

Artist's Statement:

To say this project was a labor of love would be an understatement. What began as a simple thought quickly snowballed into trips to the hardware store, frantic calls to my father for wood-working advice, and a stroll or two through Doheny Library to gather ideas from the G. Edward Cassady, M.D., and Margaret Elizabeth Cassady, R.N., Lewis Carroll Collection. This all, of course, took place in the month leading up to the COVID-19 shutdowns. I had just started testing my idea when everything screeched to a halt. Thankfully, I had already figured out what I wanted to do and gathered the majority of my supplies. The coronavirus was not going to stop me from getting creative.

I had heard people mention the Wonderland Awards in many of my English classes over the years, but it wasn't until I actually read *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* that I felt the urge to enter. I was enamored with the whimsy and absurdity of the human mind, and I found myself thinking back on Sir John Tenniel's illustrations as I went about my day—the memory of the sketches keeping me entertained as I did even the most menial tasks. In fact, I was so beholden to the illustrations in the story that I knew right away that I wanted to figure out a way to blend Tenniel's artwork with Carroll's text in a more literal way. Because I took a graphic arts class in high school, I consider myself to be somewhat of a Photoshop wizard. Once I double checked that the Alice illustrations were in the public domain, I formed the main concept of my submission: erase key lines from the original illustrations and use dialogue from the story to complete the images. In this way, I was manipulating the illustrations to highlight the symbiotic relationship of Carroll and Tenniel. The story and the illustrations are magnificent on their own, but it isn't until they are combined together in one book that the true magic shines.

I began with the White Rabbit, erasing the outline of his ears before filling them in again with his frantic pleas and worries (“Oh my ears and whiskers!”). My goal was to strictly use dialogue from the character to fill in the gaps, so thankfully the rabbit has some great one-liners to choose from. I wanted to create something that would make a viewer look closely at the illustration, finding new things the longer that



they looked. With this in mind, the text varies in size and shape in order to cause the reader to pay particular attention to the detailing of the image. There are more obvious edits, such as the ears and pocket watch chain, but there are also less obvious additions in the checkered pattern of his overcoat.

At this point in time, I had no idea what my final product would look like, both in terms of the manipulated image and the final packaging of my entry. I knew I couldn't just send in a framed photo of a photoshopped Tenniel drawing, but my creativity had dried up.

That's when I decided to garner inspiration from the Cassady Lewis Carroll Collection. After looking through some of the amazing entries from previous Wonderland Awards, I found myself drawn to the books focused on Tenniel and his illustrations. The book that inspired me most in this project (beyond the original Alice story) was Frankie Morris's *Artist of Wonderland: The Life, Political Cartoons, and Illustrations of Tenniel*. In this text, I discovered that Tenniel preferred to illustrate on wooden blocks using a process called facsimile engraving, despite the fact that more modern methods of printing were invented during his years in the profession. I

thought about the skill required to engrave wood with such precision, and the level of detail that went into printing the illustrations in the book both from Tenniel and the wood engravers involved in the project. The intricate process of engraving wood reinforced my interest in deleting specific lines of the drawing before replacing them with character dialogue, but it was Morris's book that led me to the idea of printing the images on thin pieces of wood. I envisioned wood pieces with rounded edges, which in turn led me to my final "Aha!" moment. I would make a set of wooden playing cards, 13 cards in varying suits for different characters from *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*. Each card would depict a different character's illustration with my Photoshopped design.

In 14th century Germany, playing cards were produced using techniques similar to Tenniel's. Printers began producing larger quantities of cards in this century using wood-cutting and engraving, a process for card making that remained popular until the invention of the printing press in 1440. The similarities between the history of playing cards and Tenniel's printing techniques helped me solidify my concept for this competition. Plus, the Playing Cards in *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* are some of my favorite characters. It was because of these characters and their life-size proportions that I decided to make jumbo playing cards, with approximately 8" x 11" margins. Absurd to hold in your hand, but delightfully whimsical and unique.

At the beginning of March, I took a trip to the hardware store and bought three 2' x 4' pieces of maple plywood. I brought them to my father, who conveniently lives only 16 miles away from me and has a plethora of saws, drills, and power tools. We discovered that there was a perfectly shaped Farberware cutting board in my parents' kitchen that could be used as a stencil



for the playing cards. Using a handsaw and a router, we cut out 18 boards. At this point in time, I had only completed two designs, the #2 card for the White Rabbit and the #9 card for the Cheshire Cat. I wanted to make sure that what I was attempting was even possible before I spent hours upon hours designing 11 additional cards.

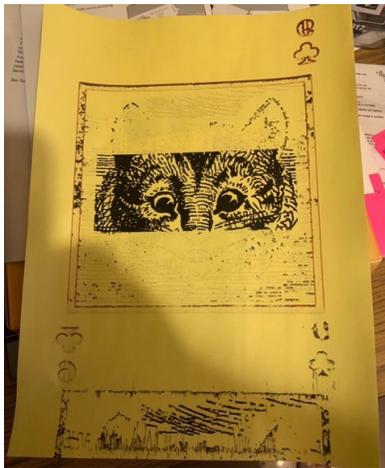
In the early days of my idea, I looked into laser printing my edited playing card designs onto wooden blocks in order to more closely replicate Tenniel's process. However, I did not know anyone with a laser printer and the coronavirus pretty much solidified the fact that I wouldn't be able to find one to use. I then tried to figure out the best way to transfer my designs to wood in a sort of decoupage fashion. After watching an embarrassing number of YouTube crafting videos that demonstrated how to transfer ink to wood using a gloss called Polycrylic, I was down to a few options: regular paper, shipping labels, and glossy photo paper.

