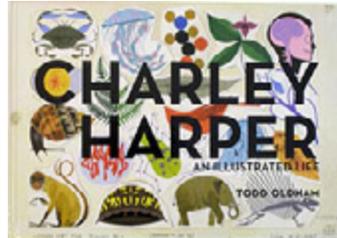


The Fashion Designer And The Artist

Todd Oldham Shares The Story Of The Friendship And Inspiration Of Charley Harper

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The collaboration between Todd Oldham and the artist who inspired him features over 700 of the Charley Harper's works. (CBS/Cincinnati Museum of Art)

(CBS) Todd Oldham has been a fixture in the fashion world since he burst onto the scene in the 1990s, with bold colors and potholder pockets. In recent years, he's teamed up with companies like Target, La-Z-Boy and FTD, to design everything from dorm room furniture to floral arrangements.

But five years ago, Oldham's design career took an unexpected turn when he happened across a promotional magazine published by the Ford Motor Company in a junk store.

"I'd never heard of Ford Times," Oldham told CBS News correspondent Cynthia Bowers, "but the illustration of this bird, a red-eyed vireo that was on the cover, it kind of just stopped you in your tracks. I couldn't figure out why my hands were zombied to this thing, and I bought the one and then looked up Charley Harper. Didn't know who the guy was, but, oh my God, what a genius!"

Turns out, that genius was the same Charley Harper who illustrated a book Oldham owned, and cherished, as a boy growing up in Texas.

"I had the giant 'Golden Book of Biology,' which was one of my favorite things I've ever had in my life," reminisced Oldham. "I kind of remember, it was like I crawled into that book. It wasn't like a book in the room. It was this fort, this immersion for me."

Oldham was determined to find the man whose illustrations had so captivated him. He found Charley Harper living in Cincinnati where he had been a working artist for the last 60 years.

Harper, his wife Edie and son Brett - artists too - were all part of the local art scene.

Oldham arranged to meet Harper, hoping to learn more about the man, and his work, face to face. Brett Harper remembers his dad was less than impressed that the world-famous Todd Oldham was one of his fans.

"He would say, 'Who's Todd?' or 'Todd Schmodd' or 'Todd's not a God,'" said Harper, laughing.

Despite Charley Harper's jokes and a forty-year age difference, an unlikely friendship sprung up between the artist and the designer.

“What happened with him?” Bowers asked Oldham. “What was the connection?”

“Well, with Charley, I mean, I loved what he did so much,” Oldham told her. “He’s one of the few people that I actually respected so much that even if he wasn’t gonna be nice, a nice guy, I don’t think there would be anything that could get in the way with how much I loved the work. So the fact that when I met him, he was enchanting and more lovely and inspiring and hysterical and sweet - I mean, way, way, way more than I ever imagined - it was really kind of a dream come true.”

A dream come true, because Harper’s art had such a profound impact on him.

“Charley influenced so many facets of my life,” Oldham explained, “starting with my color sense. That’s what fuels everything else I do.”

“So, was most of, you know, what you guys became as friends, was it all centered on art?” Bowers asked, “Or did you talk about life?”

“Oh, everything, yeah,” Oldham said. “I mean, Charley was so kind. He never bristled at the five bajillion questions I hammered him with, wanting to know everything about everything.”

And as their friendship grew, Oldham began keeping a video journal of their get-togethers and conversations, which often came back around to the art that drew them together and how Harper evolved from naturalist to minimalist.

“Minimal realism”, Harper called it, a spare, geometrical style.

“The words that he used were flat, hard-edged and simple. What do you think he meant by that?” Bowers asked.

“Well, Charley was very practical,” Oldham answered. “So those were, are indeed, unemotional observations of the art. He’s leaving out all of the fuel that makes those things, those works, magical.”

Of all the magical works Harper created, his favorite was one he called “Jesus bugs.” Harper explained that as a young boy on a farm in rural West Virginia, he became fascinated with insects that seemed to walk on water.

“But he spent a lot of time staring at the creek,” Oldham shared, “and there were these water striders on these shallow creeks. And he started realizing that because of the lightness of the bug, it would create these little, circular rings around the feet.”

“Why did you do it?” she asked him.

“I’ve gotten to do a lot of things in my life. But this was one of the few things I knew, it was like, it must be done. There was no choice. It must be done. And I’m just so happy I got to do it.”

“And then the full reduction of it was shadowed on the bottom. He had this 360 way of being able to show something above, something underneath, underground. And it was so inherent in him. But the sum of all those pieces came out with the point of view we’ve never seen before, and probably never will.”

And as the years passed, Oldham made it his mission to expose more people to that distinctive Harper point of view. Oldham devoted five years to tracking down, cataloging and archiving all the works produced by Charley Harper, everything from posters to paintings to illustrations.

“I’m a Harperologist,” he said. “It’s a rare opportunity to, like, micro-study someone for five years. That’s really something.”

“Did you ever imagine five years ago that this, your life would have taken this turn?” Bowers asked.

“Well, with this, no, no. Unfortunately, if I had seen a list of what was involved I don’t know anybody that would have really signed up for it, because it was a Herculean task, you know?”

But Herculean as it may have been, it’s also reaped some rewards for Oldham. He was inspired to incorporate Harper’s art into some of his furniture designs.

“When you look at his work, what makes you think couch, ottoman and La-Z-Boy?” Bowers asked.

“Well, the forms can be adapted to many, many things.”

And those adaptable forms usually center around wildlife, everything from raccoons to cows to ladybugs to birds.

“Now these three images are all silk-screens that were first seen in Ford Times Magazine,” Oldham said, describing three of the designs.

In August, when the Cincinnati Art Museum opened an exhibition of Harper and his wife Edie’s early works, Todd Oldham was there too to introduce a new Harper work, a book called “Charley Harper: An Illustrated Life.”

Just weeks before the exhibition, Oldham flew to Harper’s sick bed to show his ailing friend their collaboration which features over 700 of the artist’s works.

“We walked in on him,” Oldham remembered, “and he was more unwell than I had seen him in a while. It was a little startling. And he wasn’t able to speak much, but we went through every page of the book, and he thanked me for doing the book and said he loved it.”

A few days later, Charley Harper passed away at the age of 84.

“Well, he meant and means everything to me,” Oldham told Bowers. “It was a bond, I don’t know - it was, it was otherworldly.”