

Off the Page, with art director Anna Minzhulina

APRIL 13, 2017 ~ NATIONAL MAGAZINE AWARDS

Off the Page is a regular interview series featuring National Magazine Award winners. In this interview we chat with award-winning art director Anna Minzhulina, who spent 10 years at the creative helm of *Maisonneuve*. “Maisy” was named Magazine of the Year at the 2016 National Magazine Awards, and over the years it has been among the most lauded and decorated magazines for design, illustration, and photography (as well as its writing and reporting).

NMAF: Let's start with *Maisonneuve*. You spent over a decade as the art director of the award-winning Montreal quarterly.

ANNA: Maison-who?! I have never heard of it?! Is it any good?!

(Sorryyyyyy, I just could not help myself!) Indeed, my tenure at the magazine was exceeded only by the logo itself—the infamous Maisy dude. I could easily be a special edition Maisy mascot!

I joined *Maisonneuve* in 2005, shortly after I graduated from the Design Art program at Concordia University. Then in the summer of 2006, I became the Art Director. At the time, the magazine was in its fourth year of publication.

Looking back, we were both wild spirited newbies! *Maisonneuve* was just getting noticed, but still in the early stages of fully developing its editorial and visual personalities. And, there I was...an idealistic designer taking my first steps into the professional art world I felt so passionate about...excitedly searching for the special place to house my creativity. There was *maison* and it was *neuve*.

We complemented each other very well. And in a retrospect, the collaboration blossomed into a fruitful and long-term relationship.

NMAF: *Maisonneuve* is one of those magazines that is sometimes difficult to describe, yet always attracts alluring descriptions: quirky, bold, refreshing, imaginative, passionate, delightful, thoughtful, exciting...



Photograph: Florentine.

ANNA: For people who are familiar with Maisy (the affectionate in-house name), you may say...A versatile humanitarian with socially and culturally inclined tendencies and some very personal issues, who welcomes anyone into its *Open House*, obsessively collects *Letters from Montreal*...in addition, has strange *Fictional* fantasies, whole-heartedly laughs at the *Comics*...at times gender confused, but very intelligent and *oh!* such a visual feast for the eyes to devour ;)!

Undoubtedly, Canadian readers have a variety of great magazines to choose from. Just as easily, dozens could fit the description you gave. But even so, I feel the major difference between other publications and *Maisonneuve* is the consistency. It's *Maisonneuve's* extraordinary ability to remain uncompromisingly true to its philosophy of high-quality editorial and visual storytelling, from one issue to the next and throughout the years.

To sum up...*Maisonneuve* is a voice of organic harmony, which with equal strength speaks *to* and *of* both human experience and human expression.

NMAF: How would you describe the creative vision you set out to achieve at the magazine?

ANNA: I feel successful visions are the ones that are flexible in nature. They adapt to the circumstances and times. With enthusiasm and passion, there is nothing impossible...as long as it's based on the principles of honesty and integrity.

I always strove to design *the* best magazine I could possibly create in spite of the numerous limitations. In my mind, there were Plans A, B...Z and, if none of those worked—well...I would do it myself!

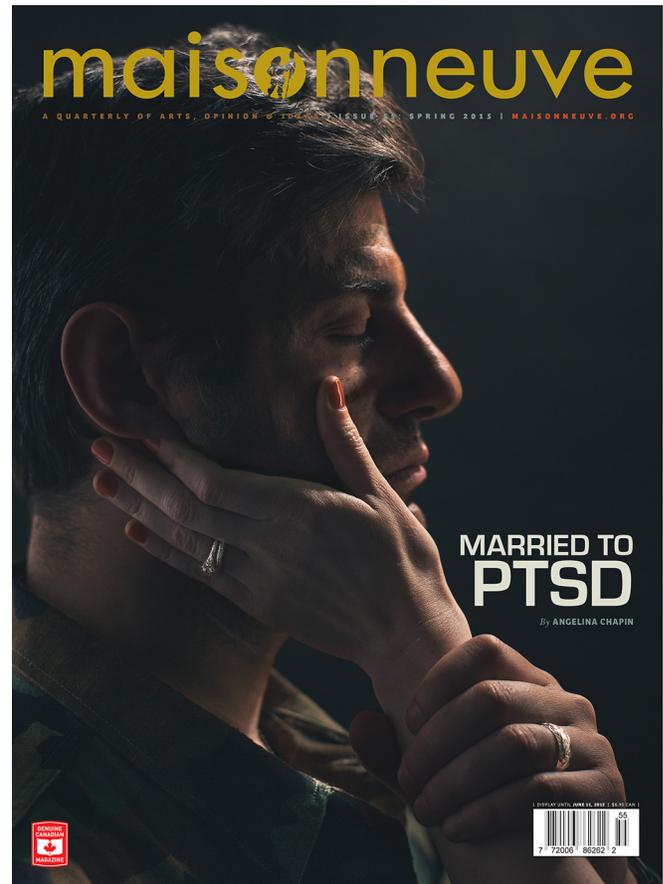
Over the course of a decade, those visions and approaches evolved beyond simply design aspect/aesthetics and into an understanding of such important values as creative collaboration and the conceptualization of emotionally deep visual narratives capable of touching and evoking lasting impressions and intelligent conversations.

