

BORN and RAISED IN a RURAL AREA of SOUTH KOREA, THE SON of a MINISTER and HOUSEWIFE HE LOVED DRAWING CHARACTERS FROM BOOKS and NEWSPAPERS. A BOOK by STEVEN HELLER INTRODUCED HIM to THE WORLD of ILLUSTRATION and SET HIM ON HIS PATH. STARTING WITH a JOB at AN ART SCHOOL HE SOON QUIT to BECOME a FULL-TIME FREELANCE ILLUSTRATOR EXPERIENCING ALL THE EXPECTED ANXIETY, CONFUSION and POVERTY, BUT ALSO GREAT HAPPINESS. AVOIDING LOOKING at CURRENT ILLUSTRATION HE'S CREATED HIS SINGULAR APPROACH.

## T H O M A S F U C H S

INTERVIEW BY ALIX-ROSE COWIE PHOTOGRAPHY BY TBD

Art directors don't call Thomas Fuchs when they need something generic or ornamental. They call him when they're looking for an idea: a rewarding witticism, or something clever to catch a skimming eye. "They wouldn't call me if they wanted pretty flowers or bees," he says. Although he has illustrated battalions of bees flying towards each other from the slats of medieval helmets for an article in *Scientific American* about swarms that wage war on each other.

FUCHS SPECIALIZES in the established editorial practice of conceptual illustration, his artwork published alongside articles on politics, science and society. "For me, the most fun part is coming up with the idea," he says. "Sometimes an idea lands immediately, and sometimes it's really a bone to chew on. If the topic is complicated or complex, it needs to sink in so you can wrap your head around it."

Growing up in Germany, Fuchs was always into "drawing and arty stuff". After high school he did internships at two design studios where he was first exposed to conceptual design and became inspired by the ways he could steer his artistic interests toward a career. This directed him to art school where he studied graphic design and illustration at the State Academy of Fine Arts Stuttgart under Heinz Edelmann—perhaps most well-known for his art direction and character designs for The Beatles' animated film "Yellow Submarine". Completing his studies at the academy in 1997 with an MFA, Fuchs' next stop was New York City.

BREAKING INTO EDITORIAL ILLUSTRATION

for major publications in late '90s New York was a case of making in-person appointments with art directors who, in Fuchs' experience, were always open and interested to page through his portfolio. "I think it's harder to get recognized now because there are so many more illustrators in the market," he says. "When I started out it was a fairly limited field." Still, as a fresh graduate he found the 'show and tell' aspect of the meetings daunting at first. "You want the work to speak for itself and not have to explain why they should hire you," he says. "But you get used to talking a little more freely about your own stuff." These early introductions paid off and Fuchs spent the next 15 years in New York building his career, with illustrations published in *The New York Times*, *The New Yorker*, *Time*, *Rolling Stone*, *The Wall Street Journal*, and *Esquire*—to name a few.

FUCHS' FIRST COMMISSION (he doesn't recall the topic) was for *The New York Times* Book Review where Steven Heller was art director at the time. "He always made an effort to grab every young illustrator and give them their first job. That was his thing." Establishing and maintaining long-term relationships with art directors like Heller, both in the States and in Europe—Fuchs is now based in Berlin—allows him certain creative freedoms. There's a personal element to these relationships beyond the work because they know him—and how he thinks—so well. "It's mostly that I just get the assignment and the basic topic and then they let me run," he explains. "They can rely on getting something printable as I obviously wouldn't want to disappoint

THOMAS IS A SECRET WEAPON. NO MATTER HOW DIFFICULT OR NUANCED A SUBJECT MATTER IS, HE ALWAYS FINDS AN ELEGANT, TONGUE-IN-CHEEK VISUAL SOLUTION.

Holger Windfuhr  
Art Director  
Frankfurter  
Allgemeine  
GmbH



*I don't think I'm even all that good at it. I mean, there are people out there that are just insanely good at nailing a likeness, and it seems like they do it effortlessly as well. In my case, I'm always almost surprised if the picture looks like the person it's supposed to. Mostly, I think I just get lucky.*

them. It's good not to mess it up too badly!"

