

Aria

GRAVITY'S RAINBOW ILLUSTRATED

ZAK SMITH ON HIS GRAVITY'S RAINBOW ILLUSTRATIONS

So ... what the fuck?

So why does a guy best known for portraits of half-naked punk-porn chicks decide one day to sit down and illustrate every single page of a relentlessly difficult classic of twentieth-century literature?

Last year a newspaper wanted an article out of me on roughly that topic. If there was a punk-porn/Pynchon connection I didn't know what it was but I told the guy I'd give it a shot and hung up the phone. I did know there was a go-go dancing, fire-eating, tattooed anarchist lying on my bed, and I knew

she was busy reading Vineland out loud—and that was about it.

A few days later, I went to Los Angeles and met lots of pornographers. The first pornographer had the muted post horn from Pynchon's *The Crying of Lot 49* tattooed on his arm. He told me to read Steve Erickson.

The second pornographer told me about a third pornographer who I had to talk to because he was like the original punk pornographer and he was doing it before anybody so I asked what's this guy's name and he said, "Benny Profane."

I called Benny:

"Benny Profane, you're named after a character in *V.* and you make dirty movies. Can you please explain to me the secret connection between Thomas Pynchon and punk-porn?"

Benny says he's a big fan and it'd mean a lot to him if he could maybe use the Gravity's Rainbow pictures in a movie he's doing for Hustler. I say no problem and I say it'd mean a lot to me if I could fuck some girls in the movie he's doing for Hustler.

Six months later I have a vigorous second career as a porn actor and Steve Erickson is writing the introduction to my book.



...So, like a lot of people, I sat down one summer and read 760 pages and the style of thought contained in those pages inspired a powerful shock of recognition and the shock bounced around my head for years afterward like a ball of fireflies. Unlike most of those people I had both an urge to catch as many of those fireflies as I could and a job that turned this activity into a pleasant and fascinating way to spend my working hours instead of a cranky, dorky, and borderline-psychotic waste of spare time.

But that's a little deceptive—I didn't really do "spare time" during the GR project. People often ask how long it took—I worked on it during nine months of fourteen-hour days and seven-day weeks. I threw away tons of drawings. I did a few

other pieces during that time but mostly it was Gravity's Rainbow all day every day. Some days, looking up the Mendoza rifle on the Internet at three in the morning or trying to figure out a new and interesting way to draw two people having a conversation in a room for the twentieth time, it seemed like the stupidest art idea on Earth. I initially tried to draw every page in order, but after a while I pretty much went after any image I could get excited about and then went through at the end and filled in the gaps. I could only pushpin about a third of the pictures to my bedroom wall at any given time and so I was constantly hanging and rearranging the pictures. My wall looks like a termite city.

People ask about my "obsession" with Gravity's Rainbow, but I wouldn't say I was obsessed—I was just doing the thing the way it

needed to be done. The book is, above all, complex and gorgeous; the pictures had to be complex and gorgeous. Would you be looking at this book if it had been done any other way?

The book was in my head as much as some Bible scene or bunch of grapes or Peruvian factory-worker plight was in the head of some other artist, and I decided to deal with my subject in the hope that, once dealt with, it would make sense, and so I dealt with my subject, as all artists do, with the only style I have, and my style is nothing if not thorough . . . , . . . which makes these illustrations a little complicated.

— Zak Smith