



L.A. Exit

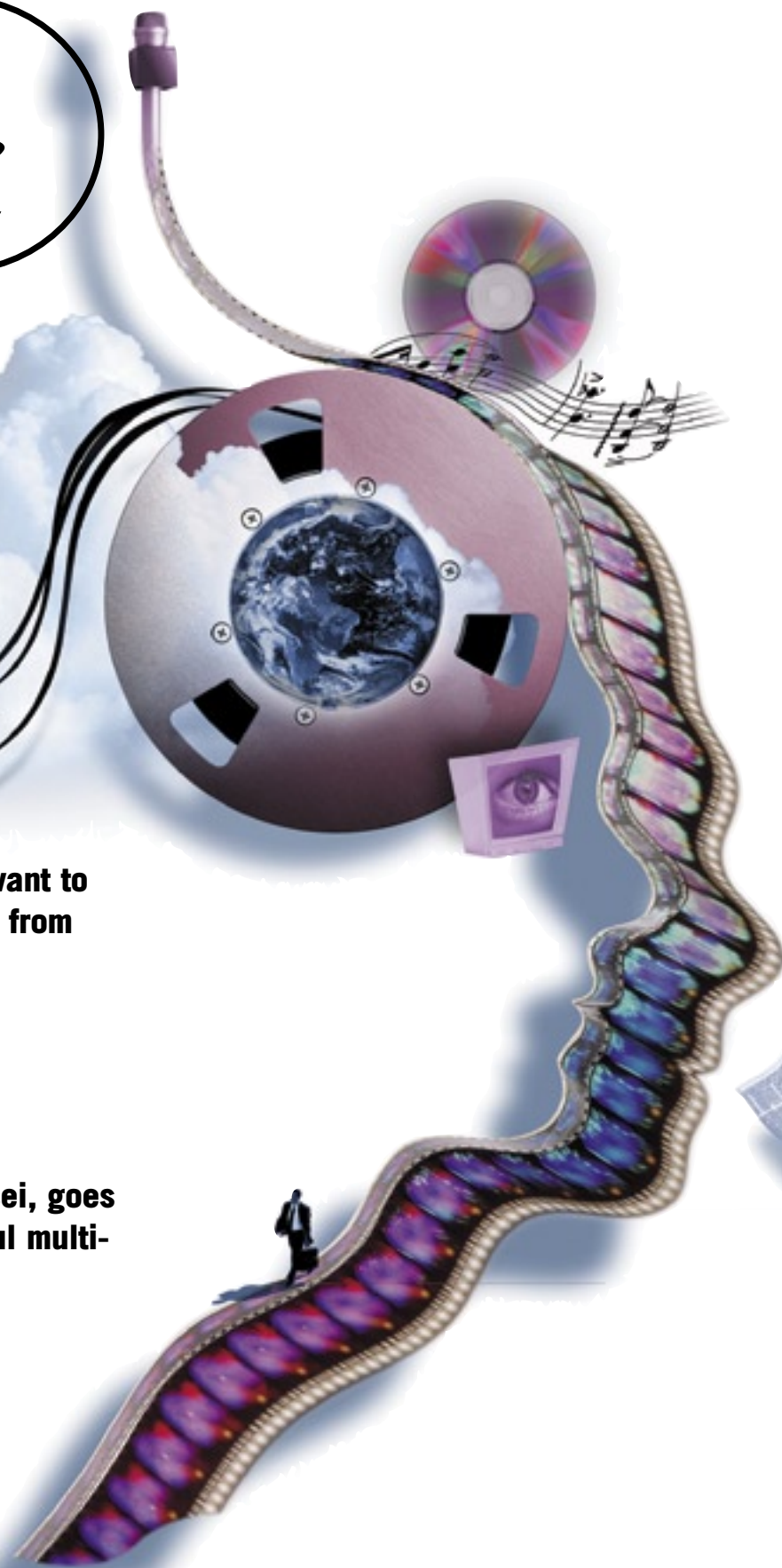
Photo-illustrator
Russ Widstrand
heads for the hills.

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Get Outta Town

Getting away from it all put photo-illustrator Russ Widstrand smack-dab in the middle of things.

by Michael Kaplan

Russ Widstrand moved to the kind of neighborhood where you don't mind getting lost. Driving to his home on the mountain roads that wrap around Santa Barbara, California, you pass ribbons of beautiful foliage, rustic-looking homes set back from the road, and a historic Spanish mission that attracts busloads of tourists. While searching for the switchback leading to the dirt road that runs to Widstrand's property, you wonder whether this may be too remote for a big-time commercial photographer whose income has been doubling annually for the last four years.