Furthermore, I like to think of the magazine pages as the walls of an art gallery, where art is *displayed* for practical reasons, such as the pictorial entourage to an article. The words and pictures co-exist.

But at the same time, the images exist in a realm of their own and are appreciated as a separate entity with their own story. Usually, that story is connected to the written one, but it does not have to be in a literal way. I liked to commission illustration that, if there were just empty pages with no words, the images would still have the visual power to stand on their own.

If you think about it, that's the natural state of the words before they arrive on the designed page. Why can't the images create their own sustaining presence? That's one reason why I think *Maisonneuve* has been so successful... it has had these multiple strong presences that can stand alone and also interact.

NMAF: Is there a magic formula for directing such a unique publication, or do you re-invent the wheel, so to speak, every time you start work on a new issue?



ANNA: Hmm... yes and no?! Each issue is a new experience, for the team and for the readers. Be that as it may, you don't reinvent the philosophy—it's the anchor. You adapt and modify the approach to the underlying design to provide individual and suitable reflection of each story and its characters, which are unique in their own right.

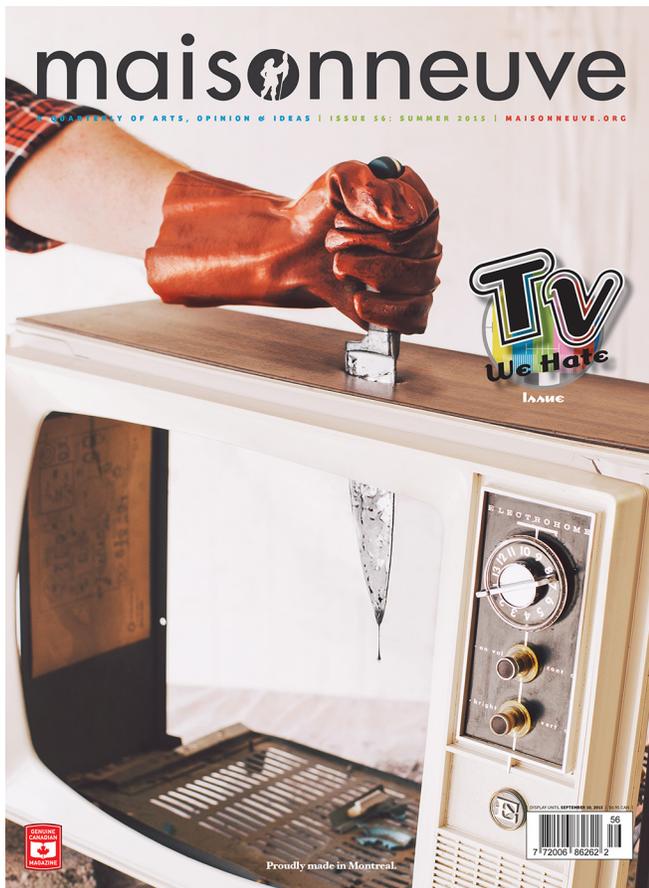
NMAF: It's fair to say that *Maisonneuve* has been one of the most celebrated magazines in Canada over the past decade, as judged by its peers in the industry and its readers. As its art director you have collected 6 National Magazine Awards for your work—3 for Best Magazine Cover and 3 more for Art Direction—among more than a dozen nominations. Maisy has also won Magazine of the Year twice in that span.

ANNA: The number of people, who *de-friended* me on the Facebook skyrocketed! Truthfully, I am humbled and very honoured for every nomination and award. Thank you!

NMAF: What has been the significance to you of the National Magazine Award recognition from your peers?

