

Martin O'Neill

Graphic artist, illustrator, filmmaker



Frederick Douglass In Five Speeches (2022)

London born Martin O'Neill creates mixed media collages for a wide range of international clients across publishing, advertising, design, film and interiors. His work evolves from a subtle alchemy of collage, silkscreen, photography, paint and digital techniques. He approaches each project with a fresh perspective; a constantly moving array of processes fuel an evolving practice which include typography, writing and experimental film. Years of hands-on studio experimentation have resulted in a unique and instantly recognisable brand of image making with an analogue ethos. Martin works from a large archive of found and self-generated material and also with supplied imagery.

Interview 22/01/23 MO=Martin O'Neill, CW=Charlotte Waelde, GR=Graham Rawle

MO I've been ploughing away making collage for three decades now. About six years ago, I was asked to make a collage in response to meeting a holocaust survivor. We made a small collage film from a voice edit of her talking about her life, but it became a kind of template for us. We started getting the animation for documentary work. I don't know how to animate, so there's a friend, Andrew Griffin, who does all of that. We kind of landed on this formula through a small experimental film and it really clicked, people really liked it.

GR When you began working in film did you think about copyright differently than when working with static images?

MO When I'm working for editorial it feels ephemeral; it will be gone quite quickly, but when it came to signing a contract with Netflix or HBO every single part of the work has to be copyright cleared or original. We've done six proper jobs now and it's been new territory for every director we've worked with. We had to invent our own template of how it all worked but essentially, they want to know that everything, every flower in the background, however fleeting, is either mine,

cleared or licenced. Cut It Out collage stuff is taken out of the history of print that I have twisted up and made my own. I have to be confident enough to say, 'These are Cut It Out elements I clear them for inclusion.' Other elements are what they give me to use from their pool of brand material for the documentary.

GR Are they prepared to accept your saying that they're cleared? They don't need any other evidence of that?

MO One client was really like, 'Where did this flower come from?' I said, 'It's from a flower bed in a postcard of Roundwood Park in London'. Because it is moving image and things are fleeting, there is a grey area of stuff that is so generic. I will splice three different cars together to be one car and things like that. I might use a famous photograph of Charlie Chaplin, but I've got new arms and a different head and so on. I think every commercial collage artist has to learn to draw their own line in the sand, and that only comes from experience. Being a pre-internet artist, there were the glory days of just chopping up almost anything - straight out of college, I heavily chopped into National Geographic, things like that. You see a lot of online / instagram collage artists doing that and not even thinking twice. I'm really careful when it comes to commissioned work, even editorial.

GR Are you careful because of fear of a legal claim against you or is there an ethical or moral judgement about what you use and what you don't?

MO I think it's more legal. Cut It Out is run by just me and my partner, and one big legal dispute could just wipe out the company.

GR Instead of always running scared of being legally challenged on your use of copyright protected material, have you ever looked into what your rights might be as a collage artist, as a pastiche artist?

MO There's lots of writing about copyright in collage and reappropriating images and there's always a sentence at the end where it says it's a sort of a grey area.

GR Do you think about it more than you used to?

MO Yes. The Internet opened up availability. There was a student or young artist a few years ago who just printed loads of my work off my website and made books. I found it on Etsy, selling away. I said, 'Oh, you can't do that.' And they said, 'Well, why not? What are you talking about? I found it. I found it on the internet.' I said, 'But that's my work, I made it.' They didn't get it, even though they'd done a degree and everything. But I do use other people's really arresting images, they're not all obscure oddities, I do choose these sort of heroic moments in photography to base the new work on and that does need more serious consideration. But it's a kind of untraceable amazing body of work. So, it's tempting, you know... I did a sketch for a client using an amazing vintage photograph of a female model and he wanted to build his brand around this sketch for this CBD edibles Mother Nature branch of spliffs basically in America. He fell in love with the image and I was like, I just can't let it be used. Even though there was no known source for that image I just couldn't let him use it. It was the best image, it was perfect, but I just don't want any heat coming back because it could be nightmare.

I saw that there is the percentage rule of thumb: taking something and it being less than 10% of an overall image. I've heard different percentages quoted for that rule of thumb thing but the

part of my image that might be in contention is only 10% of the overall image and it's not the important bit, the main factor for the whole image, things like disappear into the ether of the new work.

MO I do find Flickr Commons very good because what has happened over the last 15 years is that even tiny little libraries in the middle of Auckland or something like that have started scanning their archives and putting them in their little library digital archives. Things like that are amazing for being able to track things down and then get permission for these obscurities. Netflix have a clause in there where I have to indemnify them... one of the things we try fight for is an indemnity cap. So if anything ever did get pulled up, our legal bill wouldn't be astronomical. I work with an animator and sometimes he will use a bit of Wave footage. When we first started out, I was like, 'Where did you get that from?' and he'd say they were royalty-free on the Internet, but we had to make sure that was from a qualified downloadable source and list it in the assets that were used to create the film. I have to state that whatever I do is 100% clear, everything is totally fine. So, I always say, 'Can we have a cap on the indemnity, like the price of the job at least, and they often just say, 'No we can't.'

