

left, Deer (Deer Diary), ballpoint, 9" x 16"  
above, Horse (Clothes Horse), ballpoint, 10" x 9"

## Intelligent Art **With a Funny Bone**

written by Kylie Serebrin

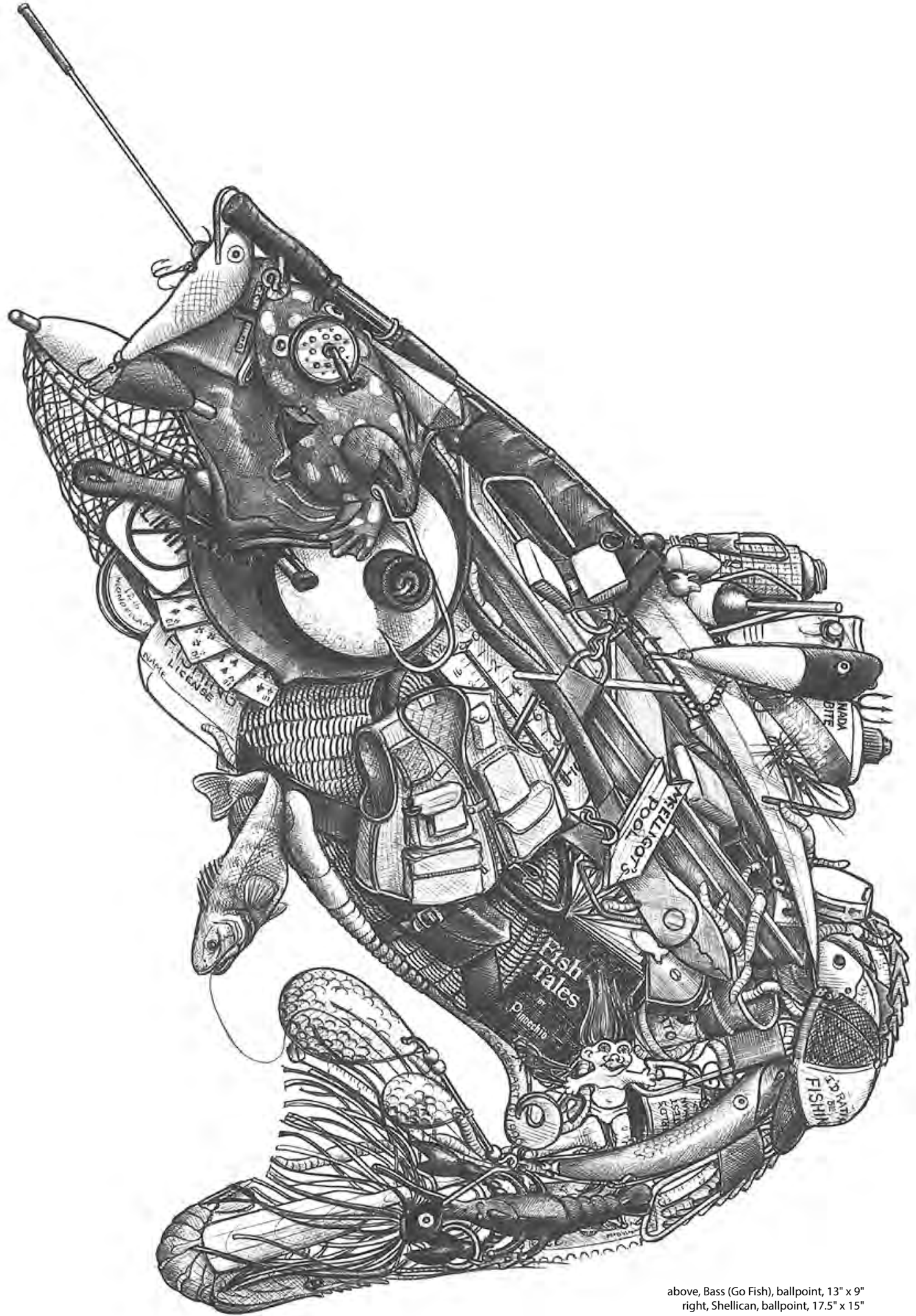
### The Hidden Pictures That Shape Us

Just as a single drop of ink can spawn a drawing, so too can one event shape an entire life. Anyone who doubts this need look no further than Don Stewart for an exemplar.