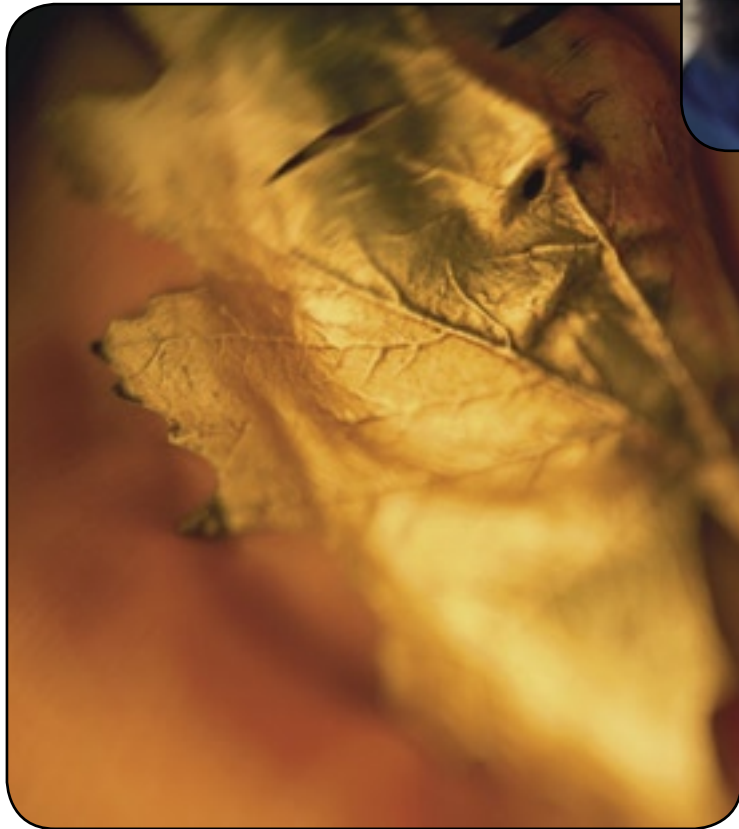
It's a thought that has crossed 37-year-old Widstrand's mind as well. Sitting on a weather-beaten Adirondack chair next to his home (he and his wife and studio-manager, Barbara, have affectionately nicknamed it "The Barracks") and the converted indoor pool that's now a 1,000-square-foot studio complete with a state-of-the-art office and computer-facility, Widstrand explains that moving so far from his longtime home of Los Angeles was not something he spent a lot of time mulling over. Leaving L.A.'s art community behind was a sacrifice, and one gets the impression that if he had thought about it for too long he might have stayed put—never mind that things have been going swimmingly since the Widstrands moved up here a year ago.

Skyscraping oak trees, a backyard abundant with cacti and chirping birds are not exactly what you'd expect to see outside the studio of a man who makes his living by creating computer-enhanced photo illustrations for button-down corporate clients like Hewlett-Packard, IBM, Xerox and Sprint. But Widstrand insists that the natural environment offers at

least one professional upside. "My creative process has a lot to do with a quiet meditative time when I can't have any interruptions," he says, pointing out that this is necessary because his work, which illustrates concepts that are awkward to articulate, is created pretty much from whole cloth. "Basically, I go away and conceptualize. I just doodle with a note pad and an eraser. In that regard, being here contributes positively." He smirks and adds that the downside of working in such a remote area became clear during a recent storm when a large tree came crashing down, and electricity disappeared for three-and-a-half days as a series of deadlines loomed.

High-tech nature boy

Tall and lean, with shoulder-length hair, laconic vocal delivery, and a preference for grunge-wear, Widstrand specializes in concise photo illustrations that communicate multiple messages to broad groups of people. He produces them by using



Russ Widstrand (above) shot "Silence" (left) in 1993 with a conventional 4 x 5 camera, using selective focus. The still life was not commissioned, but has been bought from stock by several publications, including *California Business*.



Widstrand's studio (left) sits atop an indoor swimming pool, which now serves as a storage area under the floor. Its large windows can be covered with black-out shades. He created "Figure 3.1.2," (below) for the Times Mirror Company in 1993. This image, which depicts the transfer of printed information in schoolbooks onto a CD, was deemed "too dark," says Widstrand, who revised the piece, making it brighter, for the company's annual report.

a combination of photography, illustration, Photoshop, and plug-ins such as Specular Collage and Andromeda. A 1982 graduate of Pasadena's Art Center College of Design, Widstrand creates work that is multimedia and multi-disciplinary. "It's difficult, but not problematic, to be straddling photography and illustration," he says, leading me into his office where new furniture (fresh from Ikea) supports a sprawl of monitors, optical drives, scanners and computers. "Clients love to segment and specialize. But all this digital stuff blurs the lines big-time. When I work on a particular piece, I alternate between being a photographer, an illustrator, an art director, a designer, and a guy who knows all the digital stuff. People who hire me can't quite figure the final image like I can," he says, shrugging, "so they just let me do it."

