COVER STORY

CHRISTOPH NIEMANN'S "I'VE GOT IT"

The artist discusses the secret to drawing a tree.

By Françoise Mouly
Art by Christoph Niemann
July 19, 2021

Summer is the time for sport, but sport is often interrupted. In this week's cover, Christoph Niemann indulges his sense of play, hiding a foot, hand, and Frisbee in a haze of foliage. We recently talked to the artist about how one has to loosen up to capture the essence of a tree.

Playing Frisbee usually requires a large, open space. How did you arrive at the image of one stuck in a tree?

One of the minor human follies is that the absence of open space seldom deters us from playing Frisbee, badminton, or anything else that will lead to this kind of predicament.

You're something of a tree connoisseur. What have you learned from drawing so many?

I became obsessed with drawing trees when I was a teen-ager. I took the same approach as I did when learning to draw the human body—trying to understand the structure, the weight, the proportions. But I always got lost in the details, and the results didn't look convincing. Trees are much

too complex to follow rules; each is unique, especially in the summer, and I've made my peace with that.

I do keep looking to see how the masters solved trees. (I recommend Matisse, Félix Vallotton, and Wayne Thiebaud.) But I admit the most important lesson came from watching the TV host Bob Ross: if you want to draw trees, you have to loosen up and be in a good mood.

Niemann's sketchbooks often depict trees in various degrees of abstraction.

Many of your images, including this one, play with color and composition to show us a scene at the edge of perception, hidden at first and suddenly revealed. What leads you to construct these puzzles? And do you ever consult family and friends to see how long it takes to "read" the image?

Absolutely. I try to find a sweet spot, where an image that's technically an abstract composition of shape and color is somehow legible to a viewer. The recognition doesn't flow so much from deciphering clues as it does from tapping into unconscious visual memory. This process is hard to get right, harder to pull off than traditional representation or conceptual drawing. But I constantly show my work around and ask a single question: What do you see?

You live in Berlin and spent the pandemic there. How does this summer compare to the last? Do you have any travel plans?

Right now, things almost feel normal. (Although I'm not sure I still know what normal is.) If all goes well, we want to go to Greece for a few days in August. There, I can enjoy my other obsession: drawing water!

See below for more covers celebrating trees:

"Higher Still," by J.J. Sempé

"The Eternal Summer," by Eric Drooker

"The Road," by David Hockney

Françoise Mouly has been the art editor at The New Yorker since 1993.
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