

How to escape agency banner-ad hell, win illustration awards

 By Leigh Andrews

31 Aug 2017

While award shows celebrate the agencies and brands doing amazing work, those behind-the scenes don't often get a chance to step into the spotlight. Step aside for illustrator Sarita Immelman, whose work garnered 11 Loeries and two Cannes Lions awards this year alone.

Immelman's Loeries accolades include work on the Design Grand Prix for **Marble Open-flame dining** with Grid Worldwide Branding. Immelman's work with Grid on the **TBWA 'The disruption company' redesign campaign** also racked up campaign silvers.

Immelman also worked on **Goodbye Malaria** with TBWA Hunt Lascaris Johannesburg, which also picked up metal at Cannes Lions.

Impressive stuff. But then, everything about this Johannesburg-based freelance illustrator and designer flourishing in a world where illustration has taken a back seat to photography and is dominated by technological advances and increasingly sophisticated computers is impressive, from her daily 5am start to how she's pushing for illustration to make a comeback as a specialised craft and empowering freelance designers to do so with her Fresh Helga studio.



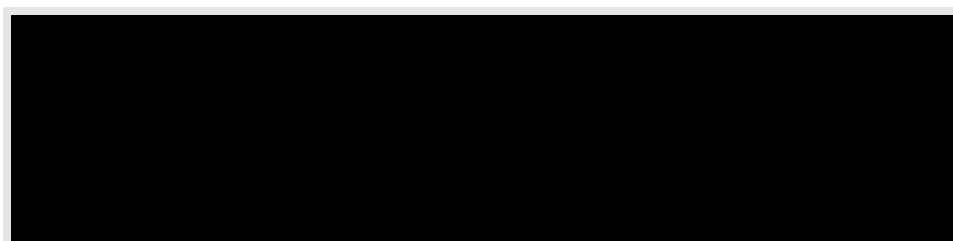
Sarita Immelman.

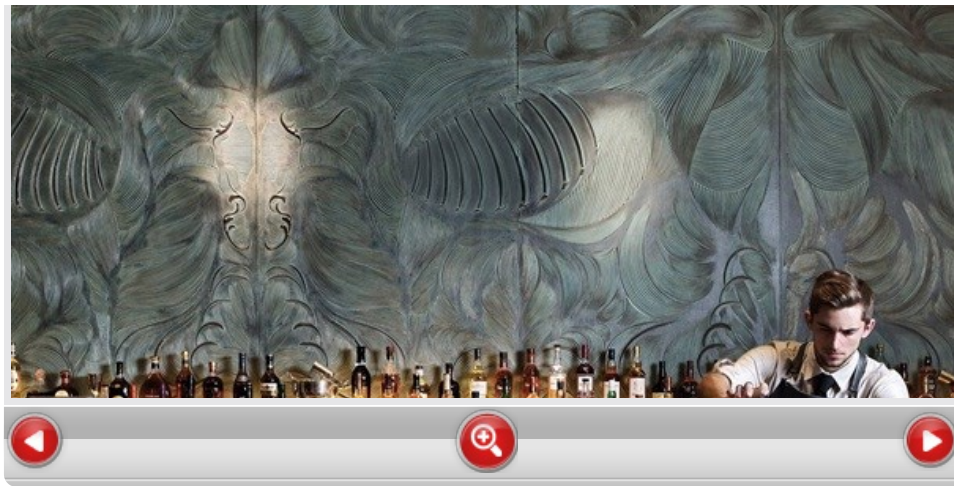
There's so much to tackle here, I almost didn't know where to start. Immelman shared how that Loeries' Grand Prix-winning concept was brought to life as well as what this level of recognition at the Loeries and Cannes means to her as an illustrator, gives us a glimpse into an average day in her life and how Fresh Helga is set to benefit the current freelance community.

■ *Talk us through how the concept for the Grand Prix-winning work for Marble restaurant in Rosebank came about and how you brought it to life.*

Jan-Hendrik Labuschagne from Grid approached me with the concept of making meat – something most of us take for granted – into a luxury object. He had a very clear vision of merging the delicate strands of fat that you get in quality meat with the pattern in marble stone to create the core visual for the branding campaign. So for the logo, I recreated the natural texture in a piece of marble to form a bull's head that you almost don't see when you look at it the first time. Rather, it invites you to take a closer look at the ordinary and see something sublime in it. We went through quite a few versions to get the balance just right. It had to be visible, but not immediately. That was used on most of the collateral and we did posters in the same style, bringing the bull to life with more movement across three frames.

