
Spotlight

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Life as Looney Tune

Serious art works, 'By Comix Touched'

By Dinah Berland

Art critic

When artists first began to pull away from the gravity of abstraction in the early 1960s, they launched pop art. Using cartoon-like drawing and blowing up panels of actual comic strips, Andy Warhol and Roy Lichtenstein, among others, attempted to wake people up to the absurdity of modern life.

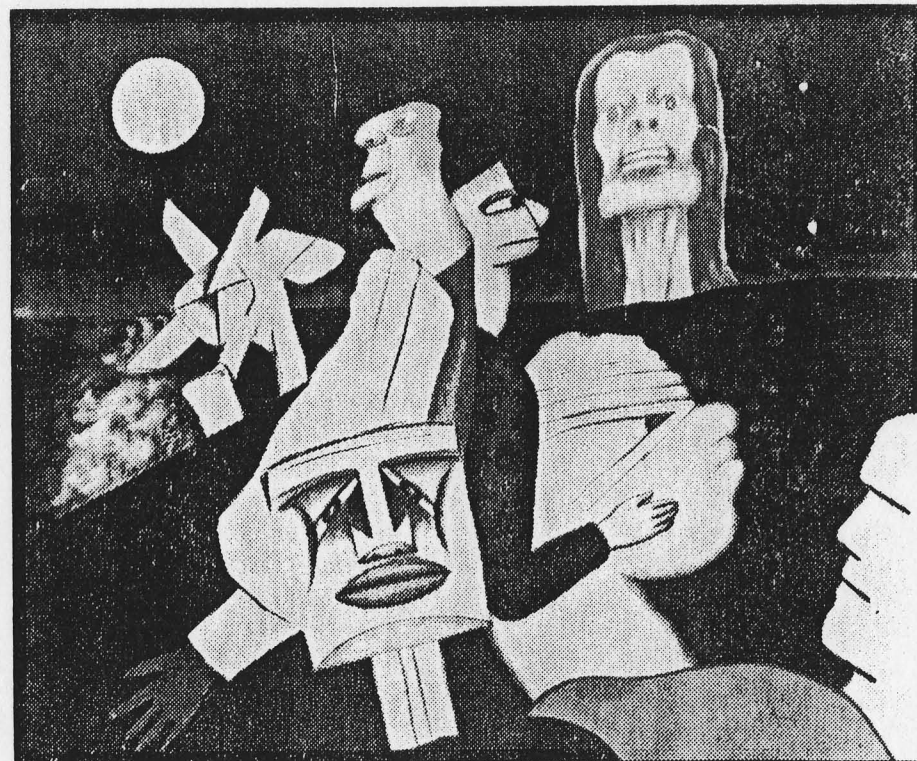
But pop artists didn't invent cartoon imagery, they only rediscovered it. Distortion of the figure through caricature has been around since the mid-19th century. It was then, and still is, used for the purposes of political or social satire.

John Randolph Carter, Dick Ibach and Michele Roberts, the three young artists represented in "By Comix Touched" at the Long Beach Museum of Art, are inheritors

Art review

"By Comix Touched." Paintings, drawings and prints by John Randolph Carter, Dick Ibach and Michele Roberts. Long Beach Museum of Art, 2300 E. Ocean Blvd. 439-2119. Wednesday-Sunday noon-5 p.m. Through Sept. 11.

of this rebellious streak in art history, although not one of them has a clear socio-political bent. They also are the inheritors of a culture steeped in Superman comics and Looney Tunes. All three grew up, as senior curator Josine Ianco-Starrels points out in her catalog essay, to develop "a predilection for the comics and cartoons they



"Faces by the Sea/Moonlight on the Water," John Randolph Carter.

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"I Tell You My Dream, You Figure It Out," Michele Roberts 1984 monoprint, from "By Comix Touched" exhibit at Long Beach Museum of Art.

'By Comix Touched' at LBMA

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read and looked at."

Carter, Ibach and Roberts share with a significant number of artists of their generation the practice of "bad painting," or intentionally ignoring the classic canons of composition, draftsmanship and color harmony. Their colors clash uproariously; their figures are ridiculously out of shape. The result is good clean fun, for one thing, and intensely expressive, for another.

Ianco-Starrels discovered Ibach while organizing an exhibition in Spokane, Wash., where the artist lives. Ibach invents tableaux so full of energy, they almost dance off the paper they're painted on. His family of wiggly figures are most often engaged in some mundane activity: reading, waiting at the airport, tying a fish hook, playing baseball. But the vibrant, psychedelic environments these characters inhabit are anything but mundane. With a touch of caprice and a

talent for observation, Ibach electrifies the everyday.

Roberts, a Santa Monica artist, tells visual stories, mostly about male-female relationships. Her large, angular paintings, silk-screens and monoprints are sectioned into parts, often vertically like geological strata, and invariably include a provocative line or two of text: "I Tell You My Dream, You Figure It Out" scrawled below a sequence of animals howling at a house, a magician causing a woman to float in midair, dogs attacking a man with faces flying from his teeth.

This hint of the nightmarish is coupled with a poignant attention to love lost, love sought, love in a quandry. "How Could He Tell Her He Loved Her?" is the title of a large painting in which a man carries a huge flaming heart toward the object of his affection who is oblivious to his presence, and ultimately crushes her with the weight of it. The emotional potency of this work is palpable and remains so from the largest oil paint-

ing to the smallest monoprint.

Carter, who works out of Los Alamitos, is the most surreal of this trio, in method as well as imagery. His watercolor and felt-tip pen drawings are elicited by automatic drawing, a technique used by the original surrealists to tap the unconscious.

Carter's drawings are mysterious and oddly somber for all their color and inventiveness. His subjects — spacemen, invented animals, a military tank, a mushroom — are capable of transforming from organic to geometric, from realistic to abstract. His titles are whole poems in themselves: "Torso in Red Slipper Inserted in Blue Running Shoe Crashes on Mountain Top" or "Man with Orange Suit and Gray Hands Runs on Rocky Road."

All three of these artists may have been "by comix touched," but they were evidently touched in uniquely inspired ways.