

Why Grow Up?

Centre de l'Illustration, Moulins (03) France

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Exhibition curated by Emmanuelle Martinat-Dupré

FOREWORD

by Jean-Paul Dufrière, President of the Conseil Général of Allier, France

International artist Etienne Delessert—originally from Switzerland, now living in Connecticut—takes his place in the ranks of talented artists who have transformed the graphics, themes, issues, and objectives of illustration: Milton Glaser, Maurice Sendak, Leo Lionni, Tomi Ungerer, Seymour Chwast, Heinz Edelmann and André François.

He, along with publishers Harlin Quist and Delpire, have wonderfully subverted the notion of “good taste” and “educational values,” once a must in works for young readers. During the 1960s and ‘70s, he joined the avant-garde movement that redesigned the picture book by adhering to a strong and innovative axiom: children perceive, assimilate, and develop an esthetic sensibility beyond the limits and restraints that adults believe possible.

From his Protestant pastor father, Etienne Delessert inherited a sense of rigor that forms the basis of his esthetics, exacting in tone and concept.

From childhood stories he has developed the perfect equilibrium between graphic

tension and narrative drive. In balancing the two, he stays between consciousness and dream. He speaks equally from the absurd and the baroque, dwelling in the same universe as Kafka, Ionesco, Becket.

Painter, graphic artist, author, illustrator, cartoonist... Etienne Delessert is one of the most important figures in contemporary children's literature. He has illustrated over eighty books, which have been translated into fourteen languages, and has received many international awards throughout his long career.

Since 1975, he has been featured in many retrospectives. Following in the footsteps of the Musée des Arts décoratifs of Paris, the Musée Olympique of Lausanne, the Maison du livre et de l'affiche of Chaumont, the Palazzo delle Esposizioni in Rome, the Musée d'Art et d'Histoire of Saint-Denis, the Musée de Jenisch of Vevey, the Library of Congress in Washington, D. C. and the School of Visual Arts Museum in New York, it is an honor for the Centre de l'illustration to weigh in on this impressive career by presenting his new show: "Etienne Delessert: Why Grow Up?"

Jean-Paul Dufrègne, President of the General Consul of Allier

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(caption) The magic garden, Epalinges, Switzerland, 1944, Collection E.D.

WHY GROW UP?

by Etienne Delessert

Good question—without a real good answer. As the writer Jean-Claude Carrière explained when writing about me, “...a child is more than a child. Often, even more than an adult.”

The essence of childhood? Let’s forget about those Proustian madeleines, they’ve never really interested me.

Why would this adult chose to write and illustrate for an audience primarily made up of children? First, and most simply, because I want to tell stories, like in a film, and the process is easier when writing a book. No need for much money; no power struggles.

From drawing editorial illustrations, I learned how to condense a lot of information into a picture, but a children’s book lets me play with the text and the images, write my own scenario, then put it into action quickly and easily. It allows me to be the sole creator—like the filmmakers of the New Wave. Born in Switzerland, I always envied those who made films completely on their own. They were the supermen for this little kid from Lausanne.

I redefined myself by doing children's books, by coming up with the entire concept, figuring out the right amount of ambiguity. By speaking the truth.

That's the answer that I give to those who persist in asking me why a gifted artist would deign to work on children's books...

even fans ask silly questions.

The question that really fascinates me is: what is the mysterious power of a melody? With only a few notes, a melody can bore into our memory, no matter if the song is quite stupid or the notes make up the backbone of a symphony.

What is the equivalent in the fine arts?

A few days ago, I was day-dreaming while staring at an old shirt sleeve faded to an exquisite pale blue. When, suddenly, the color reminded me of the juniper berries that I gathered with my father sixty-three years ago, on a sunny afternoon, on the side of a hill around Vallorbe. I relived the scene, heard the Paris train going by. Good old Proust...

At will I can recall very precise memories from my childhood—my earliest memory comes from when I was two and a half years old, when the woman who would become my mother, after having met with my pastor father for an hour in his office, came to see the “beast” that she would be in charge of. We were both a little intimidated. I remember the exact gray color of the varnished door that I was backed up against, the shape of the brass doorknob, and the small yellow duck pin that she wore on her bright red sweater. She noticed my stare and gave me the duck, without saying a word. She was my true mother

for more than sixty years and, with the power of her imagination, she was the creative force that helped me become what I am.

