

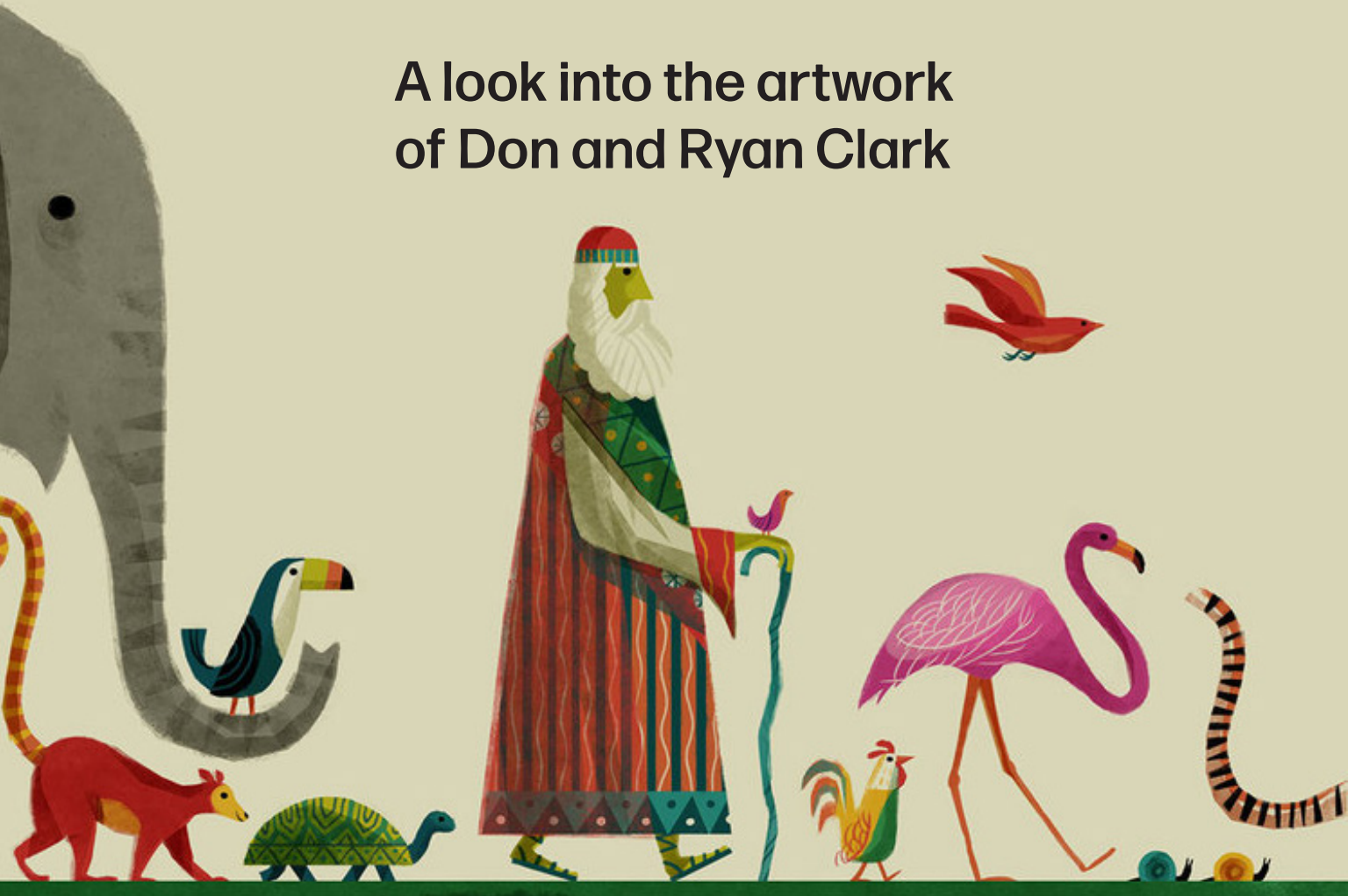


**INVISIBLE
CREATURE**



INVISIBLE CREATURE

A look into the artwork
of Don and Ryan Clark



The text of *Invisible Creature* is set in Forma DJR Micro, a typeface designed by David Jonathan Ross as a revival of Aldo Novarese's late mid-century neo-grotesque for the Italian Nebiolo foundry. This book was designed by Laura James.

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Seattle-based illustrators Don and Ryan Clark are succeeding at a balancing act many creative pros have found impossible.

