

AN ARTIST IN THE VALLEY OF MAKE-BELIEVE DREAMLANDS

by
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Todd Schorr believes more is more.

More eye-kicks per square inch of canvas equals more thrills and fascination for the lucky, awe-struck viewer.

More technical facility and compositional genius and visual verisimilitude equals more suspension of disbelief in the face of the surreal.

More pop-culture icons rubbing shoulders in frenetic crowd scenes equals more overwhelming nostalgia explosions and trash epiphanies.

This maximalist man is one *giving* artist! No hoarding of concepts for our paint-daubed lad, no parsimonious doling out of dribs and drabs of creation. Creation gushes forth from the Schorr geyser as regularly as Old Faithful piped with a rainbow of Winsor & Newton colors. "I come and go through many different themes and images," Schorr reveals. "Whatever I happen to be interested in at the time. I couldn't say anything I've ever used as subject matter has been fully exploited. There are always new interpretations of familiar subject matter." In other words, the well of dreams never runs dry at Atelier Schorr.

Twenty astonishing new paintings by Schorr went on exhibition at the Merry Karnowsky Gallery from October 18, 2003, to November 15, 2003. These newest works reveal a supercharged, even more ambitious--and dare one say, even more mature and insightful--Schorr than his fans might recall from earlier exhibits and from his first book of paintings, *Secret Mystic Rites* (Last Gasp, 1998). These new works and a score of others will soon be available in *Dreamland*, a deluxe publication from Last Gasp. Schorr tells *Juxtapoz*: "It will be a large format, 11" x 11", hardcover with slipcase, and the reproductions are going to be incredible. A lot of full-bleed blow-ups of details so viewers will really be able to see all the little details, especially in the big paintings."

Schorr's philosophy of generosity, of fertility, of insane cosmic fecundity is apparent in his panoramic canvases such as the older trilogy of *The Spectre of Cartoon Appeal*, *The Spectre of Monster Appeal* and *The Hydra of Madison Avenue*. These cosmos-defining spectacles are direct descendents of the all-encompassing hellish, heavenly and proletarian vistas of Bosch and Breughel, part of the school of art that intends to represent an entire world-view in a few square feet. Schorr intends to make some kind of supra-logical sense out of the welter of material goods and famous personages--real and imaginary--that blizzard by us every day too fast and thick for instant comprehension. By arranging them in his carefully calculated montages, he's arrayed them so as to draw out all their deepest meanings. And in their own Western way, Schorr's paintings are also akin to Tibetan mandalas: stylized and symbolic arrangements of potent mythic figures and objects which, when meditated upon, plunge the viewer into transcendental states.

If living in the modern media-saturated world is indeed akin to trying to drink from a firehose, what Schorr has done is to metaphorically freeze the flow from the hose, then sculpt the ice column into some kind of arcane and monstrous totem-pole of significance.

This approach comes across clearly in his most recent Technicolor, Cinerama blockbuster, *Into the Valley of Finks and Weirdos*. Confronting the jam-packed acreage

of this canvas, the typical viewer's eye is first drawn to the centering figures of Ed "Big Daddy" Roth (slyly masquerading as a hamburger huckster) and his most famous creation, Rat Fink. They function as the beneficent deities bestowing their blessings over the quintessentially Californian chaos around them. Von Dutch flying eyeballs cruise above Wolverton's Lena the Hyena, while a parade of gear-shifting monster hot-rodders encircles a Dave Clark Five-style band and their fab dancers. Roth's classic Kustom Kar, "Road Agent," is about to be engulfed by a surfer-filled wave straight out of Beach Boys lore. A cheerfully demented alien whom we all know and love as Scuz Fink bears the "Finksville" banner and seems intent on checking the airwaves for groovy sounds with his navel tuning dial.

I maintain that this is as close to a representation of Utopia as you will find in art today. An anarchic joy-fest where everyone does his or her or its own thing under the swaying West Coast palms. Schorr, a Boomer, has clearly not forsaken the Edenic dreams of his generation.

But these Weltanschauung-capturing mammoth vistas are merely one of the modes that Schorr excels at. The other two kinds of paintings on display in *Dreamland* are the allegorical and the narrative.