I'm sure that President Obama can also remember the precious memories of his childhood when he wants. Is this the key to becoming a well-rounded thinker, one who can juggle adult problems and still keep the freshness of an age when all is possible, when trees and rocks talk to you, the sight of a train roaring by tells you that it's time to go, leave the country, conquer the world, risking everything?

Why grow up?

Even little children know death, the sadness of abandonment, the anger of never being perfect. But at least they hope to change their lives. To dance in an unknown world.

What a very sweet memory.

Etienne Delessert, June 2009

(page 6, caption)

Moon Theater: Outside the moon, acrylics on paper, 25 x 43 cm., 2008, Etienne

Delessert

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ETIENNE DELESSERT: GERMAN, MENTOR AND FREE

By Emmanuelle Martinat-Dupré

A visionary

Why has Etienne Delessert chosen to write and illustrate for children? Probably because he knows their tendency to look outside of reality, he understands the way they see nature as an infinite source of artistic transformations, he understands their taste for turning priorities upside down and their fertile imaginations which work contrary to outside evidence.

Children know how to go from the real to the imaginary. And throughout the ages, great artists, novelists (Dickens), poets (Hugo), musicians (Schumann), painters (Henri Rousseau), have recaptured this ability, thus holding the key to that lost paradise—childhood.

A child is not held captive by appearances, not yet locked into all those moral orders, physical, and social constraints. Children haven't experienced the rigidity of adults who are unable to escape from reality's bondage. Using their imaginations, they bound ahead.

For children, imagination and knowledge are the two ways of being in the world and building a personality.

Delessert sets out to rediscover in himself a hidden part of childhood—to feel once more this early ability to perceive all things, and the desire to reaffirm imagination's power

against the troubling nature of being in the world.

According to Baudelaire in *The Flowers of Evil* (1857) we live “in a forest of symbols,” and therefore we must strive to disentangle the threads of correspondences by which the universe is organized.

These are the symbols from which Jerome Bosch (1453-1516), often quoted by Etienne Delessert, makes a bonfire; in Durer (1471-1528) they bring on “Melancholy;” and for Paul Klee (1879-1940) they leave him “Crazy in Trances;” to name just a few of Delessert’s artistic influences.

Culling from both the ancients and moderns, Delessert uncovers the power of disturbing symbols and pulls from this source the pleasure to “draw ferociously,” to paraphrase his own expression. “Draw ferociously” in order to order to make man come face to face with himself, on a path that leads, slowly but surely, to an end. In much the same way as Hans Baldung Grien’s (1484-1545) allegorical tableaux, such as “The Three Ages of Life,” evoke the inevitable, by means of an unconceding art. There is no cover-up here. With the acuity, Delessert reveals the chaos of adulthood and evokes the social and political events of our times.

The force of this creative energy is what we call vision—a vision which pre-exists, and which takes a step toward understanding.

To be a visionary—or not to be.

The Imaginary is the New Hope

Etienne Delessert sees. He makes art that manifests his endless imagination. The profusion of images and their many meanings allows the artist to challenge the limited nature of both human life and the biological world of animals and plants.

He has a remarkable gift for going from the visible to the invisible, revealing a multitude of meanings and freeing them from any sense of strangeness. He claims this world despite the laws of logic. He never worries if his universe, his characters, his creations are real. He never submits to adult reality, which limits by extension and formal constraint.

Like a child, like a creator, he observes the essential plasticity of nature. Watch a blade of grass move and see the forms it takes. This ever-changing sense of nature, constantly transforming itself, allows for an unceasing rebirth of the senses.

Because he is gifted with this imagination, the artist goes beyond the man, giving his art and his quest for meaning a kind of constant vigilance and urgency. Like a poet or a religious man, pastor or priest, the artist is a mentor. He devotes himself to the the inner child, amazing survivor in the ruins of adulthood, and not to reconstructing the more obvious appearance of the outer child.

He guarantees a revelation. He reveals the child to the adult and, at the same time, tries to reveal the adult to the child.

