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ART

This Time, the Joke Is on Us

Scott Grieger, a longtime skeptic of orthodoxy, turns his critical eye toward the nation in 'Let Freedumb Ring.' But don't take it all too seriously.

February 01, 1998 | Hunter Drohojowska Philp | Hunter Drohojowska Philp is a frequent contributor to Calendar

Scott Grieger is known as an "artist's artist." Asked about this, the painter looks slightly sheepish but acknowledges, "I love that. Artists usually get it; they see what I'm doing."

The rest of us can get a chance to see what Grieger is doing in his current exhibition, drolly titled "Let Freedumb Ring," at Patricia Faure Gallery in Bergamot Station in Santa Monica. Stylistically varied, his art has one thematic consistency--"skepticism about orthodoxies," he quips.

Visited a few weeks before his paintings left for the gallery, Grieger talked in his studio, a converted garage behind the Venice bungalow he shares with his wife, artist Alexis Smith. Among his new works are framed maps of North America, executed in black chalkboard paint with scrawled white labels saying "United States of Anxiety" or "United We Gripe." Grieger is protesting the small but annoying trend of contemporary artists who use their artwork to analyze their personal problems.

"That thing about everybody being a victim, the cry-me-a-river aesthetics, really! Let's get over that," he says with a moan.

For another series, Grieger soaked and tinted sheets of thick paper to resemble parchment, then painstakingly decorated them in the style of illuminated medieval manuscripts. But instead of holy signifiers, his oversized initials stand for high-tech abbreviations like CD, ROM, even ATM or TV. Crouched within the big letters, images of saints are hard at work on their laptops, as if to say that computer wizards are the educated monks of the 21st century.

Grieger, 52, appearing tan and weathered, explains that the idea for some of his recent work evolved during a 1995 trip to Italy. He recalls looking at manuscripts in a museum in Bologna: "It clicked. I was in a country that had an orthodoxy, which was the Catholic Church. I had come from a country with a new orthodoxy, which is information. It's the same thing to me. In my mind, they collided, and that is what started this work. Also, I had read Humberto Eco's 'Travels in Hyperreality,' where he talks about the new Middle Ages. Attitudinally, we haven't changed that much."

Computers, however, do not render the incredibly complicated furbelows and embellishments of Grieger's artwork. For that, he resorts to pre-21st century talent, a gift for detailed drawing and painting that has characterized his work since the mid-1970s.

Grieger is an artist who experienced overnight career success after graduating with a bachelor's degree in fine arts from Cal State Northridge in 1971. Then-

Whitney Museum of American Art curator Marcia Tucker, known for her perspicacity, selected him for that year's Whitney Annual at the New York museum.

"She came to my studio, saw my 'Impersonations' and started laughing," Grieger recalls of a series of satiric photographs in which he used his own body to impersonate textbook examples of contemporary art--in one, he posed on all fours with a tire around his middle to imitate Rauschenberg's famous goat sculpture. He also combined the identifiable styles of disparate painters and sculptors, mixing Donald Judd boxes with Jasper Johns faces, for example, to make "recombinations" in his own style.

At the time, Grieger was working packing trucks for an art transport firm: "A Kenneth Noland painting would be leaning against a 17th century armoire and I'd think, 'Hey, that might be a good show.'" It was heresy then, since the notion of mixing and matching Modernist styles was antithetical to the ideas about purity so popular in the art criticism of the '60s and '70s.

In addition, these art-about-art photographs were made at least a decade before issues of appropriation or re-contextualization became part of the vocabulary of contemporary art. Art-dealer-turned-critic Dave Hickey showed Grieger's photographs in 1971 at his Austin, Texas, gallery, and then, four years ago, Hickey revisited the work by organizing a show in L.A. at Margo Leavin Gallery.

"Those early pieces were enormously influential," Hickey says. "In my view, Scott invented an attitude toward object making that had a self-consciousness about style. They are about the vanity and foolishness of art practice, but they are not anti-art. They are about representations.

