

High & Low: Commix, Art, and Their Influence  
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High & Low is focused on assembling a library of visual and literary art pertinent to, and informative of, my own artwork. As an artist, my work is directly influenced by what I absorb from the world around me. By regulating what I surround myself with, I am not only able to direct my work through these influences, but I am also able to better understand the ideas and functions of the ideas and themes I'm being influenced by.

I have been drawing in earnest since my earliest adolescence. Motivated by nothing more than the excitement of watching line become form under my hand and the execution of an image that approximated most closely what I had in my mind. Influenced by what was around me, which were, among many other things, the Sunday comics, T.V. cartoons, picture books, toys, and nature. My bibliophilia began very early; books were ever present in my childhood home, and reading was always encouraged. During the summers, to distract my sisters and I, my mother would take us to the library, where I would check out stacks of Goosebumps, cartoon books, and late seventies 'choose your own adventure' fantasy books. As I grew up I began to visit the library more often independently, and would spend more and more time in the comics section. There I was exposed to less mainstream arts and graphic styles, as well as more bizarre content. On the same shelves as the boring Dunesbury, New Yorker, and disgustingly scribbled political cartoon collections were Smith's clever mixture of ultra cartoony and realistic character design in Bone, the sleek, heavily stylized and abstracted forms of Cherkas' Silent Invasion, the surreal, and near pornographic Welcome to the Zone, drawn with Chelsea's amazing stippled photorealism, the foreign, vertigo-inducing layout and dazzling zipatone effects of manga, and stacks of giant "best-of-illustration" annuals. I was glutting myself on myriad graphic styles and modes of visual representation and communication. These books opened my eyes to innumerable possibilities; not only were the stories and art so different from anything I had seen before, but each one was different from the other. Having been fed thousands of Disney and Warner Brothers cartoons with their soft, innocuous, carbon copy art and stutteringly repetitive, dumb slapstick storylines, I was in ecstasy over the idea of the existence of not just an alternative style to that, but an entire universe of different styles, stories, and ideas. Then something horrible happened.

A friend introduced me to superhero comics in 1996. This was the beginning of my adolescence, and served as both adolescent male power fantasies, and a sort of "training pornography," as superhero comics in the early to mid nineties published one thing: women laden with massive breasts, guns, and as little else as possible. This was a dark age in my book consumption, as the U.S. was flooded with manga, and I saw that, quite contrary to being an exciting, new, and most importantly to me, different style, it was just as hackneyed and clichéd as the most derivative WB franchise. I was buying comics merely out of habit by then, drawn by the relatively cheap price and nearly naked super heroines (I was twelve, what can I say), having somehow forgotten all wonders of the library. I eventually bought a stack of comics off of a friend, which contained several issues of The Maxx and Madman Comics, which were mainstream forays into the alternative of superheroes: the unhero. The main characters of both these comics, although still garbed in bright, skintight costumes, suffered from delusions of grandeur, crippling depression, mild disassociate personality disorders, and lacked any superpower. The content of the work was amplified by the drawing style of each book. The Maxx displayed a virtuosity with expressive brush and ink, manifesting gritty, earthy imagery

and beautifully grotesque anatomical distortions, while Madman was drawn with a very clean, high polish, in a style which pays homage Clowes and Kirby, without resorting to cliché or blatant plagiarism, and illustrates the main character's sharp, clear, yet simple, almost naive, perception of his world. Although these books did not rouse me as intensely as those erstwhile library finds they were important in reawakening me to the idea of meaningful, well-made, and exciting comics.

The two works that influenced most heavily my artistic output at that time were Johnny the Homicidal Maniac and Scud: The Disposable Assassin. JtHM was first printed in 1997 as a seven-issue story. By 1998 it was in its seventh printing. The story contains a toothpick thin psycho; killing people whilst being tormented by two animate Styrofoam pastry mascots. It is, I admit, like superhero comics, a vehicle for adolescent male power fantasies, but handled much differently. Instead of righting wrongs and bringing evildoers to justice, Johnny himself "is the fucking villain in this story." For the first time the story became more important to me than the high contrast black and white art, which is as angry and combative as the story itself. He made manifest a justice more real and pertinent to me than thwarting an alien invasion or taking down a corrupt super-soldier-manufacturing government agency: he destroys with rage all the bullies, jocks, "populars", and sundry Others who make his life, and my own at that time, hell. Concurrently, I discovered Scud, a machine-vended robot who self-destructs after killing its target. Not wanting to die, he puts his target in a coma and places it on life support at a hospital, having to take more jobs to pay for it's care. The author, Rob Schrab is a genius at storytelling, combining masterfully dialogue, plot, and image on the page as to hold equal sway over the reader's attention, the way Quentin Tarantino does with film. I was for the first time conscious of how much more I enjoyed these comics than what I was consuming previously, and I began to think about what aspects of the work I was drawn to.

