

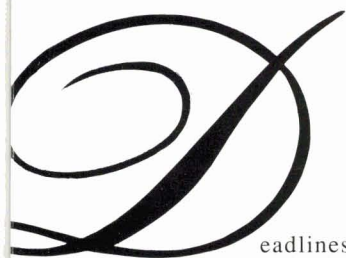
Aziza Mascara
advertisement work



Land of Endless Deadlines



by BETTIE JOHNSON



Deadlines loom over artist Garie Blackwell as frequent and menacing as the summer thunderstorms that crash around her South Florida studio. For years, Blackwell has fed the insatiable appetite of major advertisers, creating her work under looming and constrictive deadlines. Those deadlines were so dominant in her work and her life that one reason she picked the site for her home was its relative proximity to an airport so that she could get her work into the overnight mail at the last possible moment. She even has a Federal Express drop box outside her garage.

Deadlines are nothing new to any artist. Often artists find themselves near the end of an ad's development, waiting for it to work its slow way through an agency, past writers and client approval before reaching the artist's studio. But add the frantic time pressure of the television industry to the deadline pressure that is part of any artist's life, and you have the often frenzied world of an artist who specializes in animatics.

Before filming expensive television commercials, many companies do a far less expensive version on videotape. Instead of using actors and actresses, detailed, illustrated storyboards called animatics are filmed with voice-overs giving a highly accurate preview of the commercial and its potential impact on the audience.

Blackwell is an expert in meeting the tight deadlines animatics call for. Sometimes she must produce the equivalent of 20 small paintings in a week.

Blackwell is currently at a cusp in her career. Although her commercial skills with an airbrush were honed on the tight-deadline, assembly-line production of animatics, her work has also appeared on calendars, in magazine illustrations, and even on a collector's edition of plates.

From the studio at her Hallandale, Florida, home, Blackwell says she wants to get away from the animatics work. Now she wants to do fine art and further develop her illustration skills. "I spent my first fifteen years as a commercial artist without any desire to do my own work. Now I have so many ideas," she confides. While she ponders the turns

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her career might take, she is working as a draftsman in an architect's office. One option under consideration is a teaching position.

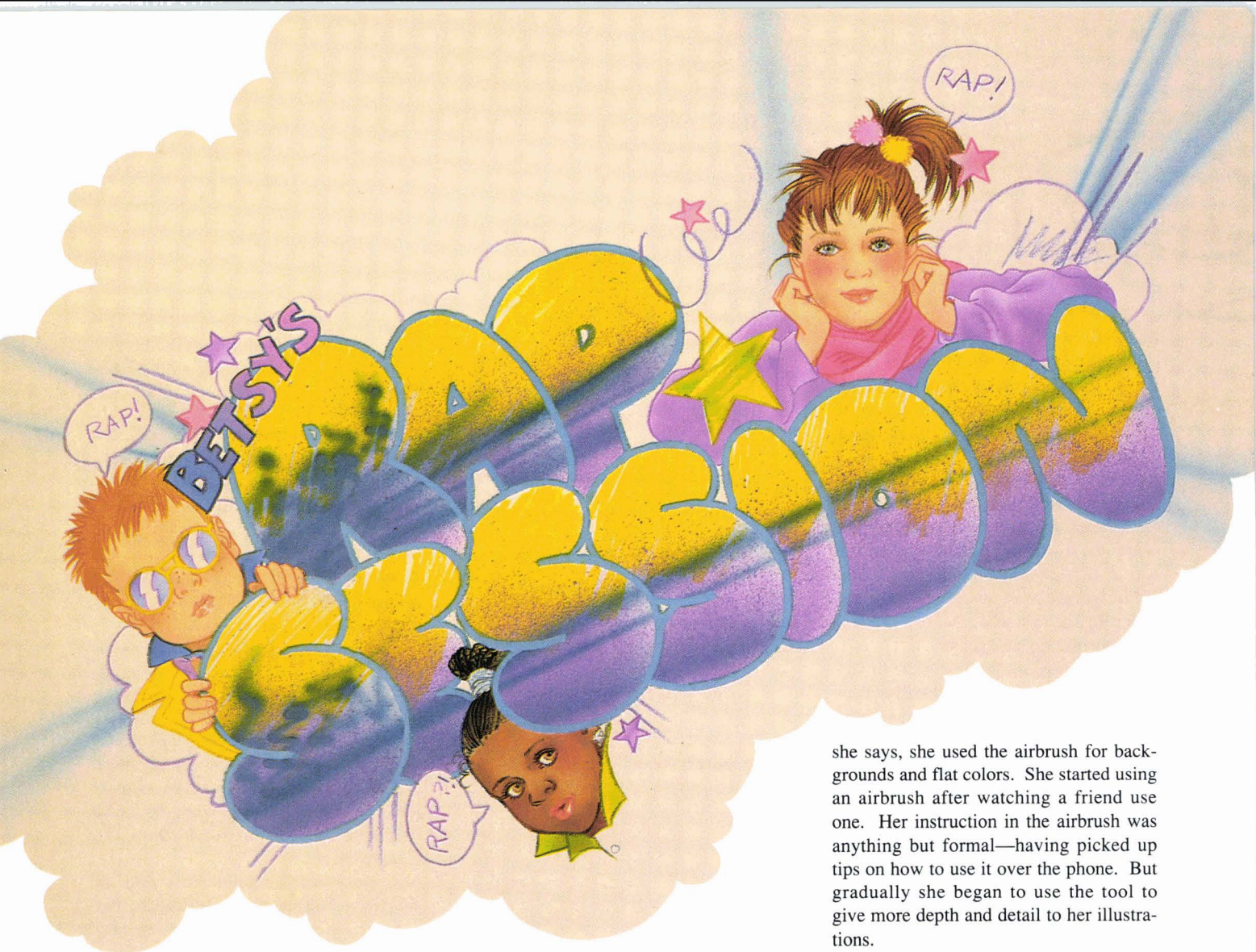
A quick scan of her portfolio reveals recognizable illustrations. There is a calendar of women dressed in period costumes that Blackwell painted for Avon, illustrations for stories in *Cosmopolitan* magazine, and a series of floral collector plates. Other national accounts Blackwell has worked on include Welch's jam, Revlon cosmetics, Exxon, Keds, Corning Glass, and Allied Chemical.

