with sleepless nights of, "What am I gonna do now? What am I gonna do now?" It's a gift and a curse. ■