Post: "2013-07-07 We're in July, and the Alt Press Fest is on tap for this coming Saturday, putting the spotlight on illustrator talent in Utah. Yes, the event is more for zine makers, but many of those talented people who participate have a background in illustration and drawing as part of their talents. The festival even puts a spotlight on people who aren't even involved with it, as those participating will point people in the direction of other's work."
Following in that vein, today I'm chatting with local illustrator and photographer Phil Cannon about his artwork and style, as well as his career and a few other topics. (All pictures courtesy of Cannon.)

Phil Cannon

Gavin: Hey, Phil. First thing, tell us a little bit about yourself.

Phil: I have been doodling and drawing since I was a young child, but I had a lot of other interests. Becoming an artist was actually never really the plan for me. I went to college, got a bachelor’s degree in history, and went on to do medical school at the University of Utah. Unfortunately, med school was hell for me. I
loved it, but I developed a nasty neurological condition during my first year that I tried to keep hidden because I worried it would prevent me from getting my MD. That period of my life was pretty dark. I just remember feeling a prodrome coming on during lectures, running off to the bathroom on the second floor, falling down in the stall, and convulsing uncontrollably on piss-stained floors, scared shitless. I didn’t know what was happening to me and I didn’t know what it meant for my future. Eventually, I found that it meant I was no longer going to be able to pursue my dream of becoming a doctor. I still struggle with that from time to time, but have mostly made peace with it. The cool thing about what has happened is that I now just get to spend my time creating, painting and drawing. I feel pretty lucky.

Gavin: What first got you interested in art, and what were some early influences on you?

Phil: If there was any one thing that got me interested in art as a kid, it was Saturday morning cartoons. I’d wake up as early as I could every Saturday, flip on the television, and just watch for hours. I’ve just always really loved animation, from the Disney classics to stuff like Aeon Flux. I also loved the Sunday-morning papers because they had all the strips in full color. Then, there was anything by Jim Henson. Growing up in the ‘80s and ‘90s was
great; you had *The Simpsons*, *Beavis and Butthead*, *The Secret of NIMH*, *the Garbage Pail Kids*, *The Far Side*, *Sherman’s Lagoon*, *Calvin and Hobbes*, *MAD Magazine*, *SPY VS. SPY*, *The MAXX*, *Aeon Flux*, *DragonBall Z*, *Batman: The Animated Series*, *Jim Phillips, Star Wars, The Dark Crystal, The NeverEnding Story, Labyrinth, Voltron, Thundercats, Transformers, DuckTales, Rescue Rangers, Darkwing Duck, Animaniacs, TMNT*, etc., etc. The '80s, especially, just had a lot of weird shit going on that had a real impact on me growing up.

Gavin: What drew you toward doing more illustrated works, and what were your early works like?

Phil: Animation is really what first drew me to illustration. I always wanted to be able to draw what I saw on TV and was always trying to draw Mickey Mouse, Goofy, Batman, Homer and Bart and whatever else I could copy. I could never get Bart right, but the rest of them were passable. I think every artist has a medium that they prefer and mine is just a pen and some paper. I do a lot of Photoshop work now, but my real love is laying down some tight inks. Frank Miller is the king of ink, in my mind; the stuff that he put down in *Sin City* blew my mind. Ted McKeever, Rafael Albuquerque and Mike Mignola are some of my other favorites. A lot of my early stuff was influenced by Big Daddy Roth, graffiti and Gary Larson — crazy colors, harsh lines, weird subjects and abstracted forms. It was also really flat without much change in value.
Gavin: Did you seek out any college classes in the arts, or were you mainly self-taught?

Phil: I actually didn’t take any art classes in college. I was a history major, hellbent on going to medical school. Throughout both college and med school, I did do political cartoons for the school papers and won a few national SPJ awards. It wasn’t until after I left med school that I decided to seek out some real training. I had been told that the illustration program at Utah Valley University is a good one. I enrolled and found that it was, in fact, great. The program is really incredible and I took a few introductory courses. I already have a bachelor’s, so I just took a few courses that appealed to me. The head of the illustration department is a guy named Don Seegmiller, and he’s surrounded by a host of incredible artists who really make the UVU program both challenging and very competitive. Don is a guy with a lot of experience in the industry and he is known as one of the godfathers of digital painting. I loved studying there, but my health made continuing my studies difficult. Now, I’m trying to build on the lessons I learned there through continued self-study.

Gavin: What was it like for you displaying your artwork in galleries and getting attention around the city?

