

AVENUE



MEET MY MEMES

BY MARK MEDLEY

On the surface, *Hot Potatoe* is a monograph by the artist Marc Bell. The handsome oversized volume features multiple essays, including "an overview of recurring memes and utterances in the Marc Bell oeuvre," an in-depth interview with the artist and a detailed chronology of his career thus far. The book is downright scholarly in its meticulousness. But, flipping through its 270-odd pages, one gets the sense there's something not quite right with Bell. Maybe it's the fact the chronology continues past his death in 2075, when "Bell dies in Hamilton, Ontario after former Prime Minister George Stroumboulopoulos invades his home and strikes him with the soapstone sculpture Bell tried to defend himself with."

"I tried to set it up as a formal monograph, but then sort of make fun of the form," says Bell on the phone from Montreal. "I've always kind of approached things in a bit of a tongue-in-cheek sort of way."

The art of Marc Bell is a hectic mash-up of comix, high art, typography and cartoons. His work has been compared to that of R. Crumb, but to these eyes it looks like what would happen if Richard Scarry's nightmares came to life. The pages are crammed with odd creatures, random words, shapes, colour — you can spend half an hour on some pages and still not catch everything.

"They look like they might require a lot of planning, but most of them are kind of done just on the fly," says Bell, who originally hails from London, Ont.

In an email the next day, he adds: "Hopefully, [readers] will be razzle-dazzled by the combination of lines and the text and the colour and they will be further fortified to deal with the rampant overstimulation of our ADD society. Also, I hope they have a laugh."

Though the name may not ring one, Bell, 38, is a veteran of the Canadian comic scene: His work has been published by Fantagraphics and *Drawn & Quarterly*, and his art frequently appears in *Vice*. His recent U.S. book tour brought out some celebrity fans, including Devendra Banhart and Tunde Adebimpe from TV on the Radio. Still, *Hot Potatoe* got its name because two publishers acquired and then passed on it before it wound up with Chris Oliveros at D&Q.

