

INTRODUCTION

For almost thirty years now, I've had the unbelievable privilege of not only putting artwork out into the world, but also receiving feedback—mostly in the form of cards and letters—from a very engaged, thoughtful, and opinionated audience. I've spent most of those thirty years working alone, hunched over a desk in the corner of a bedroom. And while that admittedly sounds pretty grim and isolated (especially as I type this sentence, hunched over a desk in the corner of a bedroom), it's never felt that way. In fact, I often think of my career as a decades-long conversation between myself and an amorphous, mostly anonymous group of people who are for some reason drawn to my work.

The correspondence I receive is generally a mix of generous praise and ruthless critiques, as well as many, many questions—often concerning tools, process, career advice, and an array of other surprisingly random and/or personal topics. Sometimes it's uncomfortable,

and occasionally it's genuinely confounding. In any case, it still means a lot to me to know that someone is responding to something I made, and it's no exaggeration to say that this feedback has affected me and my work immensely.

From 1995 to 2015 I published what I considered the most interesting of the incoming mail in each issue of my comic book series *Optic Nerve*, but I also made an effort to respond to people directly, usually with a handwritten postcard. My responses weren't particularly eloquent, but I wanted to at least acknowledge the letter-writer's interest and effort. For many years, my Sunday afternoons were devoted exclusively to this undertaking.



But things have changed. It's been a while since I've published an issue of *Optic Nerve*, and I'm not sure when I might do so again. People are generally less inclined to write letters and postcards these days, and I've been stubbornly resistant to opening a direct line of email correspondence. Most significantly, I've gotten busier, both with work and family life. (It turns out Sunday afternoons are different when you have kids!*) In recent years, my p.o. box has become mostly a vessel for political campaign flyers, shipping supply catalogs, and books in search of a blurb. For better or worse, most of the comments and queries from readers now come to me via Instagram. And to tell the truth, I have not been able to keep up with my mandate to respond to everyone—certainly not with the level of detail and insight I once strived for.

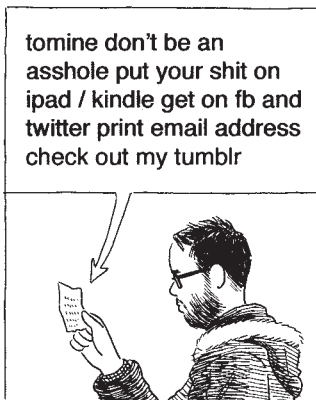
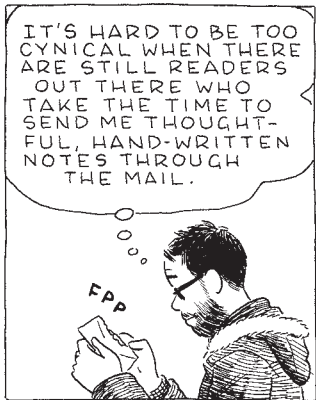
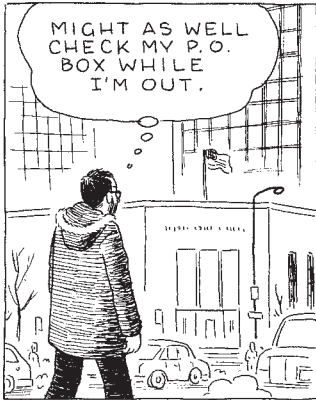
When my publisher and I began discussing this book, I thought of it as an opportunity to get back on track. The question-and-answer format initially developed as part of a “writer in residence” job that Substack offered me in 2021, and the interactive premise felt like a natural extension of those old *Optic Nerve* letters pages. My aim was to address the most common questions I've received over the years, and to do so with a greater level of

*See back cover.

attention than I'm usually able to provide while quickly scrolling through the messages on my phone. But I also wanted to include some of the less common questions, and basically, to avoid the typical tone and scope of a professional, journalistic interview (of which there are plenty to be found online). So we put out a call for questions, I answered them to the best of my ability, and this book is the result.

Thanks to everyone who participated, and thanks to anyone who has sent me cards, letters, or packages over the years. Contrary to the weird, uncomfortable affect I might present at a book signing (or, really, in any kind of face-to-face interaction), this connection, in all its forms, means the world to me. When I'm honest with myself, it was the reason I started all of this in the first place.

Adrian Tomine
Brooklyn, 2024



Optic Nerve #13 (2013)

Q: *When looking at your Instagram posts that show your process of work, it would appear that you use blue pencil for sketching, ink over that, then color digitally. Why do you start traditional, then transition to digital?*

A: I'm happy to answer this question, but as with my previous response, I intend this only as an explanation of my personal working methods, not as any kind of prescriptive advice. But you're absolutely correct about my process for creating color images. It's something of an analog/digital hybrid, in which I draw all the artwork with ink on paper, and then I create the color digitally (with a weird combination of Photoshop, Illustrator, and InDesign).* Here's an example from a recent illustration for *The New Yorker*.

* Credit where credit is due: this method was taught to me decades ago by John Kuramoto, and it's a testament to his prescience and perfectionism that I've never found a reason to depart from his original instructions.



You might be wondering why, in the 21st century, am I still drawing on paper? The simplest explanation is that I enjoy working with pens and pencils and paper, and for whatever reason, I find working on a computer to be a physically-taxing, eyeball-straining chore. Creating the line art is the most time-consuming part of the illustration process, and I prefer to spend those hours hunched over my drawing board rather than staring into a screen. Also, over the years I've learned to draw in a physical, tactile way. The sensation of pencil, pen, and brush on paper is deeply embedded in my technique, and I delight in the unexpected marks that come from a slightly dry brush

or a worn-down nib. I like being able to rotate the paper so that I can find the perfect angle for pulling a brush across the surface. As odd and fetishistic as it may sound, I enjoy making corrections by scratching away dried ink with an X-acto knife or brushing on just enough layers of semi-transparent white paint. I know, I know...this can all be digitally replicated with incredible ease. Probably true, so let's just say it's an eccentric personal preference/mental illness and leave it at that.

So then why do I create the color on a computer? This choice is based entirely on the end results I'm trying to achieve, as well as the current printing technology that's used to reproduce my work. I want my artwork to have flat, mechanical-looking color, like the comics and illustrations I grew up studying. It might be different if I was aiming for a modeled, painterly result. In that case I could apply watercolor directly onto the line art. But ironically, a computer is the best tool for me to emulate the look of coloring that was created in the pre-digital era.

A few last thoughts about all this. Aside from the matter of personal preference, I think it's worth mentioning that drawing on paper results in tangible artwork that can be exhibited and sold. I know that sounds like I'm stating the obvious (let's spare ourselves any discussion of NFTs



for now), but it's something to consider. At the risk of sounding gauche, I think it's important to share that I've made far more income over the years from selling original artwork than I have from publication fees, advances, or royalties. If money's not a concern for you, or if you have a regular job and you're just making comics as a hobby, then don't worry about this. I understand that sometimes you need to just get the pages drawn, in as quick and easy a way as possible. But I can tell you that as a full-time cartoonist/illustrator with a family, art sales have completely saved my ass (and by extension, my family's asses) innumerable times over the years.



Adam Baumgold Gallery, November 18, 2018

Also, I got to bring my dad to a gallery show of my work here in New York before he passed away, and that's an experience that means more to me than any time I might've saved by drawing on a screen.