Often creating artwork for political and opinion pieces, Fuchs aims to stay neutral, or at least subtle or suggestive, with his own personal leanings. He finds it helps to stay within the metaphorical realm—a place he really enjoys. "The point of editorial illustration is that you don't think literally," he says. Illustration should instead add an extra layer to the text. He approaches stories through analogy or juxtaposing familiar images to create new meanings, and enjoys finding unexpected ways to say something while remaining true to the topic. In one illustration, the red stripes of the Star-Spangled Banner unravel to become the straps of an electric chair for a piece about the death penalty in the USA, and in another a fish gradually evolves into a pair of praying hands in a story on creationism.

An editorial illustration can be a 'Welcome' sign for a daunting, dry or complicated article. Sometimes Fuchs' highest enjoyment is found in racking his brain for a clear and interesting visual solution for a challenging read that doesn't easily lend itself to imagery—most often niche articles in science magazines. Instead of going deeper, he goes wider and thinks more laterally. "In a way, it's horrible to have a topic that is really hard to illustrate, but on the other hand, it gives you a lot more freedom to explore how you could possibly get that message across," he says. For an article on the discovery of the Higgs boson particle—brain-bending stuff—he focused on the excitement within the scientific community, illustrating particles as the bubbles rising from a celebratory flute of champagne. On the subject of the healing properties of certain amino acids in tilapia skin, he injected some much-needed humor with an illustration of an unimpressed cartoon fish whose middle has been stripped and wrapped around a human thumb like a Band-aid.

WHEN PRESENTING INITIAL SKETCHES to clients, Fuchs tends to go in strong with one concept; a certainty that comes from experience rather than ego. He believes being asked to share five sketches creates a chance for mediocrity to slip in by sending a less good idea to meet the requirements. "I'd rather be the editor of the idea first," he explains. "Of course, I do different sketches if they don't like that idea, but I try to send

