

**MoMA PRESENTS *COMIC ABSTRACTION: IMAGE-BREAKING, IMAGE-MAKING*,
AN EXHIBITION OF CONTEMPORARY ABSTRACT ART INSPIRED BY COMIC
STRIPS, CARTOONS, AND ANIMATION**

Works by 13 International Artists Explore a Wide Range of Social and Political Themes

Comic Abstraction: Image-Breaking, Image-Making

March 4–June 11, 2007

Special Exhibitions Gallery, third floor

NEW YORK, February 27, 2007—*Comic Abstraction: Image-Breaking, Image-Making*, an exhibition of more than 30 paintings, drawings, sculptures, video and sound installations inspired by comics, cartoons, animation, slapstick, and caricature, examines the ways in which artists have used the vernacular language of these art forms as a springboard for abstraction, creating works of art that engage with a range of social and political themes. Comics have frequently tackled thorny issues, yet they have generally been interpreted as positive expressions of popular culture. While many exhibitions have explored the impact of comics in art, they have focused on figuration and easily identifiable pop characters and themes. This show approaches the topic from a different angle by looking at how artists have abstracted comics to address perplexing questions of war and global conflicts, the loss of innocence, and racial stereotyping.

The diverse cultural backgrounds of the 13 featured artists—Polly Apfelbaum, Inka Essenhigh, Ellen Gallagher, Arturo Herrera, Michel Majerus, Julie Mehretu, Juan Muñoz, Takashi Murakami, Rivane Neuenschwander, Philippe Parreno, Gary Simmons, Franz West, and Sue Williams—are evident in the highly personal nature of their critical perspectives. *Comic Abstraction* also underscores the way popular imagery, which is deeply imprinted in our collective consciousness, carries an extreme visual potency even when completely abstracted. The exhibition is organized by Roxana Marcoci, Curator, Department of Photography, The Museum of Modern Art, and will be on view in the third-floor Special Exhibitions Gallery from March 4 through June 11, 2007.

Ms. Marcoci explains, “Comics, from Disney’s cartoons to Japanese manga and anime, serve as an empirical reservoir for humorous characters and stories. By abstracting images from comics, through varied strategies such as erasure and blurring, artists intensify the ambiguity between what is seen and what is represented. Abstract work based on comics offers a new model for examining the power of images—the way they circulate in everyday life, the stories they purport to tell, and the mythologies that lurk beneath their surfaces.”

This exhibition creates a dialogue with various themes, a strategy that allows a fuller exploration of the interplay among the works and the artists’ distinct approaches to comic

abstraction. From Julie Mehretu's cartoon explosions seen in intricately layered paintings that portray the changing histories of civilization to Arturo Herrera's wall painting made by slicing and reconfiguring the pages of Walt Disney coloring books, and from Ellen Gallagher's seductively Minimalist paintings permeated by "blackface" signs culled from minstrel performances to Rivane Neuenschwander's overpainted comic strips, the works suggest ways in which political concerns can be confronted with humor. Paintings and drawings are included in the exhibition, as well as installations such as Arturo Herrera's site-specific mural-size wall painting *Untitled* (2001); *Blossom* (2000), Polly Apfelbaum's psychedelic, shimmering "floor painting" made of synthetic velvet pieces; Juan Muñoz's sound installation *Waiting for Jerry* (1991); Philippe Parreno's playful installation of helium-filled balloons, *Speech Bubbles* (1997); and Gary Simmons's large-scale chalk drawing *boom* (1996/2007).

Polly Apfelbaum's (American, b. 1955) abstract works are made of malleable pieces of dyed velvet. *Blossom*, a large, circular floor installation constructed from hundreds of pieces of fabric, is inspired by the popular animated television series *The Powerpuff Girls* and constitutes an abstract portrait of one of the color-coded characters, whose mission is to fight crime and save the world. Apfelbaum's Powerpuff paintings—like the cartoons on which they are based—are highly controlled and painstakingly put together, yet still articulate the cartoon's delirious thrill of adventure. Her work also relates visually to the Color Field abstractions of Helen Frankenthaler and Morris Louis, as well as the Post-Minimalist practice of scatter art typified by Lynda Benglis's spills of multicolored latex poured onto the floor.

Inka Essenhigh's (American, b. 1969) paintings depict synthetic, futuristic worlds informed by such media-driven millennial obsessions as the fear of faceless terrorism and the morphing reality of cyberspace. She plays with the spatial plasticity of perspective and foreshortening in ways that are similar to computer-generated imagery and cartoons, creating malleable, stylized superheroes that could be compared to Plastic Man, Mr. Fantastic, and other rubbery characters. In *Cheerleaders and Sky* (1999), an exuberant turquoise sky sets off abstract figures dressed in sports gear. This painting recreates the Rococo buoyancy of Giovanni Battista Tiepolo's eighteenth-century ceiling frescoes, but with the addition of headless, mechanomorphic cheerleaders freefalling through space.

