

Greg is the Story

Jessica Maurinck-Ganger

During high school in the late 1990's, Anna Martens worked at her father Greg's shoe shop, Old Towne Cobbler, in Wauwatosa, Wisconsin. The shoe repair trade is reliant on machinery and precision, distinguished by process, technology, invention and craft, mirroring the practices found within a printmaker's workshop.

Martens' shop, described by a long-time friend Mark Wniski, "had the feel of a 19th Century craftsman's workshop in Eastern Europe," equipped with vintage machines, custom tools, and an efficient system of organization. Steeped in this environment of intense and loving attention to detail and process, it was no wonder that, after graduation, Anna eventually found her place in the printmaking faculty of the University of Minnesota's Art Department. It is also no wonder that she credits her father with inspiring her to take the path that she eventually chose for herself.

From early on, Gregory Martens has been making comics, assemblages, and drawings. In spite of his obvious passion for these practices, he dropped out of art school in 1980 and took a job as a salesman to support his young family. Since that time, and over the last thirty-five years, he has been a construction worker, building steward, graphic designer, furnace repairman, traveling salesman, costumer, and cobbler. He is also a cancer survivor.

Diagnosed with an aggressive bone marrow cancer in 2005, Martens was given two years to live. Unable to keep up with the medical bills, Martens, his wife Sharon, and their three children lost their business and home. Following a period of extensive treatment and remarkably improved health, Martens returned to UWM in 2008 to complete his formal education in art, earned his BFA degree and then his MFA. Currently, he is a printmaker under the monogram Hip Joint Press, book artist, ceramic sculptor, and lecturer in the Peck School of the Arts' Department of Art and Design.

Martens is a master craftsman, narrator, and satirist in the tradition of Albrecht Durer, Honoré Daumier, José Posada, and Robert Crumb. Through unremitting vigor, raucous humor, shameless punning, and accomplished draftsmanship, he creates visual narratives that are documentary in tone, subtly weaving together social commentary and historical references. He describes, "I am interested in the themes from American Vernacular Art that arose during the Great Depression: suffering and joy, religion and disbelief, poverty and wealth, the burden of labor and the pride of accomplishment."

Viewing the work, one initially discovers an inherent richness and complexity in his images that brings to mind a forgotten past, a period when artists would work at length to create intricate, elaborate, and exquisitely crafted pieces. A vernacular of religious and cultural iconography which includes dead dogs, buses, pants, popular graphics of past decades, and frequent patrons of cafes and "Club Despair" weave their way through Martens' art.

Although his images are carefully selected and rendered exactly as they appear in his mind, he provides elements with the intention to encourage rembling, inevitably affecting

the way we see things or the way we think about them - allowing us to join him as artist and storyteller.

Integral to his life and artistic practice, Martens requires an atmosphere of serious endeavor, critical inquiry, creative expression, and lively exploration. Whether in a classroom, his workshop and home, recreational places like the "ditch" (former student smoking lounge outside Muskego High School), a campsite, Burning Man, or public spaces like a plaza in Peru, he fosters environments where entertaining tales are told, where impromptu performances, jam sessions and story circles emerge. He brings people together, often colorful characters that later appear in his art.

I decided to contact these characters, his closest peers, and offer them a stage to share their stories. During a phone interview, his friend Mark Wniski recollected, "Greg always told stories about mutual friends. He painted portraits of them through oral stories, then put them into comics that included twisted tales of life, boyhood, relationships and religion." When describing what being his friend can be like, Wniski warmly adds, "Greg's stories are at your expense, you are always part of some joke. He called me 'Old Man' even though I was in my late teens / early twenties."

According to The Skrususe, Martens' close friend and former Old Towne Cobbler employee and fellow band member,

All his stories begin as true stories, and he either makes them into lies or makes them truer. He is the guy you want on a long road trip, or in your prison cell (for a very short sentence, like 6 months). Martens is more entertaining

than television because he is one of the best story tellers in Milwaukee, maybe even Milwaukee County. On top of that, he speaks so often in smarmy indignation that his words move his audience to trust him; they feel special. People love that. People deserve that. What separates looks from prophets is not that their ideas are any more coherent or sane. A prophet just knows how to gain trust. Of course, I have no intention of suggesting that Martens is a prophet.

MPS teacher and longtime friend of Martens, Dean Graf shares,

Greg told stories about the people who came into his shop. He told of a day when the wife of a local billionaire came into his shop with his very expensive shoes that needed repair. An hour later a very smelly homeless man came in with boot that had a nail sticking up in it and Greg reached into this old smelly boot to fix a problem for a man who had no money. Rich and poor, the spectrum of life presented itself to Greg and he is a master at turning his life experiences into stories that help us to understand our lives better.

Gregory Martens is a rarity of talent and courage. He is an artist's artist, dedicated to his craft through life's felicities and complexities.

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