Widstrand explains that his move out here from the much more cosmopolitan Windsor Hills, a residential area of Los Angeles, was precipitated by the ultimate urban nightmare: the 1992 L.A. riots. "The neighborhood we had been living in is generally quite safe," Widstrand insists, adding that he and his wife happened to be vacationing on land they own in Montana when the riots broke out. "But after hearing that the 7-Eleven around the corner from our L.A. home was burning down, we felt it was time to leave."

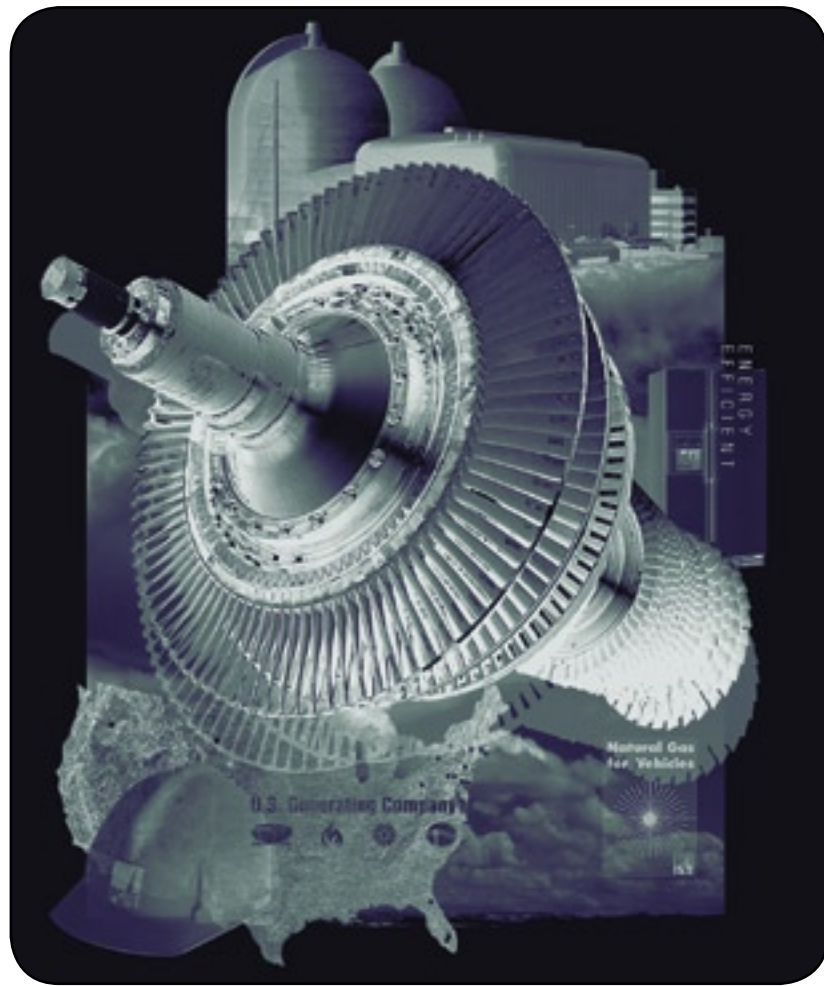
Surveying the abundant space in his office, Widstrand points out, "We considered moving to a different section of L.A., but a place like this in the Hollywood Hills would have cost around \$750,000. I mean, Santa Barbara isn't cheap, but we didn't pay that much. At one point, we even considered moving to Montana, but that state is so remote, it would have been suicide socially." In considering various relocation spots,



Widstrand found Santa Barbara appealing, in part for its proximity to Brooks Institute of Photography. The esteemed school provides him with a constant flow of assistants, a top-notch film-processing lab and enough camera-repair facilities that he recently had no trouble getting a few lenses fixed.

Location? Location? Location?

The most surprising thing about Widstrand's departure from the big city is that his career has not been hampered by the move. To this he attributes the computer technology that's been playing a major role in his work since 1990. He does not need to be near clients ("I've made the man rich and have never even met him," says Robert Cooney, creative director at Manhattan-based Principal Communications, who assigns IBM work to Widstrand) or even to a cyber-savvy lab. "We have an ISDN line here," Widstrand says, shrugging and making it all sound very simple. "So we modem our images to Bowhaus [a processing lab] in Los Angeles. Sometimes they



Pacific Gas & Electric in San Francisco commissioned " 'Tis Midnight on Olive's Brow" (left), but published a slightly altered version. London-based insurer Trade Indemnity used "Analysis & Direction" (above) for its 1995 annual report. "Sometimes I never reach a full understanding of what a company does," Widstrand admits. "I just do the art."