Ellen Gallagher's (American, b. 1965), elegant, labor-intensive paintings and collages pointedly refer to myths of racist lore by embedding these subtexts into otherwise abstract images. In her two paintings titled *Oh! Susanna* (1993 and 1995), minuscule, shorthand marks of racist caricature—big lips, popping eyeballs, and Afro hairdos—appear in shallow relief on sheets of lined paper that cover the canvases. The works look abstract from a distance but closer viewing reveals clear emblems of black minstrelsy. The title *Oh! Susanna* refers to Stephen Foster's 1848 American folk song of the same name, which originated from a slave lament about families being torn apart.

Arturo Herrera (Venezuelan, b. 1959) revisits age-old themes of innocence and experience in his work. In this exhibition, he presents a 13-by-23-foot wall painting, created here for the first time. From his first billboard project made in Chicago in 1995 to his paper-collage cutouts and wall paintings, Herrera excerpts, fragments, and reconfigures images from the pages of cartoons, fairy tales, and coloring books. In his wall paintings, metamorphosed Disney characters appear within layers of scrawls and loops in an abstracted universe that suggests sexual and violent scenarios that fall somewhere between latent juvenile fantasies and displaced adult desires. As such, Herrera's work is influenced as much by Disney as Sigmund Freud.

Michel Majerus's (German, b. Luxembourg, 1967–2002) work combines art history, advertising, comic strips, computer games, film, and music. In his multiscreen video installation *michel majerus* (2000), 25 stacked monitors show the artist's constantly morphing signature, which constitutes an abstract self-portrait sampled from animated films and Japanese manga culture. In conjunction with this video, Majerus composed a series of paintings highlighting his fragmented name. In *eggsplosion* (2002), a painting completed the year of his premature death at 35, his signature serves as a foil for a cluster of eggs.

Julie Mehretu's (American, b. Ethiopia, 1970) paintings convey the chaos of large cities and refer to mass migration, warfare, and political riots. In *Retopistics: A Renegade Excavation* (2001), she overlaps the floor plans of international airports, combining geographic shapes and dynamic lines with characters she calls "private urban fighters" who act like superheroes. Shattered into numerous pictures and stories, her work is influenced by Vasily Kandinsky's abstractions, the Italian Futurists, and contemporary comic books and graffiti.

Juan Muñoz's (Spanish, 1953–2001) work suggests a darkly comic universe that centers on the absence of human communication, the distance this condition creates, and the desire to surmount it. Until his death in 2001 at the age of 48, Muñoz experimented with sound-based installations such as *Waiting for Jerry* (1991), which explores the disquieting world of childhood, exuding at once a sense of menace and an absurd humor. In a dark, vacant room lit only by a trace of light shining from a mouse hole, a soundtrack references the cartoon series *Tom & Jerry*. With no characters in sight, Muñoz emulates Samuel Beckett's brand of theater involving missing players and a comically absurd engagement with the audience. Muñoz was also inspired by the French avant-garde composer Erik Satie, whose *musique d'ameublement* (furniture music) intermixed the sounds made by concert hall audiences during intermission.

Takashi Murakami (Japanese, born 1962) is a leading figure of the recent Japanese cultural explosion. His darkly humorous work contemplates the Japanese identity that emerged after World War II. *Milk* and *Cream* (both 1998), part of Murakami's *Splash* series, are panoramic paintings in which a liquid line arcs across pink (*Milk*) and blue (*Cream*) backdrops to make subtle sexual allusions. While the four-panel format and graceful arabesque of the lines recall traditional Japanese folding screens, the canvases also refer to anime and manga, in which sex is inferred rather than detailed in order to evade censorship.

Rivane Neuenschwander's (Brazilian, b. 1967) series of drawings titled *Zé Carioca*. *Edição Histórica*, Ed. Abril (2004) dismantles an historic edition of a popular Brazilian comic book published by Walt Disney that incorporates aspects of Brazilian culture and language. She offers an alternative to Disney's version, in which *Zé Carioca*, a soccer-playing green parrot, is cast as a stereotypical emblem of Brazilians. Neuenschwander painted over the cartoon figures in bright monochrome colors and covered the dialogue in the text bubbles with white paint. By obliterating the characters, words, and narrative structures, Neuenschwander invites viewers to imagine their own stories.