ANNA: Aside from what it personally means to me as well as everyone else involved in *Maisonneuve's* production, the recognition of effort, sacrifice, time, sleepless nights, grey hair, broken promises, cancelled dinner dates...it is the acknowledgement of women's visibility within creative fields.

I believe in the vital role women play in diversifying the publishing world by exposing it to their sensibly strong perspective. So kudos to National Magazine Awards Foundation! I hope it will inspire young women illustrators, photographers, and art directors in Canada to persevere. So that in the future, there are more female voices such as Marta Iwanek, Gracia Lam, Selena Wong, Suharu Ogawa, Genevieve Simms, Heidi Berton, Ness Lee...and the list goes on and on.



NMAF: Let's take a closer look at some of your most celebrated work, and perhaps you can tell us a quick story of how it came together:

In 2011, you won a Silver Medal in Art Direction for a Magazine Story for “Monuments: The City in Three Parts”—a progression of towering illustrations by Amy Casey accompanying a suite of poems by Roland Pemberton. What was your inspiration here—was it the poetry itself, or something more?

ANNA: The challenge with poetry is: it's an art form naturally open to interpretation. Overly strong visuals can clash with or even *crash* the delicate aesthetic of poetry itself. But no visuals at all, in a magazine like *Maisonneuve*, would be a cop out.

In the case of “Monuments” the inspiration came equally from both—the beautiful text and Amy's wonderful work. I created a collage of collapsing imaginary houses so the text could interact with Amy's images in a way that allowed both to stand on

their own and coexist in peace on the same spread. That's hard to do! So often with poetry there is a love-hate relationship with surrounding images, but this one worked.

Amy was reluctant at first, but when I showed her what I have done as a mock-up she was very excited and happy for her work to be adapted in this creative way.

NMAF: In “Gays for God”—Silver Medalist in 2013 for Best Magazine Cover—you created (with photographer Kourosh Keshiri) an irresistible image of a contemplative Jesus draped in a rainbow flag, which accompanied the cover story by Clancy Martin about a new LGBTQ-friendly evangelical movement. This is an image of infinite subtleties—from the blue eye to glowing halo and the soft edges. The mood is very inviting to the story. What were the questions you asked yourself as you worked on this design?

ANNA: Perhaps, at one time or another, we all contemplate being *draped* in the

fabric of our own fears and doubts, while waiting for the divine to show the way... it's the concept that talks to universal experience while personal as well. A close-up portrait was the best way to capture the dichotomy.

As for the questions...I am asking myself the same ones today, as I have done then. One of them is how can I, a gay woman myself, shine the light on the relationship LGBTQ community has with spirituality in a singular iconic image to the broader audience? To create a bold and intelligent visual statement to inspire pride in one side and to engage into conversation the other one.

NMAF: How did it come together?

ANNA: Well...it's not that easy to find Jesus wondering the streets, more so to convince him to be gay for the photoshoot! But hey, drop the *Maisonneuve* name here and there and you might be surprised! ;)

Usually, I have a lot of ideas and sketches for the cover (story). Drew Nelles [the editor-in-chief at the time] and I agreed on this concept as the final one—the stand alone powerful image and the direct reflection of Martin's story.

With the help from dear friend and brilliant photographer Kourosh Keshiri, I was able to get amazing raw shots to work from. Subsequently, I photo edited and photo illustrated the selected image (the most sincere and devoid of pretence) into the final cover version.

In other words, I deliberately de/emphasized and added specific details (such as halo, blue eyes, serene lighting, deep shadows)—the visual signifiers, to create a stronger impact.

NMAF: The “TV We Hate Issue” cover (also a Silver Medal winner for Best Magazine Cover in 2015) looks like it was absolutely fun to create—a friendly poke at the subversive, gonzo style of MTV. Were any TVs actually harmed in the production of this cover?

ANNA: Ha! Well, yes, twice. How many of us just get so annoyed with what is on TV we just dream of taking a hammer to it?... or in this case, a butcher knife! I deeply

apologize to TV set lovers for butchering a very cool retro television...All in the name of art!

The amazing Ian Patterson and I worked on five covers together, the “TV We Hate” was the second one in that sequence. Ian is the example of someone you just click with. He has mastered an amazing skill—working with natural light.

For a start, there were many, many doodles and sketches for this cover. As I remember correctly, we narrowed it down to two main concepts. What made this one the final one was the minimalism and pointedness. The complexity lay in the precise execution—the limited (minimalistic) number of elements did not leave the room to hide mistakes. It’s something that either works or completely fails. This is why, when one element was off the whole cover had to be reshot. Afterwards, just as with the “Gays for God” cover, there was extensive photo editing to ensure the right details are highlighted while the unnecessary ones either overshadowed or removed completely.

