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## The art world's biggest pests

### Artists wage war against good taste

By Hunter Drohojowska

Is there anyone in Los Angeles who doesn't know and love the sign advertising Western Exterminators? You know, near Silverlake and visible from the Hollywood Freeway, that long-nosed fellow in a black top hat with a mallet held behind his back, luring little mice closer so he can pummel them to death? That sign has become so popular with artists that it was chosen as the title of a rowdy, iconoclastic exhibition at the Zero One gallery in Hollywood.

The folks at Western Exterminators didn't appreciate the compliment. They threatened to sue for trademark infringement, asking for \$500,000 in damages. Exhibition curators Bert Ball and Richard Duardo settled out of court by agreeing to send a letter to everyone on the gallery mailing list explaining that the exhibition is unconnected to the pest-control company.

Yet "Western Exterminators" is an apt title for this show's artists, devoted as they are to eradicating the pests of good taste. Their graphic imagery embraces murder and mayhem, as well as sick, twisted humor, with a healthy dose of social satire. And who are these masked men and women? Ed "Big Daddy" Roth, Von Dutch Holland, Robert Williams, Georganne Deen, Bob "Hope" Zoell and Gary Panter.

Ball, an independent curator, and Duardo, an art publisher and curator, organized "Western Exterminators" because they recognized, and wanted to demonstrate, the increasing acceptance of popular culture influences on "fine artists" like Kenny Scharf in New York.

Sometimes it takes an outsider to ascertain a need. Ball, a recent transplant from New York, said, "I was shocked to realize these people hadn't had shows. To other artists these people are real legends."

Duardo added, "I always felt there was a California pre-psychedelic school, a catalog of iconography that permeated various generations of people, but never more prevalent than the one that's happening now."



Clockwise from left, Robert Williams, Bert Ball, Jill Merrill (Zero One gallery storekeeper), Georganne Deen, Ed "Big Daddy" Roth, John Rochna (gallery director) and Bob Zoell (wearing chicken head mask) put on something of a show for the camera. Williams, Ball, Deen, Roth and Zoell are involved in "Western Exterminators" at the gallery through Nov. 15.

bands asserted that a simple fragment of mundane life was more revealing than any painting possibly could be. We now know that's not the case, but dada's brilliance was in wiping the existing art slate clean: It demanded even more from art, and eventually the demand was met. Dadaism didn't just reflect a political tendency, it created an attitude by which that tendency could be turned into action.

Aspects of mass culture, including cartoons, have been important to much 20th-century art — not just dadaism but surrealism, pop and conceptual art as well. Elements of

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cartoonish indecorousness are fundamental to the work of Mike Kelley, Keith Haring, Kenny Scharf, Jeffrey Vallance and other important young artists. One reason why "Western Exterminators" is a momentous show is that it clarifies an aspect of American pop culture of the last 30 years that constitutes the very landscape from which those artists have emerged.

There is an oddly conflicting tenor to this assembled work, whether that of the "Old Masters" or of the "Young Turks." More than anything, it's a sense of impatience. Wide-eyed fascination at the madness inherent in mass culture is coupled with a jittery compulsion to be released from its hold. (The latter, I suppose, is the source of the unsupported claim that hard distinctions are no longer possible to make.) The work in the exhibition does not attempt to generate such a release for us inmates, to fashion a transformation of our madhouse. Nonetheless, "Western Exterminators" is a pretty terrific show — not in spite of what it isn't, but because of what it is.

"Western Exterminators" is on view at Zero One Gallery, 1231 N. Vine St., through Nov. 15; the gallery is open Tuesday through Saturday from 2 to 7 p.m.

## Artists

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The younger artists like Panter and Dean were influenced by the older Roth and Williams; Zoell was influenced by the animation of Walt Disney and Walter Lanz. The work of these generations together provides a hot and nasty chronicle of the weirdest edges of California imagination.

Big Daddy Roth is known to anyone who owned a Ratfink key chain. From the late 1950s until the death of John F. Kennedy, collecting Ratfink paraphernalia was about the coolest thing a kid could do. Roth's original drawings of that snaggle-toothed rodent, hot rods and other monsters are mounted high on the walls of the Zero One, in the location of greatest respect. Each is captioned by mottos in Gothic lettering: "Do Unto Others ... Then Split" or "Evil spelled backwards is Live."

