"Maria's World"
Text by Stuart I. Frolick

Her ethnic heritage influences her imagery adding mystery, romance, and drama not evident in most illustrators working today.

Philip Hays, *Illustrator*

Maria's mixed use of wood, metal, glass and found objects make each of her pieces of art truly unique.

Scott Lambert, *Design Director, Douglas Joseph Partners*

Working with Maria is an art director's dream come true. What starts out as an ordinary, mundane story becomes compelling in her magical hands.

Joan Ferrell, *Art Director, The American Lawyer*

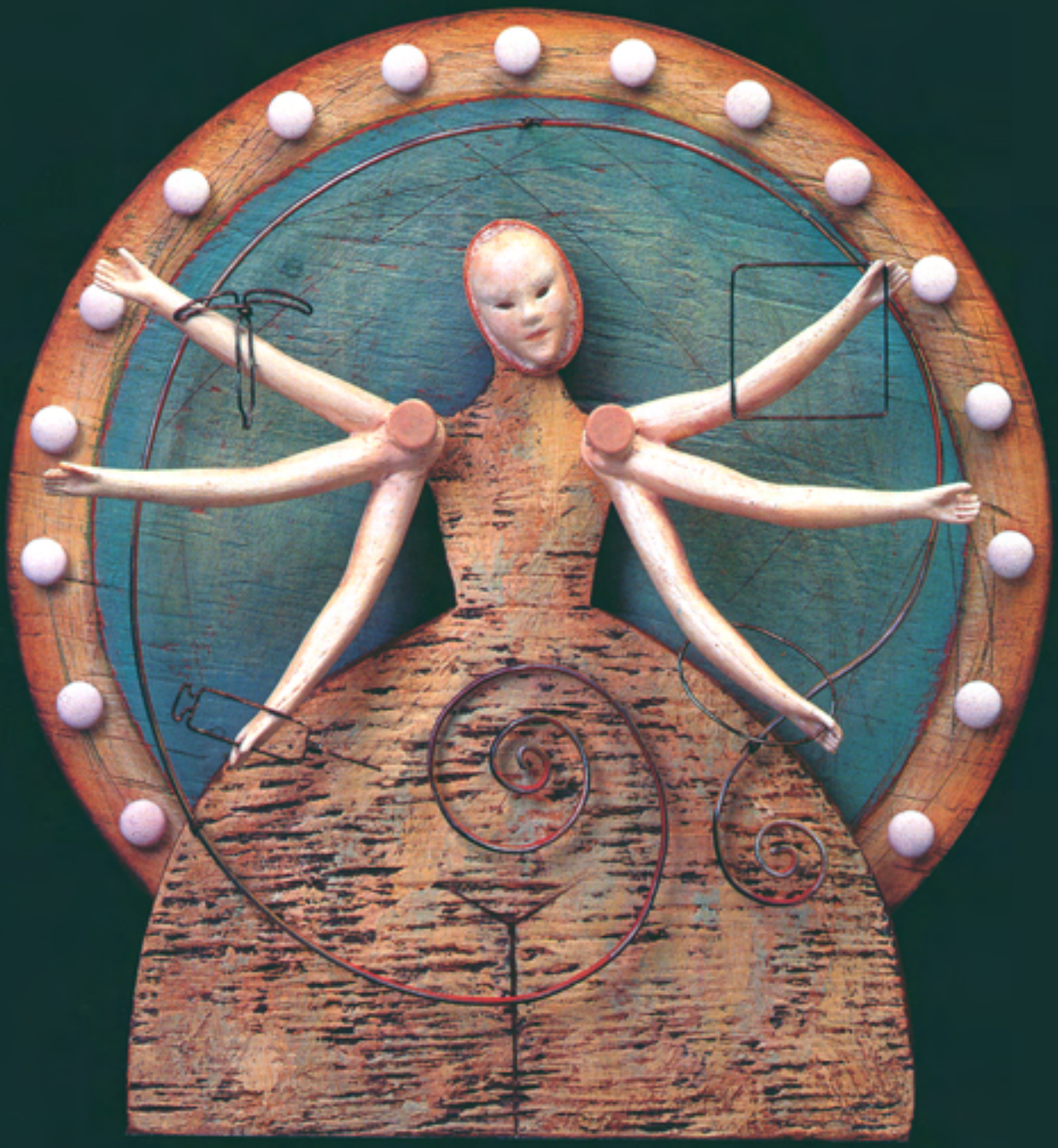
She brings a wonderful sense of metaphor to the most difficult concepts.