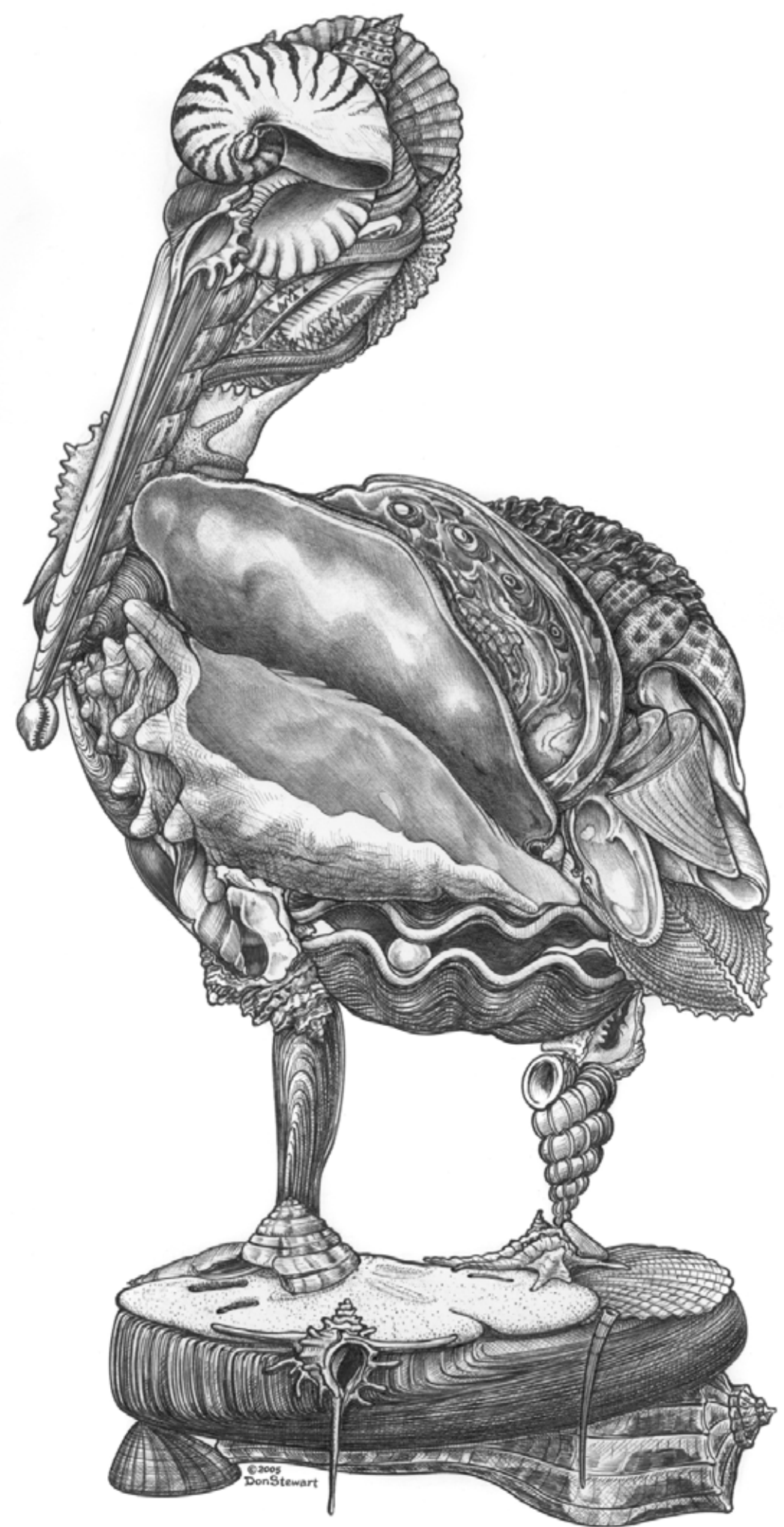
Born in Arkansas in 1959, Don's first years were spent moving through Texas, Oklahoma and Alabama with his father, a college administrator, after his mother died of cancer. As early as 3 years of age, Don recalls puzzling over his mother's X-rays during one of her many doctor visits. Hospital waiting rooms also introduced him to Highlights magazine and its mesmerizing 'Hidden Pictures' feature. In her final days, Don's mother passed the

time working with craft kits and 'Paint by Number' sets. "The fruits of these activities were the only evidence of artistic interest or ability anywhere in our family tree. These two influences – the medicine and the art – were my mother's legacy. Both would follow me for the rest of my life," Don notes.

Shortly after his mother died, when he was not quite 5, Don announced that he would one day be a doctor, himself. This intention never wavered, though his interests also included community theatre and painting. "Ironically, my older brother was considered the visual artist in the family, and there was no use competing with his talent, so I spent more time on the performing arts. I even paid much of my way through college as a comic ventriloquist," he reveals.



above, Bass (Go Fish), ballpoint, 13" x 9"  
right, Shellican, ballpoint, 17.5" x 15"



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DonStewart

left, Saxophone, ballpoint, 8" x 19"  
right, Juke Box, ballpoint, 9.5" x 17.5"