Roth is still popular with the dragster set. He attends eight car shows a year and still finds an eager audience for his drawings, T-shirts, hats and other hot-rod souvenirs. "In the '50s, kids would bring home my drawings and the parents didn't know what it meant, so they threw them out. I have adults come to me now and say, 'My mom threw out my (Ratfink) but now I have money and want to buy one.'"

Roth started painting cars when he inherited the overflow from Von Dutch Holland, considered the "father of pin-stripping." Von Dutch, as he is known, is still pin-stripping but avoids the public. He is such a recluse that he signs his surreal paintings "Von Dutch is still alive."

Williams is best known as one of the originators, in 1969, of Zap Comix, with R. Crumb and S. Clay Wilson. He still contributes his *outré* scenes there. But his start in popular art came when he worked for Roth from 1965 to 1970. "Ed was one of my childhood heroes and then I got introduced to him through the L.A. employment agency. No one else would take a job working for him."

Williams' paintings display Roth's electrical violence with the wattage turned up. They are not for the faint of heart. Gross and sexist, they are redeemed by their humor, as in "Palomino Pizza": voluptuous nudes straddle pizzas while a devilish chef leers at them, pizza cutter in hand.

Like the others, he feels his reputation as a cartoonist has separated him from the world of high art. "People in the art world refer

to anybody with a lot of technical skill as an illustrator. And that's a dirty word. Cartoons never got into the art world."

Georganne Deen draws scenes of tension between the sexes influenced in philosophy by Roth and in style by Gary Panter, who created the punk cartoon character Jimbo. Deen's movie-poster image of a woman's glamorous head deftly severed from her small body advertises: "Abused Women Sell Better Than Pretty Naked Girls."

Deen also created a shooting gallery installation where, for \$1, anyone can buy a bag of BBs and shoot at the moving glamour queens. Lighting up the game board are insults women make to men — "Hurry Up" and "You Stink" — culled from a small survey of friends. "I made it because I wanted to see if it would be popular," she said. More than 2,000 turned out at Zero One's opening for the show. The shooting gallery was so popular it broke down and has yet to be repaired.

Zoell included a painting of Van Gogh destroying Disney characters and titled "No More Dopey, No More Sleepy." Panter has one of the largest canvases in the show — "King Kong & Godzilla" — painted in fauvist colors with Japanese titles.

Duardo has been exhibiting Zoell and Panter at his downtown gallery Future Perfect since 1983 and publishing their work since 1979. Panter moved to New York last month. With a shrug, Duardo says that his artist and friend is likely to receive better recognition there. Here, he said, "I think it's tragic that (artists like Panter) don't have the formal trappings of other artists as they develop their careers."

Ball wondered the same thing after moving to L.A. last January. He had already established himself in New York as one of the first to open a gallery in the East Village — Art and Commerce — and the first to show David Wojnarowicz. "Ev-

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everybody thought I was nuts, but now David is a major player." Ball ran the video program at the East Village's now-defunct Redbar and organized the Basement Series at the alternative space P.S. 1.

When Ball met Duardo in New York, both felt they could work together. "Western Exterminators" is the second show in what Ball and Duardo hope will be a lengthy collaboration. Ball said, "I believe in L.A. and its future. I love this city." Nonetheless, they have found a backer to underwrite the costs of taking the show to New York.

Ball finances his curating career with his job as a paralegal in the public finance department of Buchalter, Nemer, Fields, Chrystie and Younger. Someday he wants to work as a full-time curator. And he's not fazed by spending about \$4,000 on this show. Art dealer James Corcoran has bought works and others have made promises. (Rock star David Lee Roth backs Zero One, which has attracted high rollers in the fields of music and film to the gallery.)

But money seems to be the last concern of the curators. "There was a crying need for this show," said Ball. "Who else is going to do it?"

Hunter Drohojowska writes regularly about art for the Herald.

# Art

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helped launch in the 1960s.

The conjoining of artifacts from today's club culture with those from the hot-rod and counterculture of the recent past is inspired, in part because punk and new wave play off those earlier forms. The "Old Masters" reigned supreme when today's "Young Turks" were children. The aura of "warped innocence" so prominent in punk and new wave owes much to the retrieval and recycling of pop culture imagery from the '50s and '60s.