In his allegorical paintings, Schorr proves himself a master at concatenating enigmatic yet viscerally resonant images which work together to convey disturbing truths that linger right at the interface of comprehension and bafflement.

Consider *Clowns and Crusaders* and its accompanying little cousin, *The Monkey's Trophy*. (Schorr has been working in these binary units lately.) In the first painting, astride the hominid tortoise the chain-mailed chimp defies both the fetus-grabbing clown in the heavens and the wiggling-out minister down below, while Harvey Comics heroine Little Lotta chows down on some killer carbohydrates, her thoughts a cancerous-looking growth. Plainly, some manner of battle royale between fundamentalism, Darwinism and the unthinking, consumerist public is being addressed here, with the forces of scientific inquiry righteously yet brutally triumphing in *The Monkey's Trophy*. (This is my reading of the allegory anyhow; you might have another.) To convey such a wealth of material in words would require the entire combined editorial forces of *The New York Times* and *The Washington Post*, generating tens of thousands of words, and they'd bore the shit out of you. Schorr does it all by himself in a few square inches, and you can look at his paintings happily all day.

A similar technique and angle of attack is to be discovered in *The Evolution of Superstition* and its counterpart, *Primitive Inclinations*. An ancient volcano-pocked landscape redolent of the underlevels of the psyche is the staging ground for a battle for the mind of youth, as represented by the boy on the shore. While a vampiric Pontiff jabbars out his super-ego treatise on sins and damnation, the uber-Fred from the subconscious gets ready to deliver a killing blow to the unholy windbag. Thus does atavism and instinct win out over decadence and guilt-trips every time!

In the pairing of *Charming Haeckel's Serpent* and *Haeckel's Folly*, we encounter perhaps the most mysterious allegory so far. Obviously, the flute-playing swami is a potent mystic to be able to captivate the weird hydra in its basket. Is this the Kundalini serpent of yogic discipline, a manifestation of the swami's inner powers? Is this diptych a depiction of enlightenment through meditation? If so, what role does the clown-leopard-sheep chimera play? Some tutelary deity? And why, in the smaller painting, have clown

and serpent merged? We may not be able to immediately apprehend the entire message here, but the material is endlessly fascinating nonetheless.

But it's in his overtly narrative paintings that Schorr offers the quickest access to his oeuvre for newcomers and veteran fans alike. These story-telling paintings each brilliantly and strikingly capture a single dramatic moment which, upon study, blossoms out into an entire backstory and sequel. Here, the godlike welter of detail of the panorama paintings is manifested somewhat differently, in the lovingly adorned individual figures and their hyper-realistically limned surroundings.

Please direct your eyes to *Tar Pit Kitty* for a dose of spooky soap opera. Late at night, perhaps in the museum at Miskatonic University, a ham-handed canine thug is putting the moves on a feline frail. Virtue and honor seem in peril--until a reanimated ancestor of the victim comes to the rescue. We can almost see the tomcat sorcerer offstage responsible for this necromantic intervention. The mate to *Kitty* is *Extinction of a Love Affair*, which shows that bulldog brawn is ultimately no match for she-cat wiles.

In my best Rod Serling voice I ask you turn next to *An Alien in the Land of Make Believe* (whose official cousin is *Wish Fulfillment from Another World*). A towering non-human Saracen with scimitar, straight out of some Betelgeuse *Arabian Nights*, looms over a tiny, helpless saucer-riding invader. But the tusked blackamoor is merely cautiously defensive of his homeland, not predatory. There's a chance for a friendly meeting of minds here, between behemoth and shrimp. The alien genie in *Wish Fulfillment* will solve everybody's problems.

This is the kind of speculative excitement Schorr's narrative paintings provoke. The viewer feels instantly that he's chanced upon a fascinating story with a long past and more to come.

Another case in point: *Domestic Turmoil in Pumpkinville* and its partner, *Vine Ripened Misery*. What's the nature of the discord driving the luscious, many-eyed Potato Babe from her formerly serene gourd hearth? The phallic mushrooms in the yard tend to make us subliminally suspect some marital hanky-panky is the source of the tension, as do the sexy undergarments trailing from her suitcase. Will she make her getaway in the retro Bulgemobile with the SPUD plates, or has Tommy Tuber her hubby pocketed the only set of keys? Whatever her means of flight, we have a sense that this Argus-eyed Idaho sex-kitten won't be without a pad to crash in for long.