But the element that brings me the most personal joy is the relief panel behind the bar. At first glance, it's also an ordinary visual of a bull in a grassy landscape. When you look at it a bit longer, the line-work becomes decadent, bulging muscle fibres and flowering ribcages mirroring itself like butterflied beef. It pays tribute to the animal that gave us his beautiful delicious flesh to indulge in. It was cut out of wood with a CNC router and painted with layers of enamel by Damien Grivas.





It's a treat for me personally, because it's going to last for years. In advertising, it's not seen as ridiculous to work on something for longer than it will actually exist in the world. These panels have become a signature piece for the restaurant. The same illustration was also woven into high-end kitchen linen and aprons and is sold in The Butchery downstairs. I reflected the same design for the custom cornices that line most of the ceiling. I love how every tiny detail that catches your eye as you walk through the place was considered and crafted to perfection.

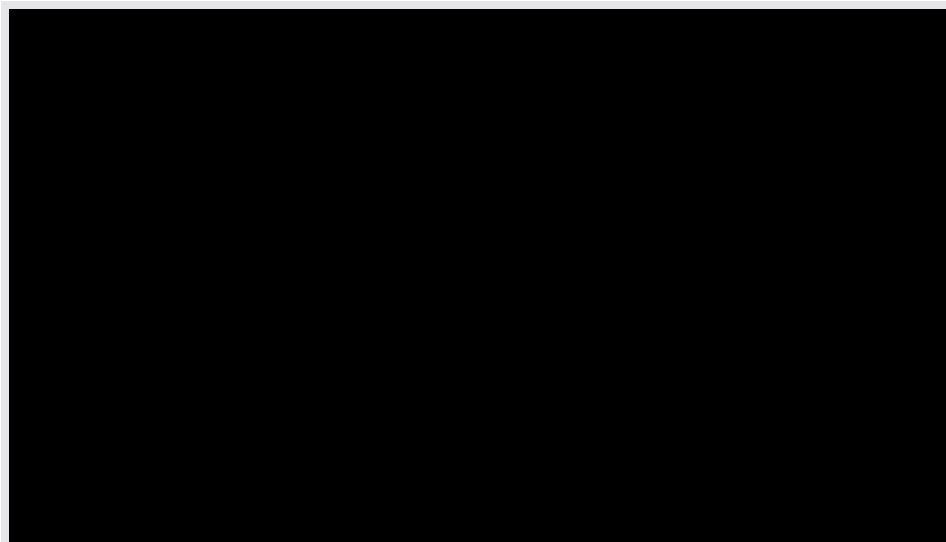
❏ ***No wonder you reeled in such an impressive Loeries haul this year. What does that level of recognition mean to you as an illustrator?***

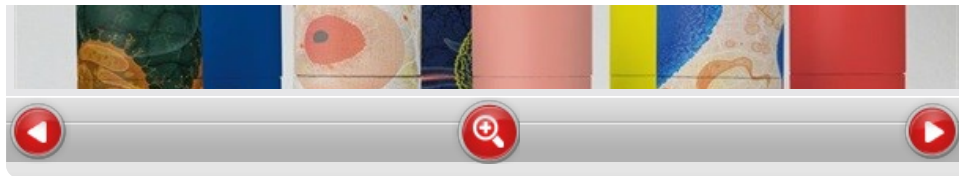
As an illustrator in our industry, my confidence takes regular beatings with a smile, so the validation helps to repair some wounds. But that feeling only lasts as long as the hangover.

As a professional, we put extra time into these awards to stay relevant. Especially as a freelance creative, your name is not needed in any of the standard promotion around a specific job, which is usually focused on the agency or brand. So winning a little something is one of my only opportunities every year to let the people I want to work with know that I'm still attempting to bring my A-game.

