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# ARTSY

## 1960s Chicago Gave Birth to a Colorful, Frenetic Art Style That Is Still Gathering Steam

By Alina Cohen

May 17, 2018



Jim Nutt Phillips



The Chicago Imagists of the 1960s and '70s created colorful, energetic paintings and sculptures that often riffed on vernacular sources (comic books, pinball machines) and the eccentricities of American culture. Barbara Rossi's colorful, corporeal shapes piled atop each other like jumbles of internal organs. Jim Nutt drew and painted grotesque figures that evoked brightly lit freak shows. Gladys Nilsson rendered overlapping bodies, simultaneously in their own worlds and parts of a larger, chaotic

mass. Suellen Rocca created busy, symbol-laden canvases. A flat aesthetic triumphed over any attempt at realism or depth. This work diverged from that of the Imagists' East Coast contemporaries; as the New York Pop artists developed an impersonal, mass-produced aesthetic, their Midwestern counterparts were making artwork that was more carnival than Campbell's soup.

It can be complicated to discern who was, and who wasn't, a Chicago Imagist, but in general, the term applies to a wide swath of artists who lived and made figurative work in the city from around the 1950s through the 1980s. They showed together at the Hyde Park Art Center beginning in 1964, giving each cluster of exhibiting artists its own quirky moniker. Instead of turning to advertising and consumer culture as their East Coast counterparts had, these artists infused a zany, psychic energy into their drawing-driven practices. Indeed, tracing the careers of the Chicago Imagists offers a narrative about American art that diverges from popular New York-centered conceptions—and presents issues that transcended locale.



Jim Nutt *Summer Salt*, 1970



Gladys Nilsson *Measure 4 Measure*, 1994, *Bird*, 2001 and *Pynkly Furnashed*, 2002  
Leslie Hindman Auctioneers

The oldest group, the Monster Roster—a name given by critic Franz Schulze as a nod to the Chicago Bears’ nickname, the Monsters of Midway—responded to the horrors introduced by World War II and the state of post-war America. Some of the men had been soldiers themselves. Leon Golub, who’d served as an army cartographer, infused his work with violence and suffering. Throughout his six-decade career (he died in 2004), Golub rendered beheadings, brawls, and torture scenes. His process itself was brutal—he used a meat cleaver to distress his paintings.

Nancy Spero, to whom Golub was married, similarly manifested an ardent political streak as she depicted mothers, children, and prostitutes through a feminist lens. Fellow artist June Leaf created fine-lined, often nightmarish scenes. In sum, the works were frequently dark, both in style and substance. Subsequent Chicago art diverged in cheerier and more frenetic directions, while still remaining deeply psychological.

According to Tang Museum director Ian Berry and Chicago gallerists John Corbett and Jim Dempsey, the more light-hearted artist H. C. Westermann (known, since around the late 1950s, for his quirky found-object sculptures and dystopian illustrations) provides a link to the younger Imagists. Don Baum, a member of the former group who helped curate the younger Imagists’ shows, offers another connection. This September, Corbett, Dempsey, and Berry will mount “3-D Doings: The Imagist Object in Chicago Art, 1964–1980” at the Tang. For a group of artists traditionally associated with two-dimensional works, the curators offer a more complex, multimedia story.



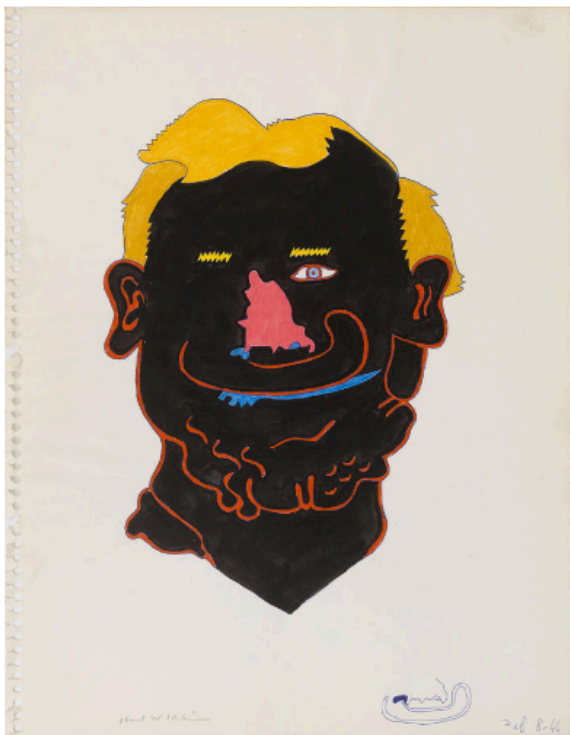
Leon Golub *Gigantomachy II*, 1966  
The Metropolitan Museum of Art

