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Rochester Institute of Technology
Rochester, New York

A Thesis Submitted to the Faculty of
The College of Imaging Arts and Sciences
Fine Arts Studio Department
In Candidacy for the Degree of
MASTER OF FINE ARTS

Sweet!
Cartoons and Contemporary Painting

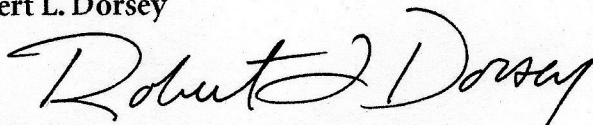
by
Sarah Atlee

2006

Approval

Chief Advisor **Robert L. Dorsey**

Signature

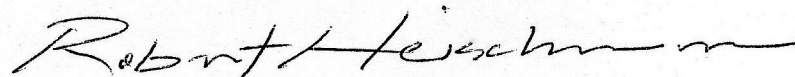


Date

March 21, 2006

Associate Advisor **Robert N. Heischman**

Signature



Date

March 14, 2006

Associate Advisor **Bob Cole**

Signature



Date

March 15, 2006

Department Chairperson **Don Arday**

Signature



Date

MARCH 20, 2006

Abstract

I am an artist, and I use cartoons. My work consists mainly of images that communicate to the viewer through recognizable forms. I also use text to help tell my stories. I often create visual elements that function in place of text or information. I use a third visual tool, a hybrid descendant of images and words: the cartoon.

Cartoons, once situated at the margins of visual discourse, now have a place in the fine art world. There are comics and animated television shows created for adult audiences. There are gallery and museum shows of work influenced by cartoons, not to mention exhibitions of original comics from early in cartoon history. Antique dealers buy and sell animation cels. The high-low culture dichotomy is no longer dogma. In this essay I will examine how other contemporary artists use cartoons, and how their practices have influenced my own work.

Many artists of the past century have invented their own pictorial languages, and incorporate elements of popular visual culture. Artists today continue to do this through the use of recognizable cartoon elements. Four artists who have been influential for me – Gary Taxali, Jeff Soto, Gary Baseman, and Saul Steinberg – share this cartoon language.

There are many themes in my work that would make appropriate topics for this thesis. I choose cartoons because they are the most relevant to contemporary visual culture. At first glance it may not seem that I create cartoons *per se*. But there are identifiable characteristics of cartooning that I find useful: the synthesis of words and imagery, the use of stylized line to create simple but idiosyncratic forms, and the recognizability of cartoons as an avenue for communication.

In the course of researching material for this thesis, I was unable to find in-depth discussions of cartoons as they pertain to our understanding of language in general. It is agreed that contemporary artists use cartoons, and the history of cartoons and comics are widely discussed. But the hows and whys of this usage are not. I hope to explore aspects of that idea here. I have attempted to place the significance of my own work in a cultural context through the language of cartoons.

Cartoons are a viable visual language, an effective tool of communication, and an important idiom in our culture. They are simple, yet very powerful. Their omnipresence in our culture speaks to their adaptability. Artists use cartoons because they say something. They are visually compelling, and they come packaged with certain messages. The language speaks.

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I am indebted to everyone whose input shaped this thesis. I would like to extend my sincere gratitude to the Saul Steinberg Foundation for granting me permission to use Mr. Steinberg's untitled drawing (Figure 8), originally published in *The New Yorker* on September 10, 1960.

My additional thanks to Gary Taxali, Jeff Soto, and Gary Baseman for allowing me to reproduce their images.

Special thanks to Bob, Bob, and of course, Bob.

The Problem With Words

“Much art is imagined, made, and loved without words. It feels good to enter the meaningful silence of works of art, to drift with them unburdened by concept. But it is our duty, our genetic fate, to speak aloud of what we know, naming the beasts of paradise, advancing civilization through reasoned discourse. Accepting the commandment to teach, we might still try to circumvent old words in search of synonyms. Doing so, we but slip willy-nilly and witless into other historical entanglements. Worse still, skirting [the words], or using them thoughtlessly, or dismissing the matter of definitions as a dry academical exercise, we shy away from the hard serious questions those words bring into awareness.”*

Art exists no matter what words we use to describe it, and how accurate those words may be. As scholars, we must attempt to explore and explain our ideas about art. Through words, we gain a deeper understanding of the art we love. In this thesis I have done my best to choose the proper words. If there are better ones, I hope the reader will forgive me.

