



## Cool Tools Show Podcast Episode 156: Michael Kupperman

Transcript

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Mark: Welcome to the Cool Tools Show. I'm Mark Frauenfelder, editor in Chief of Cool Tools, a website of tool recommendations written by our readers. You can find us at cool-tools.org. I'm joined by my cohost Kevin Kelly, founder of Cool Tools. Hey, Kevin.

Kevin: Hey, it's great to be here.

Mark: In each episode of the Cool Tools Show, Kevin and I talk to a guest about his or her favorite uncommon and uncommonly good tools they think others should know about.

Our guest this week is Michael Kupperman. Michael is an artist and writer in Brooklyn whose work has appeared in or on the New Yorker, Fortune, the New York Times, Nickelodeon Magazine, Forbes, Playboy, Heavy Metal, McSweeney's, DC Marvel, Vice, Saturday Night Live, Adult Swim, and Comedy Central, and six of his own books. "All of the Answers" is his first serious book and we'll be talking about that little bit later in the show.

Hey, Michael. How are you?

Michael: Oh, I'm fine. It's great to be here.

Mark: Yeah, it's great to have you on the show and like I said I've been a fan of your work for quite a while, so it's a real treat to talk to you.

So you have an unusual set of tools to talk about this time. One of them-

Michael: Yeah. I hope it's not too crazy a list. I'm not really a, you know, I don't make a lot of money but things like that very rarely, you know, electronic devices, so everything I have is antique and at least two years old.

Kevin: Yeah, we love technology that was invented before we were born, so if you have things that are ancient that still work, we'd love to hear about those.

Michael: Oh no, I was just referring to my Apple devices which are, you know. I have an iPhone 4S for example, which might as well be a Victrola by this point.

Kevin: But it still works, right?

Michael: Oh yeah, no, it still works great. I don't want to give it up, it's just the Apple keeps trying to update the software to 12 which would render it inoperable, so it's a little bit [inaudible 00:02:12].

Mark: Definitely. Have you seen illustrator Bob Stack's, the way he does his amazing illustrations for the New Yorker cover and stuff, I think he uses Mac OS7 and Adobe Photoshop 3.0 and then he just, it's like ancient technology and it's just his mouse is like he's using a bar of soap to kind of like ... It's crazy, plus there's videos of his work online and it's like great. I think he has no desire to switch to an upgraded version, he's got it all figured out.

Michael: I'm slightly ahead of that, but not much. I'm using CS4 and I do my Photoshop on an older machine that can't go past a certain point, but I've been trying to go back to doing it mostly by hand. In fact, the new book was done completely by hand. I mean, I manipulated it in the computer and laid it out but all the actual work was done by hand because I do feel it just is stronger for me that way.

Mark: Yeah, I think-

Kevin: And you said by hand so you mean, I actually haven't seen the book, is it like pastels, painting, ink, collages? Is that what you mean by hand?

Michael: No, no, I mean the entire book is pen and ink and the text. I did everything by hand so even on the cover, the only part that wasn't done by my hand was the barcode, which you cannot.

Mark: That would be hard to do, unless maybe certain kind of rapidograph pens with different diameters and that's not really worth it.

Michael: Yeah.

Mark: So, let's take a stab at this first tool here. It's an awareness of one's body. It's position in space in relationship to other bodies. How's that a tool and what are your thoughts along those lines?

Michael: Well, I'm a New Yorker. I've been in the city for my entire adult life, so it's obviously that a lot of people don't have this, an awareness of their body in space and how it's relating to other people. A lot of people don't have a 360 awareness of their body and walking in the city it can become very difficult. I noticed that about 20 years ago, people started to look at their phones or look at shop windows a lot more and were kind of not paying attention to where they're working, but now I think most people are doing it as a lifestyle choice. People kind of deliberately don't look where they're walking even if there's no reason not to. And then beyond that, I guess I was thinking of one's body as a piece of the great chain of intake and outtake and how unaware so many people are of that, what they're taking in and what they're putting out, and their place in ecosystem.

Kevin: So what would help them become more aware of their body?

Michael: I honestly think it's the number one thing they should be teaching in schools. I think it's the first thing they should be teaching in schools is an awareness of one's physical presence and physical reality.