The brothers, co-principles of Invisible Creature, enjoy significant commercial success and an impressive client list ranging from Warner Brothers, Nike, Acura, and Microsoft to NASA and



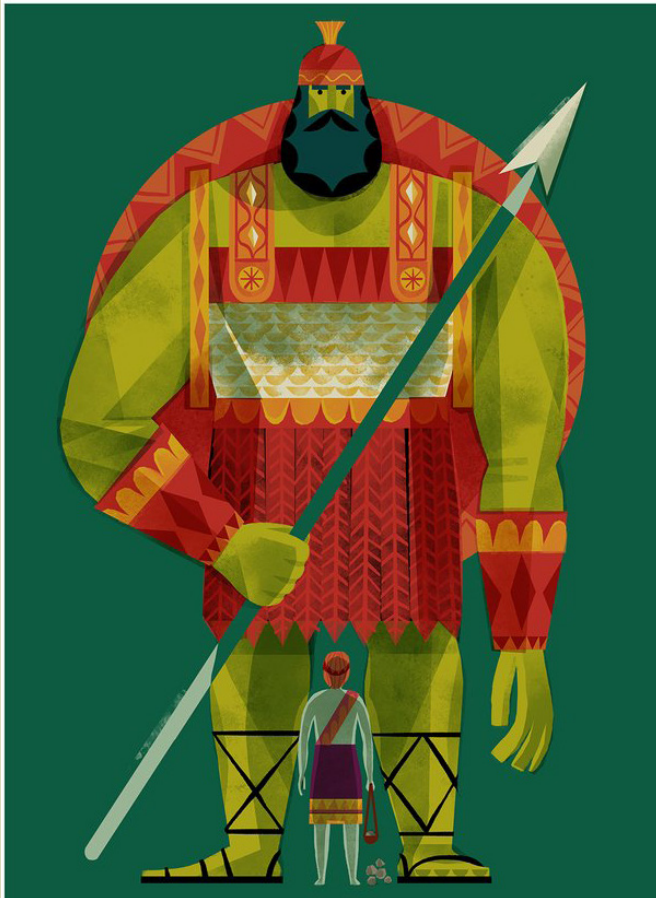
ABOVE:
NASA posters

BELOW:
Nike design

the US Postal Service. And yet, they have somehow managed to keep their business very small—essentially a two-man shop operating out of a converted barn—and full of passion and fun. And they both spend lots of time with their kids.

We talked to Don Clark about that elusive oxymoron, creative commercial enterprise, and the brothers' approach to life and art, which they've refined into something they call the "Four Principles of Being a Working Visual Artist."





ABOVE:

The Sling and the Stone
from
The Biggest Story

BELOW:

Holiday Gift Card
for Target



PRINCIPLE 1: YOU CAN FIND OPPORTUNITIES TO PRODUCE AMAZING WORK FOR DAMN NEAR ANYONE.

The first principle of their work, says Don Clark, is about making an opportunity out of whatever is in front of you.

“It’s easy to do great work for great clients,” Clark says. “It’s harder with challenging clients, or ones you’re not as emotionally invested in, or that have smaller budgets. But the gist is that you can seize opportunity from any situation or any job, and find a way do something great, whether they’re

RIGHT/
NEXT
PAGE:
Various album
covers

BELOW:
Mural Design
for Pike Plaza
City Target
Seattle



paying you \$500 or \$500,000.”

The pair learned this lesson early, thanks to their unorthodox beginning as musicians touring the nation with heavy metal bands in their teens and early 20s. Coming from a family of illustrators and inventors, “we loved playing music, but art was our first love, and we knew design and illustration would provide a steadier lifestyle,” says Don. They started exploring the intersection of music and art by designing album covers.

The Clark brothers created their first artistic opportunity for themselves in their teens, when they began designing album covers while juggling careers as touring musicians with heavy metal bands.

“It was seamless in the sense that everything in art is relationship-based, and just by spending all those years on the road we found we had a built-in clientele of friends and successful bands who liked our work, and were willing to hire us to do their covers,” Clark recalls.



“We got a lot of eyeballs on our work right away, which resulted in four Grammy nominations early on in our career. We were blown away.” Encouraged by their success, the brothers joined a friend to start Asterik, a small interactive design and packaging studio, where they spent five years expanding their portfolio before amicably splitting off to launch Invisible Creature in 2006 as a two-man shop focused on graphic design, illustration, and product design.