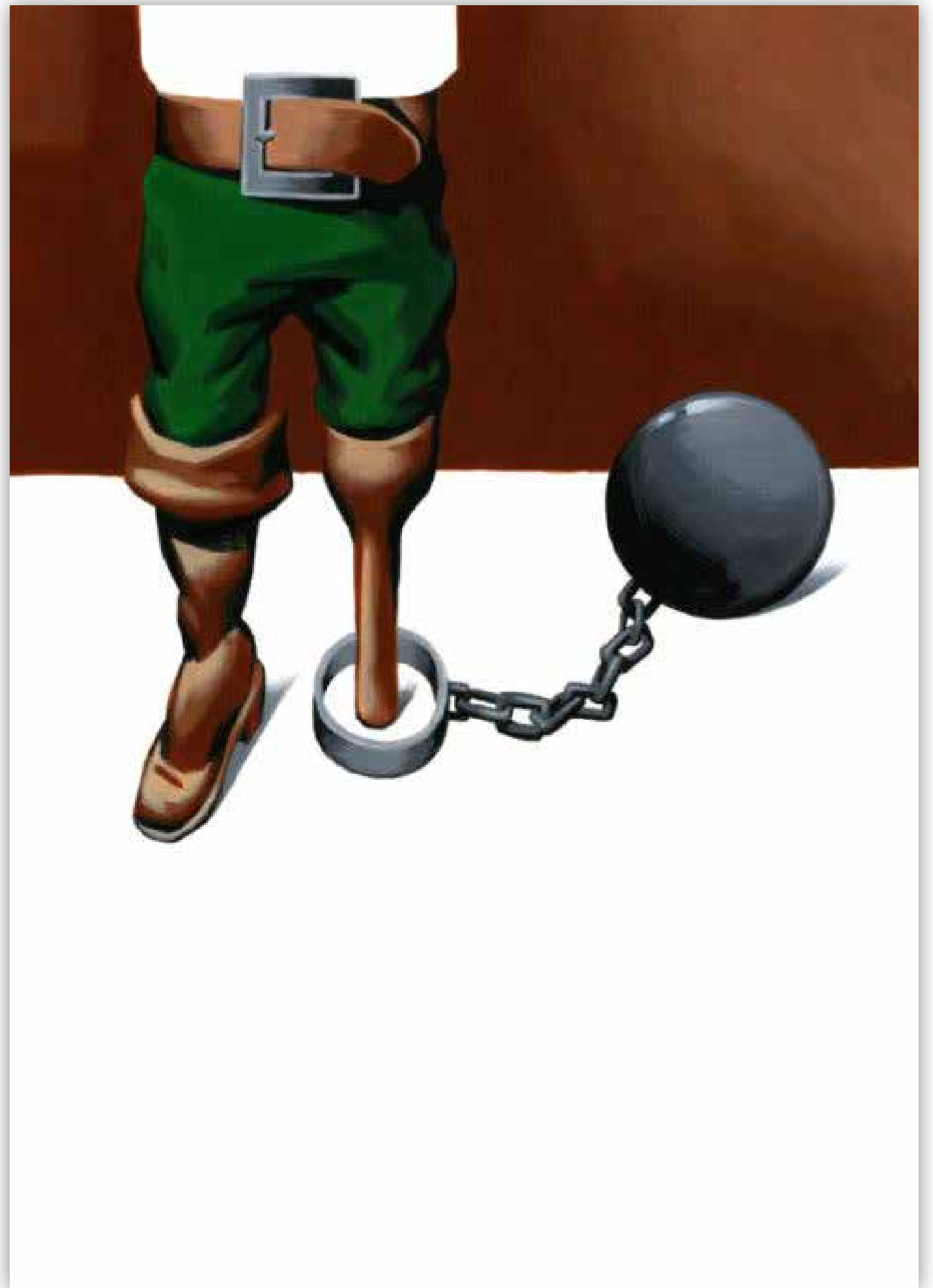


one and say: this is the one I think is best."

A GUSH OR A CONCERTED SQUEEZE, Fuchs' ideas keep flowing no more so than in his personal work. They never start as a series but end up this way because once he starts seeing symbols or double entendre, he can't stop. For his "Love&Hate" series, the ubiquitous heart motif becomes handcuffs, headlights and a wailing child's uvula. For "that naughty little series", unfortunate genitals become all manner of elaborate or everyday props and devices. "It's fun to stumble upon something that turns out to be more than you initially expected," he says. "And you just keep doing it because it's fun. Sometimes you surprise yourself with what you come up with. It keeps you loose, and if you try something you haven't done before that works, then you have another tool to add to your toolbox for a client."

THIS PLAYFULNESS is a big part of Fuchs' personality. "I'm a pretty silly person really," he laughs. "Which of course has to be reined in if I'm doing a serious job. But I try to still keep it witty. Sometimes you have to keep the illustration somewhat serious so as not to ruin the article, but you can speak with a little humor here and there." A good example is his painting of a pensive rat in the pose of Rodin's "The Thinker" for an article on animal intelligence; or his illustration for a New York Times article on mediocrity, where a small but enthusiastic dog is poised to catch a stick the size of a tree trunk on a mid-air collision course. In his illustration about inner critics spoiling all the fun, a swimmer prepares to leap from a high diving board while his shadow clings on for dear life.