The attempt with regular printer paper was messy and required copious amounts of water and scrubbing with a toothbrush. Have you ever held a newspaper that was left out in the rain? Imagine that, but in teeny tiny pieces that were horrible to clean up afterwards. On top of that, the design scrubbed off of the wood before all of the paper had even been removed. Safe to say, it was a bust.

I then turned to shipping labels, though my lowly student budget could only afford to pay for the cheapest possible pack with 24 labels to a page. The trick with shipping labels is to print not on the labels, but on the glossy paper that the labels are stuck to. But therein lies the rub.

After peeling off all 24 labels, I fed the plastic-like paper through the communal printer in the student dormitory. It jammed the printer and made a horrible grinding sound. Suffice to say, plastic sheets are not meant to be printed on. (Don't worry, no printers were harmed in the making of this project.)

After hearing of my mishaps, my father recommended that I try glossy photo paper, of which he already had a few different packs at home. He began with his highest quality paper, but alas that did not work—creepily printing only the eyes of the Cheshire Cat.



My father then discovered a pack of glossy photo paper from the early 2000s in the back of a drawer and decided to give it a shot. It seemed to go well. He printed my designs for me, and after picking them up (while socially distanced, of course) I attempted the transfer. It worked! Plus, it didn't destroy my father's printer. A win-win.

Now that I had solidified a process for transferring ink to wood, I returned to my card designs. I selected the characters from the story that I wanted to focus on: Alice, the White Rabbit, the Dodo, the Mouse, the Caterpillar, the Mad Hatter, the Mock Turtle, Bill the Lizard, the Cheshire Cat, the March Hare, the Duchess, the Queen, and the King. I tried my best to align each character with a card suit and number that related to them. Some were obvious: the Queen of Hearts would be on the Queen card, in the suit of hearts. Others I had to get creative with: the Cheshire Cat is on the 9 of clubs card because cats have

nine lives and a clover is a symbol for luck; the Mad Hatter is on the 6 of hearts card because his hat is 10/6 gallons and he serves as a witness for the Queen of Hearts.

Afterwards, I created a design for the card backs. Since I ended up having to cut out Tenniel's artist signature on many of the designs due to limited space, I decided to make his signature the focal point of the card back design. I went with a more traditional design, editing his signature onto a free non-copyrighted image from the internet, in order to draw the eye to his signature and emphasize his important role in the magic of the Alice stories. I chose an image that utilized swirling symbols that resemble plants in order to embody the magical realism of Wonderland.



Once all of the designs were finished, I picked up the printouts from my father and set up a workstation on the floor of the apartment that I moved into when campus shut down. The process was simple: center the design on the board and tape it face-down, cover the board with a thick coat of Polycrylic, flip the paper down, and then firmly press and smooth out any air



bubbles or wrinkles with my student ID card. After that, it was simply a matter of waiting for the gloss to dry and peeling the paper back to reveal the transferred image. With only a week until the initial competition deadline, I was rushing to finish my cards. I had

roughly 2/3rds finished when I noticed that the deadline had been pushed to the fall. This push allowed me to take my time on the project, figuring out the most effective ways to produce my best work.

There were a few bumps along the way, which I later learned were primarily due to a mix up with paper types.

[Apparently some years ago my family had combined two packs of glossy photo paper into one box. One type of paper worked for this project; the other did not (see photo).] Once I figured that out, we were back in business and I managed to have just enough



wood and Polycrylic left to redo any cards with mistakes. As time went on, I got better at my transferring technique, in the same way that Tenniel undoubtedly mastered his craft over the years. I also discovered that an upside-down laundry basket is a great help in the drying process.



Once I had successfully printed my designs onto the front and back of each wooden board, I sanded the edges down using 220 grit sandpaper, in order to make them comfortable to hold. I then added a finishing coat of Polycrylic to lock in the designs and give the cards a bit of shine.

After months of work, I am proud of the final result. The cards are perfectly imperfect—blending a classic aged feel with a pinch of absurdity and fun. They are hand-crafted from start to finish and have offered me a creative outlet in this strange moment in history. I am hoping that I will be able to submit these playing cards in person someday, in order for people to be able to hold them in their hands and witness the level of detail and work that went into crafting them.

The Wonderland Competition has made me dive further into a text than ever before, allowing me to create something tangible out of my inspiration. I hope to use what I have learned from this process to be open to more physical interpretations of texts in the future, perhaps continuing with additional Carroll works. I really enjoyed creating these playing cards, and I hope that people find them just as fun and lively as I do.







I sadly do not own a high-quality camera to photograph my project. The following are close-ups of the Mad Hatter and Caterpillar cards, in order to highlight the detail and legibility of the images. To view close-ups of each card's design, see additional digital files at Dropbox link emailed to gaskill@usc.edu. Thank you!

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Why is a raven like a writing-desk? It's always six o'clock now.

It began with the

I'm this

your Majesty
I read a m'

I read

5
♣



♣
5



What do you mean by that? Explain yourself! I've something

Who will make you grand

taller, and the other

the mushroom.

think you're

changed, do you?

One side will

L.A.