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Datebook, Art & Galleries

By Rachel Howard

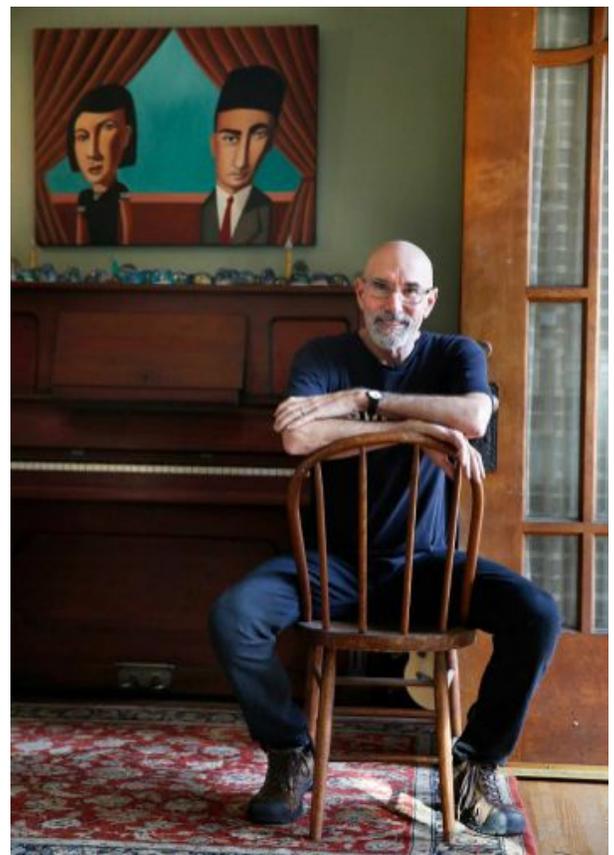
‘Dogs Rule Nonchalantly’ in artist Mark Ulriksen’s World

On a recent weekday morning, Mark Ulriksen, the New Yorker cover illustrator, stood in the front hall of his Cole Valley home, waiting for his 12-year-old chocolate Labrador, Henry, to cease barking at passersby. Then he pointed to a painting on the wall.

“That was the epiphany,” Ulriksen said, raising a thick eyebrow at two characters with blocky hair, skewed eyes and curiously familiar, penetrating gazes. When Ulriksen painted them, more than 20 years ago, an art director had just informed him that his previous characters, drawn from his head, were “too ugly” for publication. Ulriksen’s breakthrough: “Use photo reference. And don’t worry if it matches up perfectly.”

An uninformed viewer probably wouldn’t recognize the faces in “The Couple” as belonging to Liz Taylor and Franz Kafka, but many San Franciscans would instantly recognize the whimsical, weirdly intelligent style as belonging to Ulriksen, who in his 48 New Yorker covers to date has proved uncannily skilled at suggesting a subject’s wily inner life.

He captured Hillary Rodham Clinton — with the White House smashing down on her head — in his first New Yorker cover, in 1994. He’s depicted Derek Jeter and William



Painter Mark Ulriksen shows some of his work at home in San Francisco, Calif., on Wednesday, February 11, 2015.

Shakespeare and perhaps most memorably, in a spoof on “Brokeback Mountain,” Dick Cheney blowing smoke from the muzzle of a shotgun. But in this age of Internet animal addiction, much of Ulriksen’s best-known work is of man’s best friend, and his tail-thumping buddy Henry graces the cover of his first book, “Dogs Rule Nonchalantly” (Goff Books). He’ll sign copies at the Pacific Heights pet accessories boutique, George, on Thursday evening, Feb. 19.

“I felt not enough people would know who I am to do ‘Dog Paintings of Mark Ulriksen,’” he said, causing one to wonder if he underestimates his popularity. He sat in the kitchen he and his wife, photographer Leslie Flores, renovated after buying the building from their landlord 19 years ago.

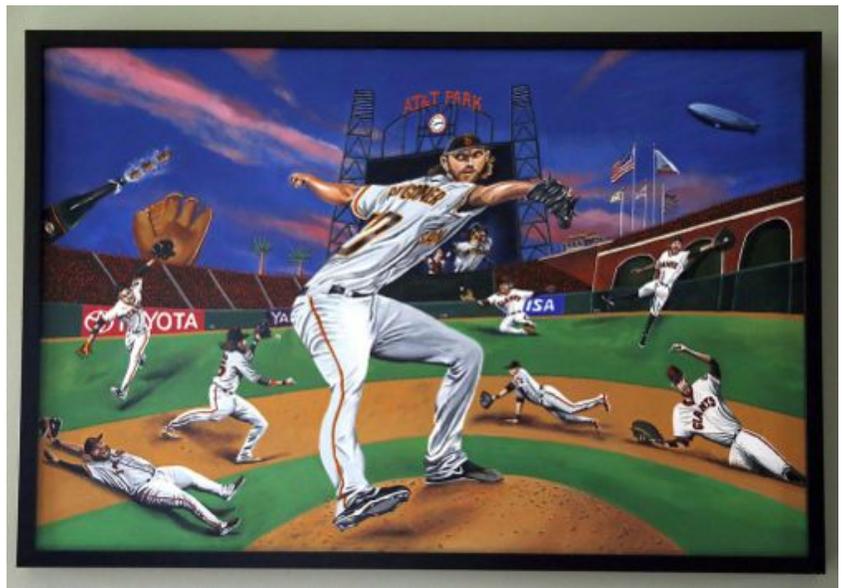
“I took a hundred dog paintings I’d done over the years, wrote captions, and showed them to Tom” — Tom Walker, a book packager and former roommate at Chico State who stepped in with a plan to position Ulriksen as “Garrison Keillor meets Norman Rockwell.”