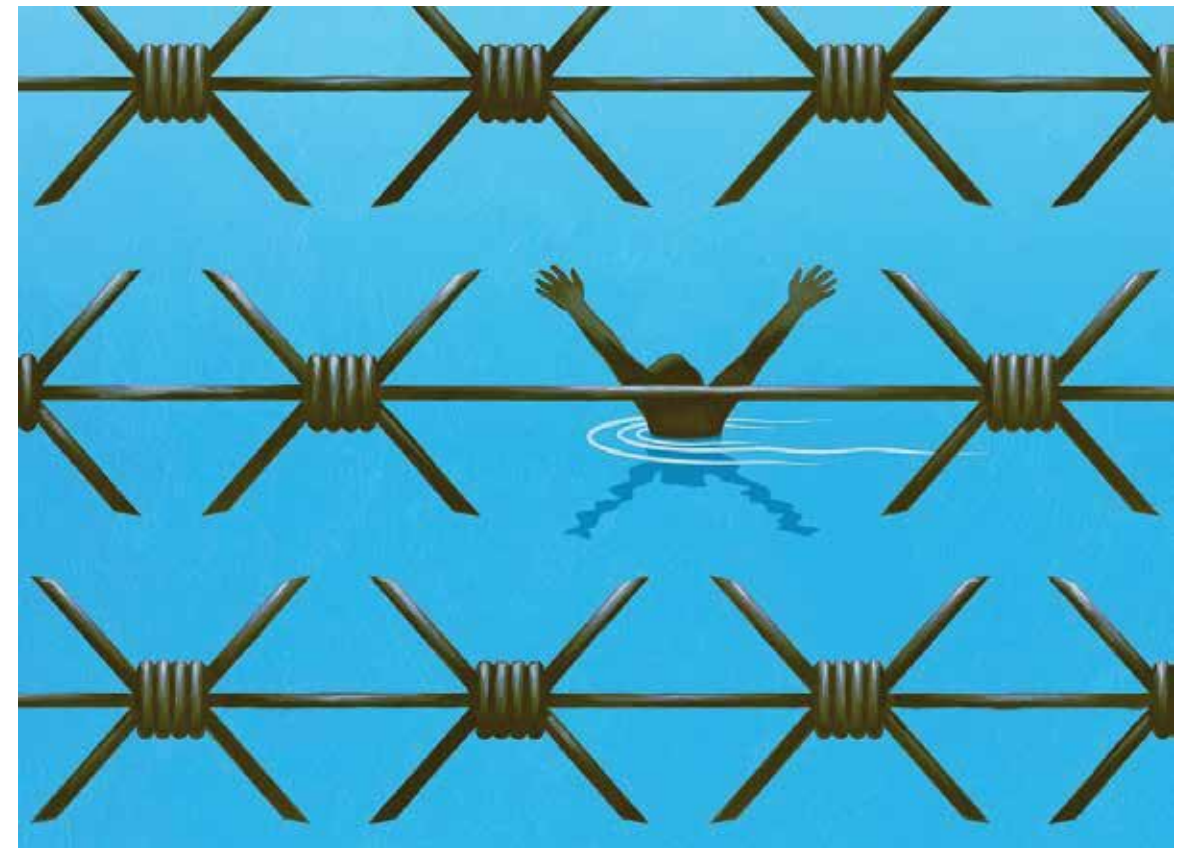
FUCHS INFLUENCES ARE ECLECTIC, ranging from the works of Boris Vallejo and Frank Frazetta, to Moebius and the Swiss and Ulm schools of design. And from Asterix comics -- "Gosciny's fine wit combined with Uderzo's fine brush... unmatched," to the complete works of Monty Python, "Inspiring in their absurdity, which is a good approach to complex topics." For personal amusement or editorial entertainment, though, his strategy is always witty over funny. "Being funny is making sure that everybody gets the joke. It's slap-your-thigh rather than a little smile," he quantifies. "Witty is more subtle. If you see it, you see it."



