

# 38 PAGES OF PURE DISGUST!



\$12.00

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1999

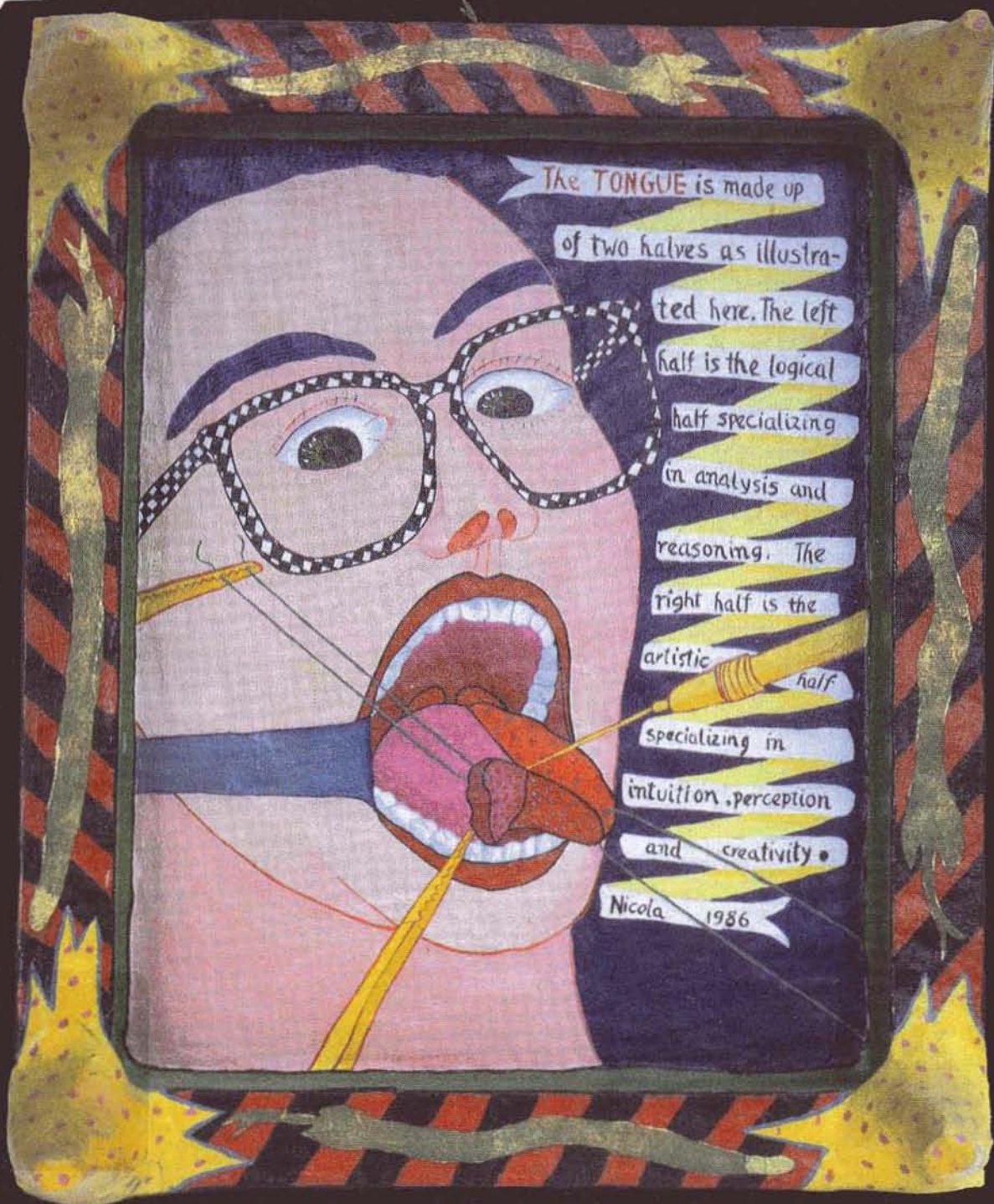
NO. 1

THE INFLUENCE OF COMICS ON  
CONTEMPORARY NEW ZEALAND ARTISTS

FEATURING...



IN THIS ISSUE:  
*Born Under a Bad Sign*  
*Why Art is "@\*#!"*  
*Art is Easy. Comics are Hard.*



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93  
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## Foreword

The McDougall Contemporary Art Annex is proud to present *Gruesome!*, an exhibition of works by fourteen New Zealand artists whose practice reveals the influence of the comic book. Featuring Mark Braunias, Gavin Chilcott, Jimmy Cooper, Violet Faigan, Dick Frizzell, Jason Greig, Bill Hammond, Nicola Jackson, Tom Kreisler, Tony de Lautour, Saskia Leek, Paul Radford, James Robinson and Peter Robinson, *Gruesome!* presents both emerging and established artists. In addition, curator Warren Feeney's catalogue essay highlights the importance of the comic aesthetic to several major players in New Zealand's art history canon - Colin McCahon, Russell Clark, Rita Angus and Phillip Clairmont.

The paintings and sculpture included in *Gruesome!* are diverse in both appearance and subject, and bear the mark of comic influence in many different ways. Some artists have

appropriated the comic speech bubble, others pay homage through vividly-coloured, simplified forms or divide their works into narrative segments or panels. Something which can be recognised in all, however, is the subversive spirit of the comic - an edgy creative freedom which pushes at established boundaries with humour, irony, innovation and attitude.

On behalf of the Gallery I would like to acknowledge Warren Feeney, whose dedication, energy and enthusiasm have made this exhibition a reality. I am also grateful to the artists and collectors (both public and private) who have made their works available for this exhibition. Without their generous support, *Gruesome!* would have remained very much on the drawing board.

Felicity Milburn  
*Curator of Contemporary Art*



# Born Under a Bad Sign

by Warren Feeney

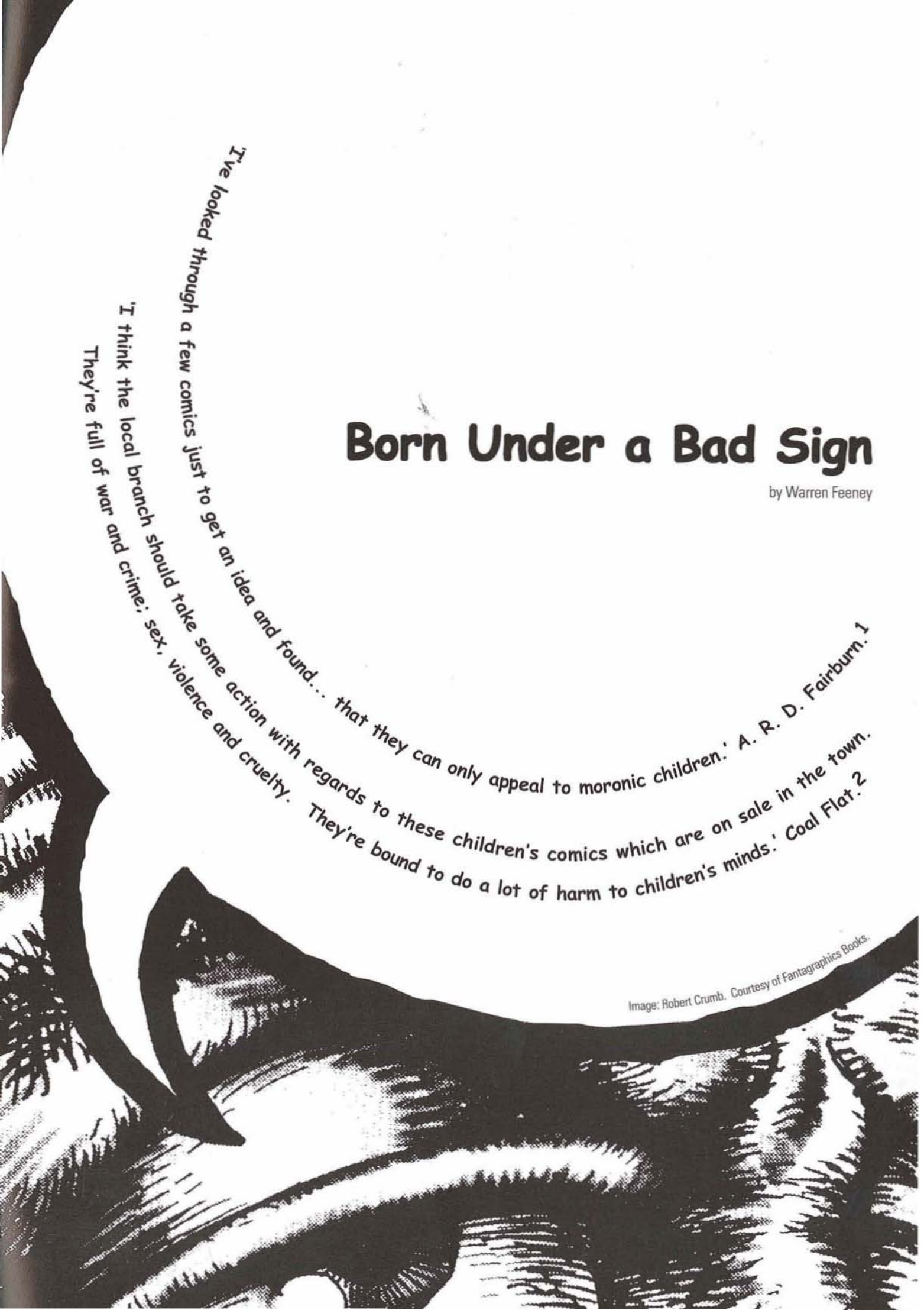
I've looked through a few comics just to get an idea and found...

I think the local branch should take some action with regards to these children's comics which are on sale in the town. They're full of war and crime; sex, violence and cruelty.

... that they can only appeal to moronic children.' A. R. D. Fairburn. 1

They're bound to do a lot of harm to children's minds.' Coal Flat. 2

Image: Robert Crumb. Courtesy of Fantagraphics Books.



The fear and loathing that comic books have encountered in New Zealand is shared by other cultures and countries throughout the Western world.<sup>3</sup> Attacked in the late 1900s in England as a 'threat to literacy,'<sup>4</sup> blamed for the rise of juvenile delinquency in the United States in the mid-1950s,<sup>5</sup> and at the centre of an obscenity charge in Great Britain in 1996,<sup>6</sup> comics are a discipline that have failed to receive the same tolerance and 'rights to freedom of expression as other artforms.'<sup>7</sup>

In New Zealand, comics were criticised by the political left in the 1950s, and have remained the subject of protest in the art community, being periodically condemned by academic and literary circles.

The respected publication *Landfall* featured an analysis of the comic book in 1955. This evaluation of the genre shared many of the opinions expressed by United States psychiatrist, Frederic Wertham, in his book *The Seduction of the Innocent* (1953).<sup>8</sup> Wertham argued that comics corrupted the morality of children and limited their capacity to learn. The *Landfall* study of superheroes, romance comics and cartoons, *Comics in New Zealand*, observed that "there will be no attempt to give them serious consideration on aesthetic grounds, because they are simply not worth it."<sup>9</sup>

## HOW IT AFFECTS YOUR FAMILY

Perhaps you don't permit your child to read foreign comics. How do you know he doesn't? At school, children of less careful parents are willing to share comics around, and you can't stop that.

Whether you realise it or not, your child is being conditioned to murder and crime.

That early teaching will cost you—as a taxpayer—money. It means more police, more judges and courts, more jails, to cope with the appalling increase in crime—crime committed by boys and girls in their teens—little more than children.

It means heartbroken parents, and disgrace on otherwise respected families.

Is your child a future criminal? It rests with you.

What are you doing to stop the deluge of crime comics pouring in on the children of Australia?



Australian Journalists Association pamphlet (mid-1950s)  
Courtesy of Tim Bollinger

It agreed with Wertham that all comics blunt "the finer feelings of conscience, of mercy, of sympathy for other people's sufferings and of respect for women as women and not merely as sex objects to be bandied around or as luxury prizes to be fought over."<sup>10</sup>

Politician and commentator John A. Lee, author and critic A. R. D. Fairburn and librarian Mavis Peat, debated the merit of comics on New Zealand radio in the early 1950s in a discussion titled *Is the Reading of the Penny Dreadful Harmful to Our Youngsters?* Fairburn claimed that allowing children to read comics at school was "rather like giving them free methylated spirits to drink in schools instead of free milk."<sup>11</sup>

Linked to this debate were objections from academic and political circles that focused on the increasing influence of popular American culture in New Zealand. Fairburn warned of a "general drift towards approximating everything, all writing, to the comic form, a sort of landslide in that direction. And I think that's a bit of a menace because we are all more or less infected with the American way of life here."<sup>12</sup>

The fundamental grievance that comic books comprise a 'lesser' art form has remained an underlying and unstated belief in New Zealand art criticism. The wider context for this assumption can be found in the art theory of American critic Clement Greenberg. In his 1939 essay, *The Avant-Garde and Kitsch*,<sup>13</sup> Greenberg maintained that a critical distinction existed between the popular arts and the avant-garde. He defined modern art's enemy as:

*Kitsch*; popular, commercial art and literature with their chromeotypes, magazine covers, illustrations, ads, slick and pulp fiction, comics, Tin Pan Ally music, tap dancing, Hollywood movies, etc.<sup>14</sup>

On moral, aesthetic and political grounds kitsch was perceived to be inferior to high art. Although widely discounted in the 1990s, Greenberg's dissertation is worthy of recapitulation because of the prevalent role it gives to modernist aesthetics and the position that it assigns to the popular arts.



