

The Steven Spielberg of contemporary art

By Hunter Drohojowska

NEW YORK — It was freezing on the streets of SoHo, but plenty cozy in Red Grooms' loft, which was overrun with his jolly, slapstick paintings, prints and his three-dimensional installations and tableaux.

Grooms, his girlfriend, Lysiane Luong, and a bevy of assistants were buzzing away on a special installation for the retrospective of his work from 1956-84 that opened yesterday at the Temporary Contemporary of the Museum of Contemporary Art. With relish, Grooms described the elaborate construction called "Tut's Fever." It will be a movie palace similar to that grande dame of Hollywood Boulevard, the Egyptian. Complete with sphinxes, pyramids and hieroglyphics, the elaborate installation provides both wry commentary on the blockbuster King Tut art exhibition and a place where Grooms' short films will be screened. (See schedule, page B-7.)

Grooms was excited about visiting Los Angeles, especially Hollywood. Much of his art concerns heroes and heroines of the silver screen, and his first ambition was to become a film director. "I first thought of coming to Hollywood," he recalled, "but I got interested in painting and then in sculpture. I was interested in theatrical projects, but you can't do what you want in Hollywood. I like being the one in control, and I like a certain quality of amateurism that you can't have in Hollywood. My films were done more like home movies, closer to the way artists work in their studios."

Charles Rogers Grooms, 49, was nick-

named "Red" for the bright hue of his hair, which rolls in unruly waves, a little exaggerated, like his downturned blue eyes and boyish face. Although he is soft-spoken, Grooms' features and gestures are emphatic. He fits in with the other characters of his environments: the voluptuous ladies, wide-hipped mothers, skinny hipsters, big-bellied old men, scrawny children, the wealthy, the seedy, the savvy and the stupid. These cartoonish creatures are larger than life, just like the environments they inhabit.

The museum is packed with them, riding in a radiant subway, shopping in a chaotic discount store and bustling through the city of Chicago. These are the environments, what Grooms originally called "sculpto-pictoramas." There is a life-size geisha in a Japanese tub and a Beverly Hills couple, not to mention the hundreds of paintings, drawings and smaller objects. No one can say Grooms ever forgot his theatrical impulses. The environmental works are an outgrowth of sets he designed for his early films and performances.

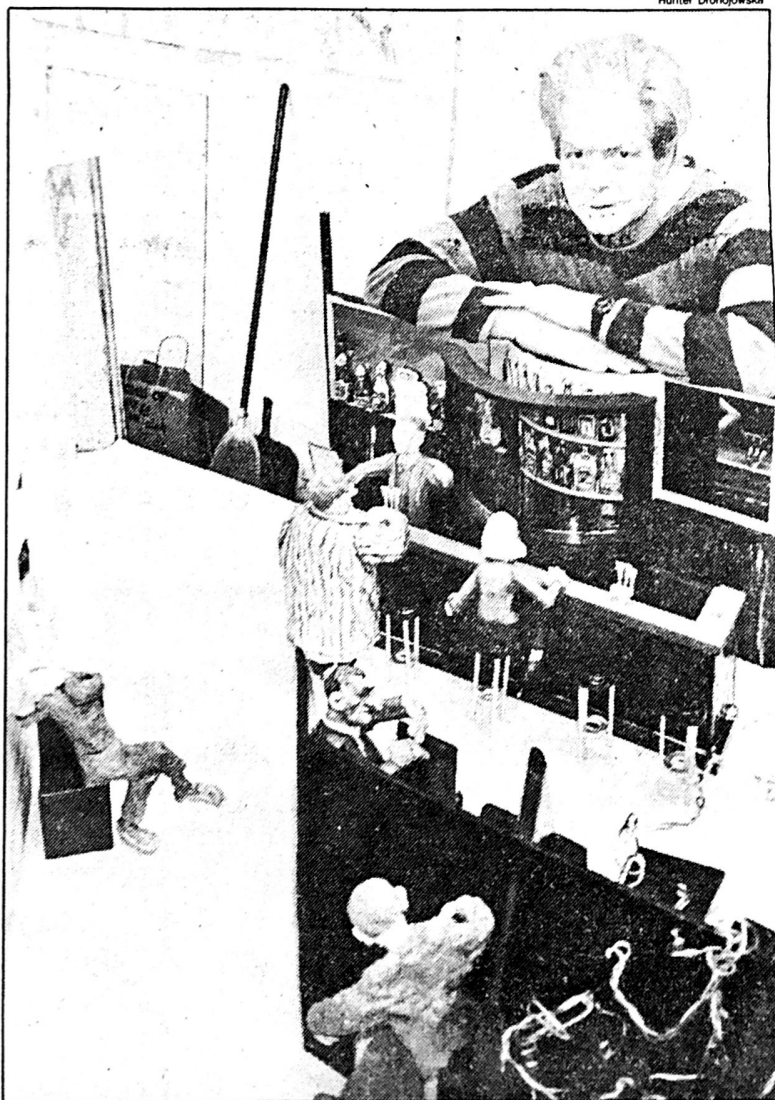
Grooms was an original proponent of the Happening, the spontaneous performance art movement led by Allan Kaprow in the early '60s. But Grooms differed from other early performance artists by heightening, rather than tearing down, the trappings of theatricality, such as characters, a plot and a clearly delineated proscenium.

Grooms' interest in performance stemmed in part from an admiration of the abstract expressionists of the previous generation who considered their painting to be active,

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Red Grooms

Grooms/B-7



Retrospective of the art and short films of Red Grooms opened yesterday at Temporary Contemporary.

Grooms

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performing art. The other reason involves Grooms' Southern roots as a native of Nashville, Tenn.

