



Double Take

An essay on John Fudge by Bill Nelson

To survey the paintings of John Fudge, you might have to arm Santa Clause. Or awaken a dinosaur, possibly a squirrel. Or stick a Coke in the hand of a deity. The dubiously sacred, in particular, is fair game.

In RULE Gallery's "Double Take," Fudge's idiosyncratic spin on neo-surrealism lives on, even if the Colorado artist himself does not. He died in his sleep in 1999, wife Jane at his side. He was 58.

Jane Fudge, in fact, should be credited—or blamed—for this upcoming month of mythological madness. Working closely with co-conspirators at RULE Gallery, she pried up the nails of personal storage crates, unearthing John Fudge treasures seldom, if ever, seen in a gallery setting. The exhibited work will span 30 years, from the late 1960s and beyond, each decade represented.

Comical. Creepy. Askew. Puzzling. These words and others like them have been used over the years to describe Fudge's practice, but they fail to convey wholly what's inherent in any canvas of his. Simply put, Fudge made gorgeous paintings. They're impeccably wrought in every hyper-realistic detail, every stroke of paint. They're often luminous, a solid technician at work.

Consider the painting "Bob and Teenage Connie in Tibet," 1994, a subdued portrayal of bogus cult leader J. R. "Bob" Dobbs and his wife. If you're not up on Church of the SubGenius history, you could be derailed by the squid "Bob" has clenched in a hand, let alone the woman seated on a rock, half-naked, apparently about to be deflowered in some strange threesome (four, if you count the squid). A UFO hovers in the background, the alien on board taking note.

Granted, this is a lot to fathom. But notice, too, how Fudge renders the scene—shadowy yet ethereal, his mastery of white bringing to life patches of snow, clouds, moonlight, a plume of smoke. In contrast, Fudge has electrified the squid, its florescence washing over the crazed look on "Bob's" face.

Riveting, to be sure. And more than a little curious. You get the feeling, though, that Fudge, ever the intellectual, has imbedded into the composition an elusive, symbolic meaning should his viewing congregation care to dig below the Tibetan surface.

"For all the weird humor, his are moralizing paintings," writes Jane Fudge in her fine essay "Objects in Mirror Are Closer Than They Appear," which eulogized her late husband. "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."

This is RULE's second go-round with Fudge. Founder Robin Rule, in the final days of her battle with cancer in 2013, spotlighted the comical realism at the Pattern Shop in her somber farewell to the local art scene. The event was billed scholarly as "Paintings and Other Allegories," but the intention—the hope—was for Fudge's trademark levity to help keep tears at bay.

Not fully expected was the level of public enthusiasm for the work itself, planting the seed for a future examination. And broader, as it turns out. "Double Take" just as easily could describe the volume of Fudge onsite at RULE—a number well into *double* digits, including early output as the artist shaped his unique vision while exploring themes of popular culture, human frailty and the paradox of love.

Decades old, these paintings remain as vibrant and relevant as the day they were created. RULE Gallery has saved the best for the last of 2018.