Linda Warren, *Warren Group / Studio Deluxe*

Her unique style of combining interesting found objects, woven together to make smart symbolic statements, has created dynamic anchors for so many stories.

Christine Silver, *International Art Director, Business Week*

Illustration **Maria Rendon** USA **140,141**



As a child in Mexico City, Maria Rendon loved to play with boxes, dividing their interiors into compartments and meticulously labeling and organizing the contents of each one. Pleasure in containment was central to the child's imagined world, and it remains so to the mature Rendon's professional work. Her astonishing expertise in craft – in building and making art – is immediately apparent. Its precision brings a sense of order and control to the many different kinds of materials and elements she employs within a single piece – cut plywood, metal wire, painted objects, and paper that is drawn or painted upon – among others.

That her work is labor intensive has scared away more than a few art directors faint-of-heart. But braver souls, such as Harper's, Computerworld, U.S. News & World Report, Harvard Business Review, and Bloomberg, have happily discovered that Rendon produces and delivers her "finishes" as quickly and cost effectively as would-be competitors working in two-dimensions. That's partly because she works with great economy. Pointing to a row of completed assignments mounted on a wall of her Santa Barbara studio, she says, "People always think the pieces will be bigger when they see them for the first time." But, of course, they needn't be any larger than the magazine pages they're designed to fill.

As important as technical skill is to her work, its deeper resonance derives from the influence of Mexican folk art, "in architecture and color, definitely," she says, and from its sheer power of invention. Following the advice of legendary Art Center instructor (and Rendon's first husband), the late Dwight Harmon, she says, "I always try to do something new in each piece. That's the only way to keep learning and to keep the work fresh." The number of different housing or framing devices she's invented are in themselves impressive. Multiple variations of the cathedral arch recur, although, Rendon says, its appeal for her is "more visual than spiritual." That may be so, yet it does contribute to a vaguely religious feeling in her work. Each illustration, regardless of the story it's telling, suggests a precious altarpiece in the church of commercial art. She communicates clearly in uncomplicated iconography that includes free-floating eyes, hands, mouths, wings, spheres, and spirals.

Take, for example, an illustration produced for a 2002 U.S. News & World Report story, "Beyond The Pill," a survey of contraceptive methods available to women. In this case, the framing solution is circular with symbolic pills glued to the circumference, a quarter inch from each other. A central figure is composed of a miniature doll's female face, and a piece of plywood cut into the shape of her torso and wide hoop skirt. The detailing includes under and over painting that allows the grain of different kinds of wood to play an integral role in her aesthetic. Rendon then "draws" five simple icons for the contraceptive options with fine copper wire – the brightest element in an otherwise muted palette. Six arms, three from each of the woman's shoulders, reach for the pill or for representations of a patch, a condom, a syringe, and a ring. At first glance the wire running around the circumference of the piece seems purely functional – a line to which the wire icons attach. But Rendon surprises by creating a clever visual pun. One end of the wire is a small, decorative spiral; the other finishes as a coil just at the point on the figure where an I.U.D. would be placed. Another nice touch is the way the wire fits between the thumbs and index fingers of the tiny plastic fingers, so that it is actually held by the fingers and not just glued to their surfaces.

Another client hooked on her work is Computerworld magazine, whose art director, April O'Connor, says, "Maria and I have collaborated on many projects in the past few years and she is a joy to work with. She excels both at generating concepts and taking direction, and she always pushes her work the extra mile. Once we've defined the message, I may offer a few visual metaphors – not as a directive, but as a starting point. In discussing ideas and reviewing sketches, Maria communicates clearly, listens attentively, and actively seeks to distinguish subtle shades of meaning. Her sketches often include several approaches to a subject, and each one includes detailed notes that are especially valuable in helping editors visualize the finished piece. Our exchanges focus on expressing the strongest, clearest message while maintaining the tightest connection to the article. As a result, the editor, Maria, and I usually reach consensus quickly."

