
Slought Foundation

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Comicology: The New Magical Real

Essay by Gabriel Greenberg

Comicology: The New Magical Real, an exhibition at Slought Foundation from September 10 - October 22, 2005, was curated by Judith Stein and Gabriel Greenberg with the assistance of Joseph Hu.

Describing her roster of demented characters, Dame Darcy writes, "I picture them living in a little town by the sea, where magic is logic." And lest we should understand by "magic" something insipid or harmless, she notes that in this town, "mermaids and Siamese twins are just as normal as other girls, and everyone has endless reasons to be dripping or drinking delicious black blood in every issue."

Where magic is logic. Since the underground comix explosion of the 60s, an emerging wave of alternative comic artists have been telling stories that mix reality and fantasy in a pictorial alchemy best described as "magical realism." Here, the streets are populated with talking animals, impossible deformities, and cosmological surprises. They serve as a shocking reminder of the profound strangeness which comic books have made conventional.

Comicology features original art by six contemporary comics creators: Marc Bell, Charles Burns, Dame Darcy, Kim Deitch, Anders Nilsen, and Ron Regé, Jr. Drawing in part from superhero serials, Sunday morning cartoons, horror comics, and Newspaper strips— as well as sources as diverse as Victorian nursery rhymes and Christian iconography— theirs is a magical realism that defies genre or conformity. At once disturbing and funny, surreal and mundane, wildly metaphysical and obsessively detailed, the works of these artists refuse to be explained away. They are among the most ambitious and visually inventive— not to mention creepy and hilarious— achievements in comics today.

As a term, "magical realism" is often relegated to the name of a genre, or even sub-genre: that brand of Latin American literature championed by Gabriel Garcia Marquez, Isabel Allende, and others. But this parsimonious use of the label is a shame, for it obscures the fact that so many contemporary artists— in film (David Lynch, Mathew Barney), in animation (Hayao Miyazaki, Jan Svankmejer), in literature (Toni Morrison, Salman Rushdie), and in comics— are doing something both radically different from their peers, and fundamentally similar to each other, and to those authors traditionally called "magic realists."

Rather than a narrowly defined literary style, magical realism is best understood as an attitude towards reality, an approach to the constraints of nature on fiction. In fact, the term was first coined by German art critic Franz Roh in his 1925

essay "Magic Realism: Post-Expressionism." The article made no reference Latin American fiction, but rather described contemporary German Post-Expressionist art. There, Roh identified "that radiation of magic, that spirituality, that lugubrious quality throbbing in the best works of the new mode, along with their coldness and apparent sobriety."

Viewed in this broad sense, magical realism is identified by stories which introduce ruptures into otherwise predictable universes. As the name indicates, these uncanny fissures are the result of mixing two key ingredients: on the one hand, magic, on the other, realism. For some authors, the *realist* element is quite like real life itself. But for most, it is merely mundane, consistent, or rational. These realms are not, for the most part, abstract or illogical, and the stories that unfold within them are reasonably linear and concrete. They are worlds that remind us, in many ways, of our own.

Yet into these otherwise orderly spaces, magical realism injects unnatural strains. When birds talk, when teenagers grow tails, when cartoon cats come alive, when mermaids drink delicious black blood— these are the moments when realist fiction becomes magical. It is a fiction populated with inexplicable, ultimately irreducible marvels.

It is thus quite distinct from the frequently associated genres of science fiction, fantasy, and superhero serials. These are all literary modes that depicted *alternate*, but nevertheless law-like universes. There are no fissures in reality here. Superhero comics and science fiction pride themselves on their explanatory thoroughness. Superman owes his strength to his Kryptonian birth, Spiderman derives his uncanny abilities from a science experiment gone wrong. With the help of a little suspended disbelief, these comics manage to make sense of everything. Even in fantasy fiction, where magic does play a role, it tends to be a rational magic; it follows predictable rules. If things had gone differently, we imagine, we could have existed among such wonders, and this is part of the appeal of these stories.