I soon began to recognize the common aspects of what intrigued me about these comics and the comics of my extreme youth. Most, if not all, the comics that I was, and still am, drawn to are conceived, written, and drawn by the same person, are almost exclusively black and white, and are most often published independently, or by small press. I became aware of the independent/ small press scene when I found SPX 99, an annual anthology of independently produced comics, by different authors, compiled at the Small Press Expo, held in Maryland. This book exposed me to world of Independent, alternative, and underground comics, and inspired me to make my own. I began writing and drawing comics in earnest, and drew every chance I could, most often in the back of class. Art making quickly became my highest priority; my high school offered a wide variety of art courses, and I became a fixture in the fine art wing of the school.

At the end of my high school career I took Art AP, which was an intensive 2-d art making survey. Along with making art, the instructor assigned us artists to study. My consciousness was again engulfed in images and ideas. Although I had visited art museums and looked at art books before, this was my first serious consideration of art history, and fine art in general. These explorations also made me think about the "low" art I was looking at independently and how, and if, it related to the world of "high" art. My "high/low" art education continued through college, where I was exposed further to fine art in my academic pursuits, and along side my independent studies. These studies have led me to many artists that inform my own work, both in visual style and content.

Most of these artists are, like myself, printmakers. Their work consists largely of black and white images, built from a complex of lines. Albrecht Dürer is one of these artists; his mastery of virtuoso line work in woodcuts, engravings, etchings and drypoints are breathtaking, and a heavy influence on my own work. I am in the same way influenced by Robert Crumb; although the content of his commix\* are at times unsettlingly perverse, crude, and juvenile, he exhibits a masterful grasp of fine line work and hatching. I am equally influenced by the anatomical distortion of the mannerists, especially by the printmaker Jacques Bellange, along with the figural distortions of contemporary artists Rob Schrab and Keith Smith. There are those who argue that Dürer, and others, produced work that can be classified as comics; After all, what is Dürer's "Small Passion" if not a cohesive narrative told solely in a sequence of images? Picture stories like the small passion are considered by some as a precursor to the modern day comics, although I consider them more like proto- proto- comics. The precursors of the contemporary extended sequential art narratives were produced in the first quarter of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

The progeny of art historical picture narratives, the so-called 'novels without words' were produced during the 1920s and 30s. Max Ernst's One Week of Kindness is a picture narrative made from collaged wood engravings culled from late 19<sup>th</sup> century books, magazines, advertisements, and other cheap ephemera. Each of the chapters is a contained surrealist narrative, with no concrete meaning. Social criticism is a common theme in these relief print novels. Otto Nuckel's Destiny, like Franz Masereel's woodcut novels, depict the indignity of city life and the persecution of social activists. Lynd Ward, whose novels in woodcut are concerned with the struggle of the common man during the depression, had a highly detailed, dense, and clean visual style, which I am greatly inspired by. By constructing a story with pictures rather than words, these artists defy the boundaries of literacy and language to communicate their ideas. These books are an experimentation in communication and form, and this kind of picto- narrative experimentation is still occurring today, in the medium of commix.

Comic book theory and experimentation is occurring now more than ever. The renaissance of comic books is happening today, and pertinent theory, criticism, and practice is being created. One of the leaders of the commix avant-garde is Art Spiegelman. Known best for Maus, his commix biography of his father's experiences as a Jew in Nazi Poland, he is far less known, outside the comics world, as a leading proponent of the fine art commix movement and the commix avant-garde. In his album Breakdowns, Spiegelman experiments with content, visual style, page construction, narrative construction, comics- and art history, and even zippatone moiré pattern. In the late seventies he and his wife founded Raw, the Avant-garde commix magazine, which ran from 1980-1991, and whose contributors have since become some of the most highly regarded commix creators, such as Panter, Burns, Ware, and others. Chris Ware is another artist deeply concerned with comics theory. His theory concerns the cohesion and equality of text and image; he simplifies the art, drawing his pictures with the same ethic, and tools, he uses to letter and create typography, thereby destroying the separation between word and picture. Despite the simplistic nature of this approach, Ware often

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\* Commix, as opposed to comics, is the term used to label subversive, underground, or Avant-garde forms of sequential art.

creates complex, sprawling, diagrammatical strips. What I'm most influenced by in Ware's comics isn't his graphic style, but rather the content of his work.

