

## **Reaction to the Lecture by José Cruz**

Ft. Worth Texas Session, March 2010  
UNIVERSITY OF HARTFORD  
Limited Residency MFA in Illustration



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The talk by illustrator José Cruz (b. 1955) of Dallas, Texas, was an event more than a lecture. As the attendees filed in from the Clarion hotel lobby, some noticed they received one of two small parodies of the evangelical tracts published by Jack Chick (b.1924) of Chick Publications; either about Nazi's or a Domsday scenario (Fig. 1). The tracts were a precursor for an "in-your-face" presentation. Cruz launched into his talk by announcing the titles of a few of his airbrush originals on the head table. The graphic titles brought gasps by a few of the more reserved in the crowd... Cruz continued. His animated behavior was punctuated with flailing arms, shoulder shrugs, jumping to the side and snapping to attention as he relayed his anecdotes and horror stories of his 30 years in the Illustration field.

Cruz's stories about mistreatment and perseverance within the highly competitive and fast paced publishing world kept those present laughing, groaning and nervously shifting in their chairs. Nothing was deemed sacred other than the finished product. The



Fig. 1 José Cruz, *The Reich Stuff* - selected pages, 2007, Digital

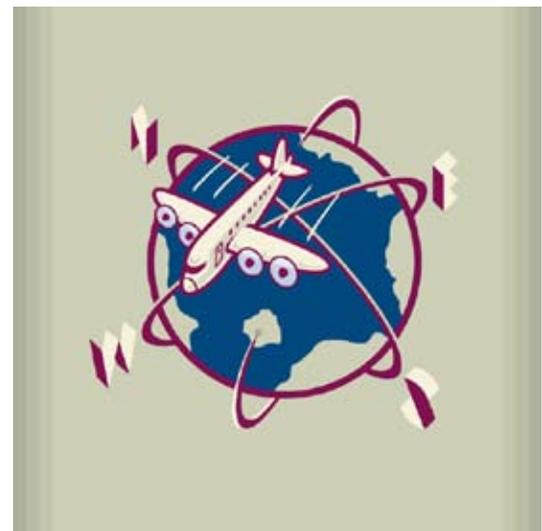


Fig. 2 José Cruz, *Travel Icon*, 2008  
AD: Roger Greiner/Shostak Studios  
Client: Convene Magazine, Digital

Cover: José Cruz: *Detail of Portrait of Judas or Art Sox*, 1990, Alrbrubsh, with superimposed photograph of José Cruz Lecturing, 2010, Paul Zdepski  
Reaction to the Lecture by José Cruz  
Paul Zdepski - [www.zillustration.com](http://www.zillustration.com)  
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reverence for artwork and crisp finish was juxtaposed by stories of finished art hacked, scarred and painted over by a novice designer, causing Cruz to tear it up in front of them. Such horror stories allowed the crowd to sympathize with him, but he would sling a crude remark about an interaction with a random Art Director or Agency, and lose half of the crowd, again. I was busting out laughing, perhaps a bit too much. Cruz had me wondering what was around the next turn.

Contrary to the coarse nature of his delivery, Cruz's illustration work has a control and polish that leaves very little room for accidents or frivolous marks. His artistic vocabulary and symbolism are unique to his interests; geometry, texture and pastel and primary colors. His hand-executed airbrush and painted panels have a slick effect now commonly seen in computerized illustration, but with a beauty and control that cannot be imitated on a printed digital output. The finished artwork is just that... art. Cruz has mastered the control of his



Fig. 3 José Cruz, *MLK is KING* - Holiday Card, 2009, Digital



Fig. 4 José Cruz, *Buying Your First Computer* Boy's Life Magazine, 1984, airbrush and acrylic



Fig. 5 José Cruz, *Wrestlers In Love* Frankfurter Allgemeine Magazine - 1986 airbrush and acrylic

mediums. No hint of airbrush masking cuts can be found on the pristine surfaces. His over spray textures are handled masterfully, laying down the sputtering spray evenly or as a smooth gradient. Similarly and expertly, Cruz has recreated many of his traditional airbrush and acrylic pieces within Adobe® Illustrator, as digital illustrations.