But magical realism presents us with phenomena that cannot be fit into our comfortably systematic worldviews. Therefore, the events of this literature cannot be chalked up to drug induced hallucinations (though there are plenty of these in the comic art of our show), nor to the imagery of dreams (though there are plenty of dreams to be found here too). For drugs and dreams are both elements of reality. Strange as they may be, they can be incorporated into a coherent, scientific vision.

For similar reasons, we should distinguish the impulses behind magical realism from those that motivated Surrealism in the early 20th century. Surrealism was always closely tied with an ideology according to which art was generated directly from the artist's subconscious. Whether such works were portraits of mental life, or merely meant to record its output, Surrealist art attempted introspective honesty. Thus, in an important sense, Surrealism was more closely tied with naturalistic realism than magical realism: it advocated a confession of psychic life that was ultimately aimed at accuracy. By contrast, the events of magical realism can never be so clearly linked to phenomena in the actual world, internal or external. Its authors are not after honesty at all— but rather the disruption and reinvention of the static world.

Magical realist comic books tend to resist not only our expectations of reality, but most of our other expectations as well. These stories serve up a delirious concoction of dislocated personalities and even stranger moral codes. Here, the literary language which dictates how characters should be developed, how plot should be elaborated, how emotions should be modulated— is scrambled into exotic cryptograms. Consistently outrageous, perverse, and intoxicating, this is not a magical realism of solitary transformation and prettiness. On the contrary, it often seems more like the product of barely-controlled insanity.

No wonder that the magical realist comic books fit easily into no genre. They are impossible to classify, and each body of work could found its own literary genus. On every level, they defy our attempts to assimilate them into the known world. They shock and discomfit us. They push us beyond our own habitual borders.

It should be no surprise, then, that magical realist comics have arguably achieved something unique in contemporary Western art history. For they are perhaps the closest heirs to medieval art since the Renaissance. Across Europe, the Renaissance instituted a number of profound changes in visual art, largely centering around the idea that a painting should behave as if it were a window, looking out upon the real world.

This injunction had a number of consequences. First, depicting multiple scenes on a single canvas— a practice common in medieval altar paintings— was discouraged; every work should reveal a single, unified image. Thus paintings could no longer depict entire narratives, but only isolated moments. Next, the representation of logical, three-dimensional space was established as the highest standard of painting, and a premium was put on naturalistic rendering. The result was that, while *metaphorical* images remained acceptable, most *symbolic* depictions did not. So, even though text was embedded in images throughout the Middle Ages, it became increasingly unacceptable during and after the Renaissance. By the same token, heavily outlined, abstracted portraits (i.e. cartoon-like drawings) quickly fell out of fashion. Finally, non-fiction, biblical, or classical subject matter gained credibility— but the outright invention of narrative was discouraged.

While each of these demands has been resisted and rejected in various ways since the Renaissance, it is arguably in the pages of comic books that they have been most wholeheartedly beaten back. In comics, the picture plane is split into frames; the narrative, not just the image, is spelled out; symbolic, cartoony depictions are embraced; and text commingles with pictures. In many cases, the constraints of logical space and naturalistic illustration are defied. But of all the trends within 20th century comic book art, it is perhaps magical realism that makes the most dramatic break with orthodoxy.

Dada, surrealism, and even magical realism have all had their moments in contemporary art history— yet they have tended to stick with the traditional, unified picture plane. Closer cousins are to be found in the varied work of outsider artists, tattoo artists, prison artists, and poster painters. But by taking the transgressions of the comic book and adding to them wholly invented fictions of spontaneous marvels, it is especially magical realism in *comics* that defies that naturalistic impulse which the Renaissance so successfully disseminated. Consciously or not, the new magical realists have tapped into modes of visual expression that have been dormant for nearly five hundred years.

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While its achievements may be historically significant, magical realism in American comics is still relatively young. Its birth is best traced to the alternative comics scene of the 80's, though its seeds were planted in the radical comix art of the late 60s. Artists of that era chose the term "comix" to set their work apart from other comic books, and to highlight their often X-rated content.

