
Imagining New Alternatives: Michael DeForge on Comics, Politics, Art, and Canada

An edited conversation with Zachary J. A. Rondinelli

The following has been edited from a series of conversations that took place online in May 2022.

Zachary J. A. Rondinelli: Please tell us how you came to be working in comics. Did you find comics or did comics find you?

Michael DeForge: Growing up, there were lots of comics around the house. My family had collections of *Mutts*, *The Far Side*, *Peanuts*, *Bloom Country*, and *Calvin and Hobbes* lying around, and it was the latter three that really resonated with me as a kid. I basically learned to read and draw off those things. I went through the stock arc of being into superhero comics as a kid and then getting introduced to both alternative comics and manga in high school.

I started self-publishing zines around that same time as I entered the DIY scene and learned to stencil and silkscreen. I was particularly inspired by Fort Thunder and the posters Séripop were making out of Montreal at the time.¹



Michael DeForge. Photo credit: Matthew-James Wilson.

ZR: Why have comics become the primary form through which you like to tell your stories?

MD: That's always a funny question to answer because at a certain point, I just think of it as the medium I chose and am sort of stuck with. I'm interested in animation and film and am often even more actively engaged with what's going on in that side of things than I am with what's going on in comics. Still, I started in comics and feel like there's a lot of exploring I have left to do there before I really feel finished with them.

I definitely appreciate that even though making comics can be demanding and time-intensive, it's still fairly cost-efficient all things considered. It often requires less money and infrastructure than film, animation, music, or printmaking. Even if my relationship with my publisher was to somehow go sideways tomorrow, I could still walk across the street to a Xerox machine and print and staple something myself. I can afford to do a lot of cheap, low-stakes experiments in comics, which isn't always the case with other formats.

I'm not a natural collaborator either, so not having to navigate a bunch of working relationships also appeals to me about comics.

In terms of formal stuff, I like that comics aren't beholden to the same spatial or temporal relations that film is. It's not like you can't break those rules in film also, but it will usually call attention to itself, whereas comics does it very discreetly—these non-linear, cubist ways of depicting time.

ZR: I think there are a lot of descriptors that could be used to discuss the comics art you do, but the one that always comes to my mind when I hear your name and see your work is *unique*. That said, I'm interested to know how *you* would describe your work and why this style resonates so powerfully with you?

MD: Some of the things that come up in my drawing over and over again I credit to my experience making gig posters, especially the flat compositions, elaborate lettering, and a preference for loud, garish colour schemes.

I think my writing sometimes has a more identifiable voice than my drawings since so many of my stories keep coming back to the same set of narrative concerns. A lot of my longer comics have been about what Ursula K. Le Guin called "ambiguous utopias," and the messy mediation of the social formations within them.² I write a lot about paranoia and surveillance, about living in a time where our personal lives have become particularly porous and exposed. Suicidal ideation has come up in my work a lot. I used to be afraid of repeating myself too often, but I've made peace with that since a lot of my favourite artists are ones who kept re-examining their same big themes from slightly different vantage points

throughout their careers.

ZR: How do you see your drawing style working together with the types of stories you choose to tell?

MD: I try to change my visual approach from story to story because obviously something that works for one project isn't going to work for another. In comics like *Brat* (2018), *Stunt* (2019), and *Familiar Face* (2020), I was really pushing myself to be a more elastic cartoonist. I wanted to put the bodies in those comics through the ringer and to have characters bend and break according to emotional swings in the story. There are other comics where I'm more rigid—strips like *Birds of Maine* (2022) and *Leaving Richard's Valley* (2019) are still very stylized, but I'm not iterating on any formal stuff very much, since those were supposed to be a little more "grounded." Formally, those works aren't all that different from, like, *Garfield* or something. And then of course other projects fall onto different points on that spectrum.

ZR: A moment ago you mentioned that "identifiable voice" in your writing, and it made me wonder about the ways that your work has or has not reflected your personal and political philosophies. Having read so many of your comics, and followed you on *Twitter* for years, it's pretty clear that you are an artist with a strong set of principles and, I think, that is often quite evident in the work that you do. But it also seems more and more common that people (especially those thinking from within the mainstream comics industry) believe that art and politics should or can remain mutually exclusive realms. What are your thoughts on the myth of apolitical art, and how has that impacted your work in comics?