Kevin: Like yoga or what would that curriculum look like?

Michael: Well, I think, I've seen a little. Actually, I've been touring schools for my son so I went to the Waldorf School the other day and they teach it there. They were teaching, "Reach out your arms, turn around, are you touching anyone?" Making the children aware of their physical space. I think that's an important tool especially as our world gets more crowded and difficult to negotiate.

Kevin: Mm-hmm (affirmative). What about for adults? Like if you had remedial body awareness, do you have any suggestions for people who are no longer in elementary school, what would help them?

Michael: Gosh, I don't know. I guess it would have to be some kind of intensive short term, but intensive training on what your body is and how it relates to others. I don't know if you've flown recently, for instance, but this is definitely, for me, a societal problem that should be addressed.

Kevin: You mean because people are sitting too close together on the plane?

Michael: Well, yeah. I just was on a flight and on the flight out the guy had his elbow in my ribs every five seconds because he was doing something digital. Yeah, and in New York it's like some people are very body aware and some people are not and it just makes life difficult.

Mark: Do you think part of this is due to the fact that people are not present because they're paying more attention to their devices?

Michael: Yeah, absolutely. Yeah, that's definitely part of it. That's definitely part of it and people, I think, are taking a more, have a more abstract relation to their own physical being in some ways.

Kevin: Mm-hmm (affirmative). Hmm. So you were mentioning that the book that you did, "All the Answers," I think that's what it's called, "All the Answers," you did it by hand in the pen. Do you have a pen that you like more than other pens?

Michael: Yeah, I tend to latch on to something and use it over and over, but I am not a fancy art hardware person. I use very cheap materials usually. I use, sometimes, office pens. Actually, I get the finest results from just Pentel micropoint pens.

Kevin: Like a gel pen?

Michael: Like a rollerball pen. And the other pen, actually, hold on a second, I've got one here. I've been using Faber-Castell PITT Artist Pens for a lot of inking for the past year or two.

Kevin: And do you like those because, and what is it that you like about those?

Michael: It's just about building a relation between it and yourself where you know what the results will be within a certain spectrum of expectations when you touch it to the paper and start to you move your hand.

Kevin: So it's like consistent?

Michael: Yeah, exactly.

Mark: What kind of paper do you use when you do your illustration work?

Michael: Most often I use Strathmore, either Strathmore drawing paper or Strathmore Bristol paper. It's very rare I use anything fancier than that.

Kevin: Do you draw at the same scale that it's going to be reproduced in or do you draw at a larger scale and shrink things down?

Michael: I frequently draw at a larger scale and shrink it down. For the new book I actually work closer to size, partly because I had to work at high speed, but also because I wanted the images to be much simpler. I do have a tendency to get kind of fussy when it's at a very large size, when it's big. But also, what was happening when I was doing a lot of work, I was doing a lot of illustration work for a lot of those magazines that you mentioned at the start, about ten years ago, and I was working in Photoshop. So what was happening was everything got taken apart into pieces because it was easier, so every piece would be separate. The writing would be separate, the frames would be separate from the images, pieces of the image would be separate, and then I'd put it together in Photoshop because it was much faster that way, to have everything as a separate

element. Particularly if you were working with a magazine like the New Yorker that might ask for a lot of changes suddenly, it just made things faster.

Kevin: But you gave that up because you're not interested in speed as much anymore?

Michael: I just felt like the results weren't as impressive as when I was doing it all by hand.

Kevin: Mm-hmm (affirmative). Yeah. And speed is not as much of an issue. If you had to go back to speed, would you do that same method or would you try to just do it by hand faster?

Michael: Well there comes a point when you're really against the wall, when you have an hour to do something and then you'll do whatever you need to to get that done, but in general, I actually had to do an intense amount of work last year because I was doing two weekly strips at times while doing the book, so I was really churning out the work but I was determined to do it all by hand and I did. I just put in the extra effort, I guess.

Mark: You know what amazes me is how some of those early cartoonists like the EC stable of artists like Al Feldstein rode every single, scripted every single story in science fiction, in weird fantasy and weird science, and drew all the covers and the pages are huge on those too, and they're just loaded with detail. How did those guys keep up with that schedule? Were they killing themselves?