Phil: It’s a funny thing, actually. Art is about expression, and I think expression is in many ways about sharing yourself with others, especially in that sort of setting. But, I am an introvert and I don’t love putting myself out there. On the one hand, I have an almost primal need to share my work, but on the other, I struggle with being in groups and opening up to people. I suppose what it
all boils down to is that I am most comfortable expressing myself with pen and paper. That being said, it’s been an amazing experience to see the way people react to my work. I have to give a huge shout-out to Robin at the Tin Angel, SLUG’s Karamea Puriri, Jendar Morales, and Corinne Piazza at Whole Foods for giving me the opportunity to display my work. SLUG has also been way too good to me; I’ve had the chance to do Localized posters and illustrate articles and just share the more cartoon-oriented side of what I do. Gallery 873 has started to rep me down in the Kayenta community outside of St. George, which has been an amazing experience for me. Ultimately, there’s nothing I would rather be doing.

Gavin: What’s the process like for you when doing a brand-new piece, from concept to final product?

Phil: It really depends on the piece. One of my things is that I just don’t love rules because they feel too confining. I don’t know where I stand on the relationship between creativity and the rules that govern things like composition and color theory. A painting can be technically sound, even perfect, and yet be completely soulless. Another painting can be technically flawed and yet still have a certain je ne sais quoi to it that makes it brilliant. In my mind, the ideal is to find a balance between technical mastery and innocence. Banksy said that it amazes him how much artists are willing to do for their art but learn how to draw. Yet, I sometimes find that the more I learn, the more stifled I feel. Ultimately, the answer to the question is that when I’m working on a brand-new piece, I’m typically trying out a new process. I think my work both suffers and benefits from this. But, I really just try to approach every piece as a new experience; I try to keep things open and adaptable. I have developed a toolkit of different skills that I can apply at various stages of the process. Also, the concept usually presents itself to me while I’m creating the final product. I really have to start just drawing or painting to get my mind working on the concept.

Gavin: Do you tend to play with your designs a lot, or when you create something are you dead set on creating it from its original look?

Phil: When I am painting, the design changes all the time. I love painting because of how free it is. I mostly paint digitally, and the process really reminds me of sculpting. You lay down some strokes, build on top of those strokes, build some more, cover up some strokes and keep building. My paintings usually end up looking a lot different than the original sketch. When I’m inking or cartooning, it’s much less malleable. There’s a definite skeleton to what I’m working on. Granted, I change things around a bit by adding lines and changing thicknesses, but the design remains mostly the same.
Gavin: When did you start doing freelance art, and what was it like for you breaking into that field?

Phil: I guess in a way I’ve been doing freelance work since high school. Cartooning for school papers was a great way to learn about the editorial process and the give and take involved in making art for other people. In terms of breaking into the field, I feel like I am still just learning what that even means. I can say that I’ve gotten to where I am by stepping outside of myself, subjecting my work to criticism and myself to rejection, actually approaching people about my work and by being excited about what it is that I’m doing. Having a good sense of humor about yourself also helps out a lot. It seems like it’s pretty easy for artists to take themselves too seriously, which is something that I have definitely been guilty of and try hard to avoid.

Gavin: A good portion of your work centers around pop culture. How is it for you putting your spin on iconic creations and making them your own?

Phil: It’s a blast. I think the key is exactly that -- trying to make it your own. I think that copying the styles of your favorite artists is a great way to develop skills and new techniques; studying the masters. There’s a wide range of styles and skills out there. I think that by simply observing what other artists are doing and picking and choosing the things you like helps you make your take on these iconic things your own. So, I look up to guys like Tim Sale, Eric Powell, Mike Mignola, Dave Gibbons, Jock, Eyvind Earle, Ryan Wood, Jim Phillips, Chris Ayers, Ted McKeever, Skottie Young, the CreatureBox dudes, Ryan Ottley, Francavilla and a
whole bunch of others. I see what they do, I try to pick the things I like and create a fusion of those things. I always want my spin to capture the sinking-sick feeling I got growing up when I saw things like Ratfink and the Garbage Pail Kids -- keep it weird on some level.

Gavin: What got you interested in photography, and what was it like for you transitioning into that area?

Phil: When I was studying illustration at UVU, people would use the term “textures” to describe photographs that were laid on top of digital paintings to add an extra dimension to the pieces. So, for example, a picture of rocks could be used to create scales on a dragon, or a crumpled piece of paper could be used to antique the image. When we were taught about textures, the emphasis was always placed on using them as little as possible and to keep them subtle. I started taking a lot photos to use as textures in my paintings and began to appreciate how beautiful some of the snapshots were as stand-alone pieces. There was one photo in particular that really got me thinking about the possibility of doing the exact opposite of being subtle with textures. It was a picture of bird shit. It had this beautiful quality to it that inspired me. Having to leave med school was rough on me; my health was failing, and life just felt ugly at that time. If I could take a picture of something as ugly as bird shit and find some beauty in it, then maybe there was some hope for me. So, I went around with my camera looking for “ugly” and abandoned things and I tried to capture them in a new light. Then, I would draw up relatively simple pen and inks that were shape-heavy and I started painting these illustrations solely with “textures." Now, I love to just run around town with my camera, taking pictures in this way. It's something that I thoroughly enjoy doing.