"Electronic Democracy" (left) is about "different ways of accessing government," says Widstrand. The photo-collage, created for IBM's Industry Solutions Group, an electronic institute that exists primarily on the Web, depicts justice, education and a federal building. Stratus Computer, of Marlboro, Massachusetts, commissioned "Pay As You Go" (below). One of Widstrand's earliest digital works, it was created on a Macintosh IIfx when the French bank Crédit Lyonnais was a major Stratus client.

send us back a 4 x 5 transparency, or I have them overnight it to the client. It's reached the point where I have that much faith in their quality."

That said, however, Widstrand quickly adds a caveat about long-distance relationships. He rarely sends out anything but a low-resolution file for client approval. "I don't like to release high-res images directly to the client because of the reproduction issues," he says. "You hand a SyQuest disk to a printer, and he won't know what the hell it should ultimately look like. I'd rather send it on a piece of transparency film so that everybody knows how it should print up."

The work is what matters

Clients, from one end of the country to the other, seem to think the world of Widstrand's judgment of color and aesthetics. "There are plenty of people who do computer illustration, but most of them are wireheads and they have no taste," says Cooney. "I like that Russ keeps his work free-flowing on a white background without framing it." Paul Kroner, art director at Lapham/Miller Associates in Andover, Massachusetts, notices a narrative element in the pieces that he and Widstrand devised for Hewlett-Packard and the high-tech company Telos: "They manage to tell good stories. Rather than being a meaningless merging of photos, they communicate information. For Telos, he had to speak to six different markets with a single image while maintaining a sense of graphic energy," Kroner says.

As far as the relocation goes, Widstrand's clients insist that it's a non-issue. Maybe if he did glitzy portraiture or fashion photography, location would be everything. But for a guy whose work is rooted in a technology that most of his clients do not fully understand anyway, the finished piece is really all that matters.

This represents a major paradigm shift from 10-or-so years ago when most photographers had to maintain cushy studios in big cities, close to their clients' offices. "Russ is actually calmer than he was in L.A.," observes Christopher Lehmann, senior designer at San Francisco-based Michael Osborne Design. "If it makes sense for him to be on some hillside in Santa Barbara, and that enhances the quality of the work, well, fine with me—so long as he can get to fax machines and FedEx drop-offs." Jane Kobayashi, a partner with Malibu-based 5D Studio and a good friend of Widstrand's, has already seen the move's impact on his work: "His pieces have become more simplified. He's stopped outlining everything and seems more in tune with the elements themselves. It's more about the visuals than the technique," she says.

Back at Widstrand's studio, he walks me through the impressive setup. It begins with a look at the very structure that sold the house in the first place: the indoor pool, which he and his wife immediately envisioned as a shooting space. After buying the place, Widstrand built a tiled floor over the pool, complete with a trap door and ladder. What was once the

pool's deep end is now gargantuan storage space. On the far side of the room is a 14-foot wall of windows, which Widstrand outfitted with blackout shades (natural light here is bountiful). And since the pool had been heated, the wiring (which puts out 60 amps of power) can easily accommodate all manner of studio lights and strobes.

Through a doorway, we are back in the office where Widstrand enhances and manipulates his photos. He boots up his Power Mac and shows off a piece he created for Hewlett-Packard that depicts a juggler's hands in action. Widstrand shot the hands in this studio, and it raises the question about the difficulty of finding suitable models so far from a major modeling center. Widstrand says it was a cinch. "There's a local agency here, and they sent over a bunch of people. Most of them don't model full-time, but that's fine with me. I've never been caught up in the whole glamour-scene aspect of photography anyway."

Setting up the ISDN line was considerably more troublesome. "The phone company out here screwed it up *ad nauseam*," Widstrand gripes. "They don't sell enough of them, and they don't have enough support. But now we've got double-bonded B channels, which are four times as fast as a 28.8 modem." And that's not the only part of Widstrand's operation that's built for speed. He's got a Leaf scanner that can create 120MB files, a Power Mac 8100/80 (with 200MB of RAM and 6GB of hard-drive storage), and a data through-put system that can move information at 5MB per second. In addition, Widstrand uses a 128MB optical drive, a 200MB SyQuest drive and a Radius Rocket accelerator card for multi-processing.