"Allowing children to read comics at school was rather like giving them free methylated spirits to drink in schools instead of free milk."<sup>11</sup>

Greenberg asserted that the avant-garde represented the salvation of the free world. Writing in 1939, he proclaimed that kitsch was the 'culture of the masses' in countries such as Germany, Italy and Russia and provided the means for totalitarian governments to control populations.<sup>15</sup> He contended that, "It is too difficult to inject effective propaganda into [avant-garde art and literature]... Kitsch keeps a dictator in closer contact with the 'soul' of the people."<sup>16</sup>

Greenberg's definition of high art, and its role in modern society as civilisation's only hope for liberty, was more recently derided by critic Robert Boyd in the American comic fanzine, *The Comic Journal*:

Greenberg believed that the bourgeoisie had given up its own powerful art (i.e. Hogarth, Chardin, David, etc) for mass-produced kitsch. The reason was that the bourgeoisie needed kitsch as part of its total program to control the proletariat; kitsch replaced folk art with capitalist machine art. As a response to kitsch, the avant-garde came into being, creating art which could not be used as mind-control to psych-out the working class.<sup>17</sup>

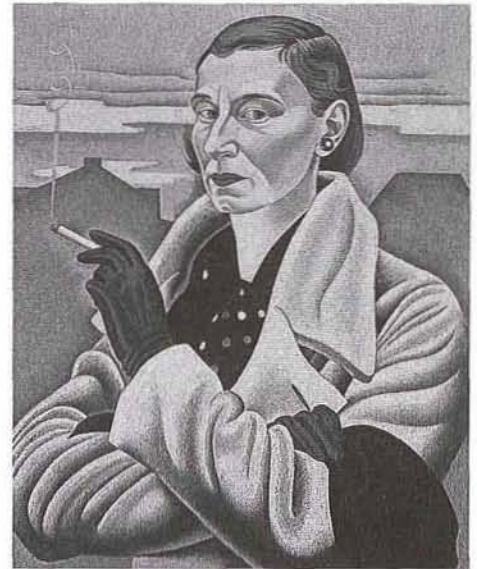
If popular art was capable of keeping the masses culturally deficient, it was also, according to Greenberg, capable of corrupting the artist: "Kitsch's enormous profits are a source of temptation to the avant-garde itself... Ambitious writers and artists will modify their work under the pressure of kitsch, if they do not succumb to it entirely."<sup>18</sup> Greenberg claimed that popular art was evidence of capitalism in decline, as "whatever of quality it [capitalism] is capable of producing becomes almost a threat to its own existence... Today we look to socialism simply for the preservation of whatever living culture we have right now."<sup>19</sup>

In post-war New Zealand, socialism and serious art were often associated with one another. Magazines published in New Zealand in the early 1950s, such as *Here and Now*

(1949 - 1957) advocated left-wing doctrine and also provided commentary on aspects of the local visual arts.<sup>20</sup> The condemnation of comics and popular art by Fairburn and other left-wing academics could be understood as part of a wider mission to raise aesthetic standards while advocating the principles of the left.<sup>21</sup>

Fortunately for the comic book, the label of 'misfit' has given it a charm that has occasionally appealed to serious artists. Regardless of critical commentaries, a number of New Zealand painters have been drawn towards the medium from the 1930s through to the late 1990s. Their involvement with comics reveals that many of them have, in fact, put the format to good use. It may be as straightforward as Rita Angus illustrating a strip for *The Press* to supplement her income as a serious painter, or as enigmatic as Colin McCahon's declaration that to realise the visual images in his work he required a compound of text and pictures - a combination that is the essence of the comic book. In the tradition of the very best comic illustrator, McCahon proclaimed; "I Will Need Words."<sup>22</sup>

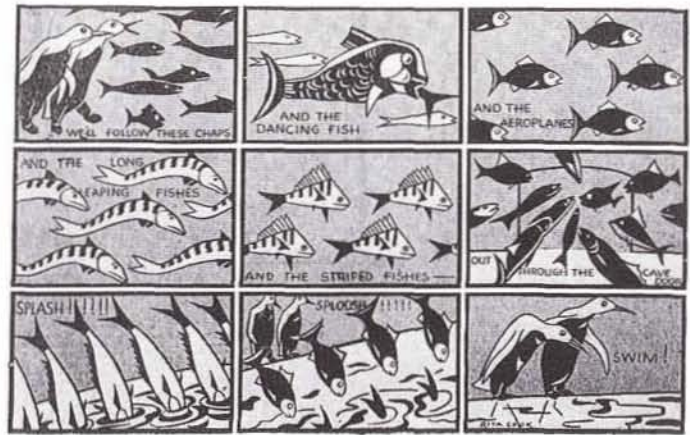
Rita Angus had realised this blend of the figurative with text when she was employed as an illustrator for the *Junior Press* in Christchurch from November 1934 until October 1937.<sup>23</sup> She completed numerous single pen and ink drawings for the newspaper and also developed a series of comic strips. Angus appears to have ventured into this format with considerable enthusiasm. Her first contribution depicted the activities of two penguins living in a "queer world at the top of the Ice Pole. Gravity goes the wrong way, colours are back to front, animals are queer, and caves are exciting."<sup>24</sup> Although this strip lasted for only nine weeks, with Angus facing difficulties in generating a cohesive or commanding story line, the strong element of



Self Portrait c.1937  
Rita Cook (née Angus)  
Collection of the  
Dunedin Public Art Gallery  
Reproduced with the permission of  
the Rita Angus estate



fantasy in the work provided her with a welcome opportunity to investigate decorative aspects of Art Deco and a stylised and tentative understanding of Cubism. In the most seductive and compelling moments of these drawings, Angus has the freedom to put together a weird vision of decorative, geometric sea life that pirouettes and reels gracefully from image to image. In addition, the weekly text guides the reader comfortably through the work's nine panels.

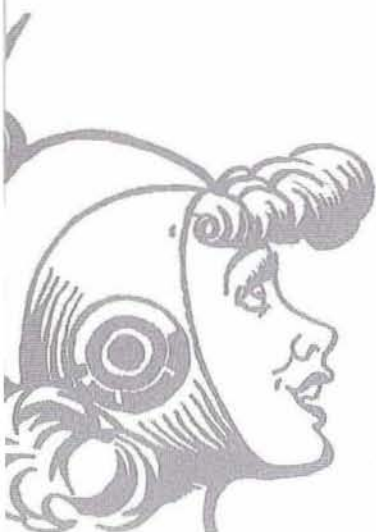


Junior Press 4 July 1935, pg 8  
Rita Cook (née Angus)  
Reproduced with the permission of the Rita Angus estate

Angus's use of bold outline and hard-edged embellishments in the treatment of various sea creatures emphasises the significance of Art Deco design in her art and recognises her commitment to the exploration of a contemporary style. The flat geometric landscapes in this early strip<sup>26</sup> also resonate in the stylistic treatment of the city of Christchurch in a self-portrait in oil from 1936 - 37. The simplification of such forms to essential geometric shapes was characteristic of the work of Christopher Perkins who had arrived in New Zealand in 1929, "bringing with him an acceptable and modified Cubist approach to painting,"<sup>27</sup> that was familiar to Angus. The concern with pattern, the flattening of space, and the elegance and style of these works accentuate the importance of her involvement with modernism, informing important aspects of her painting from this period. Just as the smart and fashionable woman in *Self-Portrait* conveyed a sense of the contemporary, these comic strips also declared that "a new spirit was in the air and Rita Angus was clearly aware of it."<sup>28</sup>

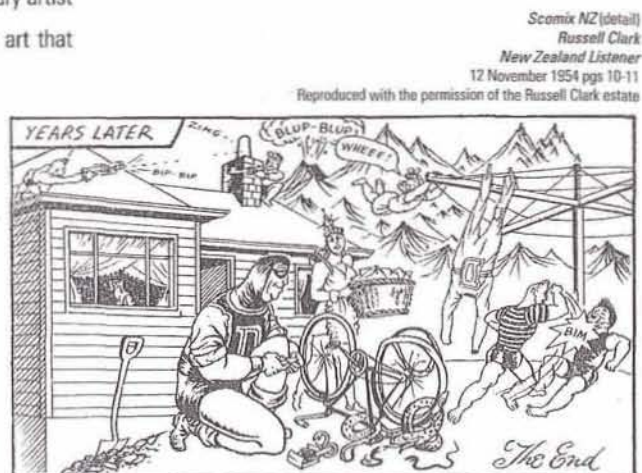
retired Director of the Robert McDougall Art Gallery, John Coley, recalls purchasing an early issue of *Mad* in 1956 in Christchurch, and the passionate response he received from Clark towards the quality of illustration in the comic.<sup>30</sup> These issues were drawn by Wallace Wood, Jack Davis and William W. Elder, artists who developed and extended the language of the comic during this period. They pioneered contemporary illustration through the development of a more realistic and tangible world with a greater attention to detail, the use of heightened perspective and stronger tonal contrasts.<sup>31</sup>

Clark drew regularly for *The Listener* from the 1950s until 1962,<sup>32</sup> with his interest in the comic super-hero apparent in a humorous strip he completed for *The Listener* in 1954.<sup>33</sup> The New Zealand quarter-acre section, rugby, mending a bike puncture with the children and the Karitane service are visited through the eyes of a domesticated caped-crusader. Clark's work indicates an affection for the ordinary life of New Zealanders in the suburbs, as well as an admiration for American illustration. The comic books



Scmix NZ (detail)  
Russell Clark  
New Zealand Listener  
12 November 1954 pgs 10-11  
Reproduced with the permission of the Russell Clark estate

Throughout the 1950s and early 1960s, Canterbury artist Russell Clark maintained an eclecticism in his art that included the impact of popular American illustration and comic books. Clark was a tutor at the Canterbury School of Art from 1947 until 1966, and his painting revealed the influence of artists such as John Nash, Russell Drysdale and Henry Moore.<sup>29</sup> However, his enormous interest in illustration also included an admiration for popular American comic books such as the *Mad* magazines of the 1950s. The

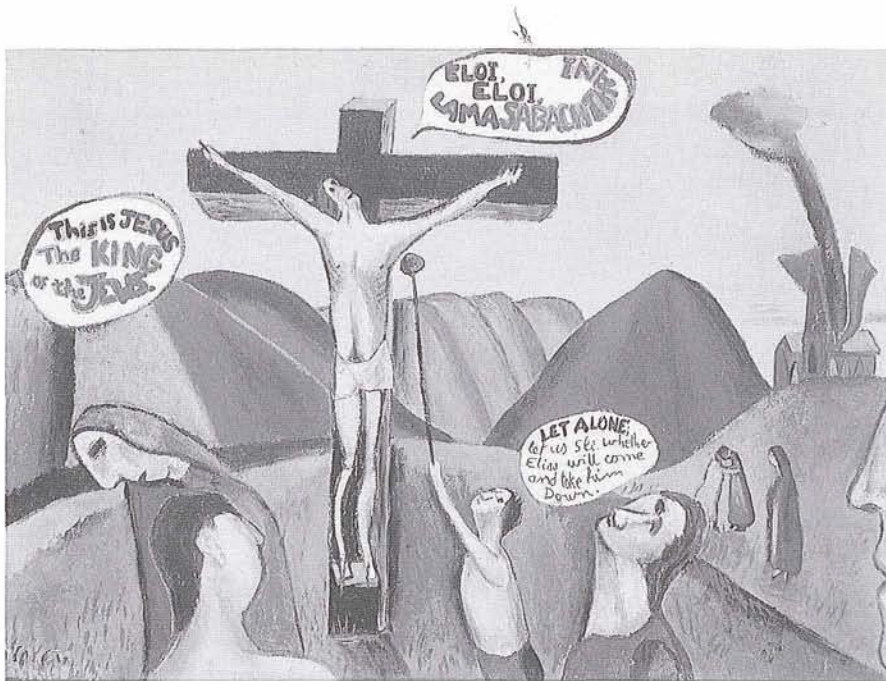


Scmix NZ (detail)  
Russell Clark  
New Zealand Listener  
12 November 1954 pgs 10-11  
Reproduced with the permission of the Russell Clark estate

that Fairburn was concerned were damaging the growth and education of local children in the fifties were not without their high-brow enthusiasts.

Just how unwelcome artists who made reference to popular art and comic books could be was apparent in Fairburn's assault on Colin McCahon's religious painting from the late 1940s. These included the use of word balloons and obvious allusions to comic conventions in paintings such as *The Crucifixion According to Saint Mark*

the mouths of various figures, confirms the overwhelming impact of the comic book. Brown sided with the aesthetics of high art. He discussed the paintings as influenced by Japanese scroll painting, Futurism, Dada, Surrealism, and Quattrocento painter Fra Angelico,<sup>35</sup> reaffirming these observations in 1984 with the publication of the biography *Colin McCahon: Artist*.<sup>36</sup> His only concession to the role of popular art is the recognition of the word balloon taken from the commercial 'Rinso' soap packet and placed into in *The Valley of the Dry Bones* (1947).<sup>37</sup>



*The Crucifixion According to Saint Mark* 1947  
Colin McCahon  
Collection of the Robert McDougall Art Gallery  
Reproduced with the permission of the  
Colin McCahon Research and Publication Trust

(1947). Fairburn described McCahon's works as "experimental cartoons." He concluded that "in design, in colour, in quality of line, in every normal attribute of good painting, they are completely lacking."<sup>34</sup> His grievances indicated that the aesthetics of the comic had crossed over into territory in which he believed they did not rightly belong.

This criticism is implicitly echoed by Gordon Brown, writing about McCahon's work from this period in the 1960s. Brown's evaluation of the artist's religious paintings scarcely acknowledged that the combination of words and pictures, and the use of word balloons appearing from

Later discussions on McCahon from art commentators Wystan Curnow and Francis Pound in the 1980s and early 1990s explored the role of comics and McCahon's use of these aesthetic conventions by acknowledging the modern movement's regard for 'primitive' art during the post-war period. Both writers established that the artist's use of word balloons and text demonstrated aspects of the unsophisticated. Curnow described this naiveté as being admired by critics and writers within the context of modernism in the 1950s, because

"such 'innocence' [was perceived as though it] might... be a condition for cultural renewal."<sup>38</sup>



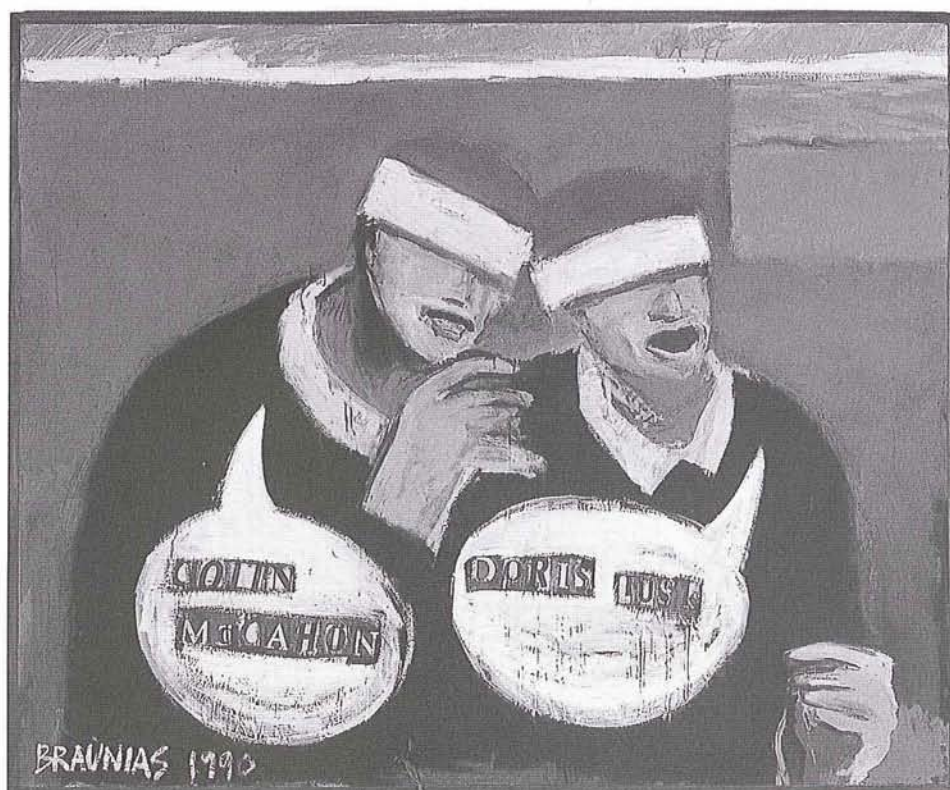
In addition, Pound observed that:

By adopting the harsh clarity of the comic book, the reading material of the 'illiterate', McCahon posed - in Tomory's phrase - 'a kind of colonial brutalism' with which he might further reject European sophistication and thus,... with speech balloons, utter New Zealand's harsh truth.<sup>39</sup>

Pound's evaluation of the reception of McCahon's religious paintings in the post-war period recognises the influence of comics, drawing attention to the limited approval of the genre, and acknowledging that, for critics such as Peter Tomory, they

Auckland's Centre for Continuing Education and self-confessed "comic obsessive," has suggested that comics, and McCahon's use of them, require greater respect. He observed that "McCahon was very aware of the sequence of reading a painting visually and textually."<sup>41</sup> This suggestion that the artist was knowledgeable in the aesthetics of the comic is confirmed by his family. William McCahon recalls that his father stated that *Six Days in Nelson and Canterbury* (1959) evolved out of the comic book format.<sup>42</sup>

In 1990, artist Mark Braunias also paid respect to McCahon as an artist capable of integrating words and pictures in the most profound and subtle manner. *Knowing About*



*Knowing About New Zealand Art 1990*  
Mark Braunias  
Collection of William Dart, Auckland

were an inferior art form. McCahon's use of the "reading material of the child and 'illiterate',"<sup>40</sup> is an aspect of his work that was applauded by high art because it contributed to the 'naive' or 'primitive' in contemporary practice.