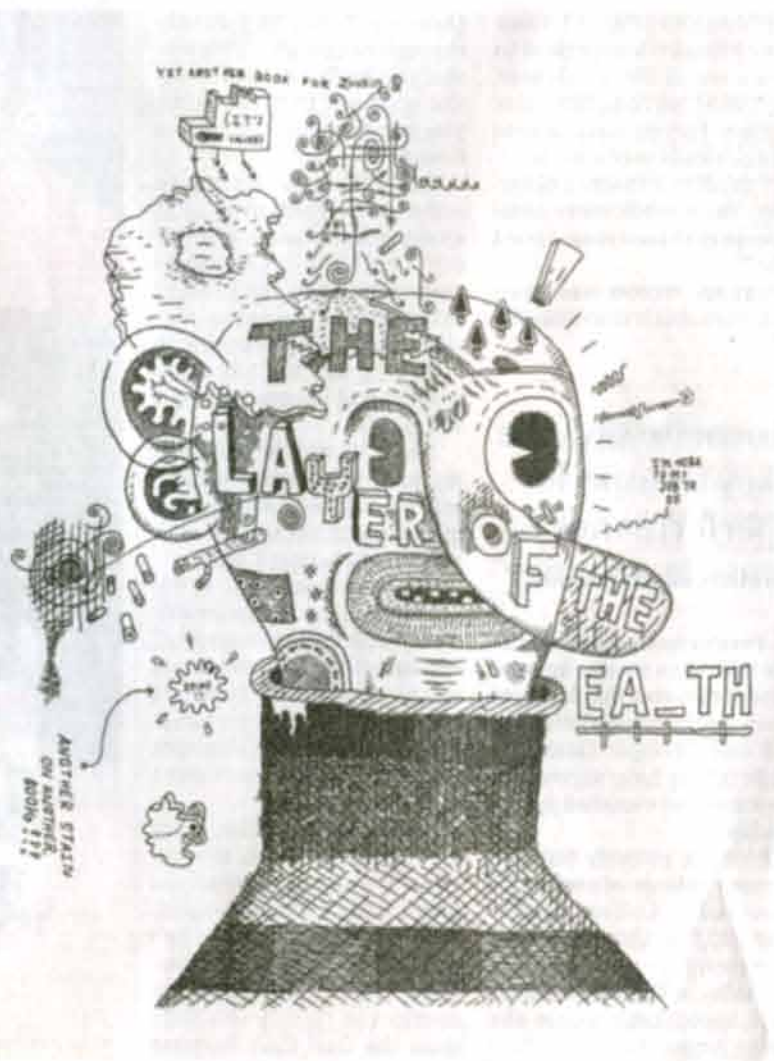
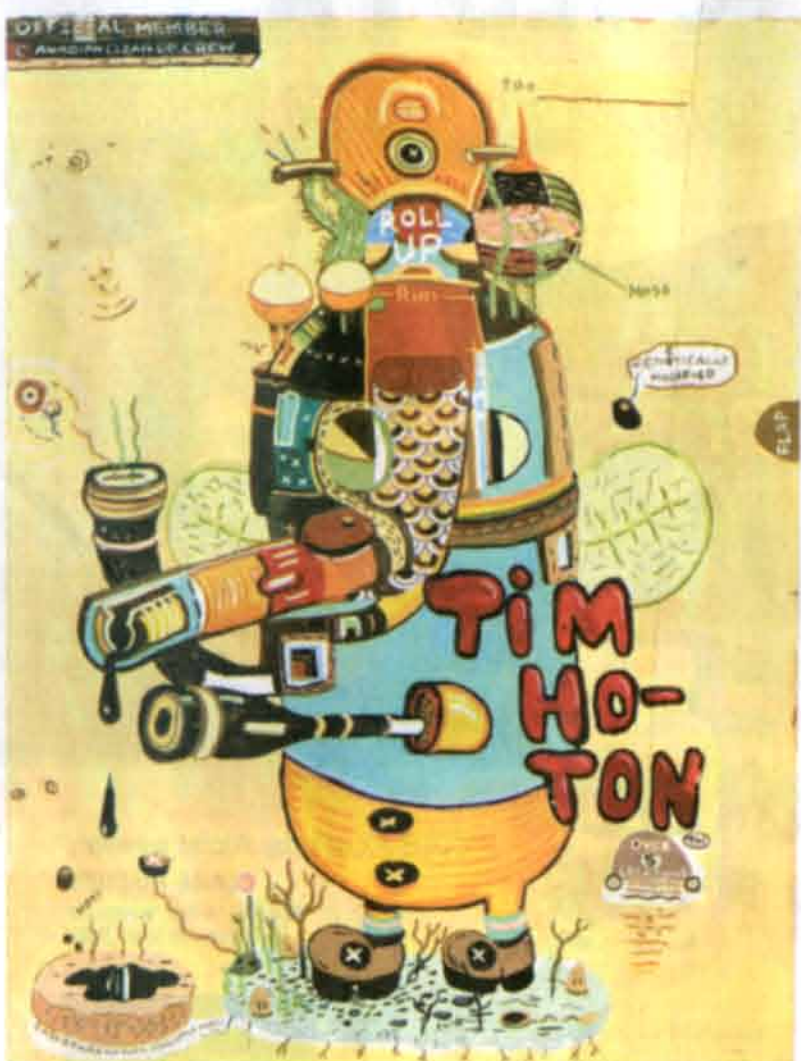
While Bell is currently represented by New York City's Adam Baumgold Gallery, which also exhibits work by Chris Ware, Charles Burns and the late Saul Steinberg, his roots are in DIY and zine culture, though he admits to feeling a bit removed from the new generation of practitioners.

This past weekend, Bell found himself at ExpoZine, Montreal's small-press and indie comics fair. For old time's sake, he brought along some self-published books.

"I was stapling them and I was thinking, 'Man, I don't know if I can do this anymore,'" he laughs. "I'm getting too old to staple these things myself."

Hot Potatoe by Marc Bell is published by Drawn & Quarterly (\$44.95). Bell launches the book this Friday in Toronto at Magic Pony, 694 Queen St. W., along with Amy Lockhart; Nov. 25, at Forest City Gallery, Blackshire Pub, London, Ont.; and Nov. 28 at the D+Q Librairie, Montreal.

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