Gavin: What kind of material do you look for when taking pictures, and what is it you find appealing in your works?

Phil: Urban, ugly and unexpected. So, for example, I like taking pictures of cigarette butts on the ground and finding a pattern to the way they are lying there that I find pleasing in some way. Or, I like to take close-ups of things like garbage bins and concrete;
gum on the sidewalk. There’s this underlying, almost organic nature to the inanimate things found throughout the urban landscape that I find simply fascinating. So, I’m usually just walking around with my head down, looking at the sidewalk, trying to find something unique and interesting to something that is often taken for granted.

Gavin: What kind of equipment do you work with, and why?

Phil: When I’m doing my pen and inks, I like to change up line thickness a lot and I use Prismacolor Premier 005, 01, and 05. You can buy them individually at Resel’s. I find that varying line thickness gives the piece a certain dimension that is lacking when all of the lines are the same width. I ink on 110 lb. cover stock by Neenah paper. Cover stock has a different tooth to it than card stock and seems to hold the ink better. I use Utrecht markers for coloring. They have a watercolor quality to them that makes it really easy to build up the colors. I use a Cintiq 12WX for painting and I love it. It gives me the freedom to really take advantage of Photoshop and do some pretty cool stuff. I’ve never been much for Illustrator and have always preferred Photoshop. The 12 doesn’t have the same amount of pressure sensitivity as the larger versions of the Cintiq and I find that I have to zoom in and out more than I’d like, but it is maneuverable and the cost is much less. I use a Canon Rebel T3 for my photography and love it. I’m not much of a tech guy and find that it more than does the job.
Gavin: How is it for you balancing out the two artforms? And are there any others you’d like to try out or have been looking into and haven’t attempted much yet?

Phil: Balancing the two styles is difficult, honestly. I find that I have to draw upon different parts of myself to create the two forms and it can be a little exhausting. I love to draw horror and I really enjoy trying to create pieces with a black sense of humor. A lot of my illustration work is drawn up with the intent of making people uncomfortable in a way that, hopefully, makes them laugh. Stephen King once wrote that he “wanted to get inside [his] readers’ defenses, wanted to rip them and ravish them and change them forever with nothing but story.” If I can ever get to the point where I’m doing that with my illustration, then I’ll be satisfied. But, mostly, I just want to make people laugh. My other style, where I use texture in a not-subtle way, is very different. My crazy illustration work reflects how I feel when I’m manic. It’s more than that, but that’s a big part of it. I just have these horrific dreams and images that pop into my head all the time, and channeling these by making fun of them helps me pretend to be a well-adjusted human being. The texture painting style is a reflection of my attempts to find beauty in unexpected, abandoned, broken and unwanted places. I call it “Urbanity” because I find that the urban landscape most embodies what I’m trying to do.

Gavin: What projects are you currently working on, and what events will you be taking part in over the next few months?

Phil: The rest of the year is going to be fun. I’m involved in the partners program through Art Access at the moment. My mentor is a guy named Jared Nielsen and he’s teaching me how to do copper plates; his work is spectacular. We do everything at SaltGrass, and they have been overly generous to me and I feel lucky to have gotten to know the people down there. Printmaking is a totally different process than what I’m used to doing and I’ve loved it. In August, everyone involved in the partners program will have a group show at the Art Access building. I’ve enjoyed learning a bit about printmaking and I’m proud of the pieces I’ve been able to put together under Jared’s direction. I’m excited to see what the other partnerships come up with. Also, the Tin Angel Café is going to be displaying some of my work for the month of November. They displayed my work last December and it was a great experience for me. The people there are just awesome. Other than that, I try and post to my blog a few times a week, and I have a website that I just finished rebuilding: the blog and the website.

Gavin: What can we expect from you over the rest of the year?

Phil: Once I’ve finished everything for Art Access and the Tin
Angel, the plan is to really dive into the graphic novel that I've been working on. The Goon and Hellboy have been a huge influence on me and I'd like to do something in that vein.

Gavin: Is there anything you'd like to promote or plug?

Phil: Have you seen Invader Zim? My friend suggested that to me recently and I think it's brilliant. The Black Mirror was a great read; I dig a lot of Scott Snyder's work -- American Vampire is awesome. Punk Rock Jesus is on my to-read list. I just started The Dark Tower series and love it. Archer is the best show on television. Metalocalypse is another great show. The Tao Of Wu was an interesting read. Carla Bruni's latest album Little French Songs reminds me of when I lived in Paris and is just brilliant. Any painting by Eyvind Earle. I just finished A Long Way Down by Nick Hornby and think he's an author everyone should read. Red Fang is my favorite band at the moment. I just finished watching all of Aeon Flux again, and am starting both AdventureTime and Batman: The Animated Series. Cartoon Network's The Clone Wars made me care about the prequel universe and I'm pissed that it's been canceled.

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