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nyone who seeks to make images these days has an enormous amount of power," says Raymond Biesinger. "There are an incredible amount of options available and it's inexpensive to do. I think in that environment, the most interesting thing you can do is to impose constraints on yourself, to place limitations on what you do." For Raymond, this means working largely in black and white. It also means making sure everything is there for a reason—he has no interest in decoration.
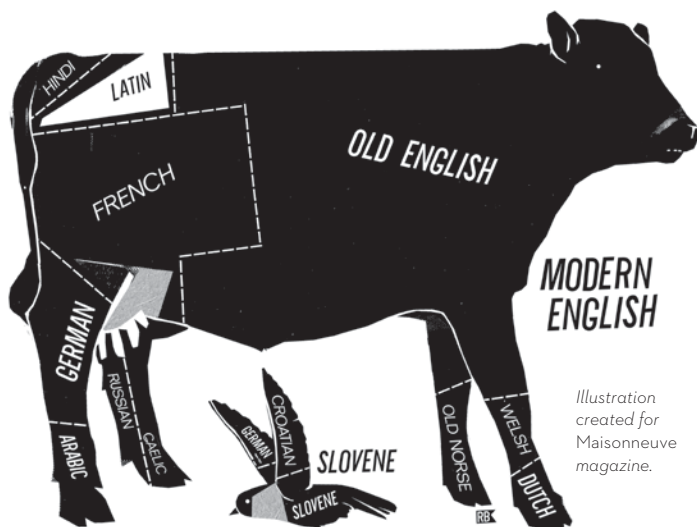

Illustration created for Maisonneuve *magazine.*

The Montreal-based illustrator is keenly aware of the milieu in which he works, and within it has honed a style and process all his own. "You can think about everything I do as kind of a collage that doesn't look like a collage," says Raymond. On his computer are folders of shapes, lines and textures that he's found in the real world and picked up, cut out and photographed. "The assemblage happens digitally. I scan them into the computer and then cut and paste them and collage them until they turn into something else completely."

Reusing these shapes creates a vocabulary, he says. A bend in the St. Lawrence River in an illustration of the city of Montreal, for instance, reappears as a bend in the large intestine in an illustration of the human anatomy. "It's the same shape, reused over and over," he says. "I've gotten an awful lot of mileage out of those things. That is the vocabulary. That's my dictionary."

The process creates a unique aesthetic that has attracted the attention of major international publications—his work has appeared in the *New Yorker, Wired, GQ, Monocle* and the *Economist*, and newspapers like the *Washington Post, the Guardian, le Monde* and the *New York Times*.

Raymond's collection of collage-able items includes lines scanned from a shoebox, along with others from the contracts in the Graphic Artists Guild handbook. He has photographs of ceiling tiles and escalator treads. He's lifted letters from the back of a Kinks record, which he cuts and pastes individually. One print features a repeating circle, scanned from the cover of an old 7-inch record. "None of these are perfect circles," he says, "and all these lines are pretty straight, but there's a certain wear and texture, and there's just something else to them."

The materials, he explains, force things in a certain direction. "I can collage in photographs of shadows and gradients and end up with an interesting texture that isn't digital and perfect. It comes with its own, special qualities—its own texture, its own waggle. People are incredulous when I say that I don't work in vectors. Vector imaging to me means that there is a perfect, mathematical precision to things, and that's just not what I do."

Working digitally allows him to remain connected to the simplicity and physicality of collage while constructing more complex images. The result is an exciting balancing act between the seemingly opposing impulses of minimalism and maximalism. "It's minimalist aesthetic, maximalist amount of time and research," says Raymond. "You could say the maximalist side is the part that is invisible—the research that goes into it, the context, that kind of thing."

This emphasis on research has given him a knack for illustrating concepts. Much of this can be traced back to a BA in European and North American political history. "Everything that an historian writes is underpinned by primary sources," he says. "That importance of fact is something that I still hold dear."