❏ ***You also won a pair of Cannes Lions this year. Talk us through what they were for.***

The first one was for a series of four illustrations I did with the beautiful minds at TBWA Hunt/Lascaris, specifically Nicola Taylor and Jo Theron. It formed a central part of the branding campaign for NGO Goodbye Malaria, which is trying to eradicate the disease in Mozambique through their innovative hut-spraying programme. The idea was to make patterns resembling the pathogens under a microscope, created to look like Mozambique's iconic capulana fabric. The illustrations were used throughout the CI and on all packaging. They were also applied to traditional fabrics to expand on the existing Goodbye Malaria clothing range. These patterns respond to real data, disappearing as Malaria cases are reduced. Each year, they will reprint the designs to reflect this.





My role in the TBWA rebrand was rather small as it's not an illustration heavy campaign, I only helped to freshen up their skull and crossbones icon – Grid and Chiat\Day did everything else. They obviously did a fantastic job. Those guys are so good!

■ ***That's for sure! Do those international Cannes Lions then mean more to you than the local Loeries?***

They do, simply because they're much harder to get your hands on – South Africa rarely wins for illustration at the international shows, I'm not sure why as we have plenty of talented illustrators. Maybe it's because we just don't really value design craft that much. At Cannes you can win a gold, silver and bronze for a whole bunch of craft categories, whereas at Loeries you can get a gold or a certificate. That says something about how we currently view the category, but I think that will change.

■ ***Fingers crossed. Let us in on your average day as a freelance designer and illustrator.***

I naturally wake up at 5am, with no alarm clock because the sound makes me sleepy. Work starts immediately and these are my quiet happy hours, I can produce like a Chinese smartphone factory before the interruptions begin. Illustrating on this level is like meditation for me so if I don't have this time, my soul starts to rot. Breakfast at 9am is then midday and my creative partner Marcelle Labuschagne and I use this time for scheduling, reviewing and briefing other freelancers on all the extra work-streams I can't get to personally.

We spend a lot of time giving extremely detailed feedback and working closely with everyone to make sure we can deliver the quality our clients expect. The rest of the day is more flexible. If I have meetings, I try schedule them for the same day so that I have larger chunks of time for brainstorming if it's the start of a new project. Now, in theory that means lunchtime is the end of the day for me but I fail at sticking to this, most days. There's just too much work, so I usually end up working more until I run out of steam.

■ ***How will Fresh Helga benefit the current freelance community?***

When I was starting out, pure illustration ironically didn't even pay enough to buy a decent Wacom. Surely you can't expect to earn a grown-up salary for drawing pictures all day? Kids do that. So we call ourselves 'designers' or 'art directors,' go work at ad agencies and treat our craft like a hobby. Something you do after hours to try and scratch your creative itch. You work for an agency that sometimes uses illustration with the hope that it will end up on your desk. But you know you're being bratty when you ask your traffic lady to schedule two weeks for exploration while the deadline is last week and those jobs get briefed out.

I eventually started freelancing when I realised all but two jobs in my design portfolio were mostly illustration. I also did much of that after hours, in my own time, for very little money. It was isolating and scary to quit a steady job and try to make it alone.



Some of the illustration work on Fresh Helga.

Fresh Helga is a natural next step as having a studio means we can offer opportunities and mentorship to the young ones who might feel safer taking this route with a little structure and guidance. We want to create the kind of environment I needed back then. We also want to bring the existing community closer together.

We've been reaching out to other small studios to collaborate, share work and push through some of the limitations we all deal with, because illustration is such a solitary pursuit. Hopefully we can make our community stronger by helping pull some of the talent that got lost along the way, out of whatever holes of despair they're stuck in.

“ The industry is changing again in the digital age. Anyone can take a picture with their smart phone. Not everyone can draw one. Suddenly you're sitting on a bankable skill. There's money to be made out here folks. Come and take it. We need you guys to push SA's illustration standard up to an international gold level. ”

[Click here](#) for more on Immelman, and visit [FreshHelga.com](https://www.freshhelga.com) to send your link through. Immelman says, “If you have the talent, we can work out the details to suit your lifestyle.” You may just be the next illustrator in the spotlight! Keep up with Fresh Helga on [Twitter](#).

ABOUT LEIGH ANDREWS

Leigh Andrews AKA the #MilkshakeQueen, is former Editor-in-Chief: Marketing & Media at Bizcommunity.com, with a passion for issues of diversity, inclusion and equality, and of course, gourmet food and drinks! She can be reached on Twitter at @Leigh_Andrews.

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