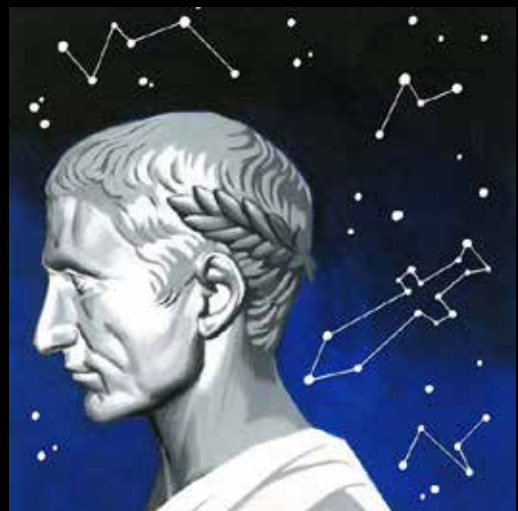












MR. FUCHS IS A COOL DUDE.  
 COOL UNDER FIRE WITH A COOL ILLUSTRATIVE STYLE...AND A KNACK FOR COOL IDEAS.  
 AND THIS PARTICULAR GENTLEMAN CAN BEAUTIFULLY CAPTURE A LIKENESS!  
 I'M PARTIAL TO HIS PAINTED WORKS, WHICH HAVE GREAT DEPTH, COLOR AND TEXTURE,  
 BUT DON'T SLEEP ON HIS VECTOR ART. IT'S ALL VERY COOL.

Kory Kennedy  
 Creative Director  
 Foundry 360







I'VE BEEN WORKING WITH THOMAS FOR A NUMBER OF YEARS, AT VARIOUS PUBLICATIONS, AND HIS WORK ALWAYS DELIGHTS. THE LAST FEW YEARS THE ASSIGNMENTS HAVE BEEN PRIMARILY PORTRAITS. THOMAS FINDS A HOOK BASED ON EACH QUOTE THAT ELEVATES THE PORTRAIT. I'VE WORKED WITH A LOT OF TALENTED ILLUSTRATORS OVER THE YEARS AND THOMAS IS AT THE TOP OF MY LIST OF FAVORITES. TERRIFIC, GRAPHIC WORK, NO ATTITUDE AND A NICE GUY TO BOOT.

Scott A. Davis  
Vice President, Creative Director  
AARP Media







WELL, WHAT DO I SAY ABOUT THOMAS'S WORK... IT'S JUST GREAT. HE'S SUPER SMART AND HE'S ALWAYS FINDING A REALLY INTERESTING TWIST ON THE SCIENCE WE WORK ON EVERY DAY. THE REAL TESTAMENT IS, WE GET COMPLIMENTS FROM THE SCIENTISTS ABOUT HOW FUN AND ENGAGING HIS ART IS, THAT SHOULD SAY IT ALL, BUT BECAUSE HE AND I HAVE WORKED SO WELL AND OFTEN TOGETHER, I KNOW I CAN TRUST HIM TO TAKE OUR VERY COMPLEX SUBJECTS AND TURN THEM TO GOLDEN ILLUSTRATIONS.