Michael: I think they were probably ... I think the thing that people always miss when they're considering artist careers is how enabled they were and how motivated they were. If you get an artist who's both enabled and highly motivated, they can work wonders.

Kevin: What do you mean by enabled?

Michael: I mean enabled, given an environment when they concentrate on their work without worrying about other considerations.

Kevin: You meaning that they're kind of protected in a certain sense just to work.

Michael: Yes.

Kevin: They don't have to do the administrative, they don't have to do the-

Michael: Yeah. Arguably just giving an artist a regular slot and having a basic set of assumption for what they're doing, that's enabling them to an amazing degree if you can get that. That's very rare these days. Back then, I think it was partly also that they were at the beginning of an art form and if you're in at the beginning of an art form or an institution you can do absolutely amazing things because there are no rules yet and there's no dead wood standing in front of you.

Mark: Mm-hmm (affirmative). And maybe it was kind of related to what you're saying, I actually went into a studio with the other artists and they worked there, they didn't work from home.

Michael: Sure. Yeah. It was a completely different lifestyle. Part of what's happened in my lifetime is when I started, computers weren't dominant yet, so you would deliver the artwork personally, which meant at least you would see the people you were working for, but that has completely disappeared now, so it's very unusual to actually meet the people you're working for or if your peers, that's completely gone out.

Mark: Do you still go into the New Yorker office and talk with Françoise Mouly?

Michael: No, I haven't worked for the New Yorker for a few years now actually. And in fact, I worked for them, I don't know, maybe 150 times over almost 19 years and I was in their offices three or four times.

Mark: Wow.

Michael: So it was not usual. Yeah.

Mark: Mm-hmm (affirmative). Okay. Alright.

Kevin: So, in doing these kinds of things, what are some of the other tools that you really rely on and make a difference to you?

Michael: Well, besides the pens, the pencils, the paper and the computer, I use a light box these days, which means I don't have to pencil and ink on the same page, which I used to do. Yeah, that saves some troubles.

Kevin: Maybe describe for those who don't know what a light box is what it looks and what it does.

Michael: Oh sure. A light box is a box that has a plexiglass top that emits light through it and you can place, do a pencil version, for example, on it and then put paper over that and do the ink over that because it projects light through the image, which-

Kevin: You can trace in the ink over a pencil drawing.

Michael: Right. Yes. One thing I do use a computer for is laying out comic pages. These days, even though I'm lettering the text, I'll lay it out with a font of my text and then letter over that, so that saves some time with [crosstalk 00:15:01].

Kevin: Oh, I see. Wait, well that's a very clever thing. So you scanned your own handwriting into a font and then you type out the text in that font and then you use that with the light table to ink in by hand your text over there computer text.

Michael: Yes, and I rule out the panels on the computer too. And for the book, I actually had it set up in Photoshop with sliding layers so I would have the panel borders always the same distance from the lettering. I'd have these sliding pieces that I'd adjust in Photoshop, then print it out, and I could work over that.

Mark: So, Michael, just going back for a second to the light table, the old light table I used had a fluorescent bulb underneath the plexiglass, but then my 15 year old daughter has a light table that just a flat piece of plastic that has LED lighting and it's so much lighter and thinner. Is that what you're using or do you have one of the old metal boxes?

Michael: I think mine is somewhere in between. It's not completely a flat yet, but it's an inch tall light box and it's 18 by 24 and I have it ... I do actually have a specially built lectern in my studio so I can work standing up, so the light box is mounted on that at an angle, so I can stand up and work on it.

Kevin: So do you usually work drawing standing up?

Michael: It varies. It really varies, what the work is, how fast I need to do it, and how exhausted I am.

Kevin: And do you find certain work warrants you to stand or is it just your own body when you're tired or when you need to change your position?

Michael: It's mostly about the size of the piece actually. If I have a larger piece or one where I'm trying to do it all as a single large page, then I'm more likely to do it standing up at this lectern.

Mark: So, Michael, your book is quite interesting. "All the Answers."

Michael: Thank you.

