



OBJECTS IN MIRROR ARE CLOSER THAN THEY APPEAR

Jane Fudge

I was a very young perennial undergraduate, and perhaps in need of a laugh when I walked into the Memorial Center Gallery on the campus of the University of Colorado, Boulder in 1968. The little gallery was cruelly dissected by a grove of columns, but it held some of the most amusing paintings I had ever seen. Not droll, not witty, but out-and-out funny and a little dumb-looking. Enigmatic actions were performed in banal surroundings. There were strange collisions of cartoon characters and stiffly realistic people and animals. In one picture a horde of caped and fanged vampires swarmed like cockroaches, while in another a dinosaur was chased out of a cornfield--Peter Rabbit-wise-by a furious farmer armed with a rake.

None of the paintings was signed, but a card on the wall advertised the artist's name: John Fudge. Like fun, I thought. In the few months I'd lived in Boulder, I'd already encountered two Peter Pans, a Suzy Rainbow, and an Avalokiteshvara Goodman.

Several years later, we met, found we were of similar, if not sound mind, and married. That delightful melodrama ended only with his death nearly thirty years later. Meanwhile, I had the privilege of watching him paint.

For want of a better term, John Fudge's work has been termed "neo-surrealist," among other things, some not printable here. What his paintings, early and late, owe to Rene Magritte is plain enough: the matter-of-fact depiction of dream-like absurdities. But Magritte's paintings are formed through a process rather like that of poetry--by condensing an infusion of pictorial elements into a single, crystalline idea.

For John Fudge, the process was quite the opposite. His works are not the fusion of previously unrelated parts, but the accumulation, sorting, and classifying separate images, the better to assign them new meanings. The taxonomy is not absolute, however, and the meanings of repeated figures--willowy dames in spike heels, dinosaurs, bizarre still-life elements-- are mutable from painting to painting.

He had been painting and drawing since grade school, with native talent and a kind of grim determination. He got off to a promising start in high school, trying to illustrate the Wagnerian operas he loved (talk about geeky) first in meticulous pen-and-ink, and later in oil paints donated by his art teacher. Exposure to the range of current artistic concerns at the University of Colorado loosened John's cramped drawing style and made him explore the possibilities of color and a freer handling of paint. Pop Art was a liberating experience, but he was less directly influenced by its whoopee-cushion blast than by San Francisco Bay Area figure painting, through the work of Richard Diebenkorn and Nathan Olivera, and later in the person of Joan Brown, who was a visiting artist at UCB during summer sessions in 1964.

For all the weird humor, his are moralizing paintings, and John was an American painter in this as surely as in his realism. This tendency is a feature of 19th century anecdotal paintings, but John's immediate sources were cartoons and comic books. Witness the beautifully-drawn, grim



E.C. (Entertaining Comics) war comics that were available in the 1950s. Their somber tales were a perfect expression of the pissed-off generation that fought the Korean War. They impressed the artist in childhood and later were the inspiration for putting over important messages in a palatable, if often puzzling, form.

The art of the cartoonist, immediate, funny, ephemeral, sometimes profound, was one of John's big inspirations. He tripped on Mad comics and 1960s Zap and Jiz. The cheery nihilism of Robert Crumb and S. Clay Wilson was pored over with much mirth. The equally cracked Book of the Sub-Genius, with its bogus god/cult leader J.R. "Bob" Dobbs, and its powerfully ironic gospel inspired several works from his last years. Demigod and demagogue, Gog and Magog. Nothing makes as much sense in our time as nonsense. And nonsense is a serious business. In The Army Means Mourning, the memento mori tradition of still-life painting is inspired by the protests in China in 1989. John and I watched the drama unfold on TV, including the famous footage of a young man standing in front of a tank, waving his jacket at the monstrous weapon as if in a spectacularly unbalanced bullfight. John's response was this handsomely painted handgun juxtaposed with an empty "carp" pattern Chinese bowl; the title is from the I-Ching, the divinatory Chinese Book of Changes. Like Confucian wisdom repudiated by China's communist regime, a truth is revealed in an enigmatic flash of insight, images here, not words.

In a fairly short while, John expanded his cast from a few actors to a whole company of peculiar characters in compromising situations. But by the time I saw that show in 1968, his style had jelled, dry and without painterly embellishment. And themes he had discovered in grand opera while a nerdy teen carried his work forward. For all the comic-book sideswipes of gender and locale, even mismatched sexual passion of unsuitable species, the paradox of love became a central narrative in John's paintings. How does one survive the grand passion?

The ordinary union of male and female is not thwarted by death but by sexual misadventure, as in Thrill-O-Rama, where enigma is observed by the artist himself in a sardonic self-portrait in the upper right. We laugh, of course, as John intended us to, but is there some other message, arcane and portentous, like the handwriting on the wall?

In the last year of his life, he talked of his next painting. It was, perhaps, another kind of apocalyptic comedy. It didn't get painted, for John died in his sleep (the noblest death) on August 14, 1999. As often happened, he selected a title first and then planned to paint something "to match." The words were derived from the banal message in the sideview mirror: Objects in Mirror Are Closer Than They Appear. Though he seldom made preliminary sketches, he was toying with the idea of his own eye reflected in the mirror, and some kind of cataclysm in the distance, an atomic mushroom cloud, say, or a menacing spaceship, or dinosaur, or dinosaur-sized squirrel. Whatever.

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