Visual knowledge is important, but it’s not necessary to enjoy something from purely aesthetic point of view. That’s why the most interesting and iconic images successfully and equally merge both, concept and beauty, into one.

Here’s a peak at how the design evolved:

NMAF: Do you have another favourite creation from your *Maisonneuve* career?

ANNA: For many artists, myself including, the favourite creation is the one yet to be created. Otherwise, what is there to strive for?

The favourite ones are the most memorable ones, which in one way or another enriched me with certain experience, insight or knowledge. Each image I worked on has a story behind it.

The ones that jump to mind, though, are:

- Ian Patterson’s “Married to PTSD” cover and the divine images accompanying the story;

- Mike Ellis’ “Rest in Peace” funeral home;
- Selena Wong’s semi-submerged/emerging aboriginal woman [at right];

- Sean Michaels’ cardboard Griffintown knight;

- Sylvain Dumas’ Disneyesque, pencilled characters in mid-flight on paper, fending off an erasure;

- Finn O’Hara’s twin cancer survivor portraits on a spread, shot in a beautiful copper-green light;

- Kourosh Keshiri’s kissing piggy heads;

- Haunting portraits of transgender performers by Andrew Querner;

- Adventurous shots of neon signage against the Vancouver landscape by Grant Harder;

- Daniel Ehrenworth’s fridge-light portraits for “Walt”;

- Luc Melanson’s comic, “Art Deco Decay”. ...and so many many more...

Each one, no matter how big or small, was an unforgettable moment in time shared between kindred spirits.

NMAF: What do you look for in a creative partnership with an illustrator or photographer? What is your process of communicating an artistic vision for a magazine story that brings out the best in an artist?

ANNA: My choice with whom to collaborate on projects is based on a great admiration for artists themselves and their work.

Imagine, you receive a bucket and it’s filled with stories for the next issue, you lift it up above your head and just turn it over... so the words just wash over you, like a waterfall. Most of the water will drain away, yet some will penetrate your skin and leave you with a sensation...a feeling or thought.

Out of the heart and straight to your mind, that will be your guide to conceptualize ideas and find the right voice to breath the life into the story. You can only bring out the best in others if you yourself believe passionately in what you do. Then your enthusiasm will ignite the alike spirits to join you on the crazy joyride called creative collaboration. And they will become your *partners in art crime*.

I love working with people who see creative process as an adventure. This requires trust, open-mindedness, and mutual respect. You are pursuing a common vision, yet ping-ponging ideas back and forth to create something spectacular. Some people can’t do that. It can be hard to find great collaborators. But when you do, it’s like a drug, the highest high.

NMAF: Now that you’ve moved on from *Maisonneuve*, what’s next for you? What would you like to achieve with the next stage of your career?

ANNA: You mean, beside the grandiose production of the *Maisy* mascot costume?!

Well...it took me a while, but I finally launched my website www.annaminzhulina.com. It’s a collection of the work I have done during my *Maisonneuve* years. I invite everyone to come say hello! And reminisce of some of the *Maisonneuve*’s classics.

All in all, I still love publishing and want to pursue it further—magazines, books, other design projects...but I’m also curious about art exhibitions, conceptual design in larger spaces, on real walls, not just paper or virtual ones... it’s all fascinating to me, as long as it’s creative and/ or collaborative.

In the meantime, I am working on a drawing series titled “See You”—portraits of random people sketched in shopping malls and plazas and other interesting, mundane places... my apartment walls are covered with them!

There is life beyond *Maisonneuve*...:) But I’m keeping my subscription! And so should you.

One last thing, before I bow my farewell to *Maisonneuve*, I would like to thank one very special person, whom I never got to thank at the NMAs:

“My dearest mom, Thank you! for giving me a precious gift—the courage to live my passion and to follow my heart.”

Anna Minzhulina is an award-winning art director, designer, artist and illustrator. For ten years, she was the Art Director of Maisonneuve magazine, where she was recognized for her imaginative concepts in cover design, design, photography and illustration. At Maisonneuve, Minzhulina collaborated with dozens of photographers, illustrators and artists, many of whom won awards for their work under her direction. More at annaminzhulina.com.

The interview was originally posted online at <https://blog.magazine-awards.com>.