Many Imagists, says Corbett, were impressed with Westermann’s level of craftsmanship, “the personal touch that he gave to all of the work,” and his “perverse streak.” Diverging from their predecessors, the Imagists who came after the Monster Roster employed an aesthetic more akin to comic books than horror

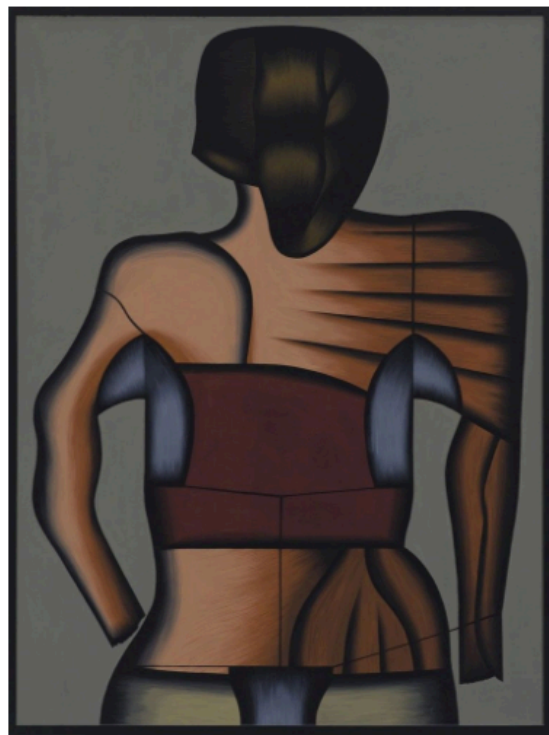
films, though they retained an element of the grotesque (Karl Wirsum's vivid, cartoonish-yet-disfigured forms are particularly emblematic of this).

"You just feel a sensibility start brewing," Dempsey says about the particular era that the Tang show focuses on: 1964 to 1980. "We talk about an accent: a collective group of people have a similar accent. Doesn't really mean they're thinking about the same things, but there's an energy that's pervasive in the air and you can almost tangibly feel that in this date range."

The Tang exhibition will include Westermann's *Memorial to the Idea of Man If He Was an Idea* (1958). Comprised of pine, cast-tin toys, glass, and other various materials, the work appears to be a cabinet with an alien's one-eyed head on top. Written in bottle caps, Westermann's initials adorn the inside of the wooden door. The object becomes a kind of personalized fetish, combining kitsch and craft. Similar details distinguished the frames of work by Ed Flood, a younger Imagist. He and Nutt adorned the backs of their paintings with double entendres, stylized notes to preparators, and other secrets that remained between the artists and those who handled and owned the work.



Karl Wirsum *Untitled (Head Study for Awning Series)*, 1966  
Derek Eller Gallery