(page 9, caption) *Dance of the Dead*, crayon, 15.3 x 10.5 cm., 1974, Collection E.D.

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Much as the romantics and the surrealists did, Etienne Delessert uses his imagination like an alchemical factory, showing meanings to be revelatory, counting on the flexibility of a child in whom Euclid's common sense or the logic of Newton has yet to take hold.

He makes animals talk. Many others have done this before him. Even Orpheus... He knows that all animals talk in their own language. Certainly his cat Pluto (whom he says resembles Hergé's character Castfiore in *Tintin*) but also mice, fish, and especially swifts—which he loves because they sleep as they soar for thousands of feet on warm air currents.

He shows the moon being hoisted into the night sky by a man, an owl trying on glasses, a small boy sprinkling stars. He sees fighting cats, orchestras of strange people, an oasis on a camel's hump, a carp with Darwin's name written on its scales crawling out of the pond, a flying fish playing the violin, a small girl swinging on the horns of a lion...A complete universe of "fantasy," in the German sense of the word, and of liberty.

He creates a new world, free from the yoke of Cartesian constraints. There is no absolute truth, untouchable and weakened by all reinterpretation. With a brush stroke or under his sharp pencil point, the world is reinvented.

Perhaps his penetrating stare pierces the mystery of beings and things back to where it all started, after the flood, the chaos... a natural continuation of *The Endless Party*, Delessert's first book, which is about the creation of the world, and a certain Ark destined to save life and its many forms of creativity.

Emmanuelle Martinat-Dupre

Centre de l'illustration, August 2009

(page 11, caption) Layout of the book *Big and Bad*, colored pencils, 21.5 x 26 cm., 2007, Collection E.D.)

INTERVIEW OF ETIENNE DELESSERT

by Emmanuelle Martinat-Dupré

Is your studio filled with notebooks, full of sketches?

Absolutely not. And sometimes that bothers me. I feel like I work without stopping, with only three days off a year, but I do not draw the entire time. I don't feel the need. I could easily not touch a brush for a whole month. I think about that a lot: am I really an artist?

Did I simply chose it as a career rather than as a true “vocation?” Even if I were blind, I would go on telling stories.

How do you prepare your work? Do you do layouts?

I work like a computer, saying yes, then no. Everything’s in my head, then I draw the whole layout on a single 8” by 11” sheet, the pages of the book are small squares, that’s it. If I did more, I would lose the pleasure of doing the final drawings. Basically time passes slowly when you ink in a sketch and when you put in the color. Thank goodness I can listen to music. Often very, very loud!

(page 12, caption)

Top: *The Endless Party*: first sketch, pencil, 28 x 43 cm., 1966, Collection of E.D.

Bottom: *The Endless Party*: final drawing, gouache on paper, 28 x 43 cm., Collection of E.D.

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There are only two books for which I made more elaborate dummies: *The Endless Party* in 1966-67, the *How the Mouse...*, in 1970. Recently I found the layout of my first book, and I was delighted to see a few sketches of characters done by Eleonore Schmid, my partner at that time. She really knew how to draw!

Gouache, watercolor, ink, colored pencil, gesso, acrylic on tin, varnish, medium...?

Varnish, but no medium. I am a self-taught artist, remember that. For example, I never worked with charcoal before this year when I used it for the exhibition, *No One is a Prophet*; for Moses to Gandhi, Rousseau, Darwin, Calvin, Erasmus or King, the portraits of a great gang of outlaws who have slightly changed the way we think.

What is Etienne Delessert's technical language?

Simple, simple. Principally watercolors and colored pencils. Acrylic on wood or metal. I've done animated films and love the idea of giving life to characters that move, what power! But all I really need is a small black pencil and a piece of paper. Delessert: Just the basics.

Does this variety reflect a level of experience with a particular technique?

Sometimes I can be rough, sometimes my voice is like a caress. That's all.

How would you define your palette?

I pretty much stick to nature: those colors are the most beautiful. I hate arbitrary colors. From time to time I use a special tint to express a certain emotion. The sky might turn red, but it is a red that we all have seen in the sky.

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Why do your characters often have such a strange look in their eyes? Is it because the eyes reflect the soul?

Of course. I love that my characters actually look at you.