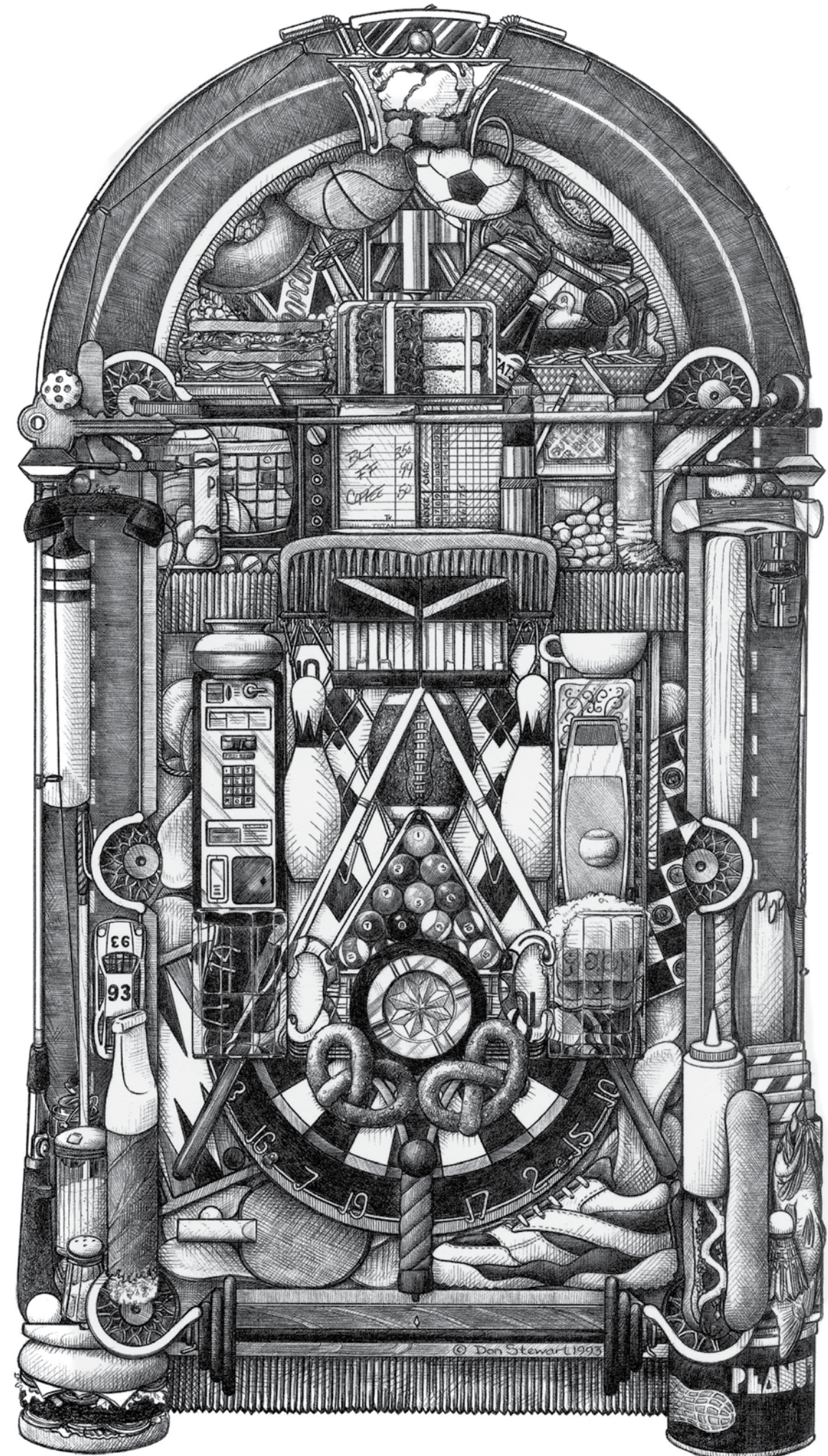
#### Laughter Was the Better Medicine

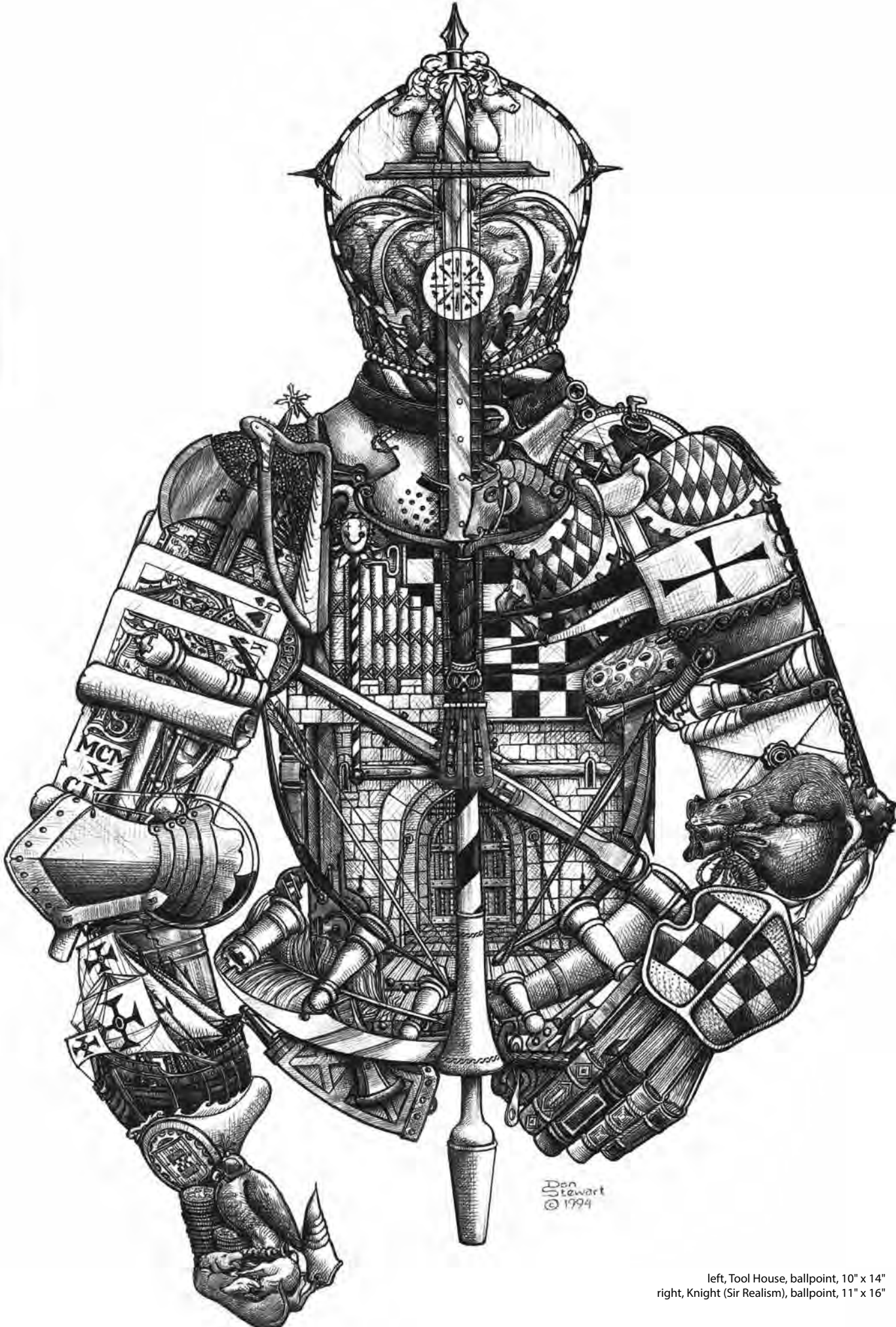
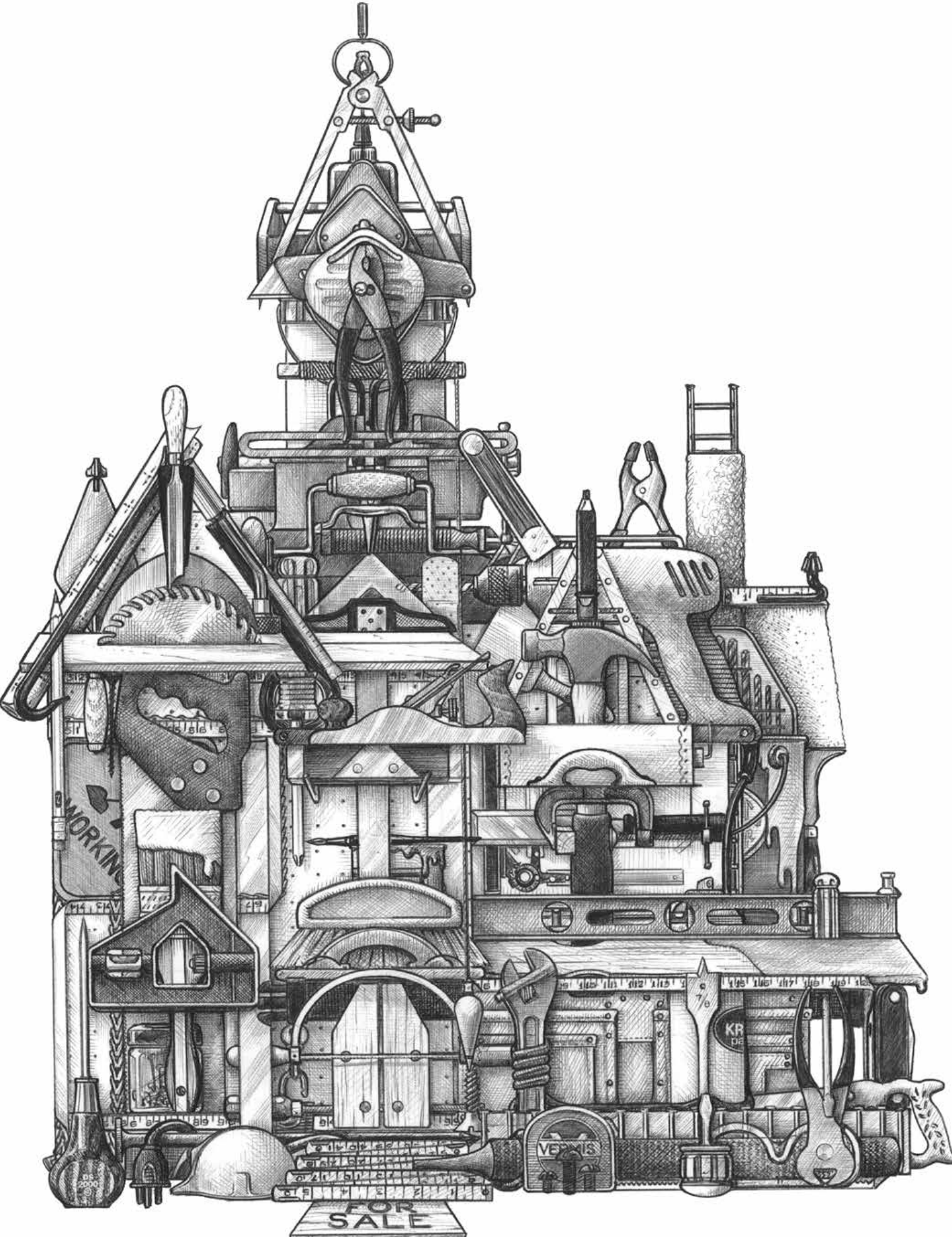
In 1981, Don was awarded a Bachelor's degree in Biology and Art from Birmingham-Southern College, having insisted on art instruction as a change of pace from the incessant science courses demanded by his pre-medical curriculum. According to Don, the double major was a bureaucratic anomaly: "With only three lower-level courses in drawing and design, I had no business being credentialed in art," he remarks. He will, however, stand behind the scientific side of his academic record, which earned him magna cum laude honours and membership in Phi Beta Kappa – a well-known American academic honor society.

Don's pre-med faculty advisor actually refused to allow him to sign up for art classes at one point, believing that they would jeopardize his chances of getting accepted into medical school. "They didn't," he recounts, "but the experience did ultimately ruin me for doctorin'." During medical school, there was little time for Don to dabble in art, even as a hobby, but he took advantage of all opportunities to draw, paint and refurbish anatomical models in the gross anatomy lab. "Even this small luxury all but vanished when I became a surgical resident at the Mayo Clinic in 1985, when creative time came at the expense of study and sleep," he remembers.