Christina Ramberg *Muscular Alternative*, 1979

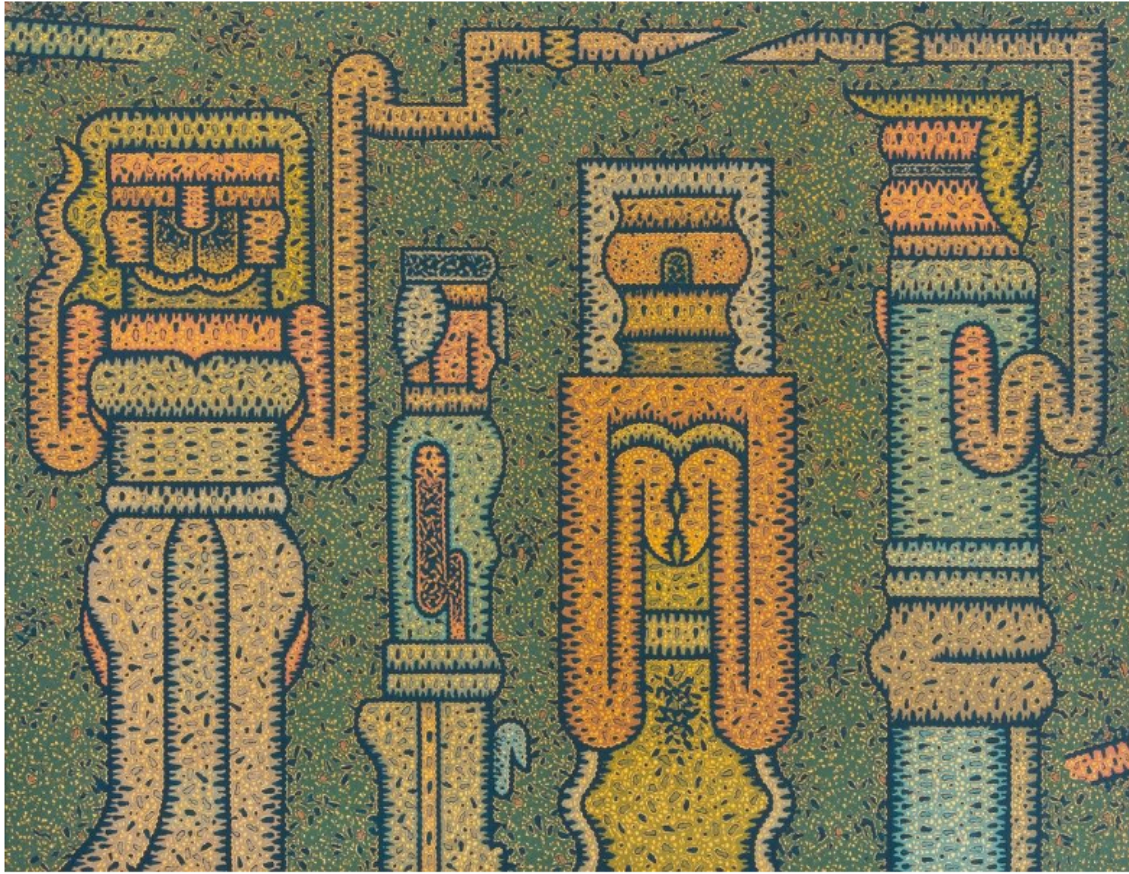
“I think all these details foreground the warmth and the intimacy of this work, which makes it stand apart from other work being made in these decades in other cities,” says Berry. Dempsey describes the effect as playfully adversarial. “It’s an interactive relationship, almost like engaging someone in a card game.” These elements also connect the group to the Surrealists, who invoked parlor games, dreams, and subconscious drives in their own practices. According to Berry, both the Imagists and their European predecessors shared a desire to look inward.

This simultaneous coyness and amiability could coincide with darker, more disturbing, obliquely political material. Christina Ramberg painted headless bodies (often female), wrapped in tight or suggestive garments. Ideas about constriction and expectations for women abound in her paintings, which sometimes feature flat, broad swaths of dim colors (no bright yellows or reds here). As Dan Nadel wrote recently, “Until her final series of paintings, Ramberg always kept her distortions ‘clean’—no matter how disturbing the imagery, the surface and the final shape would be immaculately formed and delineated.”

Notably, Ramberg was part of an exhibition group called False Image, showing with her husband, Philip Hanson, as well as Eleanor Dube and Roger Brown. (The Imagists were intensely whimsical in their naming, calling other subsets of the group the Hairy Who, the Nonplussed Some, and Marriage Chicago Style.)

Brown enjoys perhaps the strongest legacy of the False Image artists: his former home, which is still filled with the myriad objects he collected throughout his life, and accessible to today’s public as the Roger Brown Study Collection. Masks, toy cars, figurines, crosses, road signs, baskets, and more relics of everyday life in America are on view throughout the rooms and along the staircase.