You told me that you're rather surprised, even disappointed, that the term "grotesque" has so many negative connotations these days. How would you define it? Rather than remove the grotesque in your art and your humor, do you prefer to underline it?

At the beginning I didn't know how to draw and that showed! I would draw characters using basic geometric elements, because I had a hard time capturing them. Working this way enhanced my tendency to focus on ideas, to stylize a picture. Outsider art doesn't have the ability to flesh out these ideas. Now I am more comfortable saying what I think about men, and about our slowly progressing chaos. I reread my old dictionary, the *Petit Larousse*: *Grotesque*—that which causes laughter by its extravagance. *Ridiculous, absurd. Absurd. The grotesques are ornaments differentiated from arabesques by the addition of geometric motifs on men and animals.*

That works for me.

Many illustrators make a career out of humanizing animals, willingly misappropriating or sophisticatedly inverting an archetype (the gentle wolf, the audacious rabbit). Your universe is completely different: you never follow the rules of this kind of children’s literature.

Janine Despinette, in *Les Imagiers de la Litterature en couleur* (2010), kindly wrote that I am, along with four or five others, an “inventor of universes.” Which means that I have established my own rules. Turning an archetype on its head is often only a way of hiding a lack of imagination. I take scenes from life that I see every day, common or violent, and I mix them all up, I stir the broth, sometimes until it’s completely absurd, wishing simply to find the ideas that will take hold with children—and their parents. I’m always changing the tone of my voice, like everyone is, but I do it when I draw. I go from Yok-Yok to wild political images for the French satirical magazine, *Siné Hebdo*.

(page 15, caption)

Ashes, Ashes: The Three Liars, watercolor and colored pencil, 25.2 x 30.8 cm., 1990,
Collection of E.D.

(page 16, caption)

Etienne Delessert, 1970. Etienne with Rita and Adrien, 1994. Rita Marshall, watercolor and colored pencil, 24 x 19 cm., 2006, private collection.

Do you think art has a political function?

Art? The only thing that really intrigues me is the mystery of a melody. The essential discourse. If it is essential it will disturb the order of things—by shaking it up or by calming it down.

Are you done growing up?

There is nostalgia to the perfectly happy moments in a perfectly happy childhood. Pushing a tiny wheelbarrow in a magical garden with plants that are taller than me.

Fifteen days after I was born I lost my mother, and then, when I was two and half, I had the incredible good fortune to meet the woman who would become my true mother. Her signs were air and water to my earth and fire. We were made to understand each other.

Three marriages and several long affairs also help one grow up, and to rediscover the essential. Freelancing since I arrived in Paris at the age of 21, that made me grow up too. And then I had the chance, in the middle of my life, to finally meet my equal; a creative, funny, first-rate artist who is the creative director in a publishing house that she has shaped for 25 years, but who also manages with great finesse our every day life. Rita, my grasshopper and my ant. Because of her I can still sometimes risk talking to a stone, to carry slow-moving snails, to slide back into the age when one creates a whole universe by observing the world.

(page 17, caption)

The Cat Collection: Two Generations, acrylic on wood, 50 x 45 cm., 1996, Private collection.

(page 18, caption)

The Poetical Pursuit of Food of Sonoko Kondo, Pea Pods, watercolor and colored pencil, 20.7 x 15.8 cm., 1986, Collection of E.D.

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Nature

How do you feel about nature? Do you see it as a symbol of redemption? *The Endless Party* is about the flood and Noah's Ark. Are the plant and animal worlds seen as more divine while humanity is not worth much?

No. My interpretation is completely secular. In no way does it contradict my dead father's beliefs, which were extremely liberal in the noble sense of that word.

The world of the child

How would you define it? Some artists stop illustrating, claiming a certain alienation, a certain lack of substance. They find the texts too constraining, they'd

rather do more personal work instead of graphic illustration. What do you think?

There are only good or bad stories; whether they are about a particular person or a country.

I'm always going back and forth from one style to another. At the same time, I always choose the stories I work on, the themes of my shows, with great care.

Revealing likenesses

In your art, you evoke the flaws, the scars that we all have. Yet you varnish your work, even glaze it. Paradoxical or coherent?