The magic of Maria's world happens in an idyllic studio built amid the gardens behind the Spanish style house that Rendon shares with her husband, advertising art director Robert Giaimo. The well-lit studio is organized to accommodate the many aspects of her creative process. A large square worktable dominates the center of the room. Rendon demonstrates that it remains stable regardless of how hard she hammers on it. The presence of a power dremel, table saw, and other industrial strength equipment usually fueled by testosterone seems somehow incongruent with the delicate – if not feminine – sensibility of her signature work. There's nothing remotely macho about this shy, enigmatic artist, but she projects great strength of character. Rendon's work mirrors her personality: open and communicative, yet perfectly contained.

A fan and client, San Diego-based graphic designer, Mark Murphy, says, "If you want to collaborate with great artists, it's important to find ones that don't separate their art from the rest of their lives. Maria's passionate perspective always delivers unexpected results. Her deep engagement with her influences, her solid commitment to working in three dimensions – and her seemingly never-ending ability to invent – all create a unique blend of illustration and fine art that pleases the artist and her clientele."

The fifth of seven children in her family, Rendon's father was an engineer and excellent draughtsman. "I was always fascinated by his drawings, "she says. "I loved math and physics and did well in them in school – I could very easily have gone into either of those fields because I really enjoy problem solving." Rendon earned a BFA in graphic design from Universidad Anahuac, Mexico City in 1987, and another in illustration from Art Center College of Design in 1992. Her mentors there were department chair Philip Hays, and instructors Harmon and Joel Nakamura.

Reached for comment at his New Mexico studio, artist and illustrator Nakamura says, "As a student, Maria was willing to try something that wasn't popular at the time – 3-D illustration – and some of her other instructors were not very encouraging. She's a true pioneer in the medium. As a professional just starting out, she was unusual in that she actually listened to and followed the advice she sought. Many young illustrators call for advice but they just want you to tell them what they want to hear. Maria did the hard work of designing and implementing a self-promotional campaign, and she's had success with it. On top of that she's a fabulous person with an inquisitive mind. Maria also teaches, which I think is important – to be in the "giving back" cycle. You get a lot from the students' energy – as you're helping them articulate what their work is about, you're always rearticulating what yours is about. I think that's the last piece of the puzzle for Maria. There's nothing standing in her way of becoming a superstar of illustration."