Clark says his years illustrating album covers taught him the most important principle of being a working artist. “It was great practice, because we did work we were proud of for all types of bands. Some we liked, some we didn’t, but for us it didn’t matter. Our job was to give a visual representation to their art, find the elements of quality to elevate. We wanted them to be over the moon when we’re done. That’s the goal: make something great.”

***“We wanted
them to be over
the moon when
we’re done.
That’s the goal:
make something
great.”***

**BELOW:
Illustration + Tutorial for Adobe
Illustrator CC. Creative**



“We just put the things we loved doing out there on a small scale, and hoped they’d pay dividends down the road.”

PRINCIPLE 2: YOUR WORK MAY ONLY BE AS GOOD AS YOUR ABILITY TO SELL IT.

“Fifty percent of our success is communicating,” says Clark. “It’s not enough to just draw a beautiful sketch. You need to be able to sell your client on your idea. Communicating your idea is crucial.”

“As an artist, the experience you’ve gained on all your projects adds up to a cumulative wealth of knowledge,” he says. “Your client is the authority on the product, but you are the authority on design. If you’re able to truly prove that, they’re going to trust you, and things will go more smoothly, with less churn, fewer revisions, and a better result.”

Fortunately for Clark, he enjoys this part of the job. “I love people, I love the conversations I have with clients,” he says. “No disrespect to people who get project managers to present for them—articulating your ideas doesn’t come easily to everyone. But personally, I love the whole package: the interaction with the client, drawing, presenting the work myself. I enjoy the fact that I’m dealing directly with the client.”

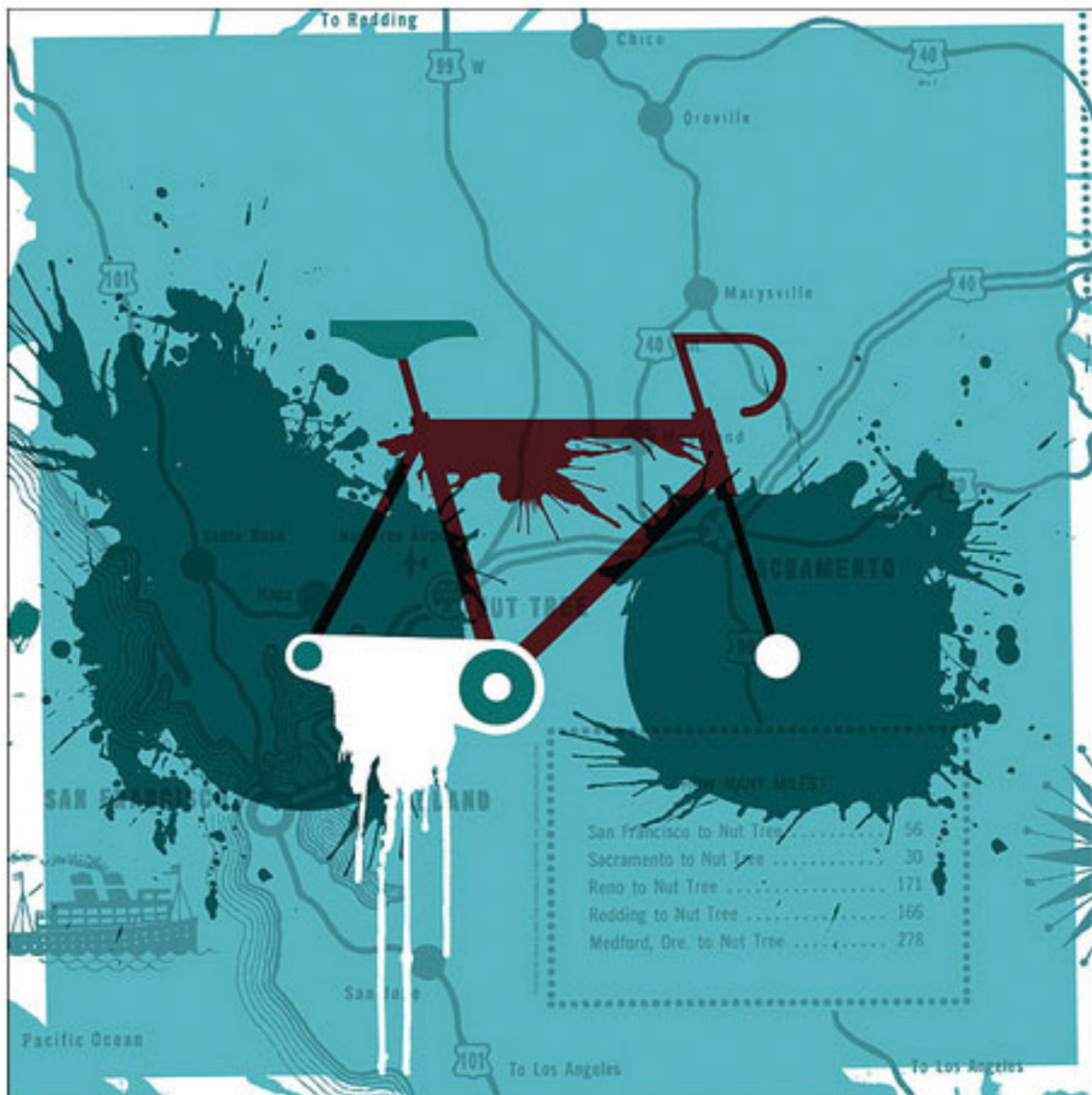
When pitching an idea, Clark says, “Our sketches are pretty rough, but we always present a mini-novel explaining what our thinking is.” His presentations are usually via email and phone, rarely in person.

