How we illustrate tech (and AI) at The Markup
Hi!

Illustration helps us communicate the unseen…

Many times, we uncover things that cannot be seen by the naked eye.

I’m Gabe Hongdusit, and I’m a visual designer at The Markup, an investigative journalism nonprofit that challenges technology to serve the public good.

My job here is to figure out how we can best use visual imagery to tell our stories.

Take this story about a scoring system in Los Angeles that determined who got subsidized housing.

This illustration tied together lots of abstract concepts that didn’t naturally have visuals:

Racism, access-to resources, and the simple algorithm that affected everything.
To help people understand our stories, we use four themes and motifs:

- **Hands**
- **Humor and Pop Culture**
- **Characters**
- **World-Building**

There aren’t a lot of opportunities for photography when you report on tech...

Gray building in Silicon Valley

Senator/tech oligarch (usually white and male)

Whistleblower who doesn’t want to be photographed

Hands help us show the people behind institutions, companies, and technologies. The tech doesn’t exist without them, and it’s the decisions made by people that we want to hold accountable.
OTHER TIMES, THE SUBJECT MATTER IN OUR STORIES ISN'T THAT VISUALLY COMPELLING.

A STRAIGHT-UP IMAGE OF ANY OF THOSE THINGS WON'T MAKE YOU WANT TO CLICK ON THE STORY. SO, WE OFTEN USE HUMOR AND CULTURAL REFERENCES TO MAKE ART THAT'S INTERESTING. OUR FOCUS ON TECH ACCOUNTABILITY DOESN'T MEAN THAT WE CAN'T HAVE FUN.

SOMETIMES WE INTEGRATE DIGITAL ELEMENTS INTO OUR ILLUSTRATIONS AND IT WORKS WELL.

BUT REPEATED ILLUSTRATIONS OF BROWSER WINDOWS GET STALE REAL FAST. CREATING CHARACTERS HELPS FRESHEN UP OUR AESTHETIC (AND LIKE HUMOR, CAN MAKE OUR WORK MORE FUN AND ACCESSIBLE).
We report a lot on practices that happen on a screen. Illustrations for topics like these are often conceptual stock images. Boring.

Instead, we used illustrations to create a new world that helps you see the narrative: a crowd of jelly bean characters bidding in an underground auction.

Take this story about digital ad auctions, which happen online within milliseconds.

The power of illustration is that you’re not limited to the physical world… you can conjure new surroundings that help communicate a narrative.
This approach also applies to AI. When we think of illustrating AI, robots immediately come to mind...

But robots Obscure the fact that AI is created and used by humans.

Julien Posture, who writes a weekly newsletter on visual culture, wrote this spot-on quote:

“From abuse of underpaid labour in post-colonial settings to the objectification of people’s lives and work as ‘data’ to the extraction of rare minerals to power increasingly demanding computational needs, AI runs not on sci-fi futuristic utopia but on the appropriation of today’s world’s material and human resources.”

It can feel like we’re living in end-times for artists when AI, trained on images without consent from their creators, can conjure up new images within seconds. But our hope is to use illustration to hold people and the decisions they’ve made through AI and other forms of technology accountable.