But much of that was work done in the early 1980s, before she became involved in animatics, the land of endless deadlines. "A lot of the work that shows what I can do is eight years old," she says. "I would have been a much more skilled illustrator if I hadn't done animatics." In terms of current work, the artist has done two recent illustrations for *Cosmopolitan*.

Blackwell's studio is in what is called the Florida room of a canal-front house in the southeast corner of Broward County. The west side of the room is

**Clairol
animatic work**





lined with windows. Through the glass, Blackwell can see the sailboat a friend has docked at her house. It's clear that the focus of the house is the studio. The living room is nearly empty, and the few items of furniture in it are mostly bookshelves containing art books.

From the living room, you can step through sliding glass doors into the studio. In most houses in the neighborhood, the Florida rooms are used to relax, sip drinks, and gaze at the water or pool in the backyard. Not so for Blackwell. Her studio has more furniture than the living room. The two of its walls that aren't windows or glass doors are covered in red felt. Blackwell has two white drawing boards. White cabinets line one wall. A flat file, filled to overflowing, leans against the opposite wall. The art studio has a Diazo machine to reproduce roughs of her drawings. There is a photostat machine in one bedroom. Next on her list of equipment will be a fax machine, she says. There's no telling where that will go.

Blackwell uses an Iwata airbrush, a brand selected for its reliability. At first,

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she says, she used the airbrush for backgrounds and flat colors. She started using an airbrush after watching a friend use one. Her instruction in the airbrush was anything but formal—having picked up tips on how to use it over the phone. But gradually she began to use the tool to give more depth and detail to her illustrations.

Also tucked among the artistic paraphernalia in the studio is a highly sophisticated stationary exercise bike, evidence of one of Blackwell's other passions. Blackwell, 50, is in serious training for a triathlon—a grueling event that combines swimming, running, and cycling. A set of weights is stored partly under the blue-line machine.

Blackwell didn't start out to be an illustrator in 1960. She spent seven years as an art director for a Los Angeles advertising agency. "I studied to be an art director. I was not an illustrator. I never trained for it. But I kept doing more elaborate drawings for presentations, and people kept telling me I should get an agent and become an illustrator." That's exactly what Blackwell did when she moved to New York.

Though she started working in New York at her old job as an art director, within a month she had an agent to represent her, and she soon quit the ad agency. Her first commercial work was for *Seventeen* magazine. After that, the work kept coming in. She worked on a number of fashion and cosmetics accounts before getting into animatics.