Whether drawn, painted or assembled, the idiom that dominates the exhibition is the cartoon. Virtually all the artists employ satirical, stylized forms; the condensed, speeded-up narrative of cartoons — which requires caricature, not character — is abundant. Camp monsters (Godzilla, Gargantua, King Kong and various invented beasts) as well as familiar, mainstream figures (the Seven Dwarfs, Donald and Daffy Duck) are frequent subjects.

As visual imagery, cartoons address themselves partly to children. They acknowledge a less rational audience with a short attention span, and thus tend to evoke the demonic, the grotesque and the fantastic. Propriety and decorum are smashed in favor of the senseless and the nihilistic. The late critic Amy Goldin said it best: Cartoons address the audience "from a madhouse, inmate to inmate."

Likewise, the idiom that dominates the larger terrain of pop culture today is also the cartoon. Almost all television shows and most movies are simply live-action cartoons. Advertising, in its myriad forms, most magazines and best-selling books, and run-of-the-mill pop music all present life in caricatured, comic-book form. When

threaded through the apparatus of mass communications, life tends toward the cartoonish: Consider the congressional spectacle of the cartoony "Washington Wives" demanding warning labels on cartoony records. As the title of a strip by the young cartoonist Bing McGillvray succinctly puts it, our world today is a "Cartooniverse."

How did this come to pass? The clue is in mass communications, for the cartoon is a distinctly modern form. It does crop up elsewhere: in Romanesque manuscript illumination, the decoration on Gothic architecture, 16th-century handbills and those non-Western cultures in which the demonic plays a prominent role. But cartoons are largely the invention of the 19th century, of Thomas Nast, Honore Daumier and other artists working in the press.

It's worth noting that, before the 19th century, the term "cartoon" was applied to an artist's full-sized preparatory drawing for a painting, fresco or tapestry. That is, it was a coarse, unrefined pictorial utterance that needed to have its sharp edges filed down, its form cleaned up and polished. In the French academy, the cartoon was transformed into the oil sketch, a rough study that would be "finished" in the academic manner in the final canvas. In fact, much of the outrage generated by the direct, painterly mode of impressionism arose from the artists' refusal to "finish" their work; to the academic mind, impressionist paintings were merely elaborate oil sketches, the gussied-up descendants of cartoons.

Cartoons, therefore, came to have a political dimension: They assaulted acceptable form. (That Nast, Daumier and other early progenitors achieved their renown as political cartoonists shouldn't be surprising.) The need for this new form arose simply because a new audience was being created: The emergence of a mass audience required the emergence of a mass

art, and the cartoon has proved to be just the thing to fit the bill. The mass has no rationally codifiable form, no universal code of propriety and decorum applicable to all. It includes the king and the bum, the banker and the servant, the intellectual and the child — the whole spectrum of the human madhouse.

As the mass has grown in the last century, the cartoon has invaded every corner of life. What, then, separates the work in "Western Exterminators" from the larger flood of cartoon imagery in which contemporary culture is awash? Nothing, really. Its distinction is its quality; as with all forms of popular art, its popularity is a fundamental determinant of that quality. This work is like a visual read-out of the mass psyche that has embraced it. When gathered together, the show derives its pull, its power, from the compression and condensation of a wider, more amorphous, less immediately visible landscape.

This is not to say that the pop culture artifacts in this energetic and compelling show are terrific works of art. Popular art and fine art simply aren't the same thing; they share some features, but not others. The commitment to a tendentious political dimension — the toppling of accepted form — is one primary attribute shared by art and by the cartoons in this show. While a political tendency is necessary, it's never sufficient for art.

A brief but often illuminating essay called "The Ascent of the Profane" accompanies the show (a full catalog is in the works). In it, Ray Zone recognizes the political dimension, but he casts it as an old-fashioned battle between highbrow and lowbrow culture, extrapolating from Dwight McDonald's well-known "Theory of Mass Culture" (1953). But McDonald's class interpretation — highbrow is upper-class, middlebrow is middle-class, lowbrow is lower-class — has long been supplanted. Zone's argument that distinctions between highbrow and lowbrow have been shattered in contemporary culture — and that Roth, Panter and the rest therefore shouldn't be considered "mere" popular artists — is something of a red herring.

"It is now apparent that all of culture is a seamless web," Zone writes. "We can now walk upon the streets as if we were in a museum, with a new perspective on T-shirts and cars, tattoos and guitars." True enough, although we've been able to do so for more than a half-century. For such a view was a fundamental tenet of dadaism, in which a framed collage of ordinary buttons, ticket stubs and cigar