Illustration **María Rendon** *UNA* **144,145**

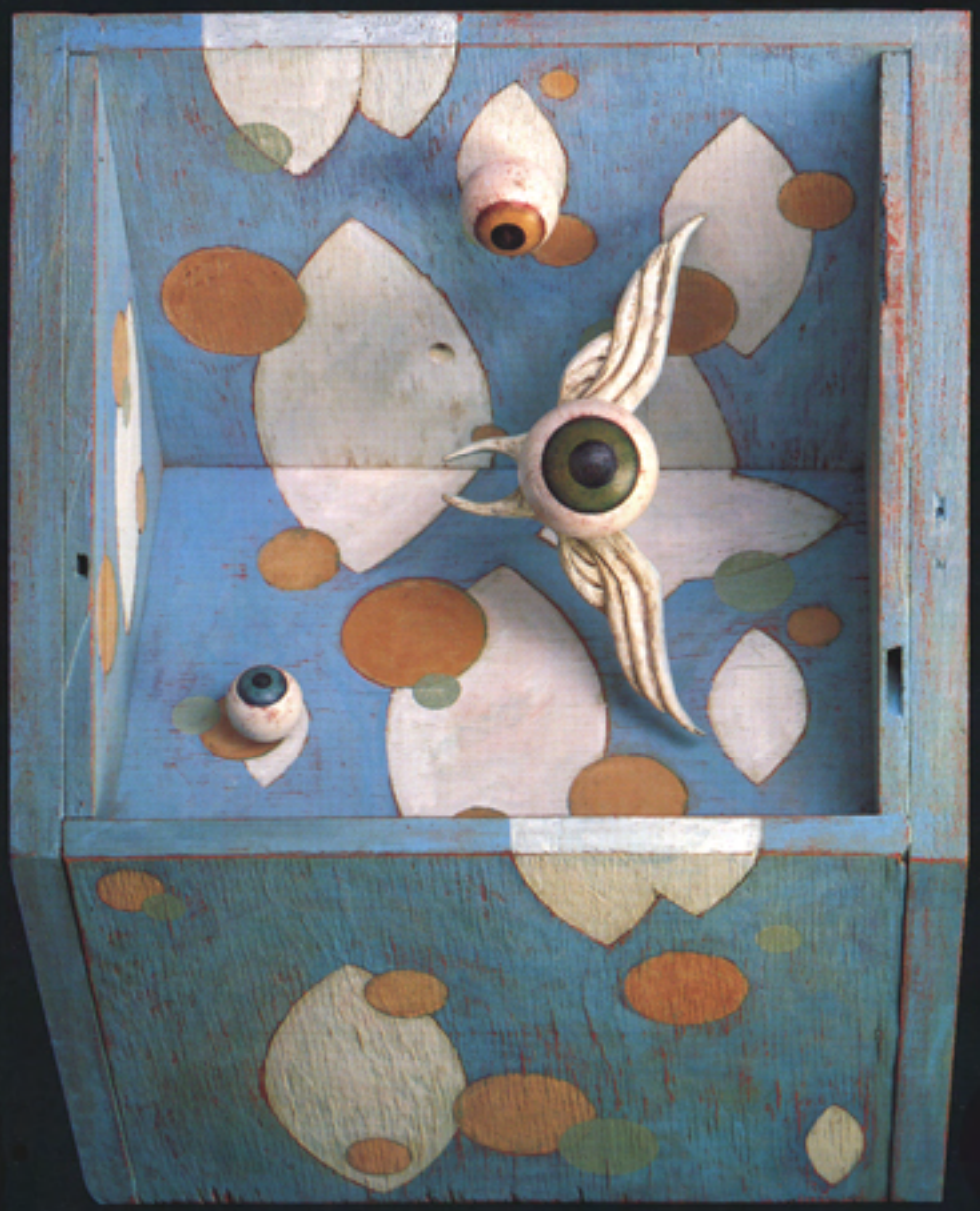
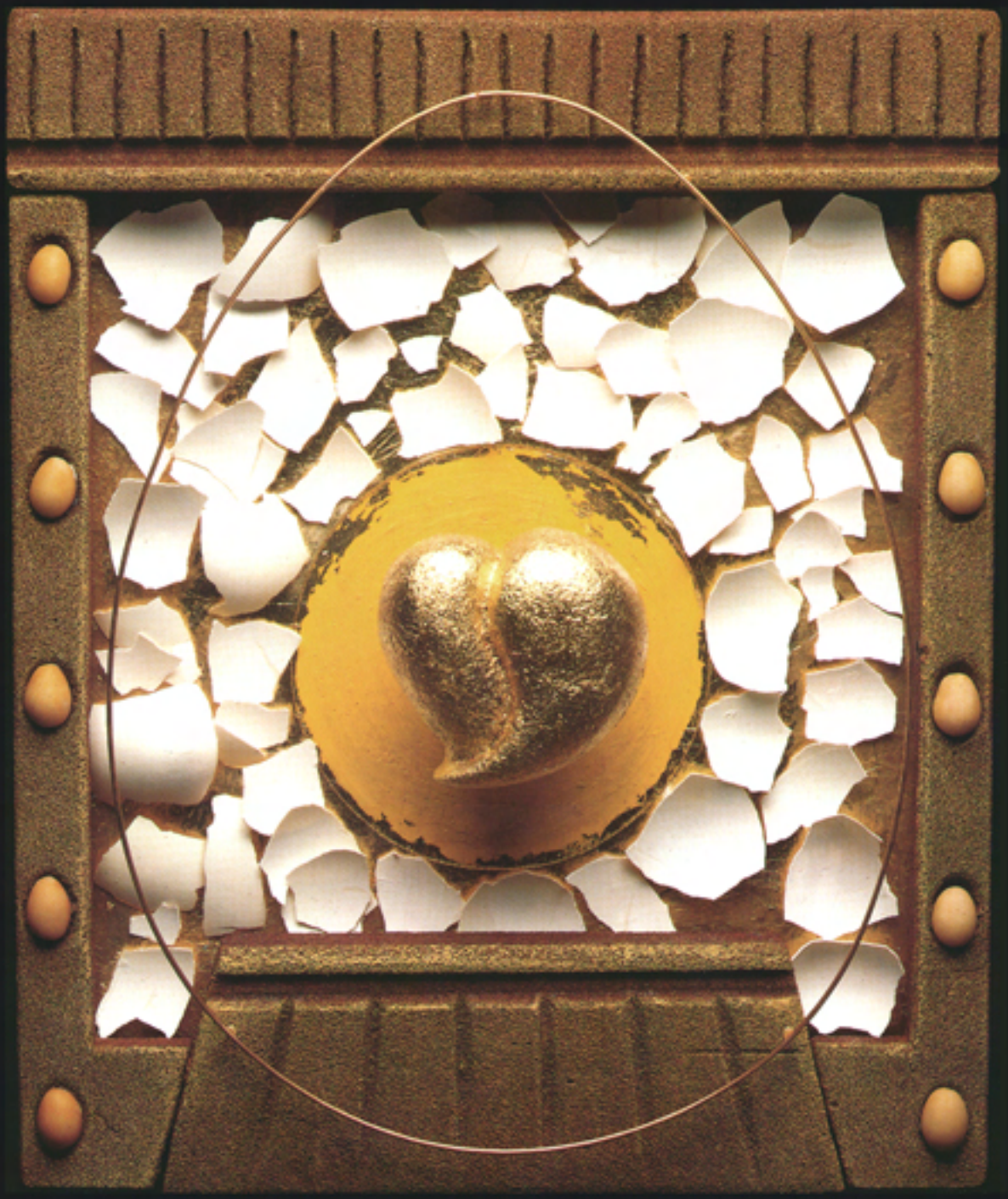