Animatic Attraction

"The most frustrating part of doing animatics," Garie Blackwell laments, "is that I seldom get my originals back." The work usually winds up in the vaults of agencies that commissioned the work.

When Blackwell does manage to reclaim her art, she often finds it unsuitable for her portfolio. This is due to the nature of animatics—often 20 or more are used for a 30-second test commercial. Each painting is seen for only a second and does not warrant much detail.

"Usually I have a week or two to finish 15 or 20 paintings—occasionally I only have a matter of days." Because she must rush the finished pieces to the client in such a hurry, she jokes that they sometimes get them while the paint is still wet.

The paintings on this page are indicative of most animatic work. Though each is comparable to some print illustrations, they represent twenty pieces done for a single job—seen for just a second by a select test audience. The exposure the work gets is minimal.

Blackwell estimates that only one of every ten animatics concepts is actually produced. She is often surprised when she sees a professionally produced sequence on television that she originally painted for a test audience. "Sometimes I wish I had a penny for each time some of the finished ads run," Blackwell teases.

Because of the expense and time required, animatics are now very much an assembly-line process done by the agencies' staff artists. Having recently chosen to drift away from animatics herself, Blackwell is not bothered by this evolution. She has found that after a decade of doing mostly animatics, she has few concrete samples of work to show for it.

"Animatics are the ultimate in disposable art," Blackwell states. When asked if she has done her last animatic, she answers without hesitation, "I hope so!"





"Dancing in the Dark"
Client: Time-Life Music
Acrylic & dyes; 1984

Her shift into animatics was gradual. In the late 1970s, Blackwell began to do a few animatics jobs, though it wasn't until about 1982 that she found she was doing little else. "Someone called my agent and asked if I could do animatics and he said, 'Sure.' I had three to do in three weeks, and I had no idea what the end product was supposed to look like. I drew like crazy for weeks, and they were thrilled."

The paintings are used by television advertisers to help gauge the reaction to the commercials without going through the expense of producing the actual ad. But the animatics are about as close as you can get without putting actors in front of the camera. Often the test commercials are shown to an audience inserted in a television program to obtain a more realistic measure of viewers' recall about the product.

Blackwell's job is to produce still images of what the commercial will show. They look much like storyboards but with far more detail and often with a series of Mylar overlays. She starts with rough sketches from the ad agency, then paints the scenes. The finished paintings are filmed in a series of rapid dissolves with the voice-over from the commercial, giving a startlingly accurate preview of what the finished advertisement would look like. The animatic version is then shown to test audiences before the actual commercial is shot.

In doing animatics, the artist also has to consider camera angles and how patterns will show up on videotape as opposed to how they look on the flat painting surface. A series of animatics for a baby oil commercial included paintings of a woman in a shower pouring the oil on her shoulder and a middle-distance scene where she talks to her roommate about the attributes of the product. It also included some detached arms and hands holding paintings of the baby oil to be used for tight shots as well as paintings of the product for close-ups.

A number of animatics jobs include "pour shots,"

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Blackwell says. Pour shots require a number of paintings for just a few seconds of videotape as the product—coffee, baby oil, wine, or bathroom cleaner—pours from its container. There have to be enough paintings to give the illusion of a liquid pouring and a wine glass or coffee cup filling.

Blackwell says the deadlines are tremendously structured. Seldom is any deadline longer than two weeks. "You turn out an incredible amount of work. You might do twenty paintings in a week. Now, in New York, it's an assembly-line operation."

The animatics have a limited audience. Seen once, they are put into a vault while the advertisers decide whether to make the commercial or revise the script. "They are seen by a test audience and accepted or rejected," says Blackwell. "All that energy for something used for one second!" Rarely does Blackwell see the finished tape or get her original work back.

One deadline was so tight that Blackwell flew to New York with the paintings and taxied straight to the studio to shoot the test commercial. The client never saw her work until the test commercial was shot.

Even as Blackwell was cranking out the animatics, the desire to do more creative work was growing. At first without realizing it, she began to put more time into the paintings, adding detail and



**Work done for
Dextrim advertisement**



"Poppies"

**Client: Harrowsmith Magazine
Acrylic; 1984.**

depth with the airbrush. "I was putting more time into them than anyone can afford for what they are used for. I was putting all this energy into paintings that were going to be seen for maybe half a second."