* Henry Glassie. *The Spirit of Folk Art: The Girard Collection at the Museum of International Folk Art*. Santa Fe, New Mexico: The Museum of International Folk Art and New York: Harry N. Abrams, Incorporated, 1989. p 24.

Introduction

What is a cartoon? This should be easy enough to answer. We all know what cartoons look like, and can point to certain images and say, that is a cartoon. There are various definitions available, but none that I find satisfying. There is no concise, overarching definition for the cartoon language because it is a medium, like paint or film or the written word. There are conventions and traditions within cartooning, but its boundaries are not strict. As with English, or any other language, cartoons can be used to say anything.

We can construct loose definitions based on how cartoons look, how they usually behave, and what they allow us to accept from images in general. I will begin with a formal definition of cartoons: *any stylized drawing using line as its principal formal element*. (Already this umbrella does not cover animation, sculpture, or even most painting.)

The medium of cartooning is best suited to suggesting simplified form with minimal detail. The cartoon's power lies in the viewer's ability to understand it without a great deal of information. An instructional brochure, for example, is a cartoon in the formal sense, not the conventional. The simplified drawings telling us what to do in the unlikely event of a water landing, or how many screws come with this bookshelf kit, are a kind of cartoon – a distillation of reality for the purpose of clearer communication with the viewer.

A conventional definition of cartooning comes from how we are used to seeing cartoons in our culture. Cartoons have their own history, traditions built on traditions, in various media, all over the world. In Western culture, cartoons typically include text and humor.¹ Anyone familiar with the funny pages in newspapers will recognize the relationship between cartoons, words, and jokes. Though these three things are often used together, cartoons can exist without the inclusion of the other two. Text and humor can affect the content of a cartoon, but a cartoon image can exist apart from situational content. It is also important to remember that cartoons have characteristics in common with written language, but they do not depend on it.

Certain visual cues tell us we are looking at cartoons: round eyes and noses, four-fingered hands, words that come in particularly-shaped bubbles (pointy tails for spoken words, round for the non-verbal). These bubbles are called *fumetti*, and are perhaps the most exploited cartoon cliché. Cartoon characters are simplified and exaggerated versions of real people. Other symbols have come to be cartoon conventions: “@\$%!” for swear words, parallel lines and dust clouds to indicate motion, even stars for dizziness and hearts for – what else – love.

It is necessary to clarify the difference between cartoons and comics, as the two terms are often used to refer to the same thing. Cartoons are the building blocks of comics. Comics are typically sequential, and text is more integral to comics than to a single cartoon. Cartooning is a means of creating visual information, and comics (along with other media from animated movies to road signs) utilize that means.²

Some cartoons can be defined by how they look, some by where we find them. Other cartoons are not bound by either formal or conventional definition. Cartoons' graphic origins (line drawings) combined with a history and cultural expectation, give rise to the cartoon mindset. Immersion in cartoon culture allows us to expect certain liberties from creative visual fiction, whether or not that image is conventionally cartoon-like. We know certain things are allowed in cartoons. Physical laws are flouted, characters experience violence but not lasting pain. Animals, objects, even the weather is anthropomorphosized. We may expect punch line humor but are satisfied with cleverness, wit, irony, or no humor at all. When an image is bigger, faster, rounder, louder, cuter, funnier, more exaggerated, less real than its real counterpart, we are more likely to call it "cartoony."

Cartoons are creative visual fictions, necessarily incongruous with reality. The twist on reality may take the form of exaggeration, simplification, or anything that pulls back the curtain of the Real to expose something more interesting. We allow and welcome surprise – we expect the unexpected.