In step with the hippie ethos, these underground creators brought an exhilarating combination of adult themes and psychedelic drug references to comic books. With *MAD Magazine* as their guru, 60s artists weren't interested in *abandoning* the traditional content of comics, so much as freakishly reinventing it. Robert Crumb's fixation on cute furry animals engaged in

raunchy sex was typical of this approach. The comics of **Kim Deitch**, one of *ComicoLogys*'s featured artists who began his career in the late 60s, introduced a demonic cartoon cat that tormented demoralized animators.

By the mid-70s the once thriving comix scene had waned significantly. Under the pressure of cultural and governmental censors, and concurrent with the sagging of the hippie-era, underground comix seemed spent. The heady transgression which had invigorated them was either outlawed or authorized, and there was little room in the middle to be original. The hard-edged world of punk had seized the baton of counter-cultural force, and, initially anyway, it wasn't clear that comic books could be a part of the new punk attitude.

But the 80s witnessed a rebirth of underground comics in America, and it is this groundswell of so-called "alternative" comics which has persisted more or less unbroken into the present day. *RAW*, Art Speigleman's alternative comics magazine, was the masthead of the new front, including both American and European artists; two of the creators in our exhibit— **Kim Deitch** and **Charles Burns**—showed their work in its pages. (European comics followed a similar trajectory to American comics through the 60s and 70s, but it was not until the 80s that genuine creative cross-pollination between the continents finally took place.) The American comic art of this era was influenced in equal parts by 60s comix, the punk movement, and work from Europe but it derived its distinctive creative energy by breaking new aesthetic ground.

For all of its inventiveness, the 60s underground had developed an occasionally prescriptive set of acceptable themes and styles. The themes were sex, horror, drugs, and rock music. The dominant style was characterized by an "overall" approach: every page was crammed with panels, every panel with detailed, overflowing imagery. Finally, stories tended to be short, rarely extending for more than the length of a single comic book, and usually less than that. Both the exhaustive details and short stories made economic sense— artist of the time had to fit as much into as few pages as possible— but, with several important exceptions, it resulted in arduous and predictable material.

The influence of punk allowed artists of the 80s to break free from what had become a soupy art form, and to define something fresh and unknown. The stories now were longer, the drawing styles more hard-edged, but also more varied. These formal innovations opened up unexplored routes for emotional expression. With this new energy propelling the medium forward, two distinct approaches to alternative comics began to emerge in North America (with Canadian artists playing an increasingly important role). Both had their roots in 60s comix, but both differed significantly from their common progenitor.

One was "realist" (though the title has never been adopted by the artists themselves): it latched onto the adult, sexual, and confessional themes of the 60's underground press, while largely leaving aside its psychedelic aspects. The works of these authors inevitably represented a move away from the traditional content of comics, and towards established modes of "serious" literature: personal journals, dramas, romances, autobiographies, histories, journalism. When their stories *were* fictional, they aspired towards naturalistic, often brutally honest accuracy. Their panels were filled with life-like stories and a passion for everyday or historical detail.

While typically embracing the *culture* of the comic book, these authors usually rejected the supernatural content of mainstream comics. The characters in these stories read comics, drew comics, collected comics— but they tended not to fly, grow tails, or drink black blood. In the ensuing 30 or so years, realism has flourished. Artists working in this vein today include Ho Che Anderson, Jeffery Brown, Chester Brown, Dan Clowes, Joe Matt, Joe Sacco, Marjane Satrapi, Ariel Schrag, Seth, James Sturm, Chris Ware, and many others. (Some, like Dan Clowes and Chester Brown began their careers in a distinctly magical realist vein, but soon turned to extremely realist material.)

The other faction to come out of the 80s alternative scene in North America was, of course, the magical realists. Like the realists, they were by no means a cohesive whole, and have never explicitly recognized themselves as a group. Yet this motley crew, of which the artists of *Comicology* are exemplary examples, share some distinctive traits.

For one thing, unlike the work of their realist counterparts, their stories belie a love for the absurdist elements of mainstream comics and animation. From TV cartoons and kids comics come talking animals and pudgy drawing styles; from horror and crime comics come a taste for twisted, surreal surprise; from superhero comics come endlessly complex cosmologies and a tolerance for bizarre premises. Then, from underground comix themselves come drugs and sex, along with a deep-rooted love for pop-culture sources, and, at the same time, a desire to warp and bend them.

