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## Michael Labash: the interview!

di **Claudio Parentela**

### Something about you in your words...

I was born in 1958 in Indianapolis, Indiana USA. My dad was a chemical engineer for Eli Lilly and got transferred to Sydney, Australia when I was about 6 years old. My parents divorced when it was time for us to be transferred back to the States and my sister and I stayed in Australia with our mother. Dad went back to the U.S.A. I went to a private boys school for grammar school and high school (the same school). It was like those stuck-up English schools you see in the movies. In high school, I played guitar, sang in a band and wrote songs. We planned to pursue it full-time after I got back from a planned 6 month trip to the US to visit my father when I got out of high school. Well, after the 6 months passed he said he didn't have enough money to send me back to Australia, but apparently he had enough to pay for a semester of college at Indiana University. I was too gullible and took the bait and ended up in Indiana University for four years (I loved it!). I started off as a business major (!?!), but in my sophomore year I discovered they had an Fine Arts Department with Graphic Design and immediately switched my major to Fine Arts. A whole new world opened up and I go into it! I spent hours and hours at the library looking at paintings in books and in the University Art Gallery. I took as many art courses as I could afford (supplies cost a bundle and Dad suddenly couldn't afford tuition once I became an art major).



After college, I spent the summer of 1981 doing an internship at the National Zoo in Washington DC and then went back to Australia for a few months to see if I wanted to move back there. I didn't really care for it any more. I didn't really like what my old friends had become, plus I had a girl friend from college who had moved to San Francisco so I moved there to be with her. I didn't really do any art. Just worked 80 hour weeks as a yuppie in highbrow SF design firms. I finally started drawing again in about 1987 after I quit my job to pursue a career in music and started a band and opened a recording studio in

Emeryville. I drew all the fliers, made backdrops, painted murals in the studio, etc. It was all kind of cartoonish Keith Haring influenced stuff. In 1988, my band (which later became the Counting Crows) was on a fast track to the big time, managed by Bill Graham Presents and on the verge of a record deal with a major label. I wasn't happy though, the creative family/community that I had wanted to create was really just a bunch of yuppies looking out for fame.

Anyway, we were playing at The Oasis in San Francisco and I saw this girl out in the audience who just jumped into my awareness ... it was like a spotlight was on her. I looked for her after the show and we made plans to get together. It turned out she was a student of performance artist Frank Moore! She showed me some of Frank's writings and when I read them the floor fell out from under me. Soon after, I went to one of his performances at a small record store in Berkeley and sat there with my jaw hanging as naked body-painted men and women danced and writhed with strobe lights pulsing and Frank wailing away. Needless to say, I'd never seen anything like it. I started working with Frank and quit the band a few weeks later to sing backup vocals for Frank. I've been with him (and Linda Mac) ever since. We live together in our house in Berkeley along with three cats.

### How did you get started in art?

Apparently I started drawing at an early age. I remember having my father show me how to draw cars and one night, I guess I went nuts with the crayons and filled the entire window in my bedroom with drawings of cars. I spent most of my free time in high school locked in my room doing homework listening to music. My idea of a good time was listening to LPs and drawing covers for my cassette tapes with my jumbo set of colored markers (40 colors!). I didn't officially consider myself an artist until I hooked up with Frank (Moore). Up until I met him, I did not get any encouragement from any significant others, in fact I was mostly met with resistance and criticism. I didn't even think I could draw. When Frank learned I was a graphic designer he set me to work on lots of drawing/painting projects; posters, brochures, backdrops for performances, illustrations for his book, etc.

One day while we were sitting around our living room, admiring all my art on the walls, Frank asked me, "When did you realize you could draw?" I looked around the room for a little while and pointed to one of the large complex drawings and said, "I think it was after I finished that one". He was shocked. He assumed because I was a graphic designer that I must be able to draw ... it turned out my teachers in college had told me I couldn't draw, my boss at my first design job said I couldn't draw, my best friend in college always just thought my drawings were OK and went on about how great an artist his ex-girlfriend was whenever I showed him something ... there was no positive feedback from any significant others so I thought I just couldn't draw. Frank likes to tell this story to art students ... And then tells them to quit art school and follow their own vision.

### What medium do you like the best, and the least?

My main tool is a fine point black marker on Bristol board. Cheap and simple. I like writing the least.



### What artists influence or have influenced you (these need not be visual artists) and how have they done so?

As a kid, it was *Mad* magazine. I liked all the art better than regular comic books. I especially liked Don Wilson's stuff. He did the guys with the big feet and multiple chins. I think I started drawing goofy faces (tongues sticking out, popping eyeballs, etc.) at some point and I think they came directly from the influence of *Mad*. When I started listening to music and all through high school I loved LP covers. I particularly loved the art of Roger Dean (he did album covers for Yes, Uriah Heep, Osibisa, Greenslade and more) and bought many a lousy record just to own the cover art. I remember telling people, including my mother, that I wanted to become a commercial artist and design record covers and they would just laugh or shake their head and say "You can't make a living doing that!".