I like to show that sometimes I am happy, sometimes sad, sometimes mean. Glazing is just a technique. According to how I feel, I'm either refined or rough.

(page 20, caption)

Rainy Day, watercolor and colored pencil, 19 x 19 cm., 1987, Collection of E.D.

(page 21, caption)

Eugene Ionesco's Story Number 3: The Toys, watercolor and colored pencil, 25.5 x 38.5 cm., 2008, Collection of E.D.)

(page 22, caption)

Ashes, Ashes: Mist in the morning, watercolor and colored pencil, 25.5 x 19 cm., 1990,

Collection of E.D.

(page 23, caption)

Dance!: The monsters, watercolor and colored pencil, 25.5 x 30.5 cm., 1994, Collection of E.D.

(page 24, captions)

Top: *Big and Bad*, watercolor and colored pencil, 30.5 x 45 cm., 2008, Collection of E.D.

Bottom: *Who Killed Cock Robin?*, watercolor and colored pencil, 28.5 x 45 cm., 2004,

Collection of E.D.

(page 25, caption)

Eugene Ionesco's Story Number 3: The Zoological Garden, watercolor and colored pencil, 25.5 x 38.5 cm., 2008, Collection of E.D.

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Felines

What kind of hold do they have on you?

I love cats, dogs and especially birds—they make the best drawings. Our cat Pluto talks all the time, all day long, and I threaten to kill him every morning around three o'clock, when

he wakes to the calls and murmurs of nature. We let him out to go run around in the park. He's a Bengal, half wild, and he knows how to fight: badgers, fox, even a bear that wandered in one morning and curled up to take a nap only 15 yards away from Rita's studio.

Birds of Prey

What idea is behind your “resemblances”? Do you see man as a bird of prey?

There are so many predators! Just look at the newspaper headlines. This last crisis was quite spectacular.

So-so

In *Thomas et l'infini*, the issue of the limited nature of existence is at the core of Michel Déon's tale. An unavoidable end. Your father was a pastor. Do you think that such an end is final or more like a transition?

I think it all ends with death. But, from time to time, I think that it would be nice to stand behind the artists that I love, watching them work without bothering them. And to once again put my hand in my father's hand.

(page 27, caption)

American Bird of Prey, watercolor and colored pencil, 27 x 25 cm., 2000, Collection E.D.

(page 28, caption)

Gandhi, charcoal and red chalk, 80 x 55 cm., 2009, Collection of E.D.

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Portraits

In your portraits the furrowed brows are plain to see. The wrinkles, the scars, the crackling of the glaze...are you afraid of these things?

This kind of erosion makes a face beautiful. And it's taken me years to dare to really look.

I was forty when I had a woman pose for me, so that I could paint her exactly as she was with a very fine brush—no retouching, no holding back.

Every day of Rita's pregnancy I sketched her. When she turned fifty I made a limited edition of twenty of this book. *Rita's Book*. She's never shown it to anyone...

Drawing like writing

In a society where people still don't know what the signs all around them mean, what place do the images you create have?

You just have to hit them a little harder, with more emotion. Some editorial pictures show how to condense the message, the core of an idea, and the emotion. It's the same with great

political speeches. They “shake” us up.

Etienne Delessert, why angels?

I don't really believe in angels... However if they exist and not just, as the writer Nabokov thought, in the form of butterflies, then they would look like human beings, with wrinkles and bent backs, very different from the Renaissance paintings of angels, who look pretty with Botox or Photoshop. Also, one could have a really good conversation with them because their knowledge of joy and sorrow would be utterly perfect.

(page 30, caption)

American Suite, four pages from *Siné Hebdo*, watercolor and colored pencil, each 25.5 x 20 cm., 2008-2009, Collection of E.D.

(page 31, caption)

An Angel, watercolor and colored pencil, 29.5 x 24.5 cm., 2004, Collection of E.D.

Cover image: “The egg and the bird,” watercolor and colored pencils, 28.5 cm. x 20.5, 2009, Collection of E.D.

Page 1: *Dance!*: Yok-Yok, watercolor and colored pencils, 25.5 cm. x 19 cm., 1994,

Collection of E.D.

Page 32: "Erasmus," charcoal and red chalk, 80 x 55 cm., 2009, Collection of E.D.

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