In fact, many of the Imagists were collectors. According to Corbett, the Maxwell Street Market (Chicago’s major flea) was a treasure trove for Ramberg, Hanson, Wirsum, and Ray Yoshida. Yoshida himself had a unique influence on other Imagists: He taught many of them at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago. Yoshida amassed large collections of printed matter, from comics to cookbooks. The former, in particular, inspired his “specimens”: collages that resembled a scrapbook page filled with clippings.



Ray Yoshida *Unbelievable Refuge*, 1980  
Leslie Hindman Auctioneers

Yoshida, born in Hawaii in 1930 to a Japanese immigrant father and a mother of Japanese lineage, was also the only artist of color associated with the Chicago Imagists. Though the group was far more equitable across gender lines than contemporaneous movements centered on the East Coast (Abstract Expressionism, Minimalism, Pop art), it was still very white. Yet the Imagists derived plenty of inspiration from the non-white cultural production that surrounded them in Chicago. Perhaps most famously, Karl Wirsum's *Screamin' Jay Hawkins* (1968) depicts the well-known African American singer and performer. Corbett and Berry describe the Imagists' significant engagement with, and love for, the music and multimedia of their time. "It was a much more complex set of relationships in an insanely segregated city," says Corbett.

The Tang is just one of many institutions to celebrate the Imagists within the past few years. At Milan's Fondazione Prada, curator Germano Celant closed a show this past January, "Famous Artists from Chicago. 1965–1975." The project suggests the Imagists' widespread appeal and an international interest in a movement that was thriving far from global art centers.

Matthew Marks Gallery exhibited work by the Hairy Who in a 2015 group show, placing the group members in dialogue with San Francisco Funk Artfigures such as Peter Saul and the Detroit-based Destroy All Monsters group, which included Mike Kelley and Jim Shaw. Curated by Nadel (who's become one of the Imagists' biggest champions with his writing and curation), the show proposed that, operating beyond the mainstream art world, these artists turned to figuration inspired by advertising, primitive art, comic books, and other sources once dismissed as lowbrow.



Installation view of "The Chicago Show" at 56 Downing St., Brooklyn, 2018. Photo by Johannes Berg. Courtesy of Alexandra Fanning Communications.

Placing the Imagists in a contemporary context, Chicago-born curator Madeleine Mermall has curated "The Chicago Show," an exhibition in a Brooklyn townhouse, on view through May 20th, that pairs the work of Nutt, Yoshida, Westermann, and their ilk with that of emerging Chicago artists who similarly revel in cartoonish figuration. "There's this strong, special community right now," Mermall says. "They're all working together and showing together and putting on DIY shows."

One of the exhibited artists from the younger generation, Darius Airo, recalls a corner of the Art Institute of Chicago where he first noticed the work of Ed Paschke and Karl Wirsum. His own acrylic painting, *Chicago Faucet Venus* (2018), features a very pink, heavily distorted female form with a fractured face. Another participant, Jenn Smith, says that what interests her in the Imagists' work is a feeling of "holding your cards close to the chest. How much information to reveal and how much to conceal. Like a sexual repression." She also admires their sense of humor and flat treatment of the figure.

A third artist, Bryant Worley, is presenting a 2018 work entitled *Dic Pics*, which features tattooed men in cowboy hats. He goes so far as to call the Imagists “my entryway into painting as I know it today.”

This renewed attention to the Midwestern group seems to only be getting started. Derek Eller, who has shown Wirsum since 2010, says that since then, he’s seen “a lot more interest here in New York, and probably internationally.” While Barbara Rossi recently enjoyed a small solo exhibition at the New Museum, many of the Imagists have yet to receive major museum retrospectives. This fall, however, the Art Institute of Chicago will mount a group show, as will Goldsmiths Centre for Contemporary Art in London in spring 2019. Corbett thinks it’s time, and the recent wave of shows contributes to a certain momentum. “We’ve seen in the last five, six, seven years a whole bunch of small survey shows that have set things up for the opportunity for incredible, career-spanning exhibitions,” he says. Before long, Chicago’s distinct aesthetic accent should be more pervasive than ever.