Illustration **Maria Rendon** *USA* **146,147**



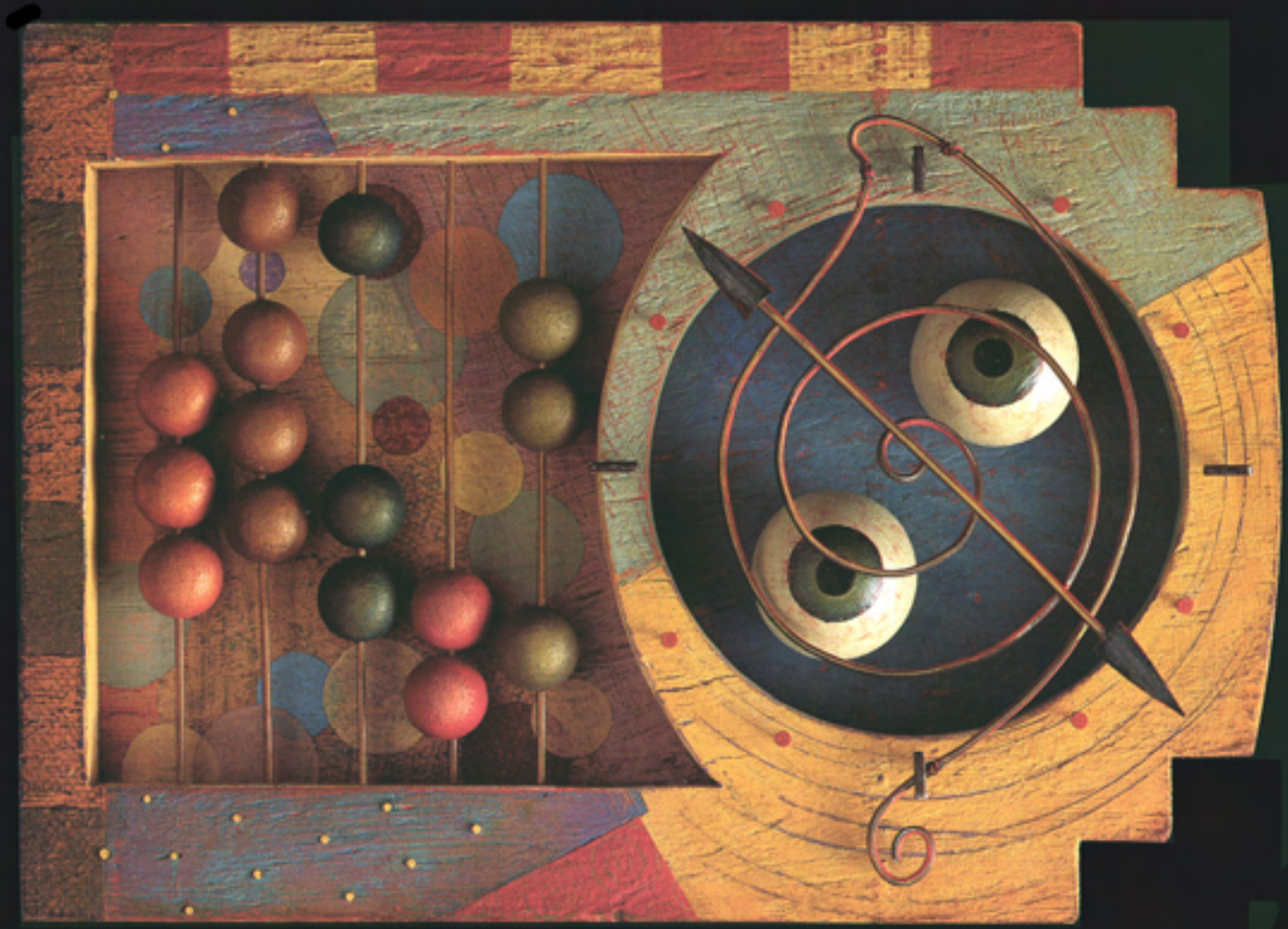
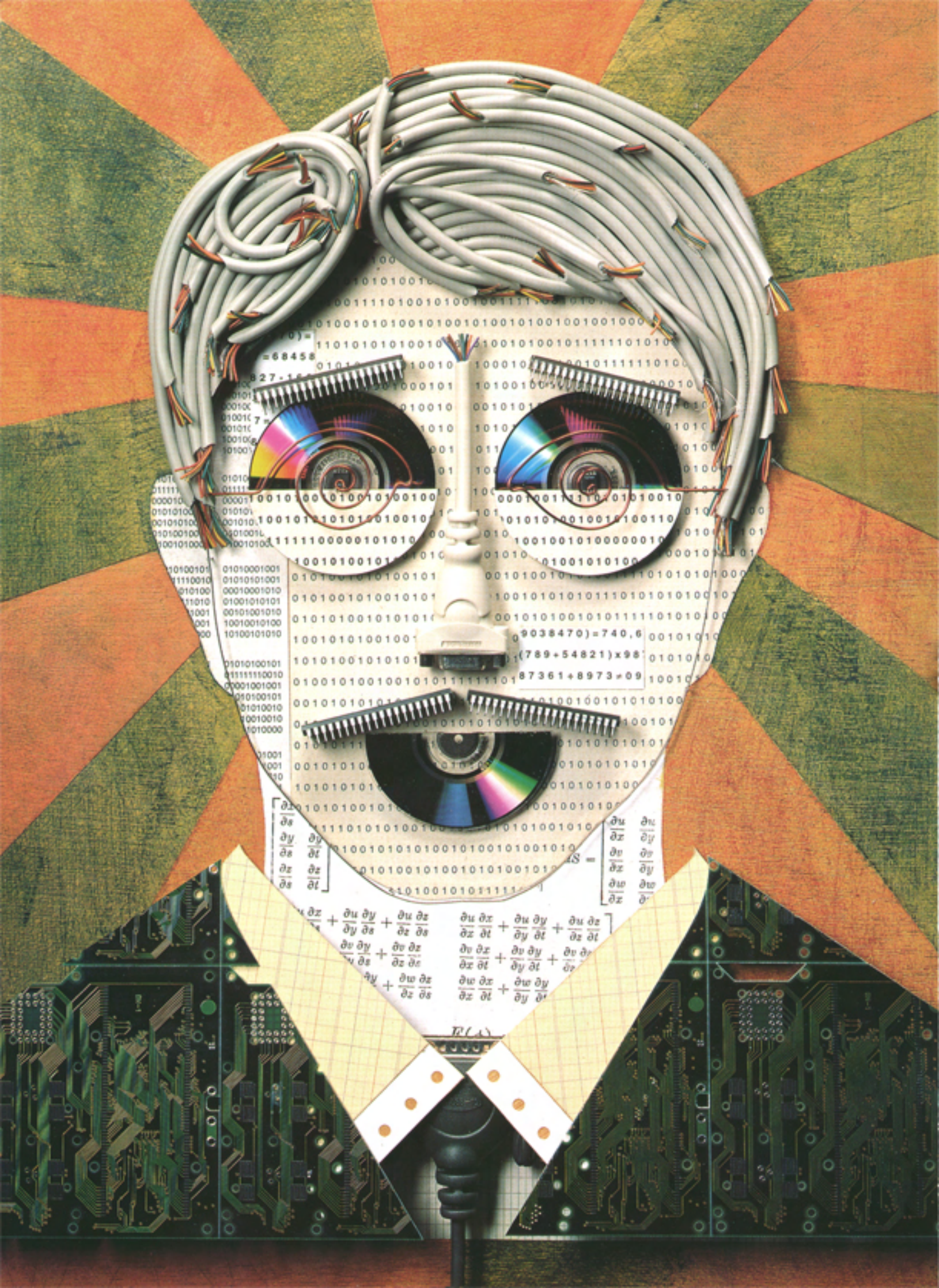