The stories of the magical realists do not strive towards “serious” literary categories, but neither are they psychedelic. They learned from the 60s underground that it is permissible to break with reality, but they have reigned in the druggy disorientation, distilling it into potent droplets of illogic that they drip (or pour) over more sober terrain. So even as the new artists have broken with the tropes of hippie literature, they still channel the spirit of hallucination. But unlike the delicate poetry of Latin America’s magical realism, the new comics tend to squeeze moments of serenity between breathtakingly giddy and horrifically disturbing story arcs. These works are as intent on displacing nature as breaking up comfortable aesthetic sensibilities.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, the artwork of realist authors favors consistent and well-defined story-telling techniques— like splitting the page into evenly-spaced square panels— which foreground the narrative and put images in its service. Magical realists, on the other hand, tend to explore more experimental territory in terms of overall narrative, layouts, and drawing styles. In these comics it is much more common to find images which defy and occasionally overcome the dictations of coherent, linear plot.

The point, obviously, is not to draw a hard line between the themes and styles of realists and those of magical realists. These categories are rarely invoked self-consciously, and many authors have their feet in both worlds. Nevertheless, there do seem to be *two* worlds, two attitudes, two very different ways of constructing a story.

So it was that the bounty of the hippie era was divided up among its children. To the realists went confessional honesty. To the magical realists went the drug-cartoon-dream distortion of reality. To both went an unrestricted view of what could be said in print, and a desire to continually sail the medium into uncharted waters.

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Of the artists featured in our show, Charles Burns and Kim Deitch are the most direct inheritors of the innovations of the 60s underground. Not coincidentally, their brand of magical realism often makes explicit reference to the hallucinatory imagery of dreams and psychedelic drugs, both central concerns of 60s comix.

Kim Deitch was in fact a prominent figure of the comix movement, contributing to such hippie periodicals as *Young Lust* and *The East Village Other*. But where many artists of the day settled on short, dense, trippy parables, Deitch reconceived the counter-culture formula to fit his own peculiar ends. Over his 40-year career, Deitch has employed intensely detailed, organically drawn pages to sustain a number of complex and powerful epic narratives. Recurrent themes include delusion, alcoholism, and the dark side of the animation industry. It is in binding these threads together that Deitch makes especially evocative use of a 60s-style sense of psychedelic disorientation. His most recent comics-novel, *The Boulevard of Broken*

Dreams, traces the life a promising but emotionally unstable animator as he is plagued by a domineering demon cat who insists on becoming a starring cartoon character of the silver screen.

Charles Burns first made his mark in the pages of *RAW*, the seminal alternative comics magazine of the 80s. Early on, he established his heavily inked and clinically polished drawing style and an obsession with strange teenage diseases. His work drew from early Horror comics and detective stories as much as from religious iconography and traditional Japanese prints. Burns' recently completed masterpiece, *Black Hole*, combines a ghoulish account of a virus that spreads exclusively among teenagers with dark mysticism. The symptoms vary: one infected boy grows a truth-telling mouth in his chest; another girl sprouts a tail. Ten years in the making, the book pushes Burns' signature themes into increasingly poetic and abstract territory.

Equally inspired by 60s artists and the punk aesthetic, Burns was part of a new wave of alternative comic artists that reinvigorated the medium. The rest of the artists in our show are inheritors of that liberated mood, and represent a second generation of magical realists. These younger creators— **Dame Darcy**, **Marc Bell**, **Anders Nilsen**, and **Ron Regé, Jr.** — all began their comics careers over the course of the 90s, each defining his or her own highly individualistic style, and resisting standard conventions.

Marc Bell is known for the continual stream of surprises he pours into his meaty worlds. Narcotic and exhilarating, Bell's panels relentlessly reinvent the English language, comic book conventions, and his own established patterns. The wildness is given root by satisfyingly concrete renderings of chunky monster-animals, and the places they live. In a typically schizophrenic story from his book *Shrimpy and Paul and Friends*, Saul, brother of one of the main characters, Paul (a kind of walking sausage), meets an untimely death. There is a quest to recapture his unleashed soul, and when it is found, it is sent to reside in Paul's right nipple for safekeeping. Bell's *Gustun* series stars a cartoon version of the iconoclastic painter Philip Guston, as he makes his way across a fully sentient "layer of the earth". Be it souls-in-nipples, class warfare, or the relationship of man to his environment, Bell manages to deal in weighty themes without ever breaking his consummately goofy stride.