Only in 1995 did a writer recognise the worth of evaluating McCahon's art as fully integrating and embracing comic book aesthetics without qualifying approval by referring to the manner in which McCahon's art embraces primeval aesthetics. Dylan Horrocks, a tutor at the University of

*New Zealand Art* (1990) by Braunias humorously points to the popular misconception that reading too many comics may be damaging to an individual's intelligence and pays tribute to McCahon's painting from the 1940s. *Knowing About New Zealand Art* acknowledges the 'colonial brutalism' of McCahon's art, while demonstrating an appreciation for the conventions of the comic book medium McCahon exploited.

Pound also gave qualified recognition to the potential of



the comic book as a serious art form in the early 1980s when he championed the 'New Image' artists in an exhibition of the same name.<sup>45</sup> He singled out George Baloghy, Denys Watkins, Dick Frizzell, Richard Killeen, Paul Hartigan, Gavin Chilcott and Wong Sing Tai as a group of artists who gave a new priority to the figurative in their work. He observed that these artists referred to "non-art images - comics, posters, labels, logos, camouflages, patterns on lino or cloth - to all sorts of signs and symbols."<sup>44</sup> According to Pound, they also shared "a concern with images not normally called art, images of low art rather than high."<sup>45</sup> His commentary was sympathetic to Frizzell and Hartigan's love of the comic book,<sup>46</sup> but Pound managed to maintain high art's authoritative response to the use of 'low' art sources. Comic book aesthetics were generally approved of in the text because of the respectability that they had acquired in serious art criticism through the emergence of American Pop Art in the 1960s. Consequently, Frizzell and Hartigan were shown 'the way' by Pop Art,<sup>47</sup> while Watkins's painting is aligned to the art of Roy Lichtenstein.<sup>48</sup> The most obvious admiration for the potential of the comic book came not from Pound, but from artist Dick Frizzell, who commented:

"I read comics as a kid all the time. I stopped reading them at art school - I was ashamed of being seen. Now I'm past all that shit. I can be myself."<sup>49</sup>

If comics found their way into Pound's text partially through the impact of Pop Art, their presence in the *New Image* exhibition ultimately served the cause of serious painting. Comic book conventions in a painting frequently signalled the subversion of the pretensions of high art. Hence, Pound refers to the use of 'low' art sources as "non-art images,"<sup>50</sup> with their purpose being primarily as a vehicle to generate a discussion and criticism of serious art.<sup>51</sup> Pound's recognition of comic aesthetics and their contribution to the dialogue of painting is welcome and the contempt for high art's posturing is refreshing. However, the emphasis placed upon the potential for 'low' art to trigger irony and ridicule places the fine arts in an obvious position of superiority. Although Frizzell and Hartigan demonstrated a respect and enthusiasm for such things as comics and comic art, *New Image* gives limited approval to such values.



Am / 1997  
Dick Frizzell  
Courtesy of the Artist and Gow Langsford Gallery, Auckland

High art was also prepared to attack popular aesthetics in a more direct and conspicuous manner. Curnow responded to the attention given to the *New Image* painters in the early 1980s as occupying 'advanced' positions in the art world, a stance for which "they [did] not, in [his] opinion, qualify."<sup>52</sup>

He was, however, pleased to exempt Frizzell from this group because he believed that Frizzell's art had changed since 1983 into a more "personal myth-orientated imagery and handling that is faux-naive, sincere... [it] has deepened and subverted his previous manner, putting popular culture at a distance."<sup>53</sup> In summary, Frizzell's art was perceived to be of substance because he was understood (mistakenly) to have thrown off the influence of popular art and comic books.

Dunedin artist Nicola Jackson was also labelled a *New Image* painter.<sup>54</sup> Writing for *Art New Zealand* in 1990, art critic Peter Leech reviewed a group exhibition of work by Jackson, Jenny Dolézel and Debra Bustin at the Dunedin Public Art Gallery. Leech took writer Peter Entwisle to task for declaring that Nicola Jackson's art might represent a challenge to the duller aspects of recent local modernism, observing that "challenges for the rest of the artworld are normally figured in the metaphor of flinging down a gauntlet, not waving a brightly-coloured woollen mitten."<sup>55</sup> The assumption Leech makes is that the trappings of popular art, i.e. the rich and sensational colours, the bold black outline and cartoon forms described by Jackson, fail to fully engage on a profound level, either aesthetically or philosophically. Rather than recognising the subversive



nature of Jackson's work, Leech valued it as "a passing fascination."<sup>56</sup>

Is it possible to deal with the imagery and format of comic books in serious Western culture and gain credible acceptance? Possibly not. More recently Dick Frizzell has been berated by critics for the lack of genuinely profound moments in his work. This was evident in reviews of his 1997 retrospective *Portrait of a Serious Artist: 20 Years of Dick Frizzell*. Auckland critic Keith Stewart commented that the exhibition was the equivalent of McDonald's at Auckland's Children's Hospital: 'McArt.'<sup>57</sup> Gregory O'Brien tendered dubious approval, noting that on one level; "The curiosity, enthusiasm and... discipline with which he approaches the business of putting paint on canvas or board permeates his oeuvre," while observing that the exhibition lacked a certain profundity. He commented that "The next twenty years will be pivotal for [Frizzell] in every respect. The success of these paintings... demands another step."<sup>58</sup>

Tony de Lautour has been equally condemned for his depiction of a corrupted comic-book character that strives to resemble a New Zealand kiwi. In *Bad White Art*, de Lautour's 1995 exhibition at the Brooke/Gifford Gallery in Christchurch, critic Justin Paton noted in *Art New Zealand* that de Lautour was:

an enthusiast [of the lowest strata of comic-book imagery] who also happens to paint. That's what makes the works so enjoyable, and so inconsequential. You feel sure he'd rather read a comic than an art magazine.<sup>59</sup>



*Canta* 1972 (detail)  
Philip Clairmont  
Vol 42, No 5

Paton's commentary fails to recognise the impact of a sophisticated comic-book aesthetic on de Lautour's art that emerged in the early 1990s in America, through publications such as Robert Crumb's *Weirdo* and *Fantagraphics Books*. American artists Harvey Pekar, Kaz, Peter Bagge and Jamie and Gilbert Hernandez dealt with questions of alienation, human identity and the dilemma of existence through the comic-book medium with characters close in spirit and aesthetic to de Lautour's. If the work appears 'inconsequential,' then this is an appropriate commentary, not on de Lautour's work as a whole, but on the predicament of estrangement that the 'low-life,' in his paintings, are forced to confront.

Objections to comic book aesthetics are not merely limited to critics and writers. In *Comix: A Survey of Contemporary New Zealand Comics*, (an Auckland exhibition curated by Tim Renner at the Fisher Gallery in 1996) a traditionally fine art gallery provided exhibition space for leading New Zealand comic artists.<sup>60</sup> While this exhibition represented the first time that such an art space had been given over to comic art, the gallery treated it differently. Participants were given guidelines regarding the censorship of their art and reminded of the Censorship Act 1993, as it related to pornography. Would the gallery have raised such issues if the work in question had been painting, printmaking or sculpture? Their concern over pornography in the exhibition indicated a lack of confidence in the comic book to deal with little more than content attributable to children.

There was also an implication that those artists who chose to draw and write comics were undisciplined in their behaviour and character. The discussion of general business in the gallery was described in the meetings notes for the exhibition as unmanageable and that 'such abuse of an agenda was almost totally unheard of.'<sup>61</sup>

This evidence of the intolerance between high and low art contradicts the premise put forward by American art commentators Kirk Varnedoe and Adam Gopnik in the exhibition catalogue *High and Low: Modern Art and Popular Culture* (1990). Varnedoe and Gopnik's text accompanied an exhibition of the same name, curated by the Museum of Modern Art in New York, in which they contended that serious and popular art have mutually drawn upon one another at various times in the twentieth century.<sup>62</sup>



Our goal is to examine the transformations through which modern painters and sculptors have made new poetic language by reimagining the possibilities in forms of popular culture; and as a corollary, to acknowledge the way back into the common currency of public visual prose.<sup>63</sup>

However, the issue of the relationship between high and low art for most artists and writers is complex and more frequently characterised by friction and disagreement. Some painters have demonstrated difficulty in dealing with comics as little more than a tool with which to subvert high art, while galleries, critics and historians have automatically assumed the superiority of fine art over the comic.

This point of view is also evident in Varnedoe and Gopnik's text. Robert Boyd noted in his review of Varnedoe and Gopnik's exhibition catalogue that underground cartoonist Robert Crumb is diminished by these curators when they make comparisons between Crumb's work and painter Philip Guston. Varnedoe and Gopnik state that:

In 1966, at the same time Crumb was experiencing his moment of vision and revolt, another and larger revolt against an entrenched and cheerful lie of art had just begun, larger than Crumb's revolt in scale and ultimate achievement.

The assumption Varnedoe and Gopnik make is that Guston's work as a painter is more significant than that of Crumb's as a comic book artist.<sup>64</sup>

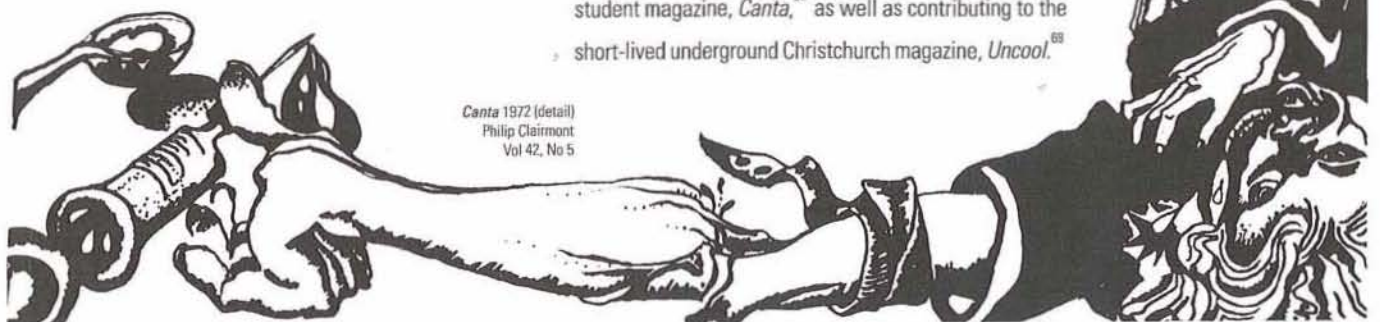
Consequently, the very disdain with which comics have been regarded can make them an appealing and subversive area of exploration for a number of serious artists. American art critic and historian Irving Sandler observed that the emergence of 'new image' art in the USA in the late 1970s was characterised by a deliberate rejection of;

"the classic canons of good taste, draftsmanship, acceptable source material, rendering, or illusionistic representation... This is work that avoids the conventions of high art... Accordingly, bad painters looked for inspiration to 'low' art."<sup>65</sup>

Such borrowings however, were capable of being far from innocent or executed with affection for the medium. Carrie Ricky argued in *Flash Art* that such admiration for popular aesthetics was often the artist's way of "being intellectual about anti-intellectualism."<sup>66</sup>

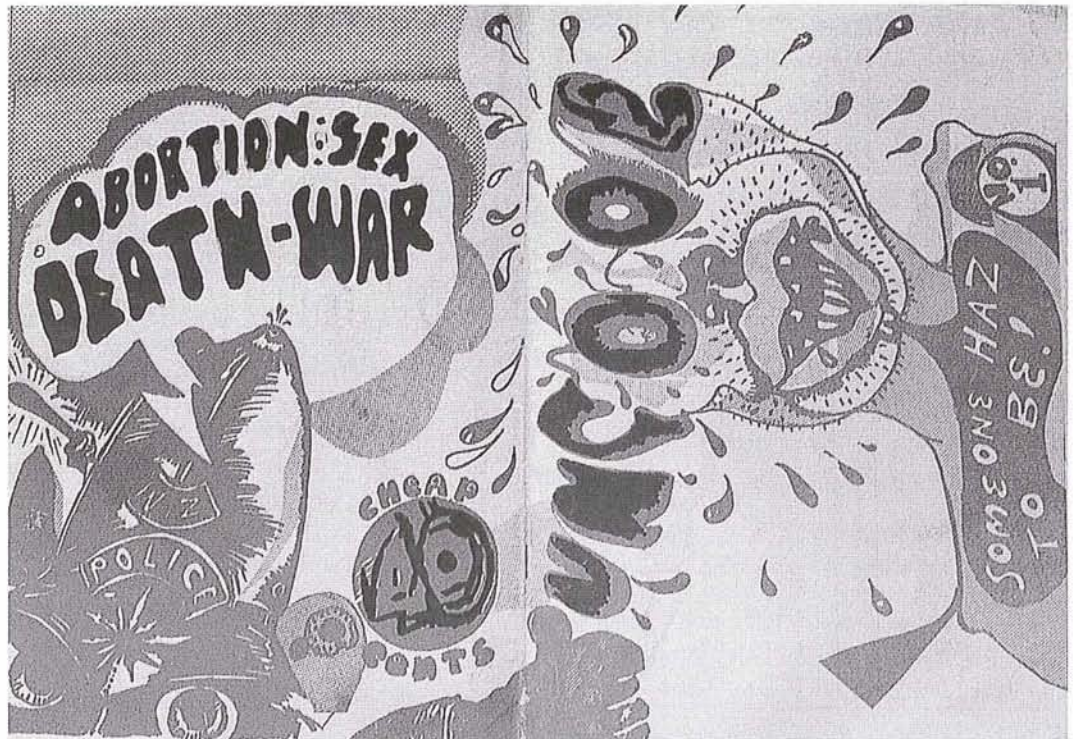
Boyd's criticism of Varnedoe's and Gopnik's *High and Low: Modern Art and Popular Culture* also contended that both high and low art have historically been dismissive of one another. Photographer John Heartfield used pop culture, not out of admiration, but critically. From the perspective of the cartoon and the comic book, popular artists have been equally disdainful of serious art. "There is a whole tradition... [in comics] of gag cartoons ridiculing the latest thing, whatever it may be, in painting and sculpture."<sup>67</sup>

In spite of such tensions and discord, there are artists, both inside and outside New Zealand, who have responded with varying levels of attachment towards the comic book. One local painter who demonstrated little difficulty with comics, expressing a genuine affection for them in numerous aspects of his work, was Philip Clairmont. His expressionist art of the 1970s and early 1980s is informed as much by popular and underground comics as it is by German Expressionism. In the early 1970s Clairmont illustrated an issue of the University of Canterbury's student magazine, *Canta*,<sup>68</sup> as well as contributing to the short-lived underground Christchurch magazine, *Uncool*.<sup>69</sup>



*Canta* 1972 (detail)  
Philip Clairmont  
Vol 42, No 5

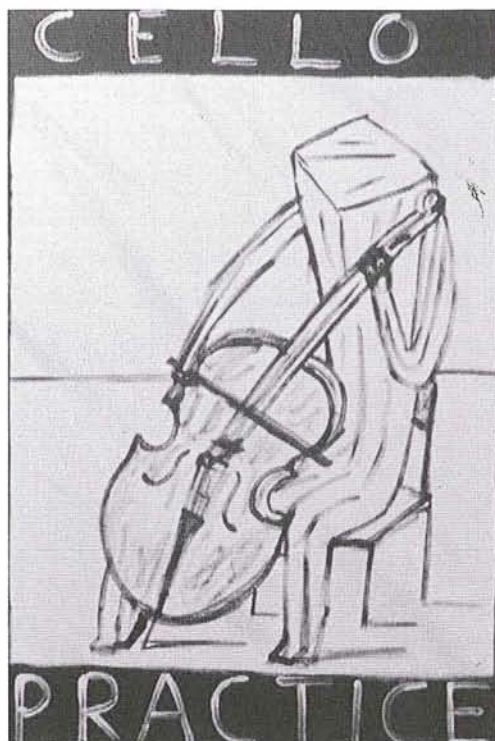




"Uncool" No. 1 (cover)  
Philip Clairmont

His illustrations for *A Conscientious Drug Guide*, in *Canta* in 1972 conveyed a strong admiration for Robert Crumb. Clairmont copied images directly from early issues of Crumb's *Zap*, as well as providing more original biomorphic psychedelic texts and illustrations. Clairmont

acknowledged the source for his work below the image, labelling it 'Ripoff-Crumbum'.<sup>70</sup> The distortion and elongation of forms and figures, bound in heavy shadows and thick black outlines, may ultimately be traced back to German Expressionism, but in the early 1970s, this iconography was a familiar part of Clairmont's world through his experience of the counterculture and underground comics.