Author Robert E. Horn defines visual language as follows:

1. The integration of words, images and shapes into a single communication unit.
2. The use of words and images or words and shapes to form a single communication unit.³

This is a general definition of a broad form of communication. However, by his own definition, Horn would not classify cartooning as a visual language. Yet cartoons share common ground with written language. The word "apple" is abstract – it does not visually resemble an apple. But when I see the word "apple", I know to what it refers. The fact that I am writing this indicates that I am fluent in the English language. My knowledge of English allows me to interpret a single unit of that language – a word.

Cartoons are similarly abstract. A circle with a short line emerging from its top only vaguely resembles an apple. But it is not a precise depiction. I have spent so much time looking at cartoons – in books, on television, on packaged products, on road signs, and so on – that I can recognize that drawing as an apple (or at least a fruit of some kind). I am familiar with the cartoon language. My cultural conditioning equips me with the ability to interpret a single cartoon, free of context.

Images function by representing forms that we recognize (even if those forms are other images).

Text functions by referring to our spoken language, in turn connecting to our thoughts and experiences. We learn languages. Cartoons function as both images and text, and they are a visual language.

Semiotician Arthur Asa Berger defines *sight* as the ability to see, *seeing* as the process of using sight, and *perception* as the ability to apprehend and know the world by means of sight.⁴ The viewer *sees* a cartoon, and *reads* it as an image. The viewer perceives the image, interprets it, assigns it meaning through association built on previous experience. This action is almost automatic, but depends on the viewer's ability to see and certain cultural conditioning.

Human beings can look at a drawn image and perceive a form. We are capable of understanding (and creating) representation. We look at an image and believe it to represent things that are not there – forms, space, events, living creatures. We accept the illusion of a two-dimensional image because images are a language that we recognize.

Further discussion of the visual language of cartooning appears in Appendix A.

1. Fun with words: Cartoons are not always funny. Comic books are often not funny, but comic relief and stand-up comics are supposed to be.
2. This paper is not a history of cartoons, a history of comics, or a discussion of comics as a medium. For an excellent work on these topics, see *Understanding Comics* by Scott McCloud. (New York: Harper Perennial, 1993)
3. Horn, Robert E. *Visual Language: Global Communication for the 21st Century*. Bainbridge Island, Washington: MacroVU, Inc., 2002. p. 8
4. Berger, Arthur Asa. *Seeing is Believing: An Introduction to Visual Communication*. New York: McGraw Hill, 1998. p. 24

Read

Cartoons as Text / Text as Cartoons

Cartoons, as a visual language, are read like nonlinear text. Put a few circles and lines down on a page, and you have a simple comic strip. Cartoons are an invitation for the reader to interpret, add narrative, emotion, and history. Gary Taxali is one artist who recognizes the intimate links between the written word and the drawn image. Taxali was born in India and grew up in Toronto, Ontario, where he lives and works today. He is a successful illustrator with such clients as Coca-Cola, Converse, *Time* Magazine, and Bonny Doon Vineyard. A self-described typography nerd, Taxali enjoys printed ephemera such as old textbooks and packaging, frequently incorporating these objects into his work. He also enjoys children's book illustration (and has had the opportunity to create some of his own). His favorites include *Curious George* and Dr. Seuss. In a 2004 interview, Taxali described how much he enjoyed Dr. Seuss' books as a child. He called the experience like feeling "cold water on my little eyes."¹

Taxali painting *Toy Monkey* (Figure 1) is an example of how the two media interconnect. This painting is a close cousin of the cartoons found in the Sunday funnies. Line is the defining element of *Toy Monkey*, delineating shapes and areas of color. The Monkey figure is simple, outlined with an elegant, calligraphic hand. The symbols on the left are less shapes than they are very fat lines. Taxali often paints with a gestural, textural stroke, but this piece has a beautiful graphic economy. This simplicity accomplishes what cartoons do best – communicate with minimal information.

The figure, little more than a few balls and boxes, is as simple as can be while still communicating a form. Things like elbows and knees are not necessary. We understand that this character represents a living thing, with movable limbs and facial expression. Value is kept to a minimum and conveyed mostly through areas of flat color. There is a little modeling on the Monkey figure, just enough to suggest volumetric forms. The Monkey has the round features and bold outlines that typically define cartoon characters.