"Southerners consider themselves different. Our love of theater, literature and philosophy, I suppose, makes us feel aloof from the rest of the country," Grooms mused in a drawl. "I think that fantasy is not too extraordinary in the South. In the North, a lot is made of the fact that my stuff is phantasmagorical. They put it in a freakish category. In the South, they see it as a shared tendency, not an oddity."

Grooms has lived primarily in New York since 1959, in his current loft since 1969 and feels New York has provided most of his aesthetic influences. But the funky, hand-crafted qualities of his sculptures are inherited from his engineer father, who created art and crafts in his spare time, and his mother, who was interested in music and supportive of her son's art.

After graduating from the Art Institute of Chicago in 1955, where he studied commercial illustration, Grooms went to graduate school at the George Peabody College for Teachers in Nashville, then the New School for Social Research in New York. He studied with Hans Hofmann at his school in Provincetown, Mass., in 1957, and had his first performances there at the Sun Gallery.

Grooms' natural abilities as an illustrator gave his paintings and earliest sculptural work a light-hearted quality that caused him to be associated with the pop artists in the early 1960s. Although he garnered attention and sold work, he has steadfastly stated his allegiance to the heroic painters of the 1950s.

"Pop painting was such a flat style," Grooms says. "I liked the action in painting. Not so much in subject matter. It was the painting temperament that I had. I was expressionistic to some extent. I adhered naturally to chiaroscuro and stuff."

It also has been assumed that the caricatured figures and tortured buildings in the environments he has created since the early 1970s are satirizing consumerism, city-dwellers, the art world and other social evils. Grooms insists not. "I don't have the nerve to satirize. I think the distortion in my work is a real physical emphasis. I feel as much warped by gravity and every other problem as everybody else does. I don't feel removed. I feel at peace with the milieu the work is about."

"I always pick subjects I'm particularly interested in. My work comes out of my life, so the elements and people around me become a part of my work." Grooms points out that the inspira-



Grooms with girlfriend Lysiane Luong who helped prepare the retrospective.

tion for "Tut's Fever" came from a trip to Egypt. He began showing his work at the Tibor de Nagy Gallery in 1963, then switched to his present Marlborough Gallery in 1970. In the late '60s, Grooms' paintings evolved toward three-dimensionality, as though all that he had to say could no longer be contained in the traditional format. His first significant "sculpto-pictorama" was "The City of Chicago" (1967), built with friends including his ex-wife Mimi Gross. Working collaboratively was a natural extension of the days of the Happenings, but as the environments grew more ambitious, Grooms had to hire a staff.

"The Discount Store" was commissioned in 1971 by Martin Friedman, director of the Walker Art Center. The riotous collection of stuff for sale, from donuts to lingerie, from guns to garden hoses, complete with crazed shoppers, impressed the Walker's young curator, Richard Koshalek. When Koshalek graduated to the directorship of the Fort Worth Art Museum, he commissioned Grooms to create a piece for the exhibition "The Great American Rodeo" in 1975. As director of the Hudson River Museum in Yonkers, N.Y., Koshalek asked Grooms to design the bookstore. Now that Koshalek is director of MoCA, Grooms' retrospective was predictably included on the schedule.

Grooms' best-known environment came in 1976: "Ruckus Manhattan." Commissioned to do the project by Anita Contini of the alternative space Creative Time, Grooms re-created the city of New York. The wildly baroque Woolworth building under siege by a dragon made of money, a life-size subway complete with inhabitants,

the sleazy and exhilarating energy of the city was embodied in this mammoth work. The piece was acclaimed in numerous mass media publications and on television, but critics were slower with their endorsements. Some objected because they believed in upholding modernist or formalist principles. But Grooms thinks many critics refused to take his work seriously simply because of its great popularity.

"I've gotten good press from daily newspapers and mainstream magazines, but relatively little from the art magazines," Grooms notes. "I think that when you become so popular, you are sort of untouchable by those magazines. Over and over, there has been the claim that I'm one of the most popular artists in the country. I'm in the category of a crowd-pleaser artist, which is true. In Philadelphia (where the retrospective originated at the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts), the attendance was quite large."

Grooms seemed resigned to his fate of crowd-pleaser, however. He observed that he hadn't done too badly without the imprimatur of Artforum magazine. Without it, in fact, he had become the Steven Spielberg of contemporary art.

"It's good there are some austere, dry, intellectual forums," admitted Grooms, referring to the art magazines. "But my large works are supposed to be a form of entertainment. Without folks coming in, it would be a big disaster. It is a larger public than the art world that's had to react. I can't struggle against being ignored by one faction. I've had people try to write about my work intellectually, and it never works — especially with the big pieces. They are there for people to enjoy, and that's about it."

Film schedule in "Tut's Fever" movie house:

Through June 29:

"Ruckus Manhattan" (1976), 61 minutes, shown daily at 3 p.m. and Fridays at 6:30 p.m.

Through April 19:

"Little Red Riding Hood" (1978), 16 minutes

"Ruckus Shorts" (1962-84), 4½ minutes

"Tappy Toes" (1968-69), 19 minutes, shown daily at noon, 1 p.m., 2 p.m., and Fridays at 5:30.

April 20 through May 24:

"Fat Feet" (1966), 20 minutes

"Hippodrome Hardware" (1973, remade in 1980), 30 minutes, shown daily at noon, 1 p.m., 2 p.m., and Fridays at 5:30 p.m.

May 25 through June 29:

"Shoot the Moon" (1962), 24 minutes

"Small Fry Gangster" (1985), 19 minutes

"Ruckus Shorts," shown daily at noon, 1 p.m., 2 p.m., and Fridays at 5:30.

Hunter Drohojowska writes regularly about art for the Herald.

STYLE

Los Angeles
Herald Examiner
Tuesday
March 18, 1986

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