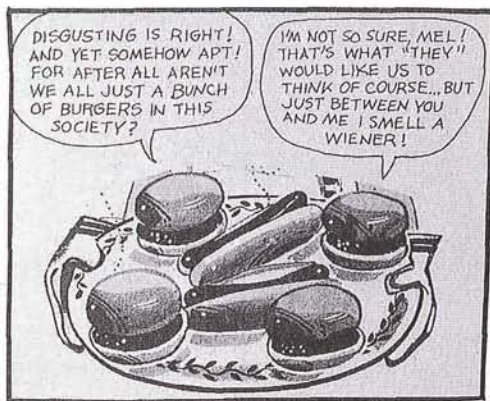
The impact of this aesthetic on Clairmont is apparent in his painting. Jim and Mary Barr's text for Clairmont's retrospective exhibition in 1987 makes reference to this, as well as the underground graphics that appeared on popular record covers. They refer to the fractured and distorted forms in *Overcoat Over the Chair* (1971) and relate its embellishments to the "psychedelic era and the popularisation of some eastern religions."<sup>71</sup> "Underground comix were a source of inspiration

*Aspects of Culture* 1986 (detail)  
Gavin Chilcott  
Collection of James Brow  
Photography: Mal Brow



as much as the German Expressionists.”<sup>72</sup> For Clairmont, it remained an ongoing aspect of his work. A later painting by the artist, *Staircase Triptych 36 Roy Street* (1977), draws upon a similar aesthetic with its depiction of a claustrophobic interior and the animation, and continually evolving distortion, of furniture and fittings.

Gavin Chilcott’s art has adopted ‘low’ art to demean the inflated ambitions of ‘serious art’ but is equally concerned with raising something of the spirit and dissident nature of the comic. The depreciation of the noble and momentous through the use of comic aesthetics in Chilcott’s work belittles wider aspects of our society. In *Aspects of Culture* (1986) Chilcott humorously addresses notions of culture and high art. He creates a world that deflates the ambitions and pretensions of art by faking the style of colouring-in books and comics from the 1960s.<sup>73</sup> This image is certainly art addressing art, with self-



*Anarchy Comics No 1 1978* (detail)  
Jay Kinney

conscious references to ways of representing culture. However, its surreal and subversive attitude is indebted to underground comics. Chilcott undermines the grandness of a world that no longer has faith in its beliefs, and in this sense *Aspects of Culture* is close in spirit to numerous political underground comics produced in the United States in the late 1960s and 1970s, such as Jay Kinney’s *Anarchy Comics*.<sup>74</sup> Kinney’s habit of allowing objects from consumer society, such as hamburgers and trays of meat, to speak about their anxiety, is both humorous and urgent. There is a

similar game of cultural anarchy and revolution apparent in Chilcott’s image.

“However, the comic book is more than an art form that serious artists have occasionally drawn upon with respect and admiration or taken up to ridicule aspects of high art.”

Undoubtedly, these are important elements of the genre’s use in fine art, but there is more. When comic book art and serious art connect, a tension and empathy can take place that cultivates both artforms.

What is it that fine art can steal from comic books? What does it stand to learn from this unique artform? What is the distinctive language of comics, its code of behaviours, its iconography, its philosophy and practice as art?

Although characterised by its reputation as an iconoclast in the art world, the comic book received a new respect as a serious artform in the mid-1980s. This critical consideration may ultimately only be temporary,<sup>75</sup> but undoubtedly comics are encountering attention and criticism in a way that they previously haven’t. “Comic narrative is finally taking its place beside film and fiction as a medium capable of profundity, wit, humour and drama... comics are for the moment, hip.”<sup>76</sup>

This development was most notable in the publication of *Maus* by Art Spiegelman<sup>77</sup> and the Pulitzer prize that it later received.<sup>78</sup> Comic artist and author Spiegelman chronicled the life of his father as a Jewish survivor of the Nazi death camps, adding a complexity of meaning to his story. He presented his father as, in part, the unlikable stereo-typical Jew that Hitler despised, and detailed the tragedy of personal events in Spiegelman’s and his father’s life in America that ultimately unfolded from the circumstances of the Second World War. This comic was nominated for the annual award in biography by the



National Book Critics Circle in 1987, and has nurtured a level of serious criticism and commentary previously unknown to the comic book. In *Comic Books as History*, American comic critic and historian Joseph Witek observed that:

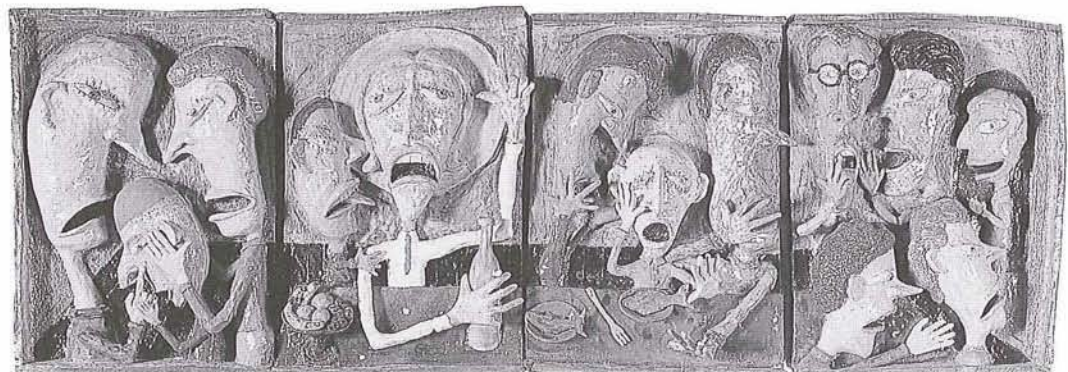
The unprecedented critical reception for *Maus* has changed, perhaps forever, the cultural perception of what a comic book can be and what can be accomplished by creators who take seriously the sequential art medium.<sup>79</sup>

In addition, the publication of *Understanding Comics* (1993) by Scott McCloud<sup>80</sup> focused on the comic genre as a distinctive artform with a language of its own worthy of critical respect. McCloud establishes crucial aspects of the art of the comic book and builds upon earlier definitions explored by American comic book artist, Will Eisner.<sup>81</sup>

McCloud argues that comics are unique in their combination of words and pictures, and in the sequential reading of the elements that is required to make sense of them. He establishes his dictionary definition as:

"Juxtaposed pictorial and other images in deliberate sequence, intended to convey information and/or produce an aesthetic response in the viewer."<sup>83</sup>

Such a definition provides a context from which the influence of the comic on serious art can be better understood. Although McCloud's explanation arguably



*The Last Supper* 1997  
Jimmy Cooper  
Courtesy of Matheson/MacDonald Collection

McCloud defines the comic book as a combination of sequential words and pictures and uses this as a working definition for the genre as serious art. For a painting or sculpture to be perceived to be genuinely influenced by comic art the image must do more than simply represent comic characters. In this sense, the Pop Art paintings of Roy Lichtenstein may depict the art of the comic, but they fail to fully engage in its processes as an art form. Wylan Curnow makes this point indirectly in his observations on Colin McCahon's religious paintings from the 1940s. Contrasting Lichtenstein's work with McCahon's, he notes that "Warhol and Lichtenstein put on the style of the comic artist, whereas McCahon adopts that of comic reader, consumer of comics."<sup>82</sup>

touches upon aspects of fine art, his appreciation of a particular set of values and circumstances that operate within comics establishes an aesthetic with a dynamic and life of its own. Recognition of this aesthetic contributes an alternative (and possibly more relevant) perspective and insight into the work of those artist who have integrated elements of the comic book into the fine arts. Jimmy Cooper's *The Last Supper* (1997) demonstrates a perfect orchestration of McCloud's definition of sequential images, and serves as a reminder that the progressive organisation of a narrative is commonly shared by high art. (Possibly most readily apparent in the artists of the early Renaissance.) The panels that separate events in a comic strip are implied through the four separate



sculptural reliefs in Cooper's *The Last Supper*. Consequently this work can be read as a succession of responses between individual figures within comic panels over a period of time. Even allowing for the assumption that all thirteen have responded simultaneously to circumstances, the emotional engagement between the various groups indicates a myriad of responses that extends and shrinks time between them. Cooper's division of events invites the spectator to read the work as a comic strip is automatically read, from left to right.

Furthermore, like Clairmont's painting, Cooper's art is informed by American underground comics. This is most apparent in the Robert Crumb-like distortions of the figures, and the unshaven, dishevelled, appearance of the Apostles who share much in common with Crumb creations such as Itzy and Bitzy or the leading figure in 'Ducks Yas Yas'.<sup>84</sup>

However, of more importance is the underlying anxiety and disquiet that pervades both Crumb's and Cooper's work. These are outsiders, removed from society. The 'larger than life' angst of Cooper's figures is shared by the emotional responses described in Crumb's art, where frequently autobiographical stories deal with individuals trapped in a society and culture beyond their control.<sup>85</sup>

The sequential nature of the comic strip and the demands that it makes upon the reader to move logically through a linear narrative is assumed without question in Violet Faigan's *Heard You Callin' My Name* (1999). Faigan understands that the work will be unravelled logically by the spectator in the same way that a Victorian pianola inevitably and mechanically moves from start to finish in a musical score. Faigan's joy lies in providing visual leaps and bounds in time, space and iconography, allowing the presumed logic of an uninterrupted narrative to be challenged and undermined along the way.

**"In addition to the notion of a sequential storyline the comic book also links words and pictures in a way that allows them to inform and nurture one another."**

At their best, words and pictures are inseparable, constructing unique means of expression and perception.

*The Tongue* (1986) by Nicola Jackson establishes the sort of dialogue between text and image that the best comic artists frequently utilise. Jackson sets up an obvious paradox, playing the image against the text. The physical violation of the individual in the work is as humorous as it is terrifying, with the carefully severed tongue and tormented response of the figure set against the funky, upbeat colour of the image and the bold comic outline. This sense of discrepancy is heightened by the contrast between words and picture. The fake rationality and well-ordered logic of the statement regarding the left and right side of the tongue, serves to increase the underlying perception of apprehension and discomfort.



*The Tongue* 1986  
Nicola Jackson  
Private Collection

The overt use of symbols and icons to represent reality is also critical to the aesthetics of the comic. The abstraction and definition of the real world as a generalised, highly abstracted set of truths, is ideally suited to a popular medium such as the comic as it allows for a compelling and intimate engagement between the medium and the reader.

Cartooning isn't just a way of drawing, it is a way of seeing. The ability of cartoons to focus our

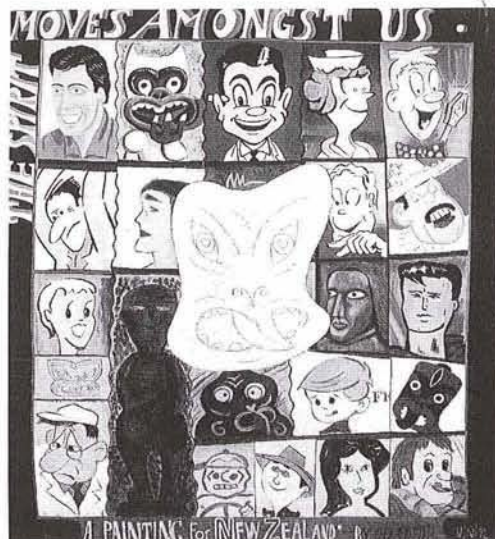


attention on an idea is, I think, an important part of their special power... The cartoon is a vacuum into which our identity and awareness are pulled.<sup>86</sup>

Dick Frizzell's *The Spirit Moves Amongst Us* (1992) acts in just this way. Frizzell places comic, cartoon, tourist and advertising figures side by side in strip panels, and surrounds them with a text that invites reflection on the nature of New Zealand culture and society. The Four-Square man, Superman, Frosty Boy and the local farmer are placed together, acting as symbols that are capable of generating a set of wide-ranging responses. The advertising tiki and Four-Square man share connections to the popular culture of the 1950s and 60s, prompting recollections of trips to the local dairy with parents and grandparents or of holidays in Westland and Queenstown. Collectively, these images form a convincing sense of personal and community identity. Frizzell's employment of the iconic power of the comic, in part, shares McCloud's recognition that the cartoon establishes a direct and commanding empathy with the viewer that naturalism frequently shuffles around.

If comic books often place emphasis upon symbolic rather than naturalistic descriptions of the world, they also define reality through other conceptual means, most obviously the written word. As an art form, comics are unique because "words, pictures and other icons are the vocabulary of [their] language,"<sup>87</sup> and all can share equal billing. Peter Robinson's use of slogans and phrases in his work from the mid-1990s onwards recognises the power of the word. In Robinson's *Community Notice Board* (1994), phrases taken from billboards and advertising notices

*The Spirit Moves Amongst Us* 1992  
Dick Frizzell  
Courtesy of Saatchi & Saatchi Ltd



*Community Notice Board* 1994  
Peter Robinson  
Courtesy of Govett-Brewster Gallery  
The Stevenson Collection, Blenheim (long term loan)

around Christchurch are not only placed in the format of a comic strip, but also work as symbols, clarifying the artist's intentions. Robinson establishes an intimate relationship between the phrases he utilises and the manner in which they are realised. The manipulation of words in comics, through devices such as expanded exclamation marks, broken wavering lines, musical notes and lightening bolts is, in spirit, taken up by Robinson in his enlargement of selected areas of the text, and inclusion of objects such as the hat, car and aeroplane. Consequently, 'WHYTE BROS. I. N. C.' assumes a corporate and criminal dimension through its placement in a silhouetted mafia-style hat, while 'MASSIVE SELL OUT SALE' appropriately takes on the appearance of a no-nonsense, take-charge message through its placement high up on the picture plane and the large expansive scale of its uppercase lettering. Robinson gives greater life to his words through recognition of their potential as a vital conceptual element in his art, inviting a close dialogue between text and audience.

Similarly, James Robinson's *He Kept Saying There Was Something Wrong With Me* (1997) utilises words in an evocative and expressive manner to heighten the power of the image that they accompany. The large and ominous 'He,' that looms over the emasculated figure in this work threatens to engage further harm, while the shaken, rapidly fading phrase, 'we get home no one there,' acts as a disappearing cry for aid. The words share equal billing with the image as conveyers of the work's message.