A huge amount of research went into what may be his most popular prints—a series of maps of Canadian cities, each rooted in specific historical moments. On the back wall of his studio hangs a large edition of his print of Montreal as it looked on April 27, 1967, the opening day of Expo 67.

"It's kind of a cubist perspective, where there's depth but there's also flatness," he says of the print. "And there's a clear disrespect for

The Washington Post commissioned this piece. "It's always a pleasure to stretch out and make tall illustrations in print," says Raymond, "and this gentleman stood about 20" tall in the 25 June 2014 issue."

perspective. When people ask for a background, I just get confused. Clearly there's a lot of plasticity, a lot of shifting going on. In a way it's kind of Italian Futurist in that I'm trying to make things in a way that I perceive them and remember them, rather than aiming for complete accuracy. But then again there's a tremendous amount of detail as well. It's pretty arbitrary where I choose to do one and not the other."

His appreciation for unassuming places helped inspire his city prints. "So much of culture is assembled in New York and London and Los Angeles, and those cities get an enormous amount of love," he says: "I feel that cities like Montreal, Toronto, Ottawa, Quebec City, Edmonton are worth making art about."

With the series, Raymond was able to indulge in his interest in local history. But another recurring theme in much of his personal work is the Cold War and the military clashes of modern nations. He says it can be difficult finding an audience for these pieces. "No one wants a print of a gulag on their wall," he laughs.

"My first love was history, and then I became an illustrator, so where those things come together I'm very excited. There are these sweet spots where my interests and the world's interests meet. There are a lot of projects where it's just my interests, but I'm equally satisfied doing ones where both my interests and other people's interests are met. In a world in which there are a zillion projects, it makes sense to focus on those ones a little more."

Still, some projects are irresistible, even if they are less marketable. As Raymond says, "The bigger projects subsidize trying ridiculous things." This arguably includes a 6.4-metre-long chart of the Edmonton music scene from 1950 to 2010. The topic is close to his heart: the illustrator is also one half of the garage rock duo The Famines, whose stripped-down aesthetic reveals another side to his minimalist approach.

Raymond's dual careers of illustrator/musician began in his hometown of Edmonton, a place he says tends to be overlooked as a cultural centre. "There are cities where artists who live there get the benefit of the doubt from outsiders. And then there are cities where they don't. There was a certain thrill of living in the 'cultural middle of nowhere,' which is what people assume about Edmonton, even though there are actually a lot of people there doing a lot of really neat things."

In 2010, Raymond and his wife, clothing designer Elizabeth Hudson of Ursa Minor, moved east to Montreal. "It is a fascinating city. I'm so happy to have moved here," he says. "It's a big part of what got me branching out into new things, specifically silkscreen prints. This is such a print town. There are such incredible silkscreen printers here."

The move has been good to him. He is busy full-time in his home studio, and has been able to make more time for personal work. He has increasingly been working with colour, too. "That's been a slow creep that's been happening for a long time," he says. "It still causes me more grief than anything else."

Although it's a departure from the starkness of black and white, he's careful not to let his use of colour distract from his stripped-down aesthetic. "I really like saturated colours a lot," he says. "The number one pushback that I get from art directors is that they want things to be brighter, louder. But I would rather that the concept and the structures wow, instead of something like colour. Colour has a shortcut into people's hearts, I think, and I want to get into people's minds instead." Ⓤ

FACING PAGE *"Ever visit a typical illustration studio? I don't mean one made up prettily for Design Sponge, but one of the unsavoury ones full of real things: an observatory, life preserver, lightbulb, shank, photocopier, globe, paint, office supplies, watercolours, infinite toil, a sketch incinerator, alphabet, calendar, cash, a budget chart, deadbeat clients, telephone, computers, photo studio, reference library, clock, alcohol, copyrights, coffee, ink, a locked entryway, shipping room, flatfile, and an illustrator with a stunted little domestic life."* **raymondbiesinger.etsy.com**

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