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*Mar 21 2007*

If you spend time on the Tacoma Arts listserv or any of the local blogs, you probably know R.R. Anderson by his Photoshopped op-art.



(PHOTO BY TODD MATTHEWS)

**"Political cartoonists are a dying breed," says Hilltop resident Stuart Neiman, who pens political cartoons for Tacoma Weekly.**

Take the proposed wall at the Washington State History Museum. It was a controversial issue last year when the museum tried to build a wall to honor its donors; critics argued it would direct foot traffic toward the museum's gift shop and box office, and away from an easily accessible pedestrian bridge linking the Thea Foss Waterway.

In Anderson's rendering, a wall was erected behind a tiny moat filled with snapping alligators, a spray-painted anarchy symbol, and scores of arrows directing visitors to "buy stuff!"

Earlier this month, Anderson launched a weekly series of hand-drawn political cartoons on Feed Tacoma, a Web site that collects posts from several local blogs into one online directory.

Though Anderson's online presence is outsized, in person the tall, rail-thin 27-year-old Web designer is reticent. He speaks quietly and appears nervous as he twists his hands and shuffles his feet while seated inside a downtown coffee shop for an interview last week.

"My online persona is definitely a bit more annoying and obnoxious," he says. "It's just me having fun." He knows he's pushed some buttons with his designs, but he says he's thick-skinned. "Originally, there was outrage," he recalls, referring to the history museum rendering. "It was like, 'How dare somebody do this to a fine institution that is trying to make things better?' But now that people are getting a feel for who I am, it's different. I've

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gotten feedback. People are definitely looking at my stuff. Some people tell me, 'That's awesome.' I think other people are just ignoring me."

And besides, Anderson asks, if he doesn't produce editorial cartoons or op-art, who else will?

He has a point.

In Seattle, two daily newspapers -- The Seattle Times and Seattle Post-Intelligencer -- have full-time political cartoonists (the latter boasts the Pulitzer-winning David Horsey), political cartoonists are part of a media landscape.

In Tacoma, not so much.

The News Tribune hasn't had a political cartoonist since 1995, when Chris Britt left to join The Seattle Times.

"The state of newspaper cartooning nationally is not a happy one," says David Seago, editorial page editor at The News Tribune. He says when Britt left, the Trib tried to find a new cartoonist. It advertised nationally and interviewed a number of candidates. "Eventually, however, the publisher at the time decided the full-time-employee was more badly needed in the newsroom," Seago explains. Since then, the paper hasn't made any efforts to hire a staff cartoonists.

"I, of course, would love to have a local cartoonist," Seago adds. "But across the industry, a staff cartoonist is increasingly viewed as a luxury mid-sized newspapers -- and even some metro dailies -- cannot afford."

Today, the Trib relies on a small roster of nationally syndicated cartoonists.

"POLITICAL CARTOONISTS ARE a dying breed," says Stuart Neiman, a Hilltop resident whose illustrations appear in Tacoma Weekly. Neiman, 47, is a political cartoonist in the term's classic sense: whereas Anderson's designs and illustrations are Web-only, Neiman's drawings appear in print on the Weekly's editorial page.

Neiman, a retired armed forces veteran, started drawing political cartoons in 2003. It was an outlet for a long, complicated lawsuit with Bates Technical College over termination of employment (the case was recently settled). "It was a positive way of voicing my aggravation to these things," he explains. "People were telling me, 'You have the skills and you have a bit of an attitude about things, and you have always had somewhat of a sarcastic look at life. You should start doing this.'"

So Neiman drew political cartoons on paper, scanned them into a computer, and posted them on his Web site -- Tacoma Trashcan.

Since then, he has turned three bedrooms of his Hilltop home into design studios. Though it wasn't his first entree into art (Neiman holds a masters degree in Fine Arts from the University of Washington), it was a different style of illustration.