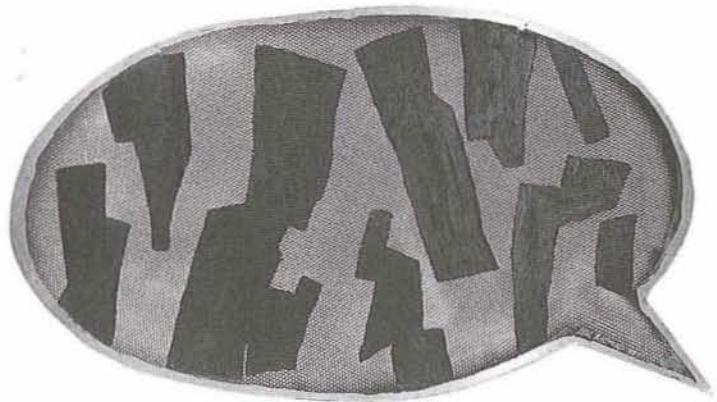
As Dick Frizzell observed about the comic / fine art partnership, the fine arts also depend upon the relationship between text and image. Although rarely acknowledged;

“The title of a painting makes the link between words and pictures crucial in painting.”<sup>88</sup>



*He Kept Telling Me There Was Something Wrong With Me* 1997  
James Robinson  
Private Collection

The idea that a picture can evoke an emotional or sensual response in the viewer is [also] vital to the art of comics.<sup>89</sup> Consequently, the comic sometimes utilises a set of familiar symbols to convey human emotions. The comic medium makes use of line in a way that has developed into “the primordial stuff from which a formalised language,<sup>90</sup> has evolved. Lighting bolts, dynamic lines and small curving lines all demand a different response from the comic book reader, as they act to represent concepts such as shock, sense of smell, explosions and other abstract ideas. Paul Radford’s *Yeah Big!* (1998) embraces this concept and takes the opportunity to invent a new and distinctly personal set of comic symbols and signs. The utterances of children are represented as rich, hefty, tangible shapes that enunciate the life and spirit of their source.



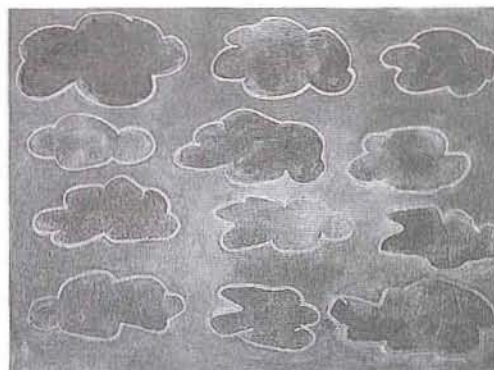
*Yeah, Big!* 1998  
Paul Radford  
Courtesy of the artist

Tom Kreister’s *Twelve Clouds: Every Cloud Has a Silver Lining* also recognises the merit of such conventions, adopting the comic book thought balloon in a way that establishes both a physical and a cognitive reality. Kreister’s image constitutes philosophical speculation, as the clouds hover between mist, vapour and thought. They seem to pause quietly, waiting for the spectator to inform them. The artist touches processes of perception and realisation, and the way in which human experience is represented in the visual arts.

This capacity to identify with signs and models of reality on a personal level is vital to the comic. McCloud argues that the active engagement the reader readily makes with its iconic nature is shared by only one other medium in the late twentieth century:

“Its been over twenty years since [Marshall] McLuhan first observed that those people growing up in the late twentieth century didn’t want goals so much as they wanted roles! And

*Twelve Clouds: Every Cloud has a Silver Lining* 1997  
Tom Kreister  
Courtesy of the artist and Jonathan Smart Gallery





that's what visual iconography is all about. As it happens, only two popular media were identified by McLuhan as 'cool' media - that is, media which commanded audience involvement through iconic forms. One of them, television, has reached into the lives of every human being on earth... The fate of the other one, comics... is anyone's guess."<sup>91</sup>

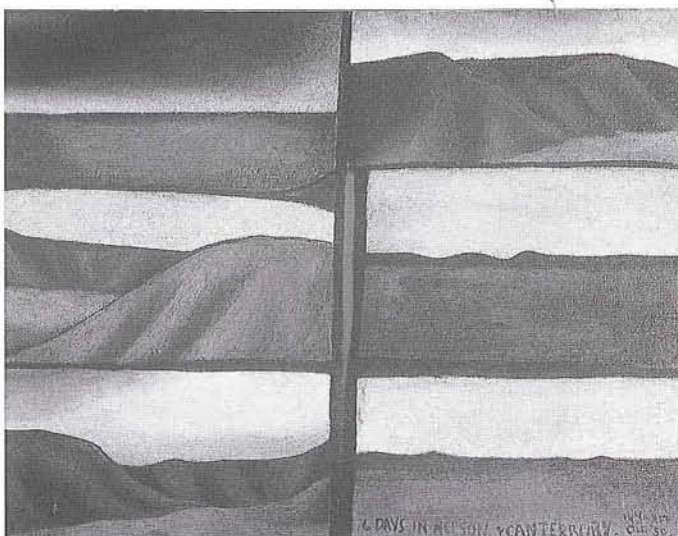
The aesthetic of the comic also recognises the importance of closure, a characteristic that lies at the heart of its appeal. The space between each panel in a comic strip is the moment in which the reader is required to put the gaps in time, space and narrative together:

"Human imagination takes two separate images and transforms them into a single idea... Nothing is seen between the two panels but something tells you something must be there... Comic panels fracture both time and space, offering a jagged staccato rhythm of unconnected moments, but closure allows us to connect these moments and mentally construct a continuous, unified reality... In a very real sense comics is (sic) closure."<sup>92</sup>

This engagement of the spectator in fulfilling the act of closure is beautifully realised in Colin McCahon's *Six Days in Nelson and Canterbury* (1959). In McCahon's division of the canvas into a comic strip of six panels, closure

occupies a strategic position. Although time and space are located within a span of six days through the painting's title, the landscape in this work indicates both a single day and the eternity of the universe. Elemental landforms witness both the rising and setting of the sun, and the enormity of life itself. If the viewer is required to fill the intervals in time and space between the panels in a comic, McCahon establishes a sense of the momentary nature of existence as the spectator takes the leap between an hour, a day, and forever, from panel to panel. The division of the picture plane into the format of comic book panels and the demands made upon the spectator to 'fill in the gaps,' confirms that McCahon is one of the country's most important comic book artists.

Equally, *Mang* (1997) by Mark Braunias demands that links are established between each image. In a Miró-inspired world of metamorphosis and permutation, forms are entrapped, released and evolve with a sense of perplexity and wonder. Void and shape interchange, inviting the spectator to share in this complication.



As for the comic panel itself, in which all the dialogue, action, imagery and narrative unfolds, McCloud establishes that the panel also works as an icon that contains:

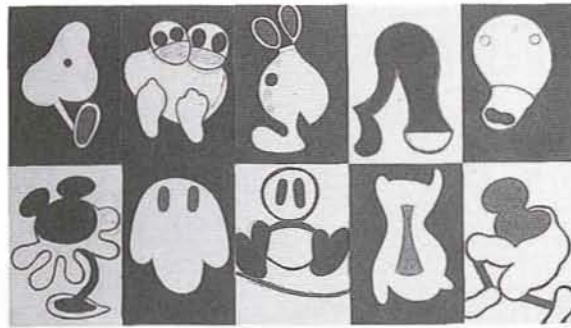
no fixed or absolute meaning... The panel acts as a sort of general indicator that time or space is being divided... The durations of that time and the dimensions of that space are defined more



by the contents of the panel than by the panel itself... The panel border is our guide through space and time...<sup>93</sup>

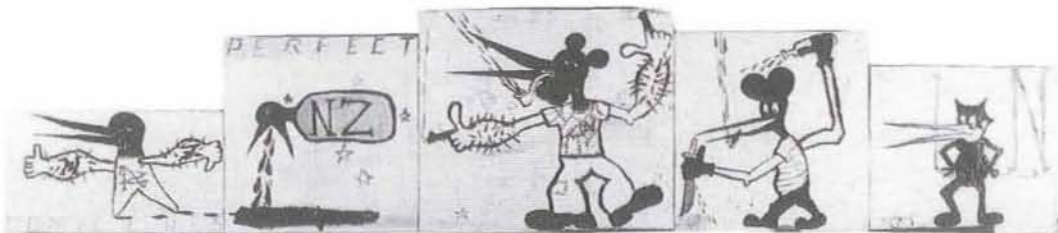
The notion that a moment of reality can be defined through the placement of the panel is readily apparent in Frizzell's *The Spirit Moves Amongst Us* (1992). The artist limits the space between the panels and crowds the figures close to the front of each frame, inviting the work to be read both as a single image, and as a set of multiple impressions. The artist is signalling that the claustrophobic assemblage of forms in this artwork represents a short passage of time, and quick snapshots of New Zealand culture.

Tony de Lautour's *Comic Cuts* (1996) also recognises this conception of a picture of local life, reassembling what



*Mang* 1998  
Mark Braumias  
Courtesy of the Gregory Flint Gallery, Auckland

and time, moving through a series of childhood memories and from individual to individual. 'Cousin Kathleen at her easel' in the first panel shares only its general concept with the second panel - that people utilise materials to construct and establish objects and forms that may be labelled art. Similarly, the strangeness of "Plasticine



*Comic Cuts* 1996  
Tony de Lautour  
Courtesy of Brooke Gifford Gallery

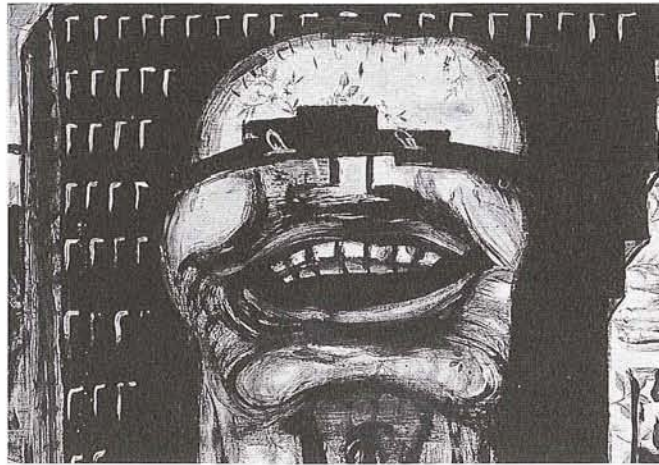
appear initially to be panels cut from various comics. The dark tattooed kiwi, the knife-wielding figure and other assorted individuals in this work are linked by their concern with violence, drugs and antisocial behaviour, yet de Lautour utilises the division between each panel to isolate them and focus upon their individuality as much as their similarities. It is like being an uncomfortable witness to a Friday night party in the worst part of town, yet being drawn into empathy with the distinctiveness of these characters. The divisions between de Lautour's panels allow for a reflective pause that recognises both the limitations and the rich diversity of the culture he describes. As leaps are made from image to image, the relationships between these figures engages a feeling that these collective lunatics and weirdos are also quite unique.

In Gavin Chilcott's *Aspects of Culture* (1986) the artist connects varying perceptions of the arts through space

dinner John St. Early 60s" asks for a leap in time and space from the viewer before returning to the final image, 'Cello practice'. Chilcott's references to creative processes act as a link between each separate panel and allow profound leaps between events, with the frame containing each image and acting as a device to signal to the reader that a move from one location to another is about to take place. The artist clearly recognises that the comic strip panel is not confined within linear time and that the panel allows him to both contain an idea or activity while connecting it in some way to wider conceptions or endeavours.

Bill Hammond's *Job Search* (1989) deals with space and time in a similar manner, although the artist removes the need for the frames of the comic book panel. The painting's title indicates a specific activity while the strips of





*Job Search* 1989 (detail)  
Bill Hammond  
Courtesy of Paul and Fran Dibble  
Photography: Karl Valpy

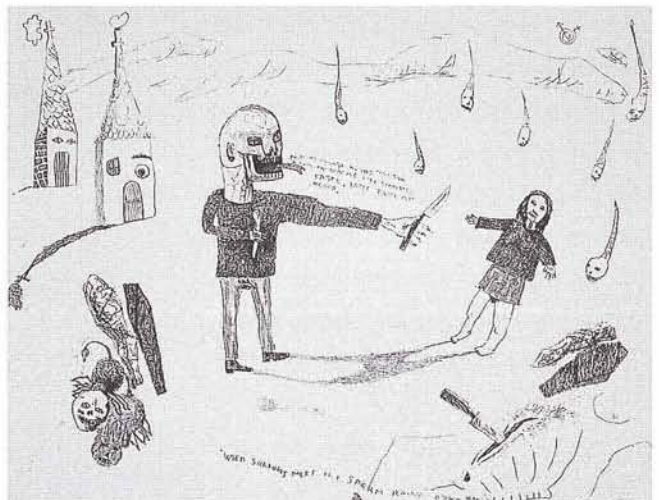
wallpaper Hammond constructs his images upon invite shifts between intimate and personal observations of anxiety to a more general commentary about the dilemma of 'life in the big city.' More importantly, however, the reading of this work in a panel-by-panel manner means that Hammond is able to shift emotional territory with ease, and move between intimacy, detachment, or intimidation.

This movement between time and place, and culture and environment, within a single image is further cultivated by the inclusion of words, which contribute not just a text, but the establishment of a pause within the picture frame:

"Just as pictures and the intervals between them create an illusion of time through closure, words introduce time by representing that which can only exist in time... sound."<sup>94</sup>

In Saskia Leek's *Coney Island Baby* (1997) time slowly unfolds through the introductory phrase at the top of the picture plane, establishing an opening mood for the work. Furthermore, the fairground attractions and their advertisements invite an inspection of the park, and delays reading the speech balloon emanating from the figure in the foreground.

*From My Tongue No Lie Will Come* 1989  
Jason Greig  
Collection of the artist  
Photography: Karl Valpy



Leek understands the conventions of the comic book in her placement of words, and in the suitably broad and expansive treatment of space in *Coney Island Baby*. It is as though she wishes to provide the spectator with enough time and room to wander around the fairground and the picture plane itself.

Jason Greig's *From My Tongue No Lie Will Come* (1989) makes use of words in a similar manner, heightening the audience's discomfort by forcing the viewer to linger in an environment that they may prefer to escape. In part, Greig's work derives from the horror comics of the 1950s. It is both a teenager's bad attempt at one, riddled with sexual guilt and unfolding levels of violence, while recognising, and representing almost everything that parents worry about in comic books. It is as though Greig is seeking to confirm the worst fears of the *Landfall* (1955) article on comics. *From My Tongue No Lie Will Come* does indeed appear to blunt "the finer feelings of conscience, of mercy, of sympathy for other people's sufferings and of respect for women as women and not merely as sex objects."<sup>95</sup>



Greig's image is consumed by the power of the comic book and appreciative of its occasionally over-indulgent sense of violence. Unravelling the strange dreams and fantasies of adolescence, Greig conveys an edgy violence and horror that is both tragic and humorous, being ultimately the pathetic, doomed and unfulfilled ambitions of popular stereotypical conceptions of a 'problem-with-youth' syndrome.