This image can easily be read from left to right like a sentence. Our eyes see the images in order: title, in white, blocks of color, Monkey, speech bubble with bunny head, exclamation point for emphasis. We recognize the speech bubble it because it's a shape with a curved, pointed tail emerging. The tail points toward the Monkey's head, suggesting that he is the speaker. Nearby is the presence of punctuation, further alluding to speech. These elements are symbols themselves, not saying anything explicitly. We can infer narrative and emotion from the exclamation point and the expression on Monkey's face. He may be

Image removed for electronic archival.
Gary Taxali's work can be viewed at www.garytaxali.com

Figure 1
Gary Taxali
Toy Monkey
Oil on Masonite
Reprinted with permission of the artist

saying, "I hate that bunny. Why didn't he come wind me up? Now I'm stuck sitting here until someone rescues me." The title suggests that this animal is not in fact a living thing, but rather a wind-up toy.

The symbols in the left corners might be Japanese, but they need only allude to some Asiatic characters in order to be recognized as language. The other parts of the image have a similar combination of clarity and mystery. This painting has, by my count, seven or eight elements to it. When a composition is stripped down to such a small number, the parts can hold a kind of conversation. It is the visual equivalent of a headline: "Monkey on flat background fumes over lost friend." Or it could be, "Word key name Monkey sad No! Bunny." Read from right to left, it could be "Bunny said angry Monkey said This so then That." The clarity of the imagery lends itself to communication, though the specific message remains unclear.

In *Toy Monkey*, Taxali has taken recognizable conventions of cartooning (the bulbous character, the speech bubble, etc.) and reinterpreted them in his own visual style. I have done something similar with my painting *Margaret IV*.

In *Margaret IV* I began to establish a symbolic language that would figure into later paintings. This is one of the first paintings in which I used boxes as symbols of information. Though they contain specific images in this painting, in subsequent paintings they remain empty. Empty boxes symbolize information. They are placeholders for words, symbols, pictures, or other visual data. (I often think that what I do as a painter is little more than presenting viewers with a data set that happens to be visually pleasing.)

The images in the boxes echo the story told by the larger figure. The scene is based on Raphael's painting of St. Margaret. I am fascinated by the legend of Margaret, not least because it is now considered apocryphal by the Church. She does not appear a great number of times in Western painting, but when she does, she is standing above or on a ferocious beast (usually resembling a serpent).²

I have painted several versions of Margaret. For this one, I chose to isolate what I considered to be the most important elements of the image: Margaret's eye, her hand, her foot stepping on the beast, her gown (which Raphael used to sensuously suggest the shape of her torso and thighs), and the serpent's undulating coils. I chose symbols to represent these things. I have listed five characteristics, but there are seven boxes in the painting. I added the brain symbol to connect with the thought bubble. (The pirate is a joke – it comes from the famous Art Test. I have wished more than once for the “free” art education that the test dangles in front of its participants.) The knot symbol represents both the serpent and the test of faith (a kind of puzzle, or knot to unwind) that the beast represents.

The boxes are arranged in a column that may be read either up or down. This column recalls a strip of film or frames in a comic strip. I am certain that viewers would read them sequentially even if I hadn't intended it. The images inside the boxes are invented symbols that correspond to more realistic images on the left side of the painting (of which only the eye, foot and hand are visible). When I composed *Margaret IV* I imagined a grid behind the figure. This grid contains a hierarchy of images, beginning with the symbols on the right and transforming into individual versions of those symbols. The transition from simple to modeled imagery is an evolution: a circle is the graphic ancestor of everything from a head to a basketball to the planet Earth. A circle's descendants could populate a world of imagery, but each image can be traced back to its simplest form. As the symbols in *Margaret IV* move further away from their graphic origins, they become more and more specific. Part of my thought process was imagining a Platonic Margaret – the one every painter reaches for when they attempt this scene. The symbols are more universal



Figure 2
 Sarah Atlee
Margaret IV
 Acrylic and ink on masonite
 2004

and generic, and the subsequent rendered imagery is imperfect, but individual.

I am purposefully playing with the Western impulse to read from left to right. Viewers may not read the grid from right to left as I would hope. But in creating the painting I was conscious that the images would also behave as text, and be read.