MD: My go-to line is that all art is political but not all art is politically useful, and I'd guess that most of what I make is the latter. I assume it's pretty easy to suss out my beliefs from reading a few of my comics, but I'm also realistically not converting many people, which isn't really a goal I have with my writing.

To the extent that art *can* be politically useful, I think it can help depict the faults in our world that we might recognize but haven't been able to fully articulate before. I think it can also help imagine new alternatives. This is partially why I'm interested in writing about utopias more. My comrade Daniel Sarah Karasik has written very beautifully about the importance of "revolutionary dreamwork."³

ZR: One question that came up during last November's Beyond 80 Years: A Virtual Symposium on Canadian Comics was this question about whether there is a truly "Canadian" style of doing comics. Every time that question was asked, I kept coming back to your work. So, I have two questions related to this. First, do you think that the stylistic work you engage in can

be defined as “Canadian?” And second, what characteristics do you think comics art would need to have to be categorized as “Canadian?” Is it even possible?

MD: I’m personally not that interested in constructing any sort of national canon. I’m sure that I recall giving interviews in the past that ascribed a sort of “gentle surreality” to Canadian cartooning—Marc Bell, Keith Jones, Ginette Lapalme, Fiona Smyth, et cetera—but when I think about it now, I’m really just describing a few specific, local scenes. But that local stuff is way more interesting to track anyway! Especially since these histories seem to slip away at a faster and faster clip lately. It’s so easy for individual artists or individual works to get memory-holed. I was really happy to see Katherine Collins’ *Neil the Horse* get re-appreciated, recontextualized, and reprinted a few years ago.

ZR: Can you talk a little bit about how you understand Canada, being Canadian, and whether it plays a role in your work?

MD: I have definitely tried to write about Canada—it’s come up in *Sticks Angelica*, *Folk Hero* (2017) most recently and *Spotting Deer* (2010) and “Canadian Royalty” (2012) earlier on in my career. All those comics are explicitly about trying to deflate certain myths about this country. I’ve thought about those three a little, and in retrospect think I was a little too gentle with my satire. I don’t regret them, but I think I was giving some of these nationalist concepts a gentle ribbing, and if I were to take them on now, would feel obligated to be a lot more forceful than that.

I’d say that my present politic both in and outside my work is “death to Canada.”

ZR: I know you mentioned that you’d handle them differently if you were to tackle them today, but I wonder if you have any interest in exploring those national myths, or even tackling this provocative “death to Canada” politic, through your work at this point in your career? In what ways do you think it might or might not be politically useful to do so?

MD: I’ve exhausted my interest in delving into our national brain rot for the time being, although I imagine I’ll circle back around to some of those ideas eventually. Both *Leaving Richard’s Valley* and *Birds of Maine* are about imagining what could replace where we’re at currently, which is also what I mean when I mentioned my interest in writing about utopias. The same goes for some of my short stories recently: “New Museum” and “Recommended for You” from *Heaven No Hell* (2021), for instance. That’s presently how I want to articulate a sort of “death to Canada” sentiment, I guess, by trying to talk through ideas about what could come next. I’m not sure how productive it’d be for me to just keep pointing out the problems, both because there’s no shortage of writers who do a much better job at

that than me, and because I think most people already recognize we're living in hell. Nobody's happy with how things are except for a small population of powerful psychopaths. The problem is one that's been identified for a few decades at this point, but people just have a hard time imagining anything changing for the better.

ZR: Seems to me as though reading more of your work could be a good remedy for that! Coincidentally, I'd like to talk more specifically about some of your comics, now.

I first encountered your work in 2017-2018 when a friend of mine in grad school told me to check out *Sticks Angelica*, *Folk Hero*. I remember being blown away by your artistry, really liking the way you "built" Sticks' character throughout and getting a kick out of the meta-inclusion of yourself as a character in the story. I wanted to start with this one because it seems to be one of your most recognizable works and is one that remains popular to this day. What is it about Sticks (the character or the work) that you think causes people to continue returning to her/it?