Illustration **Maria Rendon** *USA* **148,149**



Credits & Comments

Pg. 141 *Pigeon*, 2004, Art Director: Linda Warren, Client: Warren Group. *This piece was created to announce the 20th anniversary of the Warren Group. Surprisingly, pigeons live an average of 20 years. Unfortunately, it is this pigeon's 20th birthday; he is about to pass on to a better life and hopefully sainthood.*

Pg. 142 *Contraceptives*, 2002. Art Director: David Griffin; Illustrator: Maria Rendon; Client: US News & World Report. *Using the shape of a fertility goddess as inspiration, I created this piece about the old and new birth control choices available today.*

Pg. 143 Maria Rendón, 1991. Portrait by Salomón Huerta.

Pg. 144 *Gun Control*, 1996. Art Director: Richard Boddy; Illustrator: Maria Rendon; Client: *Discover* magazine. *To have a gun in your house or not – I interpreted having a gun in your household as a gamble, because it can protect you but it can also kill you.*

Pg. 145 *Mona Lisa*, 1994. Illustrator: Maria Rendon; Client: *Aspen* magazine. *It was a small budget project. This job got killed, but it is still one of my favorite pieces.*

Pg. 146 *Church of Higher Learning*, 1993. Art Director: Christopher Ramirez; Illustrator: Maria Rendon; Client: *Saludos Hispanos* magazine. *An image created for a story about the advantage of acquiring a good college education. This is definitely one of the pieces where my Catholic upbringing shows through.*

Pg. 147 *Limbo*, 2002. Art Director: Mark Murphy; Illustrator: Maria Rendon; Client: Murphy Design Inc. *On this side you see Heaven, on the other side you see Hell. It is a 3 dimensional piece that rotates 360 degrees created for a book titled Heaven and Hell published by Murphy.*

Pg. 148 *Egg*, 1998. Editor: Linda Zuckerman; Illustrator: Maria Rendon; Designer: Judy the Sieck; Client: Browndeer Press/Harcourt Brace. *My skin is silver, my heart all gold. The egg. One of 14 images created for a children's book titled* Touching the Distance *of Native American Riddle-Poems gathered by Brian Swann. This one in particular is a Mayan riddle-poem.*

Pg. 149 *Abacus*, 2002. Art Director: Evelyn Good; Illustrator: Maria Rendon; Client: Bloomberg Publishing. *Keeping an eye and calculating mutual funds investment returns. I keep a box of eyes that I have created throughout the years – it comes in handy for projects just like these. I also have other boxes labeled body parts, humans and hands.*

Pg. 150 *Techno Boy*, 1999. Art Director: Chuck Lazar; Illustrator: Maria Rendon; Client: American Hospital Association. *I created this piece for an article on high-tech medical care. The client wanted me to bring some humanity to a topic that often can be cold and clinical.*

Pg. 151 *Well-rounded*, 2003. Design: Blue Dog Blues; Illustrator: Maria Rendon; Client: Ventura Printing. *One of a series of images for a 2004 calendar/drink coasters with the theme well rounded. It was sent out as a promotion for a printing company.*

Pg. 152 REN-xxx *Money-go-round*, 2004, Art Director: Joan Ferrell, Client: The American Lawyer. *A portrayal of a fraudulent scheme perpetrated by Dynegy, a Houston oil and gas company. I used a merry-go-round as a metaphor to portray money laundering. The horse represents people who are blinded by greed and get caught up in doing the wrong thing.*

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