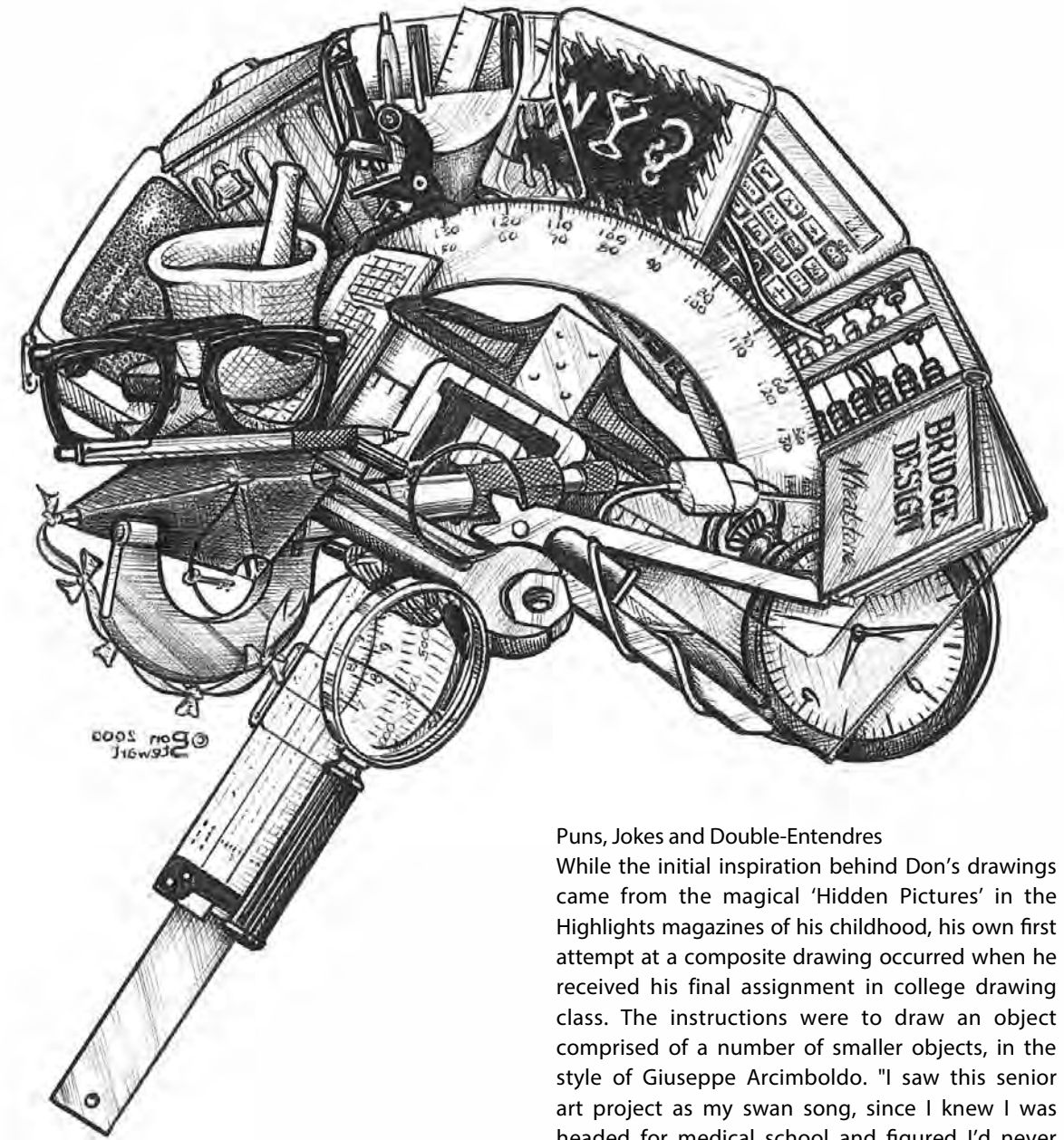
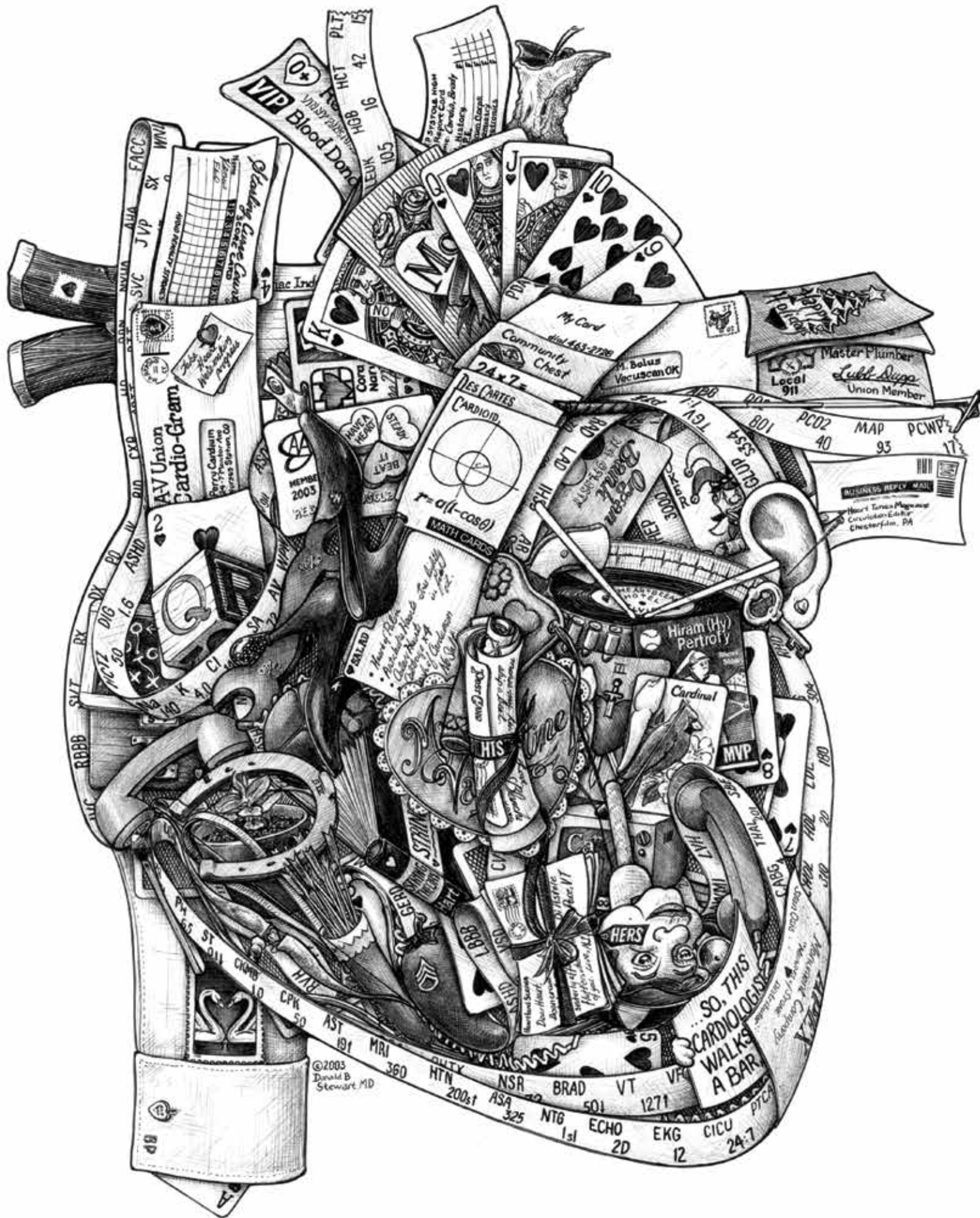
The life of a surgical intern did not suit Don's personality. "One day, a nurse asked me: 'when was the last time you were happy?' Easy. It was back in college in the art studio. That was a wake-up call," he reveals. Despite having persevered through a gruelling Internship, Don was unfulfilled. So much so, that at the end of the year, he left medicine entirely – on the very day his long sought-after medical license went into effect.