MD: Sticks was a fun one to write since she's basically the opposite of me in both her demeanour and worldview, which was partially why I wrote myself into the comic for her to basically bully around. I wanted her to start out a bit villainous—or at least villainous to me, as she enters the forest very entitled and believing in all these noxious, harmful settler myths about nature and frontierism and whatever—but to give her an arc that eventually has her fully join this community and embrace all these entanglements.

ZR: Now that you've brought it up, I think that this notion of entanglements is a really interesting way to think about your work even more broadly. *Familiar Face* is a good example because it forces us to confront the way that we live our daily lives in an ever-changing, or ever-updating, technological society and challenges us to (re)consider the relationship that we have with these technologies. In what ways do you see *Familiar Face* engaging with this notion of entanglement and what does it have to teach us about the direction that our society is headed in?

MD: I think of *Birds of Maine* and *Familiar Face* as sister works, even though one is a utopia and the other a dystopia. I'm interested in writing about the ideologies that animate certain technologies. We often have this very flat way of thinking and talking about technology as though it's this neutral thing that develops on its own and can be applied for good or evil depending on who wields it. But that of course isn't true. Whether it's data collection or automation or cryptocurrency or anything else—these aren't ideologically discrete technologies, they didn't invent themselves, and they didn't develop on their own. We're all currently stuck on this nightmare libertarian hell version of the Internet, but it didn't have to be that way. I

think it's become kind of corny to be a guy talking about Project CyberSyn all the time, romanticizing the utopian promise it had, but I do think it's productive to imagine what an Internet that had developed along those socialist principles might have looked like.⁴ Adam Greenfield, James Bridle, Evgeny Morozov, Bianca Wylie, and Sherry Turkle's writing have informed the way I think about this stuff in different ways.

ZR: Besides your long-form comics, you've also done a lot of shorter comics. Your most recent published work, *Heaven No Hell*, for instance, is your fifth collection of short comics, and each work included in the collection takes the reader on "a relentless journey of philosophical quandary and political exploration that, though thematically and ideologically connected, alternate mood, tone, and genre" (Rondinelli). Tell us a little bit about your decision to get back into short story comics in *Heaven No Hell*. What affordances do they provide that other comics formats don't?

MD: I still think of myself as a short story specialist, mostly because it allows for the sort of experimentation you mentioned. Lots of narrative and visual ideas I want to explore wouldn't really make sense for more than a dozen pages. I also sometimes feel like I need to rapidly cycle through those ideas to see which feel potent enough for me to explore further, and which are fine to more or less leave behind. Early on in my career, I looked to Dash Shaw, Kevin Huizenga, Lynda Barry, and Gary Panter as models, because I really loved how many one-off projects they seemed to do, and how none of them felt married to any single format. I think there's a Panter quote that's like, "People have made entire careers out of drawing styles I used for one week," and I think about it a lot. But I might be getting the quote totally wrong or attributing it to the wrong guy.

Short stories were the format I organized my *Lose* (2009-2015) issues with Koyama Press around, and prior to that I was putting my short comics in zines. I get lost in the big picture and can only really tackle narrative in smaller chunks. Even most of my lengthier books only came about after breaking things down into serialized parts—either in strip format like *Ant Colony* (2014), *Sticks Angelica*, *Leaving Richard's Valley*, or *Birds of Maine* or into chapters like *Stunt* or *Brat*.

ZR: You've also spoken in the past about how you enjoy drawing daily comics. *Leaving Richard's Valley* began as a daily comic strip on *Instagram*, and you're currently working on *Birds of Maine*, which is another daily *Instagram* comics strip that will soon be published by Drawn & Quarterly. What I find most interesting about this side of your work is the fact that it's being done on social media and therefore involves the public, audiences, and fans in the process much more actively. Can you talk a little bit about how you see social media factoring into the future of comics and, also, how this level of public engagement in your work impacts your

creative process?