“We’ve found that the fewer options we show, the better,” he says, adding that they try to avoid “option paralysis,” where you show a client five concept directions, only to have them choose elements they like from each and try to combine them. “We really focus on just a handful of ideas, or just one idea, and put all our effort into that one, and then sell it in written form as well.”

PRINCIPLE 3: LANDING DREAM JOBS WILL REQUIRE YOU TO GO OUT ON A LIMB.

“Do whatever it takes to get your foot in the door,” says Clark. “Our biggest stepping stones in the past 20 years have been taking the initiative to do something that wasn’t necessarily asked of us, but was something we knew we wanted to end up doing.”

One example: After their initial success with album packaging, the brothers decided to try designing posters. “We went in the hole for probably the first 50 gig posters we did,” remembers Clark. “There’s this illusion that if I’m going to do something right now, I need to see a financial gain right now. For us, it was kind of the opposite. We just put the things we loved doing out there on a small scale, and hoped they’d pay down the road.” The posters eventually led to Clark working almost full time as an illustrator.



Clark says he can trace many of Invisible Creature’s most creative projects—reimagining identity packages, inventing toys, creating children’s books, designing murals, illustrating Xbox Gamerpics—to a small trial or experiment they produced for themselves first. ““If we love an idea, we find a way to make it happen and release it. The best part of being a small company is that we can do just that, we don’t need to ask permission or jump through hoops. Many of those self-initiated works have led to some of our bigger client projects.” he says. “Daring to try things like that is massive in terms of where you want to go and where you see yourself. Don’t wait for people to call.”

These days, one way Invisible Creature practices this principle is by making an inventive thank you gift for clients every year—a toy, a nesting set of wooden blocks, a clever design—that breaks ground in a new area they want to explore. It’s a fun way to experiment with something new and thank their clients at the same time. “We pour a lot of time into the client gift, and we pay for it out of pocket,” says Clark. “We have landed many projects over the years because of our client gifts, simply because we tried something new we really cared about, invested enough to do a great job of it, and sent it out there.”

LEFT:
The Poster
Cabaret
2009 Bike Print

RIGHT:
True Love from
The Biggest
Story







PRINCIPLE 4: DON'T LET THE PURSUIT OF QUALITY WORK OVERSHADOW YOUR QUALITY OF LIFE.

"I think people come before art," says Clark. "Art is very important, it's my passion, I've made a career of it, but it's not the most important thing." Clark dislikes the term work-life balance because for him, it's more about making a conscious choice to live the way he wants to.

"In my twenties when I didn't have kids, our goal was to grow the company, so we did a lot of grinding late nights and long weeks, and it was satisfying to me at the time."

LEFT:

A page from the children's book, *The World Shines for You*

RIGHT:

A page from the children's book, *The World Shines for You*

“When I’m given trust plus ample time ... amazing things are ought to happen.”

-Ryan Clark







THERE ARE STARS UP ABOVE



“... we didn’t know exactly what we wanted to do when we were in high school, but we knew it involved art.”

-Don Clark

LEFT:

A page from the children’s book, *The World Shines for You*

But after he and his brother both started families, Clark says, “I didn’t want to be separated and detached and working on things that didn’t have anything to do with them.”

The brothers moved to a rural area outside of Seattle; their studio is a detached barn on Don’s property, across the yard from his home. Don comes home for lunch, and he’s around for after-school events with his three kids. Ryan Clark kept up his music and continues to make music and tour with the popular metal band Demon Hunter. And the brothers chose to keep Invisible Creature small.