Michael Mrak  
Creative Director  
Scientific American

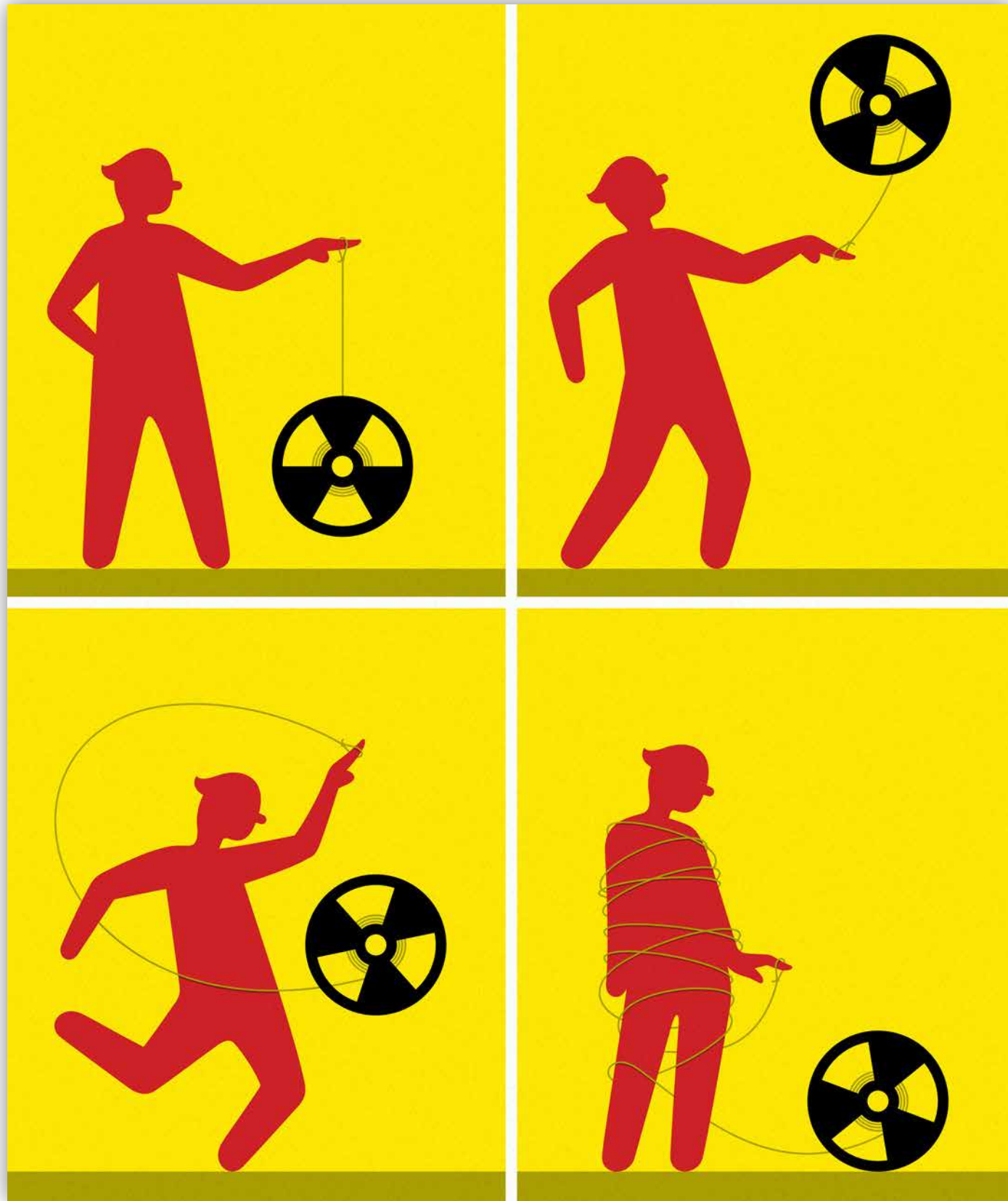




THOMAS FUCHS IS OFTEN OUR FIRST CALL WHEN WE'RE WORKING ON A MORE COMPLEX PIECE—LIKELY ONE ABOUT THE EVER-SHIFTING POLITICAL LANDSCAPE IN TEXAS, OR AN ANALYSIS OF BUSINESS TRENDS IN THE STATE. HE ALWAYS FINDS A GRAPHIC, POETIC ANSWER TO EVERY TRICKY STORY WE THROW HIS WAY! WE OFTEN JOKE THAT THOMAS HAS BECOME AN HONORARY TEXAN, AFTER SO MANY YEARS OF WORKING WITH THE MAGAZINE.

Emily Kimbro  
Creative Director  
Texas Monthly





THOMAS FUCHS IS ONE OF MY GO-TO ARTISTS. WHENEVER I DON'T HAVE MUCH TEXT FOR A STORY OR A DIFFICULT TOPIC TO CONCEPTUALIZE, I CAN ALWAYS COUNT ON HIM TO DELIVER A CLEVER VISUAL SOLUTION. THE GUY IS A GREAT THINKER. HIS BEAUTIFUL BODY OF WORK INCLUDES TWO VERY DIFFERENT STYLES, AND HIS PORTRAITURE WORK IS ALSO TOP NOTCH.

Minh Ung  
 Visual Editor  
 New York Times Sunday Business