MD: It doesn't affect the nitty-gritty of my creative process very much, except for one instance when serializing *Leaving Richard's Valley*. When I introduced the character Caroline Frog, she was immediately hated, as I was intentionally writing her to be kind of unlikeable. I didn't really intend for her to be a main character at that point, but I was so delighted by how much commenters hated her that I took it on as a challenge to make her a key part of the narrative and win readers over to her. I think it worked, as she became both my favourite character to write and the most popular character in the series. I also think she went through the comic's most satisfying emotional arc.

I've just always posted my work online, starting out in high school while on *LiveJournal*.⁵ I learned a lot from incubating there and sharing my work with other cartoonists at the time. A lot of my closest friends and collaborators were people I met from that little micro-circle. Aside from distributing zines, it's the cheapest way to get work out there, so it felt natural. I obviously hate being beholden to certain websites to such a huge degree, and like many others, have suffered from having my livelihood tied up in the whims of these social media corporations. Patreon, *Twitter*, and *Instagram* are all run by people who have nothing but contempt for their userbases, but I'm optimistic about efforts to create worker-owned alternatives.

ZR: I'd like to end with a really broad question. As one of the individuals playing an active role in shaping it, what future do you envision for Canadian comics?

MD: I'm not sure I could articulate any artistic vision for the future of comics except to say I'm always pleasantly surprised by the new and baffling directions cartoonists are pushing the medium in.

I do hope for better working conditions for art workers in both my corner of the industry and the more mainstream side of things. There used to be such a focus on getting comics to be treated as a "serious" art form for so many years, and I know the fight to get comics noticed at all was a hard-won battle. But now we're in this weird place where comics have actually won all that respectability, legitimacy, prestige, and attention and have additionally proven themselves to be fairly profitable. There's no end in sight to the current barrage of blandly competent blockbuster superhero movies, every literary journal or art magazine inevitably publishes some sort of "comics issue," comics are represented in museums and literary festivals, and the visual language of comics gets pilfered by the worlds of fine art, graphic design, illustration, film, and television. But despite all this, cartoonists themselves don't seem to be seeing much of these profits and don't get to reap many material rewards from this "renaissance"

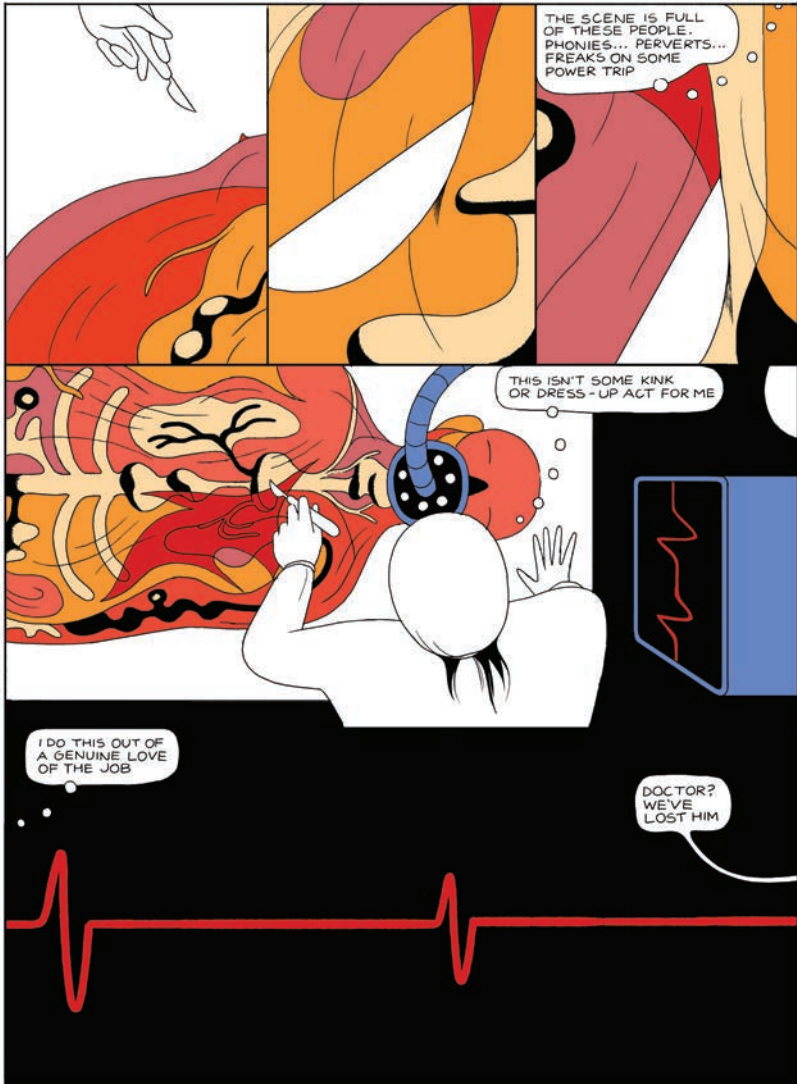
they're creating. And this obviously isn't a problem specific to comics, since these middlemen are leeching off the labour of art workers in all sorts of other mediums and industries. It sucks. I'm luckier than most, and it still sucks. So that is the one big thing I'd like to see change, and I do think there's already some momentum there.