"It's been by far the toughest thing to do creatively," he says. The challenge comes in trying not to be so literal with his cartoons. A one- or two-panel image that quickly sends a message and "pops" off the page is what Neiman shoots for.

"In essence, political cartooning really comes down to trying to tell a story," he explains. "A lot of times I kind of relate to a stand-up comedian. You're making statements or telling a story. But you are really taking some of the things and really stretching and doing parody and satire. That means you are creating your actors, moving them, and making them do things. What I try to do with my artwork is not take the literal acts that are happening, but just take the basic premise of something and then stretch it."

In February 2006, Neiman says he was ready to approach Tacoma Weekly about publishing his cartoons when a staffer came across his Web site and contacted him. Since then, Neiman has maintained an informal relationship with the paper: he draws up to three pictures a week, scans and posts them to his Web site, and the Weekly picks one to include in its paper.

"It's become something that I use to keep myself focused and producing," he says.

Neiman's targets range from the local (City Council, pot holes, the municipal budget) to the national (President George W. Bush is a favorite target). And he's been surprised by the feedback from his targets.

"A few times, I have hoped that people would get mad," he explains. "But they actually like it and ask for a copy of it. It takes some of the fun out of it. 'I've got you in a tutu, and you want a copy of it?'"

"I TRY TO get into the issues the big boys won't touch," says political cartoonist John Hathaway, 61, who posts local government gossip, news, and editorial cartoons each weekday. The comic stems from a print-edition of *The New Takhoman*, which ran between 1994 and 1999. In 2000, Hathaway moved to the Web, and, three years later, launched his trademark cartoon: three worms commenting on city politics. The worms -- Izzy, Cockalvich, and Cohen -- are named after his late father, Izzy Cockalvich Cohen.

Though his Web site also includes written editorials and commentary, he says he leans more toward cartoons because of their quick, punchy style.

"I still enjoy writing articles," he says. "It's not that I'm lazy. It's just that I've found that people's attention spans are not that great. If you can say something to them in a cartoon, they get the picture. They get the point. An actual news story over 600-800 words, the attention span just isn't there."

He also counts himself a fan of fellow cartoonists Anderson and Neiman.

"Stuart is one hell of an artist," he says. When Neiman drew a caricature of Hathaway, Hathaways' girlfriend had it framed. And he reprinted Anderson's first cartoon on The New Takhoman Web site. "The more the merrier," he says. "Welcome to the club."

FOR ANDERSON, WHO is new to political cartoons, his drawings are an extension of a long history of creativity. As a young person growing up in Juneau, Alaska, he was always into drawing and animation, but the small town offered no outlet. In the late-1990s, he moved to Sunnyvale, Calif., and attended Cogswell Technical College, where he majored in computer animation. In 2001, he moved to Tacoma and was soon hired by a graphic design company downtown. He collects his art online at Holistic Forgeworks. The name comes from an imaginary company he created in high school so he could receive resampled crucibles from trade magazines.

Today, Anderson lives in an apartment near Wright Park. He typically spends Saturday afternoons drawing a new cartoon for the week ahead. Once finished, the image is scanned to be loaded onto the Feed Tacoma Web site.

"I'm kind of like an underground editorial cartoonist," he says. "I don't have an editor saying, 'You can't do this.'"

"I'd like to keep [the cartoons] local," he adds. "The whole thing at first was that nobody has a voice for cartoonists in town. I would like to keep it local. When hot-button issues come up, I would like to be the elephant in the room."

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For more information about the political cartoonists mentioned in this article, visit the following Web sites:

1. R.R. Anderson -- <http://www.feeditacoma.com>
2. Stuart Neiman -- <http://www.tacomatrashcan.com>
3. John Hathaway -- <http://www.thenewtakhoman.com>

Also, photographs of each political cartoonist profiled may be viewed by clicking here  
<http://www.tacomadailyindex.com/pages/opart/>

PHOTOS BY TODD MATTHEWS

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