Thought bubbles are usually found around the heads of cartoon characters. The bubble in this image is centered on the figure's torso, and more importantly, her dress. In Raphael's *Margaret*, the gown seems more important than the body under it (though the painter took pains to flatter that body). Margaret's gown is traditionally blue, to signify her chastity. I added pink to the blue dress to play with the notion of representing gender through color (pink for girls, blue for boys). The thought bubble around the dress originates at the smaller dress symbol, further emphasizing the relationship between symbols and their representative counterparts. Outside the bubble shape, the dress returns to a simpler line drawing. This may suggest that the gown could be a figment of a symbol's imagination.

In comic strips, thought bubbles indicate a character's thoughts (which may or may not be read by the other characters).³ I gave the bubble, an identifiable cartoon icon, a solid outline to reinforce its graphic nature. But, as mentioned above, the bubble does not relate to Margaret's head, as is the norm. Her thoughts seem unimportant in this scenario. However, what does emerge from her head are the lavender rays that stretch to the edges of the frame. I think of these as a holy glow (befitting a virgin martyr) and an alternate avenue of communication – telepathy, perhaps. The *fumetto* directly references communication, so I down played and distorted that reference.

I enjoy utilizing various modes of representation in a painting. *Margaret IV* has both graphic and painterly aspects. I refer to cartoons and Renaissance painting, pop culture and Catholic tradition, verbal and visual communication. The different techniques I use refer to the disparate sources I draw upon in my paintings.

Artists who mix motifs and modalities have greatly influenced works like *Margaret IV*. One such painter is California artist Jeff Soto. Soto has enjoyed success beginning almost right out of art school. He has shown in the Society of Illustrators annual exhibit, and in numerous galleries across the country. His clients have included *Entertainment Weekly*, Sony, and *Spin Magazine*. In 2004 his painting *Gumivore Love* (Figure 3) was featured on the cover of *Juxtapoz* magazine. He lives and works in Riverside, California, with his wife and young daughter.

As a teenager, Soto began painting while also writing graffiti. He has developed a visual style that joins these two worlds. His work would be as appropriate on easels as on arroyo walls, though he does not consider himself a graffiti artist. (He no longer wishes to flirt with the illegality of graffiti writing.) Graffiti, a cousin of cartooning, is an interesting combination of words and pictures. A graffiti artist plays dual roles, in that he turns words into pictures, and makes pictures say more than the words they spell. A word painted on a wall may say the graffitiist's name, but it also says "I was here, and nothing could stop me from writing." Those familiar with graffiti may glean additional content from the writer's style and placement. Graffiti is more than words on walls.

In addition, a graffiti artist strives for virtuosic display of his talent. Graffitiists work to earn respect for their style and skills. Soto recalls a time when a respected graffitiist wrote "toy" and "wack" over one of his first tags. Soto, recognizing his place among graffiti artists at that time, says "He was right! It was wack!"⁴ The visual intricacy of good graffiti ranges from elegant to astounding. It is an art form in its own right.

Image removed for electronic archival.
Jeff Soto's work can be viewed at www.jeffsoto.com

Figure 3
Jeff Soto
Gumivore Love
Acrylic and mixed media on wood, 2003
Reprinted with permission of the artist

Gumivore Love is a horizontal scene full of abstract and illustrative elements, lines that pull the eye back and forth like the tide. Two figures, robot/plant hybrid creatures, summon the other elements into being. One of the robots is being “driven” by a third, smaller figure. Soto combines paint store candy colors with urban detritus, recalling layers of paint covering rounds of graffiti. There’s rust, dirt, smog, paint drips, bright lights, and swashes of pure color.

The cycle of destruction and creation is played out in Soto’s painting. The two figures stand atop a volcanic surface. (Or has it been slashed-and-burned?) The main robot creates new forms, plant life and manufactured boxes. Butterflies, a symbol of transformation, populate the upper background like an angelic choir.

Soto often mingles mechanical and organic forms to create new characters. He is concerned with man’s relationship to nature, expressing that concern with both warning and joy. In *Gumivore Love*, the cactus forms are menacing, and the flowers seem to bleed paint, but the message contains love. These robot-beings come from some invented future, but they appear benevolent, as though they have come to help us remake the world (not to destroy it).