Rock musician, comic artist, and doll-maker, **Dame Darcy** is the evil genius behind, *Meatcake*, a furiously inked celebration of disturbed Victoriana. Her doily-encrusted panels look more like cobwebbed relics from your grandmother's closet than images out of a comic book. The episodic stories feature a returning cast of mostly female characters, including favorites like the mermaid Effluvia ("It' girl of the Brine") and Strega Pez (who's permanently severed throat acts as a giant Pez dispenser.) The comic offers up a decadent mixture of 19th century macabre, jazz-era flappers, and sideshow freaks, as delicious as meatcake.

In *Skibber Bee Bye*, **Ron Regé, Jr.** relates the delightful, and ultimately extremely disturbing story of a pair of mute, parentless twins living alone in a treetop house. We bear witness to their innocent interactions with a friendly elephant, flying eyeballs, and their increasingly fraught relationship with the rest of society. Like the children of his story, Regé has defined himself as a kind of outsider-comic artist: his unique thin-line drawings, geometric caricatures, and kaleidoscopic layouts seem to have hatched from an alien egg. In the words of comic artist Chris Ware, "Regé is one of a handful of cartoonists in the history of the medium... to reinvent comics to suit his own idiosyncratic impulses and inspirations."

Among *Comico*'s featured artists, **Anders Nilsen** is the newest to the world of comics, self-publishing his first short comic book in 1999. Since then, his work has evolved dramatically. Nilsen's stories are marked by a combination of existentialist despair and a richly humanistic drawing style. His original pages are distinctive: creatively patched together, layered in white out and glue, they are dazzling collages. His ongoing series *Big Questions* follows, among other things, a flock of birds

as they ponder the fundamental questions of life and death, and the puzzle of human existence. In Nilsen's most recent work, *Dogs and Water*, a boy finds himself inexplicably stranded in a Siberian landscape with nothing but a teddy bear and a few peanut butter and jelly sandwiches. All of his works are characterized by novel page layouts and dramatic modulations of density and empty space which evoke a dynamic range of emotions, from nihilistic comedy to serene quietude.

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To skeptics on different sides of the cultural divide, bringing comic art into the gallery may seem like an imposition. On the one hand, the argument goes, comics don't need galleries; they have their own proper mode of dissemination. On the other hand, there are different kinds of art which are especially appropriate for, and in fact require the gallery space. Does this kind of exhibition do a disservice to both?

Certainly, showing comic book pages in an art gallery is a disjunction which poses more questions than it answers. How are we to look at these images? As works of art in their own right? Yet they are not presented as they were originally intended to appear. Or as technical documentation of a process which is only realized in book form? Yet they are undeniably complex, interesting, and beautiful.

There is no particular need to resolve these questions. Let them rankle. For however you choose to interpret these images, hanging comic art in the white box inevitably opens up new possibilities. It invests the work with new meanings, and brings fresh eyes to familiar spaces. It reveals unexplored creative avenues, both for the comic art itself, and for more traditional gallery art. And it demands that we think critically about how art should be presented in the first place.

If it is surprising, even uncomfortable to see this cultural contradiction at work, then so be it. Among surprises it will have the company of a truth-telling mouth which grows in one's chest, a demon cat with bad intentions, luscious flappers who drip and drink black blood, souls trapped within nipples, flying eyeballs, talking birds, and a town by the sea, where magic is logic.

Gabriel Greenberg is a graduate student in philosophy at Rutgers, and a comic artist. He is the curator of "Comic Art in the Green Mountains," which runs through February 5, 2006 at Vermont's Brattleboro Museum, and creator of the Vera Hall Project (verahallproject.com) and Mutatis Mutandis (namingdistances.com/mutatis).