Notes

1. "In terms of its place in comics, Fort Thunder describes the group of artists who made mini-comics and cartoon art while living in Providence's Fort Thunder work and living space in the mid to late 1990s" (Spurgeon). Séripop are award-winning concert poster creators Chloe Lum and Yannick Desranleau. See "Bio."
2. *The Dispossessed* (1974) is a work of anarchist utopian science fiction by American novelist Ursula K. Le Guin. In later printings, it was retitled *The Dispossessed: An Ambiguous Utopia*.
3. In "Revolutionary Dreamwork," Daniel Sarah Karasik describes the need for "artists, writers, and other popular educators" to collaborate in "seeding left dreams in the soil of culture" through imaginatively aesthetic, social, and intellectual projects as a way to "build the political power necessary to realize those dreams."
4. "Project Cybersyn was a Chilean project from 1971 to 1973 during the presidency of Salvador Allende aimed at constructing a distributed decision support system to aid in the management of the national economy" ("Project Cybersyn"). See also Medina.
5. *LiveJournal* is a social networking and community publishing platform.

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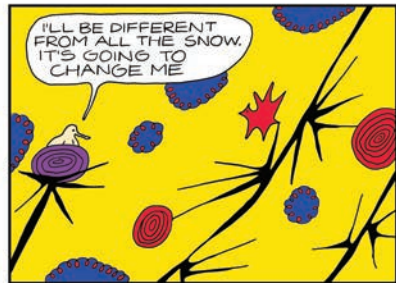
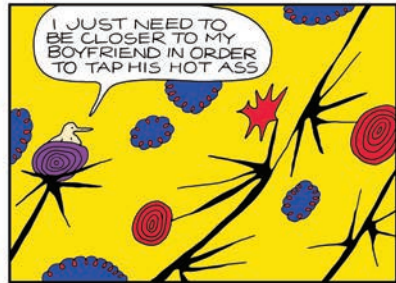
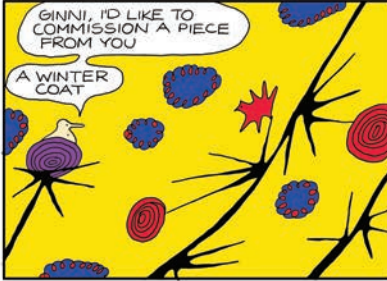
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BIRDS OF MAINE



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Michael DeForge lives in Toronto, Ontario. His comics and illustrations have been featured in *Jacobin*, *New York Times*, *Bloomberg*, *The Believer*, *The Walrus*, and *Maisonneuve*. He worked as a designer on *Adventure Time* for six seasons. His published books include *Very Casual*, *A Body Beneath*, *Ant Colony*, *First Year Healthy*, *Dressing*, *Big Kids*, *Sticks*, *Angelica*, *Folk Hero*, *A Western World*, *Leaving Richard's Valley*, *Familiar Face*, and *Heaven No Hell*. His ongoing daily comic, *Birds of Maine*, was published by *Drawn & Quarterly* in 2022.