The capacity of Greig's work to disturb, in its narrative and its aesthetics, helps to explain the appeal of the comic book to a number of artists. If the medium has received little recognition as a serious art form from critics and academics, its ability to act 'outside' or apart from more accepted means of expression contributes to the enchantment it offers to artists seeking to break the rules. In New Zealand, the work of Frizzell, de Lautour and Leek is based in part on the notion of acting as a maverick in the presence of 'serious' art. De Lautour has observed that he derives some pleasure from the knowledge that his street-wise iconography has entered the hallowed world of serious art. In an interview in 1995 he expressed his satisfaction at "the irony of using the traditional richness of oil paint, 'the fine art medium,' to express and explore 'common' concerns."<sup>96</sup>

The engagement with popular culture by contemporary art is, however, more than merely a desire to outrage. This spirit of indignation is also indicative of a skepticism about the confidence of civilisation in the late twentieth century and is shared by cultures and artists throughout the world. In Japan the comic book is a respected and established form of art and, not surprisingly, artists such as Takashi Murakami have made welcome use of cartoons, fashion and media commodities to address the irrelevance of humanism and high culture in late twentieth century Japan:

Murakami's strength lies in his ability to realise the sadness of being encapsulated in consumer society, which he shares with contemporary youth. Some may find it a tragic situation if, in a society where traditional values disintegrate

and the sense of self is engulfed in various discourses of spirituality, the only vocabulary the artist shares with his audience is that of cartoons, mass media or fashion, that is indeed tragic... Intoxicated with pleasure, it also contains the emptiness of the situation.<sup>97</sup>

This commentary on the mass media is important to the art of Saskia Leek. Depicting an American culture that she has experienced and acquired second-hand through film, music, and magazines, Leek's paintings celebrate, yet also lament, the lack of genuine engagement with the real thing. It is as though the thrill of popular culture will inevitably contain disappointment, with Leek's painting manifesting a not-quite-genuine enthusiasm for life in the fast lane.



Tony de Lautour's art is also much more than merely bad white art. The menacing tattoo, the atmosphere of violence and hangovers, are indicative of an aspiration to breathe new life into the act of painting. In paintings such as *N.Z.* (1992) de Lautour's work seems to address the difficulty of injecting a sense of danger and substance into an art world that, in the late 1990s, finds the act of painting somewhat commonplace. De Lautour's art seeks to reposition itself through adopting a counterculture that makes possible an indulgence in the task of applying paint on canvas. The world his painting defines openly admits its failure, and consequently disarms any well-intended criticism.



Within the comic book medium itself, the role of outcast means that a comic artist possesses an enviable status compared to the serious painter. In the 1990s it is possible for the comic illustrator to write, draw, print and publish work without the need for a publisher, let alone a dealer or public gallery. Furthermore, the comic artist's work is consumed without requiring the approval or support of the art world curator or critic. McCloud maintains that this freedom from the tyranny of institutions preserves the innovative life and dynamics of the comic book. He notes that "understanding comics today is serious business. Today, comics is (sic) one of the few forms of mass communication in which individual choices

Characters in *Underworld*  
© Kaz  
The Comics Journal Kaz Interview  
#186 April 1996  
Courtesy of Fantagraphics Books

Characters in *Underworld*  
© Kaz  
The Comics Journal Kaz Interview  
#186 April 1996  
Courtesy of Fantagraphics Books



still have a chance to be heard.<sup>98</sup> If the visual arts still recognise the need to challenge, push boundaries or shock and provoke an audience, then the renegade status of the comic book remains an admirable proposition. McCloud's analysis of its aesthetics concludes with an optimism that is to be envied by the fine arts.

"[Comic books] offer tremendous resources to all writers and artists; faithfulness, control, a chance to be heard far and wide without fear of compromise...(they offer) range and versatility with all the potential imagery of film and painting plus the intimacy of the written word."

In this sense, the ambitions of the comic are the hopes and wishes of all serious artists. Although comics may have too frequently been the object of critical derision in New Zealand and throughout the Western world, the medium is capable of inspiring high art, both because of its dissident status and in spite of it. From the academic

criticism of A. R. D. Fairburn, to the dismissive tones of Wystan Curnow, and the misguided criticisms of Frizzell and De Lautour, comics appear, fortunately, to have been born under a bad sign<sup>99</sup>. Possibly the recent emergence of the comic as a serious art form may be altering this standing. However, this degree of new-found respect for the medium coincides with its emergence as arguably the last remaining independent means of artistic expression available to an artist. Its long-standing reputation as an iconoclast may yet be sustainable, lending it an appeal that is compelling.

The sense of anarchy, and the limitless creative possibilities the medium contained, was (and remains today) remarkably tangible in Robert Crumb's *Zap No. 1* (1967). Crumb plunged from profound speculation about his artistic capabilities to a text that belonged in a bad detective novel, before descending to a well-poised insult and challenge aimed at the reader:

I'm one of the world's last great medieval thinkers!







**Why Art is "@\*#!"**  
**and Comics are so Fantastic**

by Tim Bollinger



# WHY ART IS SHIT

OR  
a Century of Popular  
mis-  
Conception  
rectified

## AND COMICS ARE SO FANTASTIC

by Tim Bottinger

My apologies for the deliberately provocative title...

THIS IS A CARTOONIST'S REACTION TO THE 'ARE COMICS ART?' DEBATE...

The question in my mind is — How come 'art' is such **BAD** comics?

The whole thing dates back to the turn of the century when fine art was reaching its modernist peak and new popular media like cinema and print were coming in, in a **BIG** WAY!...

\* AUTHOR'S NOTE: THIS ESSAY IS BASED PRINCIPALLY ON SPECULATION AND RHETORIC ... WHAT OF IT? \*

The traditional function of painting — to provide a social narrative — was being replaced by a new abstract and expressionist aesthetic... At the same time, mass-production paved the way for the rise of mass literacy and new populist forms of story-telling

COMICS was one of them







Those seeking high-culture, exclusivity, refinement, interior decoration and a sound investment went one way...

To fine ART...

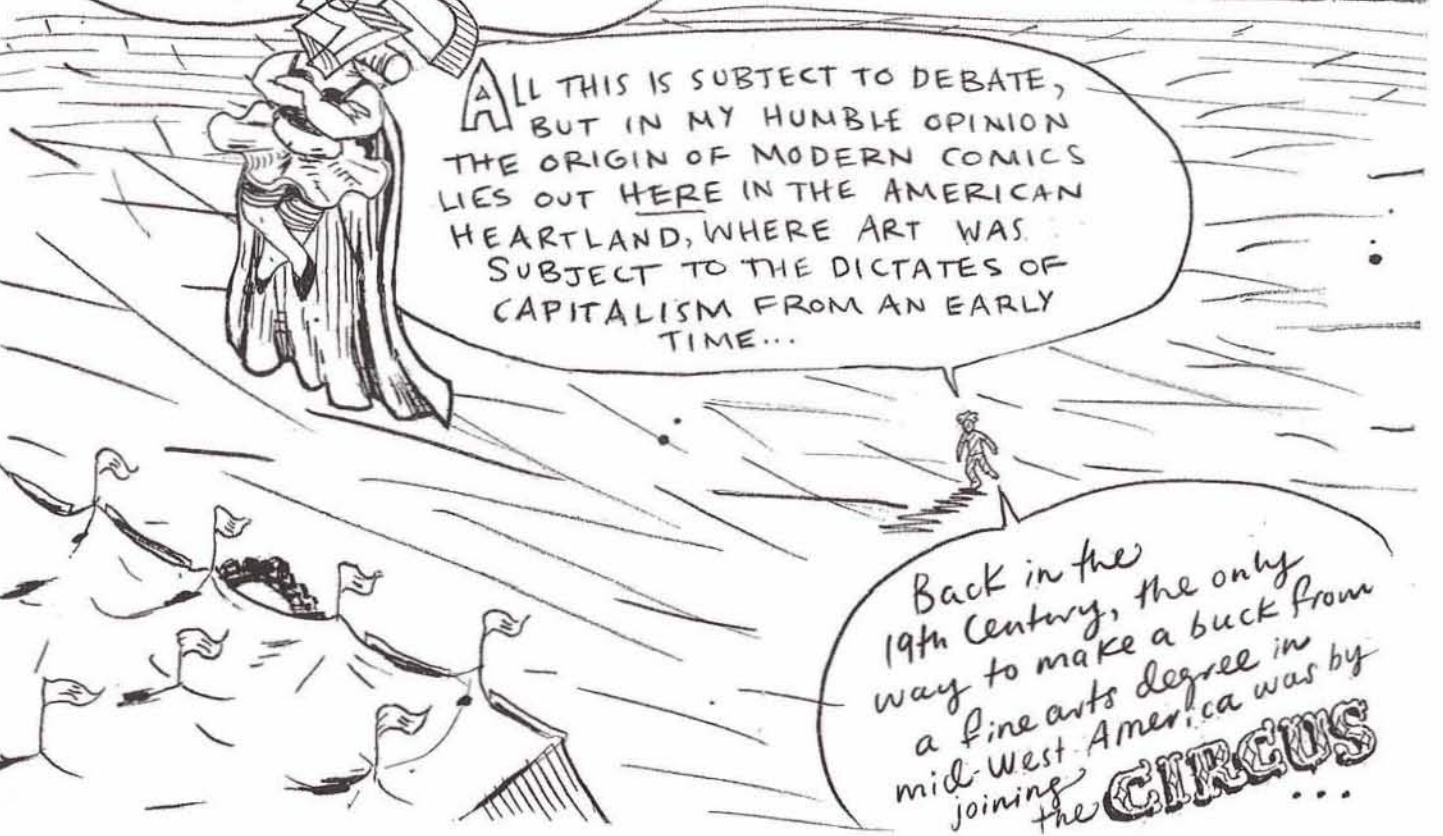
COMICS (e t c...)

Children, the uneducated, pornographers and political agitators went that way...

DON'T ASK ME WHY!...



All the allegorical symbolism, moral instruction, descriptive commentary and imaginative speculation that used to go into classical painting somehow passed on into the visual narrative of the comic book, while so-called 'art' searched vainly to find new meaning in the modern world...



ALL THIS IS SUBJECT TO DEBATE, BUT IN MY HUMBLE OPINION THE ORIGIN OF MODERN COMICS LIES OUT HERE IN THE AMERICAN HEARTLAND, WHERE ART WAS SUBJECT TO THE DICTATES OF CAPITALISM FROM AN EARLY TIME...

Back in the 19th Century, the only way to make a buck from a fine arts degree in mid-West America was by joining the **CIRCUS**...



# AMERICA

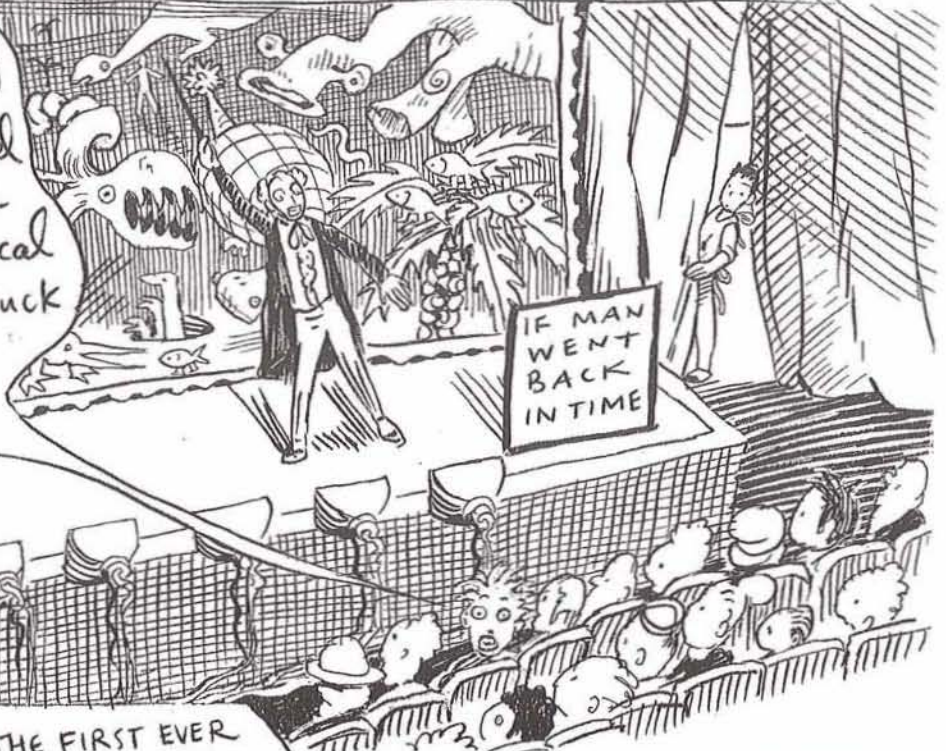
Inside the Circus tent... The entertainment industry in its earliest incarnation...

Before cinema, video games, comic books and theme parks, this is where it all took place...

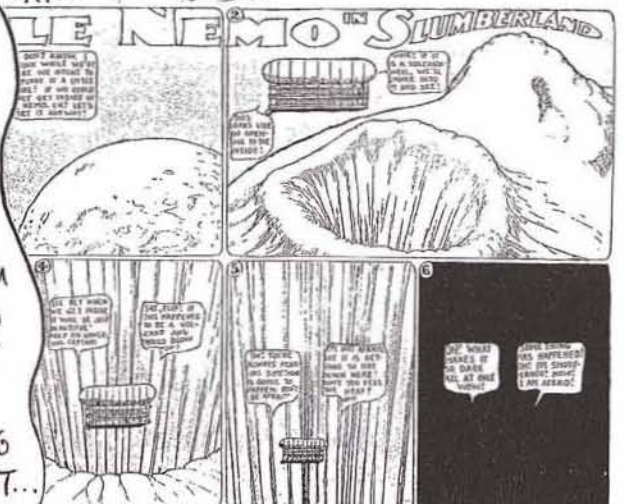


HERE, BEGAN THE CAREER OF A YOUNG SIGNWRITER AND POSTER ARTIST FROM SPRING LAKE, MICHIGAN. **WINSOR McCAY**

The young Winsor McCay would have witnessed the travelling artist-performers who presented their oversized canvases of speculative fantasy and historical allegory to awe-struck crowds in tents like this...



McCay went on to make the first ever animated cartoon film which he toured on the East Coast vaudeville circuit, interacting on stage with his animated figures. This pioneered the way for Disney, Spielberg and the whole American entertainment machine of fantasy+spectacle. But perhaps McCay's single greatest achievement was the comic pages he drew in American newspapers from around 1903. Here, he single-handedly invented many of the narrative ideas and techniques that came to be adopted by modern book artists to tell their stories in a creative and interesting way. He wasn't the first but he's still one of the best...





IN EUROPE, THE COMIC BOOK TRADITION DEVELOPED DIRECTLY OUT OF CHILDREN'S PICTURE STORIES DATING ALL THE WAY BACK TO RUDOLPHE TÖPFFER IN THE 1820'S...

Comics were as dependent on the development of printing technology as any other form of literature - communication by reproduction is what they're all about.

In America, that made them subject to the commercial demands of newspapers and 'pulp' magazine publishers. But in Europe they were less ephemeral and given greater artistic recognition by reputable book editors.



IN REVOLUTIONARY RUSSIA THE CONSTRUCTIVIST POETS AND PROPAGANDISTS DIDN'T HAVE ACCESS TO LOTS OF PAPER OR PRESSES, BUT THEY WELL UNDERSTOOD THE POWER OF WORDS AND PICTURES

Multiple copies of poster-sized comic strips were painted up with big stencils and distributed throughout the Soviets on the sides of trains and displayed on public walls in the early days of the revolution...