It was at that time that Don began winning small awards for his short stories and poetry, and when





left, Tool House, ballpoint, 10" x 14"  
right, Knight (Sir Realism), ballpoint, 11" x 16"



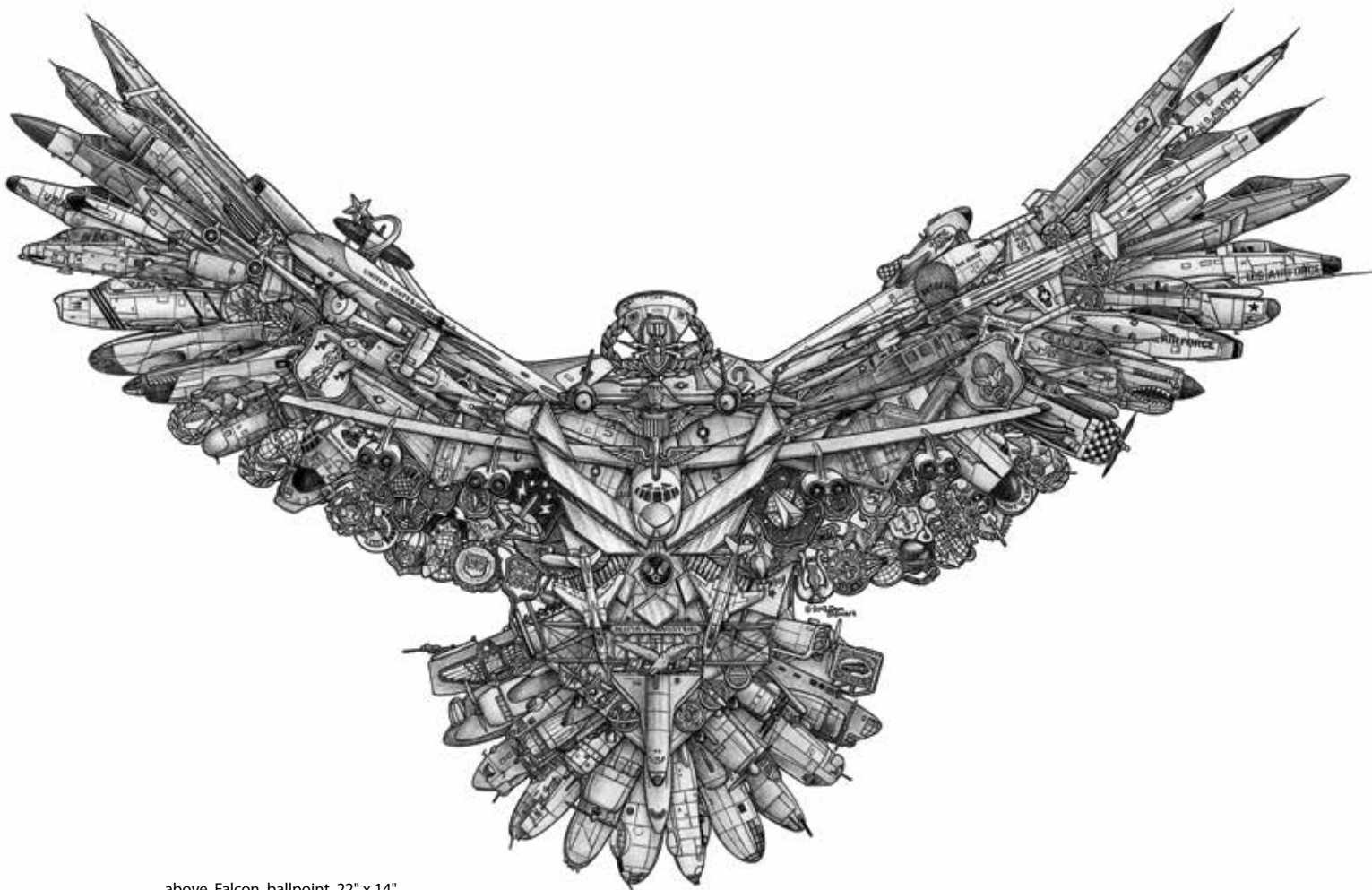
left, Heart (Card-iology), ballpoint, 10" x 12"  
above, Left Brain (N. Gin. Earring), ballpoint, 6" x 6"

