Cody Pickens

Tirin Moore sits with a notepad on his knee, hesitantly putting a ballpoint pen to paper. A few quick strokes, and an old childhood friend—with a peanut-shaped head, wild flagella-like hair, and striped shirt—skips onto the page. It’s Silly Willy, a cartoon character that Moore invented when he was around nine years old. “Wow, I haven’t drawn this in decades,” says Moore, a neurobiologist and HHMI early career scientist at Stanford University.

While many scientists grew up obsessed with microscope kits or bug collections, Moore stretched his mind in a different way—pouring himself into cartooning and filmmaking. Raised in Oakland and Vallejo, California, he sketched “Peanuts”-style comic strips about Silly Willy, who was a TV addict, and his pals. Moore also teamed up with his best friend, Brett, to create a satirical strip called “Underworld Incorporated,” which featured two assassins who were drawn like muscle-bound superheroes but “were complete morons,” he says, laughing. “They would bungle every job they had.” Some of Moore’s cartoon work was published in his high school newspaper.

Back then, “if you asked my parents, they would say, ‘Oh yeah, he’s going to be a cartoonist.’” Moore recalls. Actually, young Tirin had other dreams. “I wanted to be a filmmaker.” His artistic leanings were inspired by his father, a well-read, self-taught enthusiast of far-flung interests—from photography and making home movies to electronics, hieroglyphics, and black history.

At Stanford, Moore explores the neural circuitry that controls visual perception, a natural move, he says, from visual art. For instance, cartoons are simplistic line drawings that efficiently convey surprise in a face or a sense of movement. How do such simple cues capture the viewer’s eye? Why can we perceive motion or depth in a static, two-dimensional image? These are important scientific questions to explore, says Moore.

Today, his only artwork is drawing the occasional cartoon monkey to illustrate his experiments in scientific papers. But while most academics see art and science as separate, Moore has a different view. Art sounds antithetical to science because “it’s not precise and serious,” he says. “But if you ask most scientists what is the most valuable trait to a scientist, it’s creativity.”

—Ingfei Chen

WEB EXTRA: For a glimpse of Silly Willy, go to www.hhmi.org/bulletin/may2012.