But she got a lot of practice between then and last spring, when she began to edge away from the animatics work. During 1988, she did a series of packages for Hasbro's Maxie doll, illustrations of Betsy McCall for three issues of *McCall's* magazine, and illustrations of the 12 days of Christmas for *Reader's Digest*.

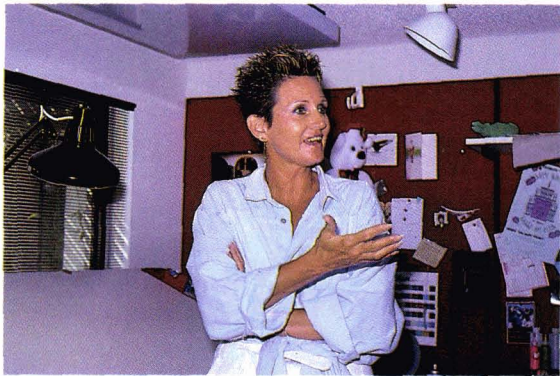
The *McCall's* assignment was one that excited the artist. Designed to entice young girls to read the magazine, Betsy McCall also gave strong antidrug messages, as well as fashion tips and social advice. Blackwell hopes that Betsy can help make the youngsters aware of other issues such as the environment. The first issue, which appeared in the September 1988 edition of the magazine, drew 3,000 letters from young readers the first week it came out. The character, a cutout paper doll that used to appear in the magazine years ago, is now a modern preteen illustrated character appearing in three supplements of the magazine. However, the project was halted after three issues when *McCall's* was sold.

Blackwell is also working with Hasbro to design the box for the new fashion doll called Maxie. Though the figure on the box will be only a few inches high, the company wants the drawing to be highly detailed, Blackwell says, including teeth and pupils.

Although she has received such plum assignments, the artist is self-deprecating about her work. "I don't think I'd be an excellent illustrator—I'm too distracted," she muses, even though her work has appeared in such tony magazines as *Playboy*.

The artist is also passionate about the environment and the outdoors. Her blue eyes flash when she talks about skin diving in the Florida Keys or sailing. Someday, she says, she wants to combine her passion for the outdoors with painting. "I would like to do more nature. I love birds, clouds, and nature. I would like to be a modern-day Audubon."

Garie Blackwell
Tech File



Style: "I started out as a fashion illustrator; now I'm doing more and more products. I don't think I'd be an excellent illustrator—I'm too distracted." The artist's portfolio belies her statement. Jobs done for such national companies as Revlon, Corning Glass, Allied Chemical, Exxon, and Keds, as well as illustrations for magazines such as *Cosmopolitan* and *Playboy*, show a distinctive and elegant illustration style.

Airbrush: Although Blackwell now uses the Iwata HP-C, HP-SB, and the RG-2 in her work, she began airbrushing with a Thayer & Chandler. The airbrushes are powered by a Medea Silent Pro II compressor.

Media: After receiving a compliment on an animatic done with Dr. Ph. Martin's Spectralite colors, Blackwell purchased the whole line. "I got a call from the client telling me how beautiful the colors were. They are extremely vibrant." The artist said that Spectralite takes a lot of abuse from scrubbing and using thinner. She also uses Winsor & Newton, Dia Dye, and Dr. Martin's Dyes. Blackwell said that since she began using the Iwata airbrushes and the Spectralite colors, she's had fewer breakdowns. "Before that, I was buying a new airbrush every

six months. I always had a couple on hand. Out of four or five, maybe two were functional."

Surface: Blackwell likes to paint on Bainbridge boards and Strathmore paper.

Masks and Friskets: Blackwell likes to make her own INTs as masks on many product paintings. These are removed with cement thinner. When doing an orange for a client, she took a photograph of an orange, made a negative, and made an INT from that. The INT was used as a mask and gave the illustration a very life-like texture. She uses Dr. Ph. Martin's Soft Tack Mask. "It seems to have a nice amount of tack. It's a good product." Blackwell prefers the matte because "the glossy gives me a hard time—paint skids over it, and there is a problem with overspray." Before the advent of friskets manufactured for airbrushing, she used Transpaseal. Blackwell reduced the high tack of Transpaseal by smoothing it with baby powder.

Cleaning the airbrush: Blackwell cleans her airbrushes by placing them in her Koh-I-Noor sonic pen cleaner. "I've submerged them in pen cleaner for days without damage." She has found this method useful for cleaning dried acrylic.

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