#### Puns, Jokes and Double-Entendres

While the initial inspiration behind Don's drawings came from the magical 'Hidden Pictures' in the Highlights magazines of his childhood, his own first attempt at a composite drawing occurred when he received his final assignment in college drawing class. The instructions were to draw an object comprised of a number of smaller objects, in the style of Giuseppe Arcimboldo. "I saw this senior art project as my swan song, since I knew I was headed for medical school and figured I'd never have time to indulge in such frivolous diversions again," he admits. And, for the first time in his life, both sides of Don's brain lit up simultaneously: the academic side and the creative side, together and in concert. "Nothing else had ever given me that feeling. After that experience, medicine turned out to be a very poor substitute, indeed."

he created and published his first two ballpoint composite drawings. He has since worked as an artist, writer and creative consultant through the DS Art Studio, where he remains endlessly entertained and challenged by creating works with his signature brand of visual humour. "In 2005, we published DS Art: The Visual Humor of Don Stewart, a collection of drawings from my first twenty years in the studio, which has since been re-issued as a paperback," he states. "A second volume of humorous medical drawings is in the works, entitled fARSe Medica: The Clinical Humor of Dr. Stewart. It's tentatively scheduled for release in 2014."

A lover of language, double-entendres and jokes (of both the clever and bad varieties), humour is always the main ingredient in Don's work. "I find that if I create an image that makes me laugh, it usually inspires others to do the same," he points out. Thus, his composite drawings usually start with a pun or play-on-words, suggesting that an object and a sub-group of tangible items are related in some way. Occasionally, the process occurs in reverse and he decides upon