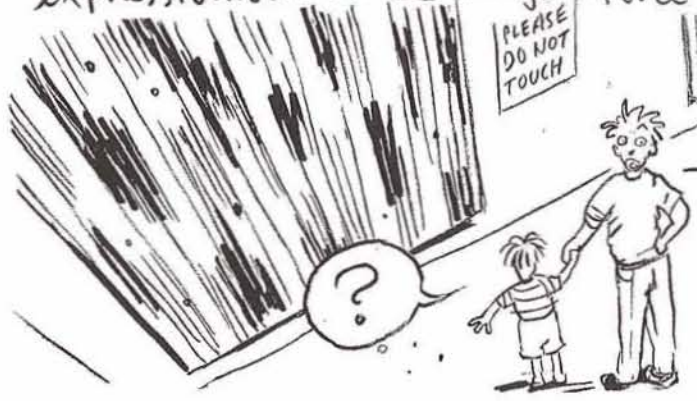


THIS UNIQUE COMICS TRADITION LASTED AT LEAST UNTIL 1945 WHEN IT WAS PROBABLY DELIBERATELY CANNED BY THE STATE.



ЛЮБЛЮ!!

But, as much as a descriptive message was the *raison d'être* for all comics, the opposite was increasingly the case in the world of fine art. In the United States especially, narrative painting styles were largely overtaken by post-war abstract expressionism as the major force in contemporary art...



INTRIGUINGLY, THIS MOVEMENT WAS HEAVILY PATRONISED BY THE ROCKEFELLERS, AND EVEN THE CIA HELPED SPONSOR MAJOR EXHIBITIONS OF MODERN AMERICAN ARTWORK THROUGH EUROPE DURING THE 1950S







POP ART AND POST-MODERNISM SAW THINGS REALLY SPIN OUT OF CONTROL. BECAUSE COMICS LACKED THE STATUS TO BE REGARDED AS 'ART' THEMSELVES, THEY WERE UP FOR GRABS...

... PAINTERS TOOK PANELS AND CHARACTERS OUT OF THEIR ORIGINAL CONTEXT AND USED THEM TO 'COMMENT' ON POPULAR CULTURE, AS A FORM OF 'IRONY', OR TO 'CHALLENGE' ORTHODOX ACADEMIA AND THE SO-CALLED 'DEFINITION OF ART'!



Any way you look at it, they didn't have much to say. Furthermore, painters tended to judge comics on the basis of their mass appeal as pop icons, rather than from a knowledge of the medium's true masterpieces...



THESE WORKS BY ROY LICHTENSTEIN AND ANDY WARHOL OWE THEIR EXISTENCE TO COMIC ARTISTS IRV NOVICK AND E.C. SEGAR RESPECTIVELY...



**I**RONICALLY, THE CULT OF THE INDIVIDUAL, SO LONG A PART OF THE FINE ART COMMUNITY, IS VIRTUALLY ABSENT FROM THE WORLD OF COMICS, WHERE MANY GO BY NOM-DE-PLUMES AND THE FAME OF MOST COMIC BOOK CHARACTERS VASTLY OUTSTRIPS THAT OF THEIR CREATORS...



To this day, nothing's really changed. A single comic book image reproduced on a T-shirt, coffee mug, or gallery wall will usually fetch a better price than a hundred of them jammed together in the pages of a comic book. The author's meaning is too explicit, its substance too threatening, its power too volatile and too direct to ever go by the name of **ART**.

NOT THAT THAT'S ANY KIND OF DRAWBACK, MIND YOU... AS FAR AS I'M CONCERNED **ART IS JUST BAD COMICS!**



- THE END -



# Art is Easy

## Comics are Hard

An Interview by Renee Jones





## Violet Faigan and Saskia Leek

**Renee Jones:** Are there any particular comics that you have been influenced by or interested in?

**Saskia Leek:** We have been discussing this quite a lot. Neither of us are really big comic collectors or really major comic enthusiasts. I guess we like pretty similar [comics] ... I like Dan Clowes. I like kind of spooky comics. Charles Burns.

**Violet Faigan:** [There are] a couple of compilations... *Duplex Planet* by Dave Greenberger which is stories being told at the Duplex planet nursing home for elderly people. That kind of thing. I find [those] to be of the most interest. I have never been one for fantasy comics or anything like that. *Real Stuff* is another one [I like] by Dennis T. Eichorn. I find that kind of spookiness to be more spooky than created fantasy.

**RJ:** The creepiness that goes on in real life anyway?

**VF:** Yeah and just that mysteriousness in fairly ordinary things... the mystery in people's personality.

**RJ:** Neither of you have collected huge amounts of comics or bought them when you were kids?

**VF:** No. I have kind of read my brothers' and boyfriends' ones more. The male comic collector's territory. (Laughs)

**SL:** Yeah. I have read them if they were around. If I have got money I would generally rather buy records. I never really went through that comic phase. I sort of grew up with *Crumb*, *Zap* kind of comics, and Harvey Pekar. Also a lot of Richie Rich and Donald Duck rather than that kind of superhero or 2000AD thing.

**RJ:** The real commercial stuff?

**VF:** I would still rather read Donald Duck than modern Sci/Fi and fantasy. Definitely. I just can't get interested.

**RJ:** You both make a strong use of words combined with pictures. Is that to strengthen the image with the words, or do they come together in a different way?

**VF:** I initially started using words in my drawings when the drawings were more a vehicle for describing an actual event. Jotting down incidents that happened to me. So the best way to portray that was to have some drawings, but the interesting things were perhaps what had been said during those incidents.

**RJ:** What about you, Saskia?

**SL:** Pretty similarly, just wanting to get across really simple everyday narratives and that just seemed like a really straight forward way of telling a story. Simple one-liners. In the [same] kind of way that maybe Raymond Carver's short stories work. I use text and image to play off each other. Saying one thing when something else is happening in the picture. Humour can also add a kind of sadness or innocence to the work... I stole text from mystifying advertising campaigns or overheard snippets of conversation, etc. I did one series where I travelled around on buses all day eavesdropping. Now people are disappointed when they're not funny, but they were never about just being funny.

**RJ:** You are actually trying to tell them a story?

**SL:** Yeah

Which can obviously be done without that, but it is quite a useful device.



RJ: I notice, Violet, that you have written down dreams as a source for inspiration for some of your artwork. Can you tell about that?

VF: Just occasionally, this was another reason why I would use text in drawings. I would try to draw dream scenarios and because dreams are so fragmented and complicated, and more often a feeling than a visual image, it required both the written information ... and the visual image as well.

RJ: The image alone may not be able to sum up how you are feeling or what the actual setting was?

VF: Just when dealing with things that are already complicated ... having both those references to go on. The visual and the written.

RJ: How about you Saskia. Have you used that as the basis as well?

SL: Yeah I have. Dream imagery has popped in there occasionally as have a lot of other (things) ... I guess ... dream imagery is a really big source for a lot of comic artists and I think more than being directly inspired by comic artists, it's more a case of being inspired by the material they draw from as well. [I have been ] really influenced by Disney... all those children's educational videos that you watch as a kid you know, Jiminy Cricket. Or ...

VF: Mr Apple.

SL: We are both pretty big thrift store art collectors.

RJ: Cartooning is so much drawn from all the other elements of popular culture and I guess you guys do it in a slightly different way as well. And it's obviously a huge part of what you do. You talked about TV and rock music. Have you actually done many comic books yourself at all, either of you?

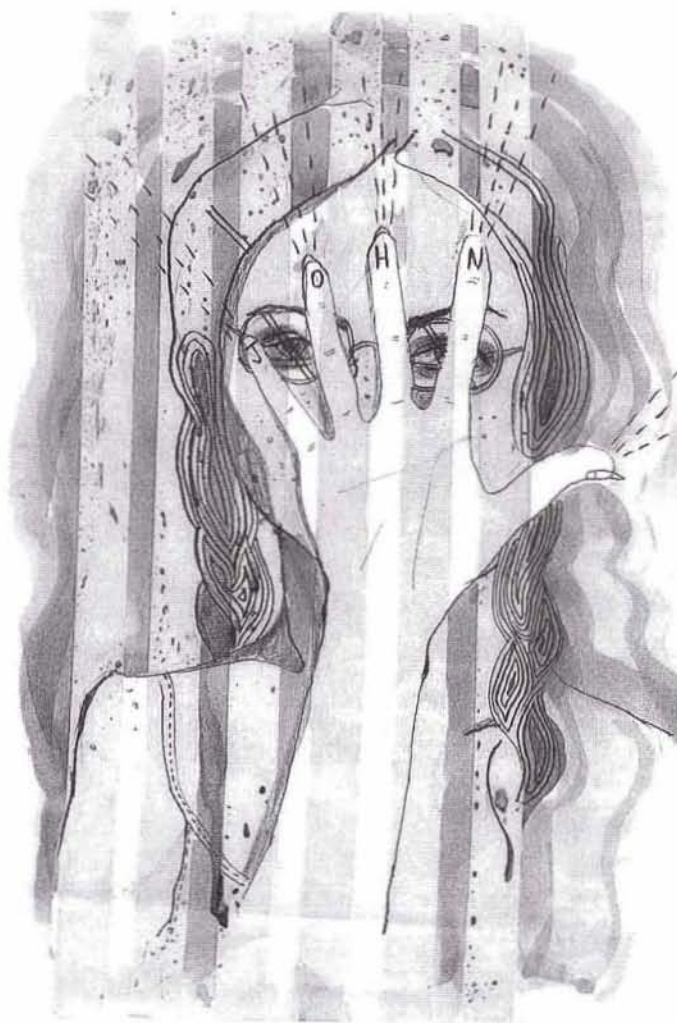
VF: We have got one in the pipeline. (Laughs) We have got a beauty!... Just a couple of years now. It has gone through many title changes. It has kind of been a project of procrastination.

SL: Yeah. We have both done stuff that we have never really compiled and we have had ideas of putting a comic together. We have come up with names for the comic. But we have never actually done the comic. (Laughs)

VF: We got pretty excited about it. It will happen. But don't hold your breath!

RJ: Why do you think it has been a harder project to complete than your own individual "fine art" in big quotation marks projects?

*Heard You Callin' My Name (detail)*  
Violet Faigan  
Courtesy of the Artist





Is it just that you have had other things to do?

VF:

I guess it has been a secondary kind of thing.

SL:

I am not good at ... I cannot come up with the stories.

VF:

Yeah, it's that thing that you have to have a bulk of really decent...

SL:

Its too hard for us. (Laughs)

VF:

Yeah. (Laughs)

SL:

Art is easy. (Laughs)

RJ:

**Conveying an image as opposed to trying to get a whole kind of story?**

SL:

It is a totally different thing.

VF:

Representing fragments alone, I can do but it requires a different confidence to feel that you have made something that is interesting enough when you are dealing with a story and you are not perhaps a writer. Although I am sure that our comic will be fantastic.

SL:

It's like the difference between photography stills and film, I guess.

RJ:

**That's a really good analogy.**

SL:

It is a different skill to grab one image.

RJ:

**How did you guys both start working in the styles that you are doing now?**

VF:

I have always done drawings and my style has developed fairly unconsciously. So where I am now is just picking up bits here and there, being influenced by the people around me, not solely visual artists.

RJ:

**That the cool's thing about how people are approaching [art] these days. It is not the big, serious conservative establishment thing that it used to be. People are having a lot more fun with it and drawing elements that they have enjoyed**

**in the past and commenting on stuff that they don't like as much, but it doesn't have to be all serious.**

VF:

That was something that I wanted to say. A comic artist I really like is my flatmate, Liz. She does cartoons and she can't really draw. She doesn't pretend not to be able to draw in a faux-naive way or anything. She really can't. She tells these short everyday stories but because she can't draw, it actually makes them more complicated and it takes quite a long time to figure out what is happening in a very ordinary scene. I think she is an excellent artist.

RJ:

**It adds something to it?**

VF:

Yeah. How do I make the arm go over here? I'll just put it over there. (Laughs)

RJ:

**Yeah, I have seen some of her stuff and it's good. She did a comic up North I think**

VF:

She does 'Flying Fox.'

RJ:

**Saskia, here is one for you. The Fisher Gallery comic exhibition catalogue?**

SL:

I don't want to talk about it. I don't even know if I was in that show. I didn't see the catalogue or anything.

RJ:

**Did they get you to send in a work and you never did?**

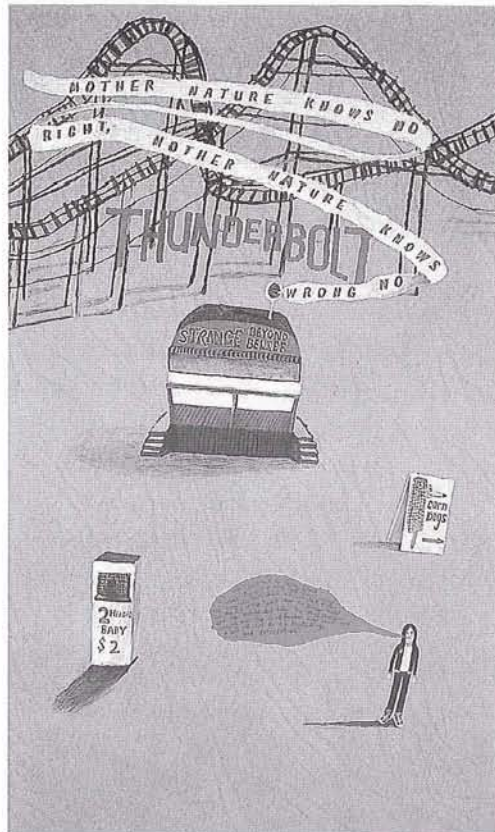
SL:

Yeah I think that I ran away or something. (Laughs) It was a weird thing for me. I didn't know the guys or anything. Somebody suggested me because they couldn't do it. It was sort of like that. It was really comic artists and I am not a comic artist, and they just wanted a woman to be in it. They couldn't track down any women. I felt pretty silly about it in the end.

RJ:

**We have briefly mentioned some of the artists that you have both been interested in.**





*Coney Island Baby* 1997  
Saskia Leek  
Courtesy of Govett-Brewster Art Gallery, Peter Robinson Collection (long term loan)  
Photography: Karl Valpy

Are there any others? You have written down Crumb.

VF: We were talking about him yesterday. Why do I like Crumb when ordinarily that kind of imagery would disgust me? Crumb is cool because he depicts himself as a disgusting man. Weedy, and dribbling, always horny and his girls are physically strong. They are huge, and I think that is why I forgive Crumb for being a pervert. I like him very much and Dame Darcy of the other end of the scale. A Victorian romantic. Very saucy! She is another person who is also involved in music as well through drawing record covers, and she is in a bluegrass band herself.

SL: I actually mentioned George Herrmann in the last interview I did as being an influence a long time ago when I was at art school. One of the first comic influences I had. Crazy Kat and Ignat mouse. Really kind of sparse landscapes. Not so much now I guess, but they were at art school. As well as other artists that

have been influenced by comics. Saul Steinburg was another influence.

RJ: You have added comic influence to your original art background.

SL: The last show that I did didn't have any words in it. It felt kind of strange. I almost had to force myself to take them out.

VF: The compositions still have that empty kind of ghostly, haunted composition which is more a comic style than a typical painting. But what would I know about your work? (Laughs)

RJ: You have chosen fine arts over comic books and I guess that relates to what I said before about it.

SL: About it being too hard? (Laughs)

RJ: About just picking out images rather than the whole process of narratives and storylines and producing books and limiting yourself to certain materials such as pen and ink.

VF: Yeah, I really like making objects, and videos.

RJ: Why is the comic industry so male dominated? It is just basically geared to young boys. Although there are a lot more women around now.

SL: A boy suggested to me that it was to impress girls. (Laughs) That boys were the biggest collectors of stuff.

VF: Girls take their other girl friends into their bedrooms and boys take their comics into their bedrooms, perhaps.