Cruz's work is reflective of advertising work from the roaring 20s through the 50s. The smooth use of curves, piping and architectural motifs are directly relative to Art Deco, the Futurists and Pop Art (Fig. 7). He mimics those textures best suited to the airbrush; chrome, plastic or rubber, but much of his painstaking rendering technique is subservient to the overall pattern and design. The isometric illustration style is often similar to 8-bit computer game design, which was prevalent in the 1980s and 90s in the early days of Atari®, Commodore® and NES® computer games and Computer-Aided Design (CAD). Cruz plays on these standards and restrictions, forcing space



Fig. 6 José Cruz, *Feliz Muertos*, 2008  
Day of the Dead Holiday Card  
Self Promotion, Digital



Fig. 7 José Cruz, *4-D Kid*  
Poster on 4-Color Process Printing  
Client: Richards Sullivan & Brock Agency  
Acrylic on Illustration Board



Fig. 8 José Cruz, *Stock Market Ups and Downs*, n d  
Spot Illustration La Tribune, France, Digital

into a raw CAD-like picture plane (Fig. 4). The play of flat space and shallow isometric depth of field underlines a restricted group of rules – design, surface and the core of the message.

By reviewing his blog (<http://x-factor-e.blogspot.com/>), the broad and eclectic subjects of interest become apparent. Cruz lists subject headings from 3-D, Art Deco and Al Hirschfield through Weird Science, WWII and Xmas. Cruz develops his characters with physical attributes that hinge



Fig. 9 *Dakkochan Doll with Winking Eyes*  
1960 - 1970, Black Girl Toys,  
Hong Kong, Plastic, 3.5 inches high  
Collection of José Cruz

off of these odd influences from his life's travels. He will find a quirky figurine, like a penguin (Fig. 10) or African in native dress with holes in the ears (Fig. 9) that will become the basis and fodder for his illustration and gallery work. Period signage, advertising and pop-culture references merge with his aesthetic. His recent gallery work has all of the elements mentioned, but he is breaking his illustration mold with splashes, drips and powerful brush strokes (Fig. 13). The work still has the core elements and rules, but a sense of freedom, if not urgency is apparent. Cruz's message is more veiled, but the voice seems louder – His painting is closer to the personality he portrays when speaking to a crowd.

Although Cruz seems to mask his insecurities with profuse swearing and coarse vulgarity, his work is as controlled and precise as an architectural draftsman. The dichotomy is astounding to me, but is as poetic as witnessing a savant. (Fig. 15) I have known few such people in my life,



Fig. 10 Kool Cigarettes, *Millie & Willie Salt & Pepper Shakers*, 1950s  
Fiedler & Fiedler Mold and Die Works  
Company of Dayton, Ohio, 2 inches high  
Collection of José Cruz



Fig. 11 José Cruz, *Y2K Bug*, 1999  
Client: Tennis USTA, Digital

and Cruz hides his sensitivity with the best of them. After reading some of his writing, I can only conclude that he may be so tuned-in that he needs to build walls to avoid being overwhelmed. He has the mind, the eye and the drive to execute powerful statements – or veiled social observations.

As an illustrator, painter or speaker, Cruz demands a reaction from his audience. He refuses to allow you to sit on the fence, ignoring what is in front of you.

He's José Cruz – deal with it.

Fig. 14 José Cruz  
Signature Icon  
Self Promotion  
Digital



<http://x-factor-e.com>

<http://x-factor-e.blogspot.com/>

<http://iconoclast-tm.blogspot.com/>



Fig. 12 José Cruz, *No More Monkey Business* 2007, Self Promotion, Digital



Fig. 13 José Cruz, *Mad Dog/God Dam, Baby Talk/Spontaneous Utterance/Big Boys Don't Cry, Sorry Wrong Number*, 2009  
Duel Personalities Show - November 2009  
Mary Thomas Gallery, Dallas TX  
acrylic on wooden panels, individually, 2 x 2 feet, group, 6 x 6 feet