Soto himself is a painter/writer, and so are the characters in *Gumivore Love*. Text spews from the

robot's hose-like appendages. The figure in the background is using a paint roller – a tool that paints surfaces or covers up paintings (as with unwanted graffiti). A curious motif is the bubble-cloud shape. These clouds have scalloped edges, as cartoon thought bubbles traditionally do. But some have the pointed tails of speech bubbles. (I explore this thought/speech interplay in *Maggie*, Figure 4.) There is a bubble coming from the robot's mouth, but it does not contain words. The text comes from the robot's arm instead. Soto willingly treats words as pictures, and vice versa. The robot says pictures and paints words.

The bubbles are signifiers for text. They don't have to say anything specific – we know there is something being said, and that is enough. Soto may be the only one who knows the exact meaning of the symbols in his paintings. His use of symbols for their own sake is effective regardless of any explicit narrative. In my painting *Maggie* (Figure 4), I make similar use of established symbols to suggest narrative rather than spell it out.

Maggie is a play on the Western ideal of the posed portrait. The figure is centered within the flat frame, resting one arm on an unspecified surface. The figure's pose, though greatly simplified, may remind the viewer of the *Mona Lisa* (among our culture's most identifiable icons). The other elements exist to set off the figure in a picturesque manner. The cherry blossoms frame the face. The background is shaded to respond to the head and body. The banner and symbols are there to describe the person represented, even if they are illegible.

The figure is highly simplified, as allowed by the long history of cartoon characters that came before. I have used a minimal number of physical features to describe this character: round head, round eyes, flat hair, an ear, a vague torso, a flat tartan pattern to suggest clothing. All I need to indicate shoulders are a couple of curved lines. I spent more detail on the arm than any other body part here. That arm includes a nod to a cartoon tradition, the four-fingered hand. Despite a lack of detail and my use of distortion the form is still recognizable as human.

In this piece I am using established symbols as well as invented ones. The placement of the symbols near the bottom of the picture implies a certain descriptive purpose. That is where captions and titles go. Knowing this, it does not matter whether or not I made symbols that mean something specific. Their presence as information is their meaning. I know that the viewer will not read and understand them, but they will recognize their significance within the whole composition (even if subconsciously). I also think of this row of boxes as teeth, suggesting a connection to the mouth (which is hidden here) and speech.



Figure 4
 Sarah Atlee
Maggie
 Acrylic and silverpoint on
 masonite
 2004

The flower icon in the lower right is likewise symbolic. I borrowed it from traditional Japanese textile design; it refers to the painted cherry blossoms, but is placed in a significant location (the corner usually reserved for the Western artist's signature). I am deliberately combining Eastern imagery with a Western pictorial hierarchy. The text in the banner is backwards, to emphasize its formal use over its explicit content. All of this information must point to something, though the viewer may not know exactly what.

The largest symbol is the *fumetto*, or speech bubble. It contains smaller, invented symbols drawn in silverpoint. Again, these symbols do not say anything, rather they stand in for the idea of text. Speech bubbles traditionally contain words. This bubble is a symbol for both speech and thought. I am also playing with the thought/speech combination through the bubble's shape – amorphous curves signifying a thought bubble, yet with the pointed tail reserved for spoken words. The speech bubble covers most of the figure's face, replacing what she would say if she had a mouth.⁵ This piece contains no dialogue or exposition, but symbols are supposed to symbolize something. These symbolize symbols.

In each of the previous examples, pictures can be read like words, and words can be viewed as images. The use of cartoons expands this duality through the exploration of the relationship between word and image. Painters use cartoons in part because viewers automatically *see and read* cartoons.