RJ: Is there a difference in the way in which women use the format of the comic book?

SL: There seems to be a prevalence among women to do a personal narrative-type story.

VF: And once again you could write an essay about why that is.

SL: But, funnily enough, both Violet and I have used that format as well.



# The Rest...

Acknowledgements

Biography

Footnotes





# Biography

## Contributors

### Warren Feeney

Born in Ashburton in 1956, Feeney attended the University of Canterbury, graduating in 1997 with a Masters Degree (with merit). Feeney taught Art and Art History at secondary schools until 1996 and has written about art in various publications. Since 1997 he has been employed as Art Consultant for the Centre of Contemporary Art. Feeney also teaches at the Design and Arts College of New Zealand in Christchurch.

### Tim Bollinger

Born in Wellington in 1962, Bollinger attended the University of Victoria, Wellington, graduating in 1991 with a Bachelor of Arts (Honours) in Politics, Public Administration and New Zealand History. Between 1983-98 he worked as a freelance cartoonist and illustrator for many institutions and publications, including: the Radio New Zealand Continuing Education Unit, *NZ Listener* and *Tearaway*. Bollinger was appointed in early 1998 as the News and Music Editor/ Cartoonist for *Tearaway* magazine. He is currently completing a history and anthology of New Zealand comics.

### Renee Jones

Renee Jones has spent her post-University years juggling her interests in both cartooning and music. Her comic strips have appeared in such publications as *Daughters of Slaughter*, *Strip Club* and *Family of Sex*. She has been a DJ on Auckland's BFM for many years, and is currently working at Flying Nun records.

## Artists

### Mark Braunias

Born in Tauranga in 1955, Braunias attended the School of Fine Arts at the University of Canterbury between 1984-7, graduating with Bachelor of Fine Arts in 1987. He has held solo exhibitions throughout New Zealand and has participated in several major group exhibitions, including *A Very Peculiar Practice*, City Gallery, Wellington, 1995; *Aftermath*, McDougall Contemporary Art Annex, Christchurch, 1996 and *Taking a Line for a Walk*, CoCA, Christchurch, 1998.

### Gavin Chilcott

Born in Auckland in 1950, Chilcott attended the Auckland Technical Institute in 1967 and the Elam School of Fine Arts between 1968 and 1970, graduating with a Diploma in Fine Arts. He received a major grant from the QEII Arts Council in 1980 and a travel grant in 1984. In 1991 Chilcott was the Trustbank Canterbury Artist in Residence at the Christchurch Arts Centre. He has participated in

solo and group exhibitions throughout New Zealand and internationally, including *Distance Looks Our Way*, Seville Expo '92, Madrid, 1992 and *Collaborations* (with Ralph Paine and Bill Hammond) Govett-Brewster Art Gallery, New Plymouth, 1993.

### Jimmy Cooper

Born in Westport in 1955, Cooper completed a Certificate in Ceramics at Otago Polytechnic in 1989. He was the joint winner of the Scotwood Award at the Cleveland Ceramics Awards in 1993 and a finalist in the 1996 XPO New Zealand Ceramics and Glass Awards in Auckland. A Creative New Zealand grant made it possible for Cooper to mount his first major one man show at the Dowse Art Museum in 1997, and during 1997 and 1998 he has participated in group and individual exhibitions throughout New Zealand.

### Violet Faigan

Born in Timaru in 1970, Faigan first began exhibiting paintings in 1988 and has included object making and installation in her practice over the last few years. She has participated in individual and group exhibitions throughout New Zealand, including: *Playing for the B Team. Hey! Hey! Fiat Lux*, Auckland, 1997; *Cowboys O' the Sea Cowboys O' the Sea*, Teststrip, Auckland, 1997; *Medium Length Brown Hair*, Fiat Lux, Auckland, 1998.

### Dick Frizzell

Born in Auckland in 1943, Frizzell graduated from the University of Canterbury School of Fine Arts in 1964 with a Diploma of Fine Art and studied at the Auckland Teacher's Training College in 1966. Between 1967-70, he worked in film animation and was employed between 1971-9 as an advertising director and freelance illustrator. In 1978, Frizzell received a QEII Arts Council Grant which enabled him to travel throughout North America. A major retrospective of his work, *Portrait of a Serious Artist: 20 Years of Dick Frizzell* recently toured throughout New Zealand.

### Jason Greig

Born in Timaru in 1963, Greig graduated from the University of Canterbury in 1985 with a Diploma of Fine Arts (Honours) in Engraving. Between 1987-90, he was employed as a Part-time Tutor at the Aoraki Polytechnic in Timaru and undertook a Visiting Lectureship in Printmaking at the University of Canterbury in 1991. Greig currently teaches at the Aoraki Polytechnic in Timaru. His group and individual exhibitions include: *Here and Now*, Robert McDougall Art Gallery, Christchurch, 1988; *Blue Blood*, Dunedin



## Biography

Public Art Gallery, 1994 and *Levitation*, Brooke/Gifford Gallery, Christchurch, 1998.

### Bill Hammond

Born in Christchurch in 1947, Hammond studied at the University of Canterbury's School of Fine Arts in the late 1960s. He held his first exhibition in Christchurch in 1979 and has since exhibited regularly throughout New Zealand. Hammond was the joint winner of the Visa Gold Art Award in 1994 and has participated in many solo and group exhibitions, including: *Distance Looks Our Way*, Expo 1992, Seville, Spain, 1992; *Headlands*, Museum of Contemporary Art, Sydney, 1994 and *Bill Hammond*, Brooke/Gifford Gallery, Christchurch, 1998.

### Tom Kreisler

Born in Buenos Aires, Argentina, in 1938, Kreisler arrived in New Zealand in 1953. He attended the School of Fine Arts at the University of Canterbury between 1963-6 and graduated with a Diploma of Fine Arts (Honours) in painting. Kreisler trained as a teacher and has taught art at New Plymouth High School, Taranaki Polytechnic and Waikato Polytechnic. He has participated in group and individual exhibitions throughout New Zealand.

### Tony de Lautour

Born in Melbourne in 1965, de Lautour graduated from the University of Canterbury with a Bachelor of Fine Arts (Sculpture) in 1988. He won the Visa Gold Art Award in 1995 and has participated in individual and group exhibitions throughout New Zealand, including: *A Very Peculiar Practice*, City Gallery, Wellington, 1995; *100 Paintings and a Large Saw*, Hamish McKay Gallery, Wellington, 1997 and *Now Showing: Artists Go to the Movies*, Film Centre, Wellington (toured New Zealand), 1997.

### Saskia Leek

Born in Christchurch in 1970, Leek attended the University of Canterbury School of Fine Arts, graduating in 1992 with a Bachelor of Fine Arts (Painting). Named as the Olivia Spencer Bower Fellow in 1997, she has participated in solo and group exhibitions throughout New Zealand, including: *Filthy Claws*, The High Street Project Gallery, Christchurch, 1995; *Now Showing*, The Film Centre, Wellington (toured New Zealand), 1997; *Pink Furniture*, Jonathan Smart Gallery, Christchurch, 1997; *Signs of the Times*, City Gallery, Wellington, 1998; and *Wrestling Pictures*, Jonathan Smart Gallery, 1998.

### Nicola Jackson

Born in Dunedin in 1960, Jackson graduated from the Canterbury University School of Fine Arts with a Diploma of Fine Arts in Printmaking in 1980, adding an Honours year in Sculpture in 1981. Jackson became the Rita Angus Artist in Residence in 1990 and was awarded the Frances Hodgkins Fellowship by the University of Otago in 1994. Jackson has participated in group and solo exhibitions throughout New Zealand and in the United States and has undertaken commissions for several major institutions, including the Museum of New Zealand Te Papa Tongarewa and the Dunedin Public Art Gallery.

### Paul Radford

Born in Brisbane in 1957, Radford studied at the Elam School of Fine Arts at the University of Auckland. A QEII Arts Council Grant enabled him to travel to the United States and Europe in 1986 and he has participated in numerous solo and group exhibitions throughout New Zealand, including *The Chair*, (group) CSA Gallery, Christchurch, 1991; solo exhibition, Janne Land Gallery, Wellington, 1995 and *Desperate Icons*, (with Jimmy Cooper), CoCA, Christchurch, 1998.

### James Robinson

Born in Christchurch in 1972, Robinson attended the Nelson Polytechnic Foundation Art Course in 1992 and attained a Diploma from the Hungry Creek Art and Craft School in Auckland between 1995 and 1996. He has participated in solo and group exhibitions throughout New Zealand, including *Touch My Wound* (with Scott Flanagan), CoCA, Christchurch, 1997 and a painting performance (with experimental sound group *Nooumenon*) at the High Street Project, 1997.

### Peter Robinson

Born in Ashburton in 1966, Robinson graduated from the Canterbury University School of Fine Arts in 1989 with a Bachelor of Fine Arts. In 1990, he received his Diploma of Teaching from the Christchurch College of Education. Robinson taught Art at Christ's College School in Christchurch between 1991 and 1998, taking a leave of absence in 1995 for a residency at the Ludwig Forum in Aachen, Germany. He has participated in exhibitions in New Zealand and internationally, including: *Bad Aachen Ideas*, Ludwig Forum, Aachen, Germany, 1995; *Johannesburg Biennale*, Powerhouse, Johannesburg, 1997 and *Skywriters and Earthmovers*, McDougall Contemporary Art Annex, Christchurch, 1998.





## Footnotes

- <sup>1</sup> Fairburn, A. R. D. Transcript from a debate between A. R. D. Fairburn, John A. Lee and public librarian Mavis Peat on the subject. 'Is the reading of the Penny Dreadful harmful to our youngsters?' Citizen's Forum, ZB Network, c. 1950s, RN sound archive.
- <sup>2</sup> Concerned school teacher Paul Rogers addressing a miner's union meeting in Bill Pearson's novel *Coal Flat*. Paul's Book Arcade, Auckland and Hamilton, 1963, p. 115.
- <sup>3</sup> See Roger Sabin's *Comics, Comix and Graphic Novels*, Phaidon Press Ltd, London, 1996, for a comprehensive history of the comic book.
- <sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 19.
- <sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 67 - 68.
- <sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 215.
- <sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>8</sup> Macek, Carl. 'For Those Who Know How to Look.' *The Comic Book Price Guide 1979-1980*. R. Overstreet (ed) Overstreet, Cleveland Tennessee, 1979, pp. A-35 - A-42.
- <sup>9</sup> Dalziel, Margaret. 'Comics in New Zealand.' *Landfall*, Vol 9, No. 1, March 1955, p. 43.
- <sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 67.
- <sup>11</sup> 'Is the Penny Dreadful Harmful to Our Youngsters?' RNZ Sound Archive.
- <sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>13</sup> Greenberg, Clement. 'Avant-Garde and Kitsch.' *Art and Culture. Critical Essays*. Beacon Press, Boston, 1961, pp. 3 - 21.
- <sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 9.
- <sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 19.
- <sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>17</sup> Boyd, Robert. 'High and Low and Inbetween.' *The Comic Journal*. 145, October 1991. Fantagraphics Books, Seattle, p. 44.
- <sup>18</sup> Greenberg, p. 13.
- <sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 21.
- <sup>20</sup> 'Sturm, Terry [ed] *The Oxford History of New Zealand Literature in English*. Oxford University Press, Auckland, 1991, pp. 596 - 587.
- <sup>21</sup> See the socialist magazine *Here and Now*. Published in New Zealand in the early 1950s the magazine combined left-wing doctrine with commentary on aspects of the local visual and literary arts.
- <sup>22</sup> McCahon, Colin. *I Will Need Words*. National Art Gallery, Wellington, 1984.
- <sup>23</sup> *The Press* 15 November 1934-14 October 1937.
- <sup>24</sup> Cook, Rita. *Junior Press*, 13 June 1935, p. 6.
- <sup>25</sup> Cook, Rita. *Junior Press*, 4 July 1935, p. 8.
- <sup>26</sup> *Junior Press*, 13 June 1935, p. 6.
- <sup>27</sup> Paul, Janet. 'Biographical Essay.' *Rita Angus*. [ed. L. Bieringa] National Art Gallery, Wellington, 1982, p. 45.
- <sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 46.
- <sup>29</sup> Dunn, Michael. *Russell Clark*. Robert McDougall Art Gallery, Christchurch, 1975, pp. 7 - 18.
- <sup>30</sup> Interview with John Coley, 25 February 1998.
- <sup>31</sup> Boatner, E. B. 'Good Lord! Choke...Gasp...It's ECI!' *The Comic Book Price Guide*. 1979 - 1980. pp. A-43 - A-76.
- <sup>32</sup> Dunn, p. 17.
- <sup>33</sup> Clark, Russell. 'Scomix.' *The Listener*, 12 November 1954, pp. 10-11.
- <sup>34</sup> Fairburn, A. R. D. 'Art in Canterbury.' *Landfall*. March 1948, Vol 2 No. 1. pp. 49 - 50.
- <sup>35</sup> Brown, Gordon. 'With My Left Hand, I Write.' *Ascent 4*, Caxton Press, Christchurch, November 1969, pp. 16 - 19.
- <sup>36</sup> Brown, Gordon. *Colin McCahon. Artist*. A. H. and A. W. Reed, Auckland, 1984, p. 45.
- <sup>37</sup> Brown, 'With My Left Hand, I Write,' p. 19.
- <sup>38</sup> Curnow, Wytan. 'Speech Balloons and Conversation Bubbles.' *And 4*, October 1985, University of Auckland, p. 141.
- <sup>39</sup> Pound, Francis. *The Space Between*. Workshop Press, Auckland, 1994, p. 62.
- <sup>40</sup> Pound, *The Space Between*, p. 62.
- <sup>41</sup> Hewitson, Michael. 'Wham, Bam Striking a Blow For Art,' *The New Zealand Herald*, 7 September 1995, Section Four, P. 1.
- <sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>43</sup> Pound, Francis. *New Image. Aspects of Recent New Zealand Art*. Auckland City Art Gallery, Auckland, 1983.
- <sup>44</sup> Pound, Francis. 'The New Image Painters.' *Art New Zealand* pp. 25 - 33.
- <sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 31.
- <sup>46</sup> Pound, *New Image*. pp. 16 - 18.
- <sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 16 - 19.
- <sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 12.
- <sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 18.
- <sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 8.
- <sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 9.
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- <sup>80</sup> McCloud, Scott. *Understanding Comics*. Kitchen Sink Press Inc, Northampton, 1993.
- <sup>81</sup> *ibid.*, pp.5 - 7.
- <sup>82</sup> Curnow, Wytan. *Colin McCahon. Gates and Journeys*. Auckland City Art Gallery/CEI Arts Council, 1988, p. 47.
- <sup>83</sup> McCloud, p.20.
- <sup>84</sup> Crumb, Robert. [ed] Gary Groth. *The Complete Crumb Comics. Volume 4. Mr. Sixties*. Fantagraphics Books, Seattle, 1989, p. 65 and pp. 90 - 92.
- <sup>85</sup> There are numerous examples of Crumb's alienation throughout the more than thirty years of his comic book career. However 'Space Day Symposium' from *Best Buy Comics*, Apex Novelties, California, 1979, perfectly demonstrates his contempt towards, and estrangement from, society.
- <sup>86</sup> McCloud, pp.31 - 36.
- <sup>87</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 47.
- <sup>88</sup> Dick Frizzell, Letter to author.
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- <sup>90</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 127.
- <sup>91</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 59.
- <sup>92</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 66 - 67.
- <sup>93</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 99-102.
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- <sup>100</sup> Crumb, Robert. *The Complete Crumb Comics*, p. 104.





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Warren Feeney

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