In art school (college) I think I was most influenced by the medieval painters Pieter Bruegel and Heironymous Bosch. Bruegel painted the peasants ... not the elite but the people and it seems like Bosch painted what went on in their inner world (sex, violence and religion). His work is disturbing and funny at the same time. I also loved Indian sculpture, it was very erotic and sensual. The poster art of the 60's has also influenced me, especially the fluid lettering techniques. Things flow together rather than being separate isolated entities. Each letter you draw influences/determines the starting shape of the one next to it ... everything is in a liquid state and it all could just as easily run together into one mass. I also love *Zap* comics, Tim Vigil's *Faust*, S. Clay Wilson and the *Horny Biker Chicks* comics ... The violence and sex are so extreme I find it hilarious. My main influence though is performance artist Frank Moore. I started working with him back in the late 80's and I found myself charged with the task of finding a visual language to communicate his concepts such as eroplay

and human connectedness. The melting, flowing-into-itself style of my drawings is a direct result of my working with him. Frank has the amazing ability of being able to recognize, develop and put to use fully what people are good at.

#### **You take inspiration from...?**

My life with Frank and Linda.



#### **What do you use to create your art?**

My favorite thing is to just pick up a fine point pen and start drawing. I've been designing all of Frank Moore's websites since 1996 ([www.eroplay.com](http://www.eroplay.com), [www.luver.com](http://www.luver.com), [www.luver.org](http://www.luver.org), [www.feisto.com](http://www.feisto.com)). I get to create whatever graphics are needed for them. I draw a lot of the stuff by hand, then scan it and run it through Streamline so I can color it in Illustrator. I've also done some collage stuff in Photoshop for some of his posters.

#### **What projects do you have lined up for the future?**

There's always a long list! I'd also like to do another large backdrop (20' x 10') for Frank's performances. I'm also getting ready to do a large pen drawing, maybe 18" x 24" ... the largest I've ever done. That'll take a while. I also have a list of artists that will be Featured Artists on [eroplay.com](http://eroplay.com) that I will create sites for. It's one of my favourite things, creating a web site for someone else's art.

#### **Is this the primary goal/focus of your work, or is a vehicle for the communication of ideas?**

It varies depending on what I'm doing. When I'm doing a poster for a performance it needs to communicate something about the performance and draw people in. When I draw I don't think or plan. I just let the pen do the talking.

#### **Do you have a web site?**

Yes I have a couple. I have one for my graphic design business [www.babylabash.com](http://www.babylabash.com), but it has a section of my "underground" art. I also just created a site to try and get some commercial illustration work at [www.lavapen.com](http://www.lavapen.com). I love all kinds of music. We started an internet audio/video station, Love Underground Visionary Revolution (LUVeR) [www.luver.com](http://www.luver.com) about 5 years ago that runs 24 hours a day from our house. **There's any music that you find particularly inspiring?**

So we have music going all the time. We get piles and piles of CDs from bands and musicians from all over. All of it is amazingly good. The powers that be would have you believe that the only good music is the stuff they put out but that's not true. Mainstream music sounds lame now compared to the stuff we get in the mail!

#### **In these days you're working on what...?**

I'm working on a big mural on the wall of Frank's studio in our backyard although that is pretty much on hold now until the spring. I've also just started doing a second chapbook of Frank's poetry. That will involve doing some new drawings.

#### **What do you think about technology such as the Internet... It's useful for your art?**

I love the internet. It's the ultimate library. We've been able to put videos of Frank's performances up that have been sitting in a closet for years and now they are getting watched by the world. And the internet enables us to do our internet station, [www.luver.com](http://www.luver.com), that is also an amazing subversive tool.



### How you define your artworks?

Complex drawings of a liquid melting erotic world of multi-gender dream creatures existing beyond taboo, morals and good taste.

### What is creativity for you?

It's an act of surrender. It's like channelling. You open yourself up and let something come through you. The artist is just the scribe.

### In your capacity as an artist, what do you hope the effect of your work will be on the people?

I don't think about that. I just draw because it's fun ... or because we need a new poster! I enjoy watching people look at my drawings though.

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Urls for art:

[www.babylabash.com/underground](http://www.babylabash.com/underground)

[www.eroplay.com/poster](http://www.eroplay.com/poster) (poster)

[www.eroplay.com/poster2](http://www.eroplay.com/poster2) (more poster)

[www.eroplay.com/Cave/NYC2001/Michelle\\_Angel](http://www.eroplay.com/Cave/NYC2001/Michelle_Angel) (20' x 10' painted backdrop)

[www.eroplay.com/blacksheep2](http://www.eroplay.com/blacksheep2)

[www.eroplay.com/tcr2back](http://www.eroplay.com/tcr2back)

[www.eroplay.com/bobbit](http://www.eroplay.com/bobbit)

[www.eroplay.com/mafia](http://www.eroplay.com/mafia)

[www.eroplay.com/polevaulting.html](http://www.eroplay.com/polevaulting.html)

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