Cartoons spread through culture, whether as an art form, a world view, or merely an entertainment. A useful analogy for describing this movement comes from genetic theory. In his 1976 book *The Selfish Gene*, zoologist Richard Dawkins coined the term “meme” to describe anything that is transferable between two minds.⁶ Dawkins culled the word meme from the Greek *mimene*, which means “something imitated.”⁷

Just as genes are passed from one living thing to its offspring, determining the structure of that being, memes pass between people, influencing their thoughts and behaviors. A meme may be a thought, idea, trend, fashion (backwards ball caps), fad, motto (I like Ike), slogan (Just do it), buzzword (information superhighway), aphorism, slang, song, dance (the Macarena), poem, joke (Why did the chicken cross the road?), rumor, legend, folklore, dogma, ritual (exchanging wedding vows), ceremony, tradition (Christmas gifts), habit (saying “like”), prejudice, mood, morale, technology (fire, the wheel), invention (the light bulb), or scientific theory. Even images are memes, such as the *Mona Lisa* or the oft-repeated *Madonna and Child*. Memes range from the banal (a fashion might only be popular for a month) to the cataclysmic (such as anti-Semitism). Several popular phrases, memes themselves, describe how memes behave: “Language is a virus.” “Ideas have a life of their own.” “Laughter is contagious.” Culture as a whole can be considered a memplex, a vast system of evolving memes.

Memes usually travel through media, which are passageways for the transmission of information. Media are typically defined as television, print, radio, and film. Other means of transmitting memes include the internet, t-shirts and other clothing, school, church, family, community, advertising, political speech, sermons, and art. The simplest method of transmission is word of mouth. I tell you a joke, you tell your friends, they tell their friends, and so on. Transmission by example is perhaps even more efficient. If my best friend comes to school wearing a new shirt, I may run out and buy one just like it. Genetic theory calls this “horizontal transmission.”⁸ Genes are passed “vertically,” from parent to offspring.⁹ Memes may be passed this way, but they do not rely on biological reproduction. A meme can move directly from one individual to any other.

Cartoonists have taken it upon themselves to propagate certain memes, building innovations into traditions. Like other artists, they acknowledge the accomplishments of their forebears and pay homage to past masters. (In his book *In the Night Kitchen*, Maurice Sendak lovingly recalls *Little Nemo* creator

Windsor McKay.) This is a kind of vertical transmission, if one gives credence to artistic ancestry. This is not to say that artists no longer break new ground in cartooning. But certain tropes persist, such as *fumetti* and googly eyes. These memes collectively form what we think of as the cartoon language. By drawing from this language in my own art (consciously or not), I become a link in the memetic chain.

The passage of cartoon memes from one artist to another is more than ancestor worship. The cartoon language has persisted, and evolved, for the same reasons that spoken languages continue to be spoken – it is an effective means of communication. Part of cartoons’ effectiveness comes from humor. Humor is a powerful tool for trapping ideas. Jokes are easier to remember than lectures, just as nursery rhymes are more interesting than textbook lessons. (The use of mnemonic devices recalls the other, less accepted origin of the term meme: the Greek word for memory.¹⁰) Cartoons are perfectly suited to memetic transmission. They are usually whimsical, if not outwardly humorous. They appear via mass media such as television and newspapers. Cartoons are *fun* – we see them, and we want more.

Notes

1. Taxali, Gary. Personal interview with Sarah Atlee, 10 December 2004.
2. Margaret of Antioch was an early Christian martyr and virgin. The legend states that she was imprisoned for refusing to marry a pagan man. In her cell, Satan appeared to Margaret in the form of a great serpent-like beast. She steps on the beast, symbolically and literally vanquishing it. Another version of the story has the beast swallowing Margaret, after which the beast’s innards were distressed by the cross she held. Her escape from this predicament leads to her association with childbirth.
3. Gary Larson made fun of this phenomenon in his comic *The Far Side*. In one panel, a man at work thinks disparaging thoughts about his boss. The boss, remarking that since they’re in a cartoon, he can read the man’s thoughts, fires him.
4. Soto, Jeff. *Fecal Face Dailies*. www.fecalface.com/whatever/dailies/archives/002544.html
5. She doesn’t have a mouth. Just two eyes, an ear, a head, and one arm. It’s a picture, remember?
6. Dawkins, Richard. *The Selfish Gene*. Oxford University Press, 1976.
7. “Meme.” Wikipedia, updated 23 February 2006. <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/meme>
8. Ibid.
9. Ibid.
10. Ibid.

Play