"He has an essentially comic vision in a moment of self-righteous indignation. Scott is temperamentally a real outsider with an outsider's way of looking at things. He's a serious artist, but he's not a joiner. If what Scott's doing becomes insider, then he's not doing it anymore."

In a 1973 interview in *Art in America*, edited by Hickey, Grieger made some comments that continue to be pertinent to the Postmodern art that became prevalent in the 1980s: "By using subjects that are loaded with implication or heavily into the public domain (like Stella's black paintings, or Barnett Newman's field paintings) I am simply gaining access to easily manipulated images. . . . I customize various art objects to reflect my tastes and bias. . . . I don't see myself as contributing to the already expanded realm of 'new' and 'interesting' art, because I don't equate vision or originality with not looking like someone else. That's a very middle-class limiting value."

Grieger's remarks continue to resonate in his work, as well, in his "manuscripts."

Despite his early success with his Conceptual photo pieces in the '70s, Grieger made the then-unconventional decision to return to painting.

"I think I'm a restless artist," he says. "I looked at the art world and came up with something else that was not accepted in the orthodoxy: Walt Disney."

Influenced by Indian miniatures at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, Grieger painted fantasy figures incorporating elements of recent art. Spider webs that looked like Frank Stella's paintings, for instance. These were followed in the late '70s and '80s by diminutive portraits of L.A.'s lively punk-rock scene.

"That's where I felt most alive at that time," Grieger says. "I gave up humor for intensity for a while. When you walked up to those paintings, they appeared to be staring straight back at you."

So what's the target of the U.S. map proclaiming "Freedumb"?

"I'm questioning the notion of freedom," the artist says. "What notions of freedom are we working with? The freedom to be dumb? The freedom to follow rules? Look at how the art world polices itself. That always seems odd to me. Why would that be necessary?"

Grieger has reason to wonder. Although he has completed a series of sexually explicit artworks, they are not in the exhibition. More than one dealer has refused to show them, for fear of offending viewers.

"The art world needs to loosen up," Grieger says with a sigh. "Alex [his wife] and I talk about the fact that, years ago, there was no money in the art world but it was definitely the alternative culture. It was a lot of fun and you met really interesting people. Now it seems very professional."

The chalkboard paintings may refer to Grieger's tenure at Otis College of Art and Design, where he has taught for 23 years, serving as chairman or acting chairman of various departments, including chairman of the department of fine arts from 1981 to 1994.

"I really enjoy being around young people," he says. "It's terrific to see them change, grow, fall on their faces, survive. I like that part of teaching very much."

His role model is none other than Nelbert Chouinard (1879-1969), patron and president of the celebrated Chouinard Art Institute, now CalArts, where Grieger initially studied alongside Terry Allen and Al Ruppersberg.

"She was very old and aristocratic, but she'd show up in your class and get down on the floor to look through your drawings," Grieger recalls. "She'd bring Man Ray to school, and the place would stop while he talked. It wasn't official, but it is the way the art world works. Part of her greatness was her ability to be flexible."

Growing up as an Air Force brat, Grieger lived on military bases until, when he was 11, his parents separated and he moved to L.A. with his mother. Afterward, she was institutionalized when she was found to be schizophrenic, Grieger says, and he was responsible for her until she died in 1987.

The artist believes that moving every two years and caring for his mother contributed to his desire to keep moving and changing. The longest he has lived anywhere is in the Venice bungalow, where he has lived since marrying Smith in 1990.

Grieger's work has consistently critiqued the orthodoxies of Modernism and the systems of the art world but always from a position of high regard.

"Yeah," he says, "but now we are expanding into the United States, so the palette has gotten larger. I make fun of anything that takes itself too seriously. The work is not ironic. It's funny. Like funny, ha-ha. Like shtick. I'd like people to have a few laughs. But, like time bombs, they will go off later."

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LET FREEDUMB RING," Patricia Faure Gallery, 2525 Michigan Ave., B-7, Santa Monica. Dates: Tuesdays to Fridays, 10 a.m. to 5 p.m.; Saturdays, 11 a.m. to 5 p.m. Ends Feb. 28. Phone: (310) 449-1479.