With little exception, Ware's stories concern pathetic men. Initially, he creates these characters to be the targets of intense, spiteful, ridicule, but ends up empathetic to them. This is most tellingly seen in his "Rusty Brown" strips, in which a fat, balding, red haired fan-boy man-child obsesses about collecting ephemera, mainly toys lost from childhood while throwing tantrums and bullying his "friend," Chalky White. In Jimmy Corrigan: the Smartest Kid on Earth the main character garners much more sympathy; he is a meek, middle age man, who travels to meet the father that abandoned him and his mother as a child. Another artist dealing with pathetic men, who had nothing to do with the visual arts, but is an immense influence on my work, is Dostoevsky. In nearly all his work the man is brought low and made pathetic, often through his own actions, sometimes by the machinations and influence of others. Although I receive insight through the oeuvre of each of these artists, I recognize the need to expose myself to the ideas and practices of a wide variety of artists, and anthologies are a perfect vehicle for this exposure.

Anthologies have become my favorite sort of publication. Anthologies are to comics what galleries are to "high" art. They are arks for a wide variety of styles, ideas, and stories. They offer new artists the opportunity to hone their craft and develop their ideas with short stories, and are vehicles for exposure for many otherwise unknown artists. Many successful independent/ small press publishers began as publishers of periodical anthologies, including, Drawn and Quarterly, Top Shelf, and Fantagraphics books. I tend to prize micro-press anthologies the most, partially because of their rarity and difficulty to find, and the excitement had by stumbling across them completely unprompted, partially because of the content, design, and nature of it's production. Micro presses are usually created by a very small, close group of creators, who, though individual style and content differs, usually have a shared ethic, so that the works share a cohesive dialogue with each other. Along with comics/ commix anthologies I have begun researching and collecting fine art anthologies; Vitamin D, published by Phaidon, is one such collection. This book focuses on contemporary drawing, showcasing the drawing work of several dozen lesser-known artists working today. This book continues to be very informative of my own work, as it not only displays an astounding breadth and variety of image making, but also discusses the ideas, theories, and influences behind driving each artist. It is one of the most important volumes in my collection.

My library is still growing, and I plan on continuing it's growth for years to come. I am continuing to seek out additions to it. It's growth is very steady, as it's comprises both of brand new publications and decades old printings. I plan on focusing more on early, underground commix anthologies and foreign small press, as well as more fine art anthologies, concerning contemporary art and art historical subjects, with a special focus on printmaking and printmakers. With the knowledge, themes, styles, and ideas absorbed from these books I will be able to not only understand the art world I will be active in, I will more readily understand and develop my own work and grow as an artist.

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Bell, Marc, ed. Nog A Dod: Prehistoric Canadian Psychedoolia. Montreal: Conundrum Press, 2006

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Blegvad, Peter. The Book of Leviathan. Woodstock: The Overlook Press, 2000

Brunetti, Ivan, ed. An Anthology of Graphic Fiction, Cartoons, & True Stories.<sup>3</sup> Newhaven: Yale University Press, 2006

Burns, Charles. El Borbah. Seattle: Fantagraphics, 1999

Castleman, Riva. Prints of the Twentieth Century: A History. New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1976

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<sup>1</sup> Approx. 6"x 9", full color, 24pp, including cover. Due to the relatively inexpensive and easy to use methods of duplication, handmade "zines" have become a popular way for new artists to make their work visible in cheap hard copy to the public. While most zines are simple stapled Xerox pamphlets, this particular zine was created using a variety of methods, including silkscreen, woodcut printing, and hand coloring. Artist zines like this have prompted me to manufacture my own zines, a practice I plan on continuing throughout my artistic career.

<sup>2</sup> 6"x 9", Full color cover, B&W & color, 176 pages. This book represents a sub grouping of my library, the dead publisher collection. The collection consists of, for the time being, books produced by two publishing companies that inexplicably went out of business: Highwater Books and Kitchen Sink Press. Not only are the books desirable to me for their rarity, but also the publications from both companies were representative of some of the best in the alternative/ small press scene. In addition to this I am simply enamored with Marc Bells work, which is whimsically naive and weird, with soft characters and wonderfully dense accumulation of line.