In *The Torment of Sammy Squashbrains*, we are privileged to spy on a slice of Life in Hell (definitely not the Matt Groening version!). Call it "Schorr's Inferno." Some long-standing grudge between demonic Sammy and the androgynous Hot Stuff has reached the boiling point. Place yer bets! The sequel canvas, *Beelzebub's Last Barbecue*, points towards a victor. Likewise, in *The Egg Hunt* and its mate *Futility in the Face of a Hostile World*, we get to witness the aftermath of a confrontation between cruel, calculating civilization and the unsuspecting hospitality of a primitive tribe. Explorer Squirrel has ventured far from the paved roads of North America down to a tropical jungle where the phallic orchids bloom. There, he's made the gustatory acquaintance of the Humpty Dumpty tribe, Father, Mother and Sonny Boy. Firepower has trumped welcoming grins and an open hand once more, and the Humpty Dumpties have contributed their soul-essences to the skillet. But will the Eggheads have the final revenge? Check out the skull appearance of their yolks and whites. Explorer Squirrel might want to get his cholesterol examined.

And it's in *Egg Hunt* that you can see what I mean about all the brute power of the panoramas being transformed into meticulous ornamentation in the small-scale paintings. Observe how the clothes of the Humpties are so beautifully contoured to their forms, and how the cracked eggshell lines the interior of Father Humpty's suit. Not to mention Mama Humpty's scandalously exposed fur patch and Sonny Boy's Jughead hat.

But to focus so exclusively on the subject matter of Schorr's paintings, fascinating as their content is, would be to slight his flawless technique and the strong surface allure of the canvases. The bizarre yet touching stories these works deliver are only half their attractiveness. The other half is their sheer eye-candy value. Schorr is a believer in the ultimate mastery of his medium. No half-baked misunderstanding of pigments and polymer emulsions for him. He's intent on ferreting out the secrets of the old masters he admires, artists such as Willy Pogany, Edmund Dulac, N. C. Wyeth, Norman Rockwell and Arthur Rackham. (I myself see aspects of the unsung *Saturday Evening Post* illustrator, Edwin Georgi, in the sparkling fabrics Schorr sometimes employs, such as the pants of the tusker in *An Alien in the Land of Make Believe* and the skirts of *The Harem Dancer*, but Schorr dissents, saying, "I don't feel any affinity to the style of Georgi.") And copious as his bag of tricks already is, Schorr is still intent on filling it with more powerful tools:

"Lately I've been studying the romantic landscape painting of the 19th century, masters like Frederic Edwin Church and Thomas Moran. I've been trying to educate myself in their use of color. Also the Orientalist paintings of Jean-Léon Gérôme. These academic painters possessed incredible techniques that vanished from the art world with the advent of the Impressionists and sadly have never been offered in present-day art schools. It's become an obsession of mine to try to re-learn these forgotten techniques and apply them to my cartoon-like subject matter."

Right there in his own words we have the great cognitive-dissonance, left-brain/right-brain, ego/id secret to Schorr's appeal: so-called lowbrow subject matter presented with the elan and vitality and superb finish of highbrow masterworks. But such a fusion is not as easy as it might seem. Exquisite depth of technique must be matched with clarity and uniqueness of vision. Luckily for us, Schorr possesses both in abundance.

The future will find Schorr busy with two large canvases--one five by seven feet, the other six by eight--both revolving around horror/monster themes. Additionally, he'll be overseeing the creation of a line of vinyl sculptures based on his trademark Bunny-Duck figure; some limited edition prints; and a new postcard set. (Visit www.toddschorr.com for details.)

Ensnared in his fantabulous 1928 Moorish Los Angeles quarters with beautiful helpmate and fellow artist Kathy Schorr, our dreamer seems perfectly positioned to continue to turn out an unending stream of his signature blends of dark whimsy and bright horror.

"The ever-present veil of Hollywood make-believe is a constant source of amusement and inspiration," Schorr states.

In that case, let's all pray Hollywood never dies!