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INSTALLATION VIEW OF '3-D DOINGS: THE IMAGIST OBJECT IN CHICAGO ART, 1964-1980'
ARTHUR EVANS/TANG TEACHING MUSEUM AT SKIDMORE COLLEGE

ART REVIEW

'3-D Doings: The Imagist Object in Chicago Art, 1964-1980' Review: A Celebration of the Weird

The brief Imagist movement looks perversely profound today and carries with it an art-historical gravitas.

By Peter Plagens
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Saratoga Springs, N.Y.

"Weird" is a word that's lost a lot of currency over the past couple of decades. Things that used to mark a person as someone who played outside the lines--tattoos, facial piercings, and clothes that make wearers look as if they'd just escaped a burning building--now wax normal. Even the official slogan of the Independent Business Alliance of Texas' capital city is "Keep Austin Weird."



Installation view of the exhibition, with Karl Wirsum's 'Mary O'Net,' 'Chris Teen' and 'Nurse Worse' (all 1972) PHOTO: ARTHUR EVANS/TANG TEACHING MUSEUM AT SKIDMORE COLLEGE

3-D Doings: The Imagist Object in Chicago Art, 1964-1980

Frances Young Tang Teaching Museum and Art Gallery at Skidmore College Through Jan. 6, 2019

Back in the day, however--in Chicago for about 15 years starting in the mid-1960s--a style of art called Imagism was genuinely weird: mostly a prickly kind of figurative painting and drawing, a mixture of cartoon, faux-naiveté and Surrealism that looked to us devotees of more stately mainstream modernism from New York and L.A. like a kind of Dr. Seuss for rebellious adolescents. That it might have been, but here in the 21st century the style looks perversely profound and carries with it an art-historical gravitas.

Both qualities are on view in "3-D Doings: The Imagist Object in Chicago Art, 1964-1980." The show, at the Frances Young Tang Teaching Museum and Art Gallery at Skidmore College, contains about 70 works from the period. (The exact number depends on whether you count auxiliary vitrine material as part of the art.)

The core group of Imagists called itself the Hairy Who and consisted of Jim Nutt, Gladys Nilson, Karl Wirsum, Art Green, Jim Falconer and Suellen Rocca. They were joined, off and on in exhibitions

and under art-critical umbrellas, by the likes of Roger Brown, Ed Paschke, Christina Ramberg, Barbara Rossi and Ray Yoshida. They all liked to puncture fine-art balloons of pretense with jokes and puns. But, more than that, they fancied folk and outsider art, and almost maniacally collected inspirational objects at flea markets.

"3-D Doings" is a wonderful show. First, it's lovingly installed in one airy gallery of Antoine Predock's superb building. Second, the exhibition includes, as any good museum show must, several works that are top-drawer regardless of pleading a special case, in this instance that Imagism was at once highly personal and rigorously disciplined. Mr. Wirsum's three 6-foot-tall 1972 psycho-mechanical stick figures, made of wood painted with acrylic and clothed, as it were, in custom dresses, are just about genius, even with their groaner titles ("Mary O'Net," "Chris Teen" and "Nurse Worse").

Better still is Brown's 1974 "Autobiography in the Shape of Alabama (Mammy's Door)." It's an oil painting, with one of Brown's patented simplified landscapes of rolling hills and silhouetted trees, on a format that's reductively the reversed shape of that Southern state. The beauty part is that if seen head-on the bottom edge would be straight across, but from slightly above--the average viewer's standing perspective--a horizontal protrusion of a lake with a boat on it constitutes that little tag where Mobile meets the Gulf of Mexico. If that isn't enough cleverness--and Imagist cleverness is a good thing--a mirror on the floor reveals that the bottom side of the work depicts a guitar (the lake being half the body and the rest of the underside the neck).

"3-D Doings" is not, however, perfect. It takes the idea of the third dimension rather casually. Much of the work is simply two-sided flat art, or a nominally voluminous object such as Ms. Rossi's puffy "Comforter (Armour Defeat)" from 1970. And there are taxonomic gaffes in the accompanying explanatory material (there is no catalog). Imagism is miscategorized as a species of Pop Art, and a brochure says that "unlike the Chicagoans, none of the best-known New York Pop artists made significant bodies of sculptural work"--as if Claes Oldenburg's and Roy Lichtenstein's never existed.



Roger Brown's 'Autobiography in the Shape of Alabama (Mammy's Door)' (1974) PHOTO: ARTHUR EVANS/TANG TEACHING MUSEUM AT SKIDMORE COLLEGE

Also, there's the central presence of Red Grooms's huge, quite literal "City of Chicago, Arch Element" (1967-68). As much as the work would fit into an exhibition about Chicago, it doesn't in one that's supposed to be of it. Mr. Grooms isn't a Chicago artist, and he isn't an Imagist; he's closer to, say, James Rosenquist than he is to Roger Brown.

Fortunately, the edge and energy of the rest of "3-D Doings" overcome Mr. Grooms's work. We can see Imagism clearly as a mode of art-making in which the big art-historical battles concerning realism and abstraction mean nothing, but where the little rules of care and craft mean everything. A quarter of this teaching museum's attendance consists of students and a goodly part of the rest comes from the surrounding community. That "3-D Doings" looks like the world's greatest-ever student show--that is, an exhibition of artists passionately and honestly doing their own thing as if blissfully unaware of the latest from Manhattan or Berlin--is perhaps its greatest virtue.



Barbara Rossi's 'Comforter (Armour Defeat)' (1970) PHOTO: ARTHUR EVANS/TANG TEACHING MUSEUM AT SKIDMORE COLLEGE

Ezra Pound said that poetry is "news that stays news." In "3-D Doings," the weirdness--the eccentric visual poetry--of Imagism indeed stays weird.

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