It's all viewed on a pair of screens (a 21-inch SuperMac and a 17-inch Apple monitor) and backed up daily on digital audiotape (DAT). "We have double-fire file cabinets for our archives," Widstrand says, adding that he is working on sell-



ing his 12,000 photographic images as stock. "Plus there's a duplicate DAT file at a remote location. At this point, those DATs *are* the business." Occupying an adjacent workstation, Widstrand's assistant, Trevor Tallman, operates an older computer/scanner/Rocket setup, while a third Macintosh is hooked up to the ISDN line as an Internet connection.

The operation, says Kroner, has become better oiled since Widstrand relocated. And when a couple of clients from Long Beach came to visit, they left with gushingly positive impressions. "They loved looking at my work in my environment,"



Widstrand created "The Juggler" (left) for a publication of Hewlett-Packard's healthcare division. The shapes were later wrapped with EKG and sonogram print-outs. His "www@" (below) appears on the Widstrand Web site (www.silcom.com/~widphoto) and "Men With Direction" (bottom) depicts a Pacific Gas & Electric building project.



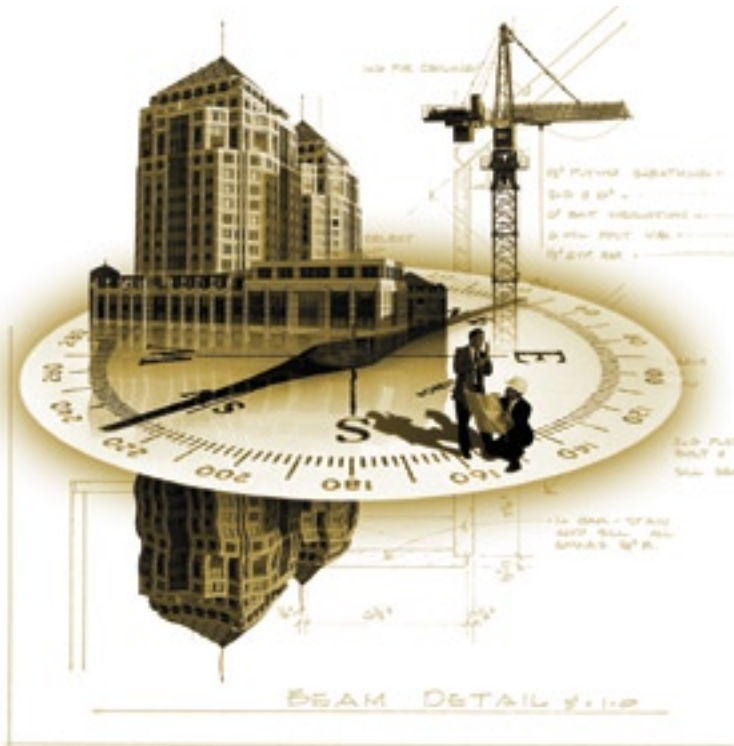
Widstrand remembers, guessing that their trip to Santa Barbara was a good excuse to get out of the office and enjoy the country on a Friday afternoon. "This place shows a certain level of success and professionalism."

Nevertheless, a good chunk of his business involves annual reports (a mercurial business, as companies rarely use the same illustrator two years in a row), and you'd think that he'd need to be in an urban area to schmooze clients and generate new sources of income. Widstrand insists that this is not the case. Working without a rep, he has managed to maintain a flow of international clients (something that became crucial in light of California's recent financial slump) through word of mouth and self-promotion. "At the moment I am expecting the Internet to be a pretty decent presence for us," he predicts. "Right by my phone I keep a note, reminding me to tell people to check out our site."

to describe," he says, acknowledging that he misses it more than he expected. "The feeling of Santa Barbara is not the feeling of L.A."

Does that bum him out? "A little bit. But now, having come from a very hectic annual report season, I am waiting for the attributes of Santa Barbara to become more a part of our daily lives. We've planted ourselves in this environment, but have not yet had a chance to set roots."

Stepping outside, he takes in the spectacular mountain view from his backyard. "The outdoors is phenomenal: We are surrounded by oak trees, the beach is nearby, we can walk to hiking trails." It's obvious that Widstrand has determined his course: "It's pretty nice here, and the business is doing fine. I don't think we will be moving back to L.A." ●



Solitude has its drawbacks

Finding the creative stimulation and communal buzz generated by contact with other artists has been trickier than any work-related issues: "The energy of L.A. is a hard thing

Michael Kaplan is a Manhattan-based writer who has been published in American Photo, Smart Money, New York and a number of other magazines. He is the author of Buried Mistakes (Dutton/NAL), a nonfiction book chronicling a murder and the events surrounding it.