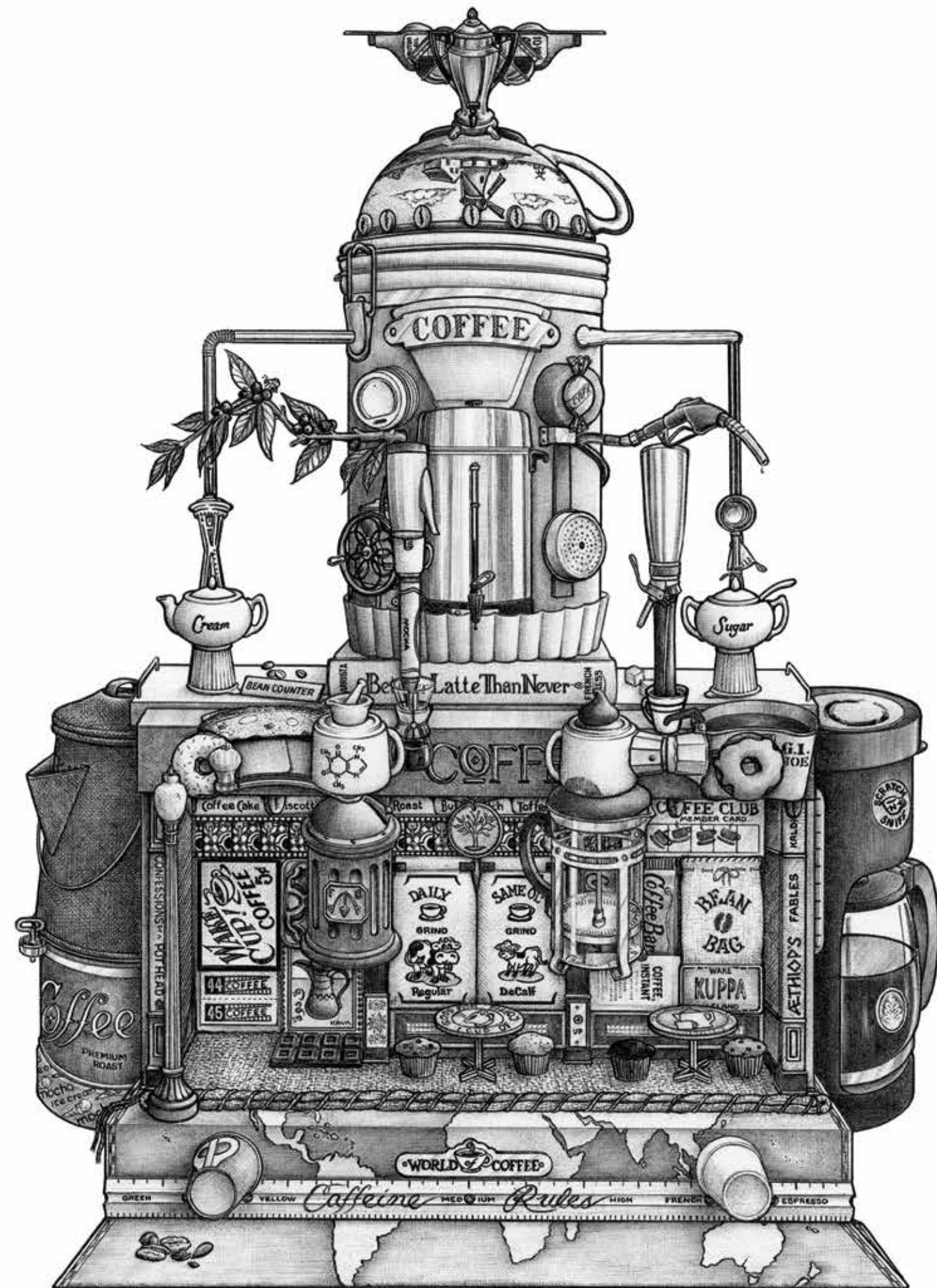


above, Falcon, ballpoint, 22" x 14"  
right, Coffee, ballpoint, 22" x 14"

an interesting subject before coming up with a group of components for it that will make a good joke. After thoroughly researching a given topic, Don begins by writing down an exhaustive list of possible component parts that might find a place in his drawing. Next, he outlines the overall design in pencil on acid-free board.

Expected shapes within his primary subject are then systematically erased and replaced with related items from his list. "This oft-interrupted process repeats itself, ad nauseum, until an entirely reconstituted, highly-smudged graphite image emerges," Don notes. "Assuming that a working sketch doesn't disappear into a pile for a year or three, each item in the design is then over-drawn with ballpoint-pen ink. Weeks later (with any luck at all), the process finds its way to a merciful end," he chuckles. At that point, any remaining graphite is erased from the board and the completed drawing is scanned for reproduction. If all goes according to plan, the entire process usually takes about a month to complete. A viewer once labeled Don's artistic process 'Visual Data Synthesis' – which sums it all up rather nicely, he thinks.

In his own work, Don strives to achieve cleverness, clarity, attention to detail, mastery of technique and contagious humour. It's not surprising, then, that these are the qualities that endear him to sculptor Bruce Larsen, as well. "Bruce's work embodies all of the aforementioned characteristics – though I must admit to bias. He does what I do, only in 3-D, and far better," he asserts, humbly. His old art classmate, Tom Wilkes, is another colleague whose intelligent humour earned Don's admiration. "From his reams of original comic strips to his series of functional miniature sculptures, Tom demonstrated how creative excellence exists in a place beyond superior craftsmanship. He placed it in the second, third and fourth layer of detail and meaning hidden in his work," Don explains. Dale Lewis of 'Whimsically Elegant Wood' also ranks on Don's list of 'most impressive contemporaries,' as does the painter Alex Grey. "Alex's incredibly detailed paintings appeal to the anatomist, the artist and the creative seeker in me – even if they are in vivid colour," he states. "I only consider using colour as a last resort."



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"Other Galleries Don't Like That"

Ultimately, Sue Ellen Brown – Don's wife – is the only other art professional whose observations and constructive criticism he takes to heart. Marketing his work is a perennial challenge, though Don insists that it remains an entertaining and creative endeavour in its own right. "Currently, no gallery other than my own will have anything to do with me," Don explains. "And, while even the remotest possibility of representation is as tantalizing for me today as it has been throughout my entire career, 27 years of consistent responses have taught me why my work is not gallery-friendly: My drawings are black and white, which apparently is less marketable than colour. My medium is off-the-shelf ballpoint pen, as opposed to a 'serious' drawing instrument. Additionally, each piece takes weeks or months to complete, by a process that is seldom linear, often interrupted and completely unreliable. Originals are, therefore, relatively expensive for black and white work (or so I've been told often enough)," he remarks. As a result of this, Don presently makes his living selling limited-edition reproductions of certain drawings, and by licensing the rights to other works. "Galleries don't like that, either," he points out, cheekily.

Fortunately, Don rather enjoys running the DS Art Studio Gallery, which is situated in a small wooded suburb of Birmingham, a couple of blocks off the main commercial strip with no sidewalks

connecting it to the rest of the business district. The gallery gets relatively little foot traffic, which is fine with Don, who takes advantage of the lack of distractions to create. The space has become a home-away-from-home for this artist: "It seems that when I'm not working in the studio, I'm playing in the studio. Or reading in the studio. Or finally getting around to vacuuming the studio – but only after a dozen prompts from the missus, who also works, and plays and hangs out there," he notes.

Creative cooperation, integrity, generosity, compassion and persistence all abound at the DS Art Studio Gallery, however there's only one absolute requirement for entry: "Leave gravity at the door. This is an environment where levity prevails."

Discover more witty works by Don Stewart at:

DS Art Studio Gallery  
www.DSArt.com  
205.802.4700

left bottom, Motorcycle (Fast Food), ballpoint, 17" x 10"  
right top, Gold Fish, ballpoint, 16" x 10"  
right bottom, Camera (Wildlife Photography), ballpoint, 12" x 8"