<sup>3</sup> 7.6"x 10", color and B&W, 400 pages, hardback. An earnest review of the contemporary art-comics movement, which contains not only straightforward stories told with words and pictures, but also experiments with the commix form itself.

Chelsea, David. Welcome to the Zone. Northampton: Kitchen Sink Press, 1995.

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Kurth, Dr. Willi, ed. The Complete Woodcuts of Albrecht Dürer. New York: Dover<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> 7.5"x7.5", B&W, 168pp. Fenwick, using only ornamentation, typography and hand-lettered text, builds the main character of the book, out of short "lessons." This book is important to my collection because it puts forward the idea of using text and type design, not instead of image, but as image, similar to Chris Ware's theory of text/ image equality.

<sup>5</sup> 21.3" x 16.3", full color, 96 pages, hardback. Kramers Ergot has set itself up as the premier publication for Avant-avant-garde art comics. The Idea behind the massive size of volume seven was to have comics art come full circle; the artists experimented with the newspaper- sized pages, which was the standard strip size of the artists working nearly 100 years before them. In addition to K.E.'s usual experiments with content and style, this book experiments with dimension and scale, and how each artist reacts to it.

<sup>6</sup> 8.5"x 12.25", B&W, 285pp. Dover publications are an invaluable asset to me. Not only do they make available otherwise impossible to find material, the books are very inexpensive, quite durable, and, most importantly, the printing value surpasses, in clarity, evenness of tone, and fidelity, many "high end" publications. I carry this book in my backpack at all times and study it often.

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McCloud, Scott. Understanding Comics: the Invisible Art. New York: Harper Perennial, 1994<sup>7</sup>

Millard, Travis. Hey Fudge. Los Angeles, Narrow Books, 2007<sup>8</sup>

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Schrab, Rob. Heavy 3PO: The Coleman Chronicles Of Scud the Disposable Assassin.

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<sup>7</sup> 6.75"x 10/75", B&W and some color, 215pp. This book is arguably the premier book on comics theory and practice. Understanding Comics is an essay, written and drawn as a comic book, discussing, among many things, iconography, language, the depiction and manipulation of time, and the general psychology of image and sequential art. It's importance to the field of comics study is immeasurable and constantly informs my work.

<sup>8</sup> 9.6"x 6.7", B&W & color, 240pp. Travis Millard's comics art is a mixture of high and low art. His work appears in fine art galleries and self published zones, and his career is a personal inspiration to me. Aside from the content, the book itself is an attractive object, constructed in a horizontal format, with a flexible, full color cover; it's a pleasure to handle as well as read.

<sup>9</sup> 9.6" x 6.7", B&W & halftone, 1-23pp. Elvis Road is a collaboration by the two-person art group, Elvis Studios. This book very aptly informs the work I'm creating now; as one interested in the book arts, this interested me both in content and in design. It is accordion bound, and therefore can be read as a normal codex, depicting an extended, chaotic street scene, or it can be folded so one can survey the entire 20 foot drawing.

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<sup>10</sup> 8.25"x 10.6", B&W, color cover, 58pp, staple bound pamphlet. Weirdo commix magazine was created in the mid-eighties by Robert Crumb, the father of underground comics. Running from 1981 to 1993, it acted as a "low art" counterpoint to its contemporary, Raw.

High and low art are terms most contemporary art historians distance themselves from, as they don't describe the skill or originality of the artist, but the opportunities afforded to them and the (usually bourgeois) tastes of those who patronized them. To answer your question, even in the "Western tradition" of art history, it evolved according to time and place. They exhibited in their own private exhibitions, shows of rejected art (the Salons des Refusés) and after much attention, made their way into the Salon, a state exhibition virtually required of artists at that time. After this, "low art" became acceptable art, and these distinctions of "high" and "low" art began to break down in a proper sense. Art and Society Art also has utilitarian influences on society. There is a demonstrable, positive correlation between schoolchildren's grades in math and literacy, and their involvement with drama or music activities. Also, art brings people together and gives people a chance to be part of a community. It provides a social connection with others. Also, economies that attract a higher proportion of creative individuals tend to be stronger. This is because the arts is at the core of many economic engines, like restaurants, music and architecture. Since art is such a vital part of everyday life, there are many professions that directly deal with art and creative pursuits.