Mark: It's about your father who was one of the famous quiz kids of television in the 1950s, I guess?

Michael: Yes. He was on the show from when it was on radio, so he started in April 1942 when he was five and left the show some time at the end of 1952 when he was 16, and it was on TV by then. It started on TV in '49.

Kevin: So would you describe the book as a graphic novel? Would that be far?

Michael: Yeah, definitely. Well, I was actually, I gave a talk at Google about the book and I said at the start, I think it says graphic memoir on the cover but I actually have been thinking a better description might be graphic auto noir because it's about the protagonist, me, investigating his family or a member of his family, and in doing so, discovering the limitations that have been present in his life.

Mark: It wasn't like a, your father's experiences as a quiz kid was positive at first and then it kinda took a turn for the negative. I'm not really, hopefully not spoiling anything by saying that.

Michael: No, yeah. It seemed like it should have been a fun experience. He was involved in an amazing period of American history and this kind of coming together of show business and the war effort and all these things and it's absolutely fascinating, but yes, at the end I don't think he ultimately enjoyed it.

Mark: What was the Quiz Kids?

Michael: The Quiz Kids was this show where five kids would answer questions, most of them sent in by listeners, and the three kids who scored the highest would come back the following week.

Kevin: Was that the show that there was a scandal with Van Doren who had been snuck some of the answers?

Mark: Was that the \$64,000 Question, maybe?

Michael: No, that was later. The show that Van Doren was on was Twenty-One. A man named Herbert Stempel complained. It's all in that really good movie, Quiz Show. My father had been on one of those quiz shows in the same period and then when the scandal hit, they also started to question whether Quiz Kids had been fixed, it came into the hearings, as well. To me, I think, I see it as he was negotiated into feeling he had cheated on a quiz show and I think it really was a source of great trauma for him.

Kevin: I see. Okay. This graphical autobiographical noir memoir that you've written, it's in black and white. Was that a deliberate decision?

Michael: Yes. Yeah, it was.

Mark: How did you go about researching the book and finding out about everything with your father and what happened in that era?

Michael: Well there were different stages. There was a lot of work on the internet and on Google, and a lot of looking at old news archives, at radio magazine archives, ancestry sites, and auction sites. There was some real-world research, going to the Paley Center and looking at their records and going to Columbia University to look at the producers' papers. And then there was a part that was just thinking about my family, which I'd never really done. In a way I hadn't. Really thinking about what things meant. It's funny because I think a lot of people stopped doing that about their family and I certainly had, and to really start to put things together was leading me to all these new conclusions about who my father was and as I followed them, it was really startling.



Mark: We will include a link to "All the Answers" and a couple of samples pages also, so people can see how beautiful this book is.

Michael: Right. Right.

Kevin: But we should mention that you've done other books or, I don't, again, I don't know what you call these graphic novels that are highly illustrated and you tell a very visual story, and do you use similar techniques or was computers and Photoshop more involved in things like your book on Thrizzle. Is that how you say it?

Michael: Yes. Thrizzle. It kind of went through an art. The first book was before I had a computer so it was completely and absolutely done by hand and I had to deliver the originals to the publisher to be scanned. The three books after that were all done using the interface of the computer to varying degrees. For the Thrizzle books, definitely the computer was more involved in that process and I used my own font and tricks like that to speed up the work. By the time we come back to the new book, I'm starting to use my hand for everything again and I think I will for the foreseeable future.

Kevin: Oh wow. So those are in color and they kind of, they have their own, you have your very special style which I really enjoy and readers may enjoy as well. They look like nothing else you've seen.

Mark: Yeah.

Michael: Thank you.

Mark: It's excellent work.

Michael: Thanks.

Mark: So Michael, I just want to thank you for taking the time to talk to us today and I really hope that people check out your book. Where can people go if they want to find out more about you and your work?

Michael: I have my own website [michaelkupperman.com](http://michaelkupperman.com) and if people want to say hello or interact, I'm on Twitter, @mkupperman.

Mark: And that's M-K-U-P-P-E-R-M-A-N.

Michael: Yes.

Mark: Okay. That sounds great. Thanks so much, Michael.

Michael: Thank you.