“People keep asking me, ‘When are you going to grow the company? But we’ve never wanted to get big. I’m very much a control freak, and I want to get in there and do it myself rather than pay someone. We’ve had employees and interns—I think the most was five—but even that was stressful. We began to take on work we weren’t happy doing, just to pay for salaries.”

“Growing up,” Clark continues, “I was a fan of Charles Schultz and Gary Larson—small independents, one or two people. I like the artist-in-the-studio mentality. I do like the idea that my main concern is taking care of my family and not carrying the burden of employees and their families.”

Clark realizes there’s a price for his choice. “There is probably an absolute limit on how successful we’re going to be,” says Clark. “But I’m not willing to put my family second. Twenty years ago, there was this toxic idea at start-ups and agencies that ‘your work family is your new family,’ but that never worked for me. It’s a personal thing: People have to decide for themselves how long they can put in the insane hours, and those gals and guys who have made that decision differently, I respect that.”

“I was a fan of Charles Schultz and Gary Larson—small independents, one or two people.”

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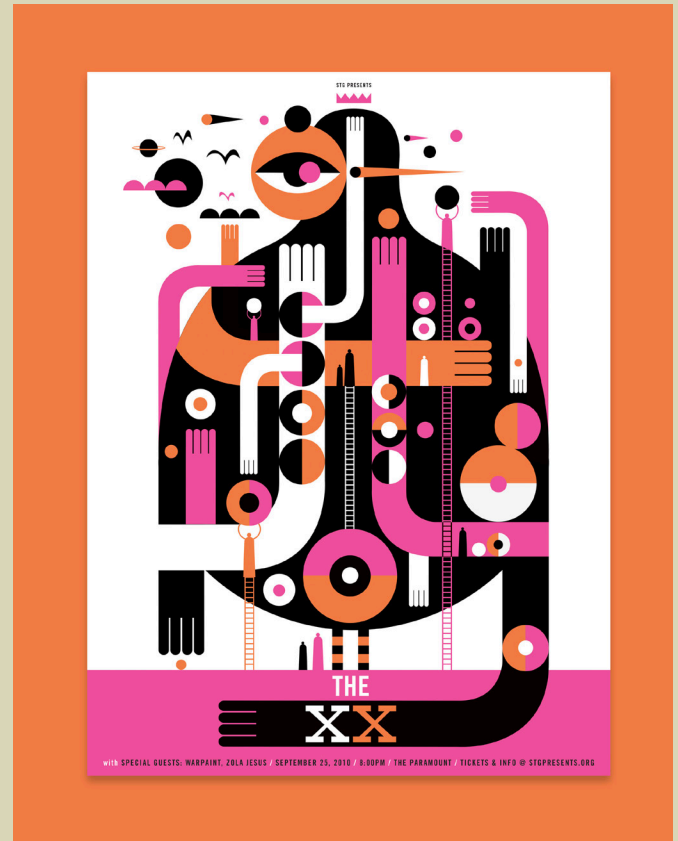
NEXT PAGE:

The XX Poster

In his case, Clark finds his family-oriented lifestyle grounding. “What’s great is, my kids don’t care what I do for a living, they just want their dad to be a dad. So I find myself going back to ‘How do my wife and children view me?’”

Unexpectedly, Clark’s choice had an artistic payoff: he says slowing down his life and spending time with his kids has influenced his illustration style and opened up new areas for him creatively. He rediscovered children’s art, created a children’s book, started designing toys, and found himself bringing new approaches into his art. “There’s this cool organic thing that’s happened,” he says. “It’s all one big congruent circle. I think I’m doing some of my strongest illustration work now, professionally, because of the time I spend with family and the fact that I work so close to home.”

Paying attention to his quality of life, says Clark, is what keeps him from burning out. “Cultivating the world you want to live in artistically is so important. Even though it pays well, you have to ask, “Do I want to keep doing this?” For Clark, the answer is yes. “I have so much fun and count it a huge blessing to be able to make a living creating art,” he says. “When folks ask what I’d like to be doing in five years, honestly, my answer is just more of the same. I never get tired of it. I never know who is going to call, which is what keeps it so interesting.”



“Cultivating the world you want to live in artistically is so important.”



THRASHER
SKATEBOARD MAGAZINE

The
OBITS

SUB POP

MOODY

Draplin Design Co. **Pretty Much Everything** Aaron James Draplin

BARN ENDERBERRY GREENWOOD AND LARSEN

CABINS
MOTTEN / CARANES