“Tom said, ‘You don’t need to write captions. Write a story about your love of dogs. Start with a puppy. What was your first puppy? Dogs die, you outlived it. Talk about that.’”

Losing his fear of color

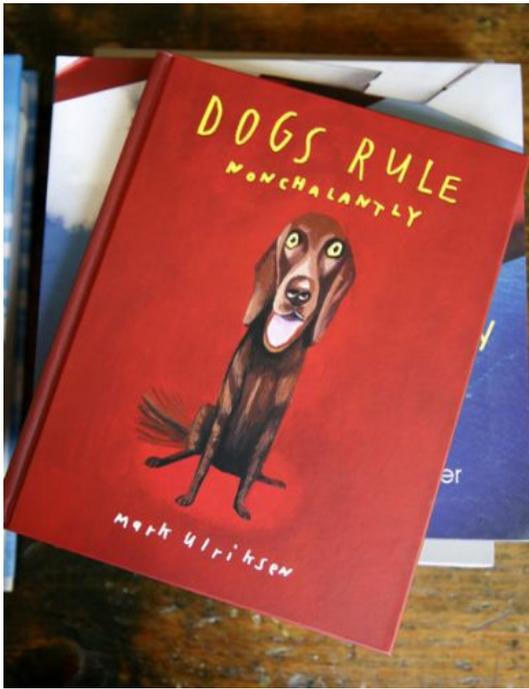
The resulting story begins with a painting of a much younger Ulriksen and his former dog Ted at a baseball game, and ends with the now-gray-bearded Ulriksen wearing a Giants cap and hugging Ted’s replacement, Henry, in an armchair.

From that, you might think Ulriksen leads a cushy dog’s life. At 58, wiry in a black vest and forest green shirt, given to bugging out his eyes behind clear-framed glasses, Ulriksen has a puppyish energy, but he takes his knocks. Even after 21 years, out of 10 ideas pitched to the New Yorker, one might get the green light.



Local painter and Giants fan Mark Ulriksen shows his recent celebration painting in San Francisco, Calif., on Wednesday, February 11, 2015. The night the Giants won is when he started painting this piece.

“Typically, they don’t like it, you don’t hear a word,” he said. “You gotta have thick skin.”



Ulriksen's recent book, "Dogs Rule Nonchalantly."

He didn't always, which is why he gave up on a one-year trial run at illustrating back in 1985 and worked eight years as an art director of San Francisco Focus (now San Francisco Magazine). "Everything I did was in black and white, because I was terrified of color." Then, on his honeymoon, he went to the Picasso Museum in Paris. "And in the midst of all these great Picassos were bad Picassos. And I said, 'Picasso did that stuff? Wow, you can be bad, it's OK.'"

He must not have been bad for long, because after he invested \$5,000 in a small accordion-folded portfolio of 10 paintings, Newsweek, Rolling Stone, GQ and the New Yorker all came knocking. The New Yorker gave him a coveted staff illustrator contract, but after three years Ulriksen went freelance so that he'd have the freedom to publish elsewhere, like the dog magazine Bark.

"His style hasn't changed, but his technique has gotten better," said Walker, his friend and producer. "The brilliance of his New Yorker covers is that he can articulate the what, why, and how. It's storytelling through pictures."

In his crammed second-floor studio, Ulriksen pointed to two 15th century Flemish paintings of the Last Judgment, featuring people with tiny, detailed hands and sharply shadowed faces not unlike Ulriksen's work. "In this one, the demon is pulling people in. But in this one the people are pulling themselves in, which makes a lot more sense."

Broad appeal

A painting of the cosmos, a January 2000 cover, stood on an easel. "That's a commission for Neil deGrasse Tyson," Ulriksen explained, referring to the famed astrophysicist. "He wants a mural of this, 7 feet high. We're going to blow up this version for his remodeled loft."

Martin Muller, founder of the gallery Modernism, is also a fan, having bought an original Ulriksen cover painting titled "Love the One You're With" shortly after it was published on Valentine's Day in 2000. Reached in Paris, Muller was happy to explain why he felt Ulriksen deserved a place in his venue, which he noted had also put its prestige behind cartoonists Glen Baxter and R. Crumb.

“The most intellectual to the least intellectual person can relate to Mark’s work,” Muller said. “It’s not unlike a Charlie Chaplin movie, the appeal to a broad audience. When he does portraits, he kind of gets to the soul. And he’s a very modest, unpretentious guy, which is refreshing in the art world, with its egos.”

Henry the Lab appreciates the unpretentiousness, too. Barking again in the hall, unsteady from two knee surgeries, he thumped his tail and waited for his master to carry him up the stairs to the studio to start the day’s work.



Painter Mark Ulriksen with his 22-year-old daughter, Emma, at home in Cole Valley. Behind is a family portrait he painted in 1993.

Rachel Howard is a Bay Area writer who frequently contributes features and reviews to The San Francisco Chronicle.

Mark Ulriksen: The New Yorker cover artist will sign “Dogs Rule Nonchalantly” Thursday, Feb. 19, from 5-7 p.m. at George, 2512 Sacramento St., S.F. (415) 441-0564.