Philippe Parreno's (French, b. Algeria, 1964) work questions the nature of images and the ways they circulate in everyday life. For *Speech Bubbles* (1997), Parreno devised an installation of unmarked, white helium-filled balloons made in the shape of comic book bubbles, which refer to Andy Warhol's *Silver Clouds*—Mylar balloons in the shape of oversized pillows that the artist produced in 1966. *Speech Bubbles* was originally conceived as a tool for organized protest in a French union workers' strike, allowing individuals to write their demands on the balloons.

Gary Simmons's (American, b. 1964) blackboards with chalk drawings are populated by racially stereotyped cartoon characters who have been partially erased. Taken from animated films of the 1930s and 1940s, Simmons's work focuses on specific physical traits, such as the wide-open eyes and exaggerated lips seen in *Crazy Conductor* (1993). The artist's large abstract drawing *boom* shows a cloudlike blast similar to the classic cartoon scenario in which two figures fight, their bodies clash, and then disperse into an explosion. Simmons expends as much energy erasing his drawings as he does constructing them, a process that is reminiscent of Robert Rauschenberg's provocative 1953 erasure of a drawing by Willem de Kooning.

Franz West (Austrian, b. 1947) makes interactive art in the form of wearable objects, pieces of furniture, and inhabitable environments. West's whimsical, portable sculptures are termed *Passtücke*, which loosely translates as "Adaptives." Made of plaster, papier-mâché, polyester, and bandage material wrapped around wire frames, the Adaptives are abstract, oddly misshapen objects that viewers are invited to handle. In the exhibition they are displayed with a cabin where viewers can interact with the absurd forms in front of a full-length mirror conceived by Michelangelo Pistoletto.

Sue Williams (American, b. 1954) bridges abstraction and comic representation in paintings permeated by sexual motifs that touch on issues of abjection and violence. By rendering her forms in strokes of vivid color, the artist infuses a fluid, cartoonish energy into these canvases. She makes Surrealist allusions to foot fetishism in many works, such as *Mom's Foot Blue and Orange* (1997), a composition of free-floating pleats, bits of skirt, and elongated shapes resembling toes and feet. Williams cites her inspiration as the "hinged foot" of Don Martin's *Mad* magazine cartoons.

SPONSORSHIP:

The exhibition is supported in part by Jerry I. Speyer and Katherine G. Farley and by Susan G. Jacoby. Additional funding is provided by The Friends of Education and The Contemporary Arts Council of The Museum of Modern Art. The publication is made possible by Agnes Gund and Daniel Shapiro.

PUBLICATION:

Comic Abstraction: Image-Breaking, Image-Making is accompanied by a major publication of the same name. It features a critical essay by curator Roxana Marcoci that analyzes the sources, methods, and ideas behind the works, as well as interviews with the artists, selected exhibition histories, and bibliographies. 9.25 X 12 inches; 160 pages, 104 color illustrations. Hardcover: \$39.95. Available in February 2007 at MoMA Stores.

PROGRAMS:

In conjunction with the exhibition, Ms. Marcoci will moderate a panel discussion with the artists Polly Apfelbaum, Inka Essenhigh, and Gary Simmons on March 5, 2007, 6:00 p.m., in The Roy and Niuta Titus Theater 2. Tickets are \$10; \$8 for members; and \$5 for students, seniors, and staff of other museums.

There will be Brown Bag Lunch Lectures about the exhibition on Monday, April 16, and Thursday, April 19, 2007, from 12:30 to 1:15 p.m. in The Lewis B. and Dorothy Cullman Education and Research Building, Classroom B. The lectures will be presented by Midori Yoshimoto, an assistant professor of art history and the gallery director at New Jersey City University. She is a contributor to *Art Asia Pacific* magazine and author of *Into Performance: Japanese Women Artists in New York*. Attendees may bring their own lunches. Tickets are \$5; \$3 for members, students, and seniors.

Tickets can be purchased at the lobby information desk, at the Film desk, or in the Cullman Building lobby at 4 W. 54 Street, and are available online at www.moma.org/thinkmodern.

MoMA AUDIO:

A free MoMA Audio program features artists Polly Apfelbaum, Inka Essenhigh, Rivane Neuenschwander, Gary Simmons and curator Roxana Marcoci as they discuss works in *Comic Abstraction: Image-Breaking, Image-Making*. Free with Museum admission, courtesy of Bloomberg, MoMA Audio is also available for download on www.moma.org/audio and on the MoMA Audio podcast on iTunes.

EXHIBITION WEB SITE:

The accompanying Web site, www.moma.org/comicabstraction, features a dynamic, animated visual menu showing one work from each of the thirteen artists represented in the exhibition. Supplementary texts are provided for each work, and interviews with curator Roxana Marcoci and eleven of the artists are included. The site was designed and programmed by Shannon Darrough of The Museum of Modern Art's Digital Media Department.

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The Museum of Modern Art, 11 West 53rd Street, New York, NY 10019

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Closed Tuesday

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