CW Do you have insurance?

MO Yes. I didn't use to.

CW But you are underpinned by insurance, so you have lessened your risk quite significantly.

MO I'm so careful now that I don't think I need it, but some of the contracts demand that you are insured.

CW How different would your work be if you weren't worrying all the time about liability?

MO I think I would make it faster and it would possibly be just a bit richer because there's some amazing photography - just the history of wet darkroom photography before digital photography. It's just a very rich seam of amazing images, when people had to take more time to make images.

GR It's like the creative process, when you're just doing it, not thinking about it, gets interrupted by second guessing - *should I, shouldn't I use that?* You've done it for so long now that you can still produce work that looks very free, unconstrained, but it must have an impact on the spontaneity, the creativity of the process, having to think about it.

MO Yeah it does. Having done all that stuff for a long time though, I can source good quality usable material quite quickly, but it's constant hurdles of the mind: yes, no, yes, no. Netflix ultimately buy the stock imagery that I'm going to put in the collage, they buy all that. Even in a sketch, because they may say 'that's it brilliant, that's what we want' I don't want to have to say, 'but we can't use that', you'd just trip yourself up. It's almost like your sketches have to be cleared in that way too, for this level of commercial output. Because it's global as well, this is forever around the whole world instantly, however fleetingly this one image, so there's that added sort of enormity. So, for peace of mind I do go to the stock image sites quite quickly when working on roughs, but then spend a lot of time winding it through my mangle to squeeze the stocky-ness out of it. I don't like it to have the taste of stock in the final output.

GR If you were doing stuff that wasn't commercial, would you make any judgments about what was off limits?

MO No, not at all. There would be nothing sacred then. The only thing that would stop me would be it being something lots of people had seen. Obscurity is my key if I'm selecting figurative imagery.



GR Do you ever get into areas where you stop and think about using another artist's work, when someone else has created something you don't feel comfortable claiming as your own?

MO Yeah, there's a line there. It's weird though, the older you get the more that doesn't bother you.

CW You did say there was a problem when the students' used your work and sold it on Etsy.

MO I think essentially it's commercialization, it's making money from someone else's creativity without even trying to push anything forward or create anything new. I think it was just so obvious that they were basically just printing my work out and selling it.

GR What were they selling it as?

MO Just 'found collage books'. There's other collage artists' work in there, but not much done to it at all really, apart from sourcing it and printing it out quite nicely and cutting it into a book format and stapling and binding it.

Having the freedom to use images from the history of print is the best thing in the world and when I make my own work and the work in sketchbooks, there's no holds barred, but when you enter the commercial realm it's a different matter. It's changed over the years; you just learn. When I started out it was kind of like, don't use Madonna or any pop stars that are alive, but everything else doesn't matter. It was very blasé. I think I'm probably over-cautious now.

CW Do you attribute the images that you use to the authors?

MO On a book cover, if I used something and it was a key part of the image, I may have to. Like collage illustration by Martin O'Neill with use of so-and-so's photograph, or 'with a nod to so and so.'

But there are the times when something is so good it transcends the copyright. I have a friend, Russ Murphy, who is a collage animation pop video artist and he draws on footage in the most beautiful way and creates these painterly abstracts. He was asked by Thom Yorke from Radiohead to create an animation based on a piece of music, and he found footage of a ballet dancer doing very beautiful moves, and he did this beautiful two-colour abstract animation over it, and then he blended it into a murmuration of starlings and stuff like that. It is ~~an~~ amazing, a beautiful thing. But the family who own footage of the famous dance, obscure as it was, recognised it and said, 'There's our Rachel from the 1980s doing her famous neon dance'. But they instantly fully endorsed it because it was so beautiful and so well done.

I think I sometimes I feel like I've narrowed myself into a bit of a goody two-shoes collage artist. At least when I'm doing work that's not for corporate giants like that, I should just loosen up a bit more and use those beautiful books I've never been able to find the source of - because you're breathing life into those images.

When it's commercial, everything's got to be cleared. It's still quite a new thing getting our head around that, but obviously we got scared by the giant quite quickly with these contracts and just went, 'Right! anything that goes into a sketch must be cleared.' I like that notion of just not caring. I think I have to loosen my T&Cs shackles and know when to tie them on again. I think you go into a groove of doing commercial work it does sort of tie you. You have to do it very quickly and it's a real pressure with copyright clearance and image choice; there is no time. For 4 minutes of animation, I might do 150 collages and that might be 15 different little animations with different themes, but that's like ten weeks, and that's sourcing treating, going through rounds of development before it goes to the animator. Collage is quite quick to make once you've got good ingredients. Like a chef, you have recipes in your head and it's quite easy to knock something out; even with really basic ingredients you can make something quite palatable, if you're experienced. It's kind of been an invented career; there wasn't a template for it, you just pick things up as you go along. I'm still nervous of the whole copyright thing, but then you just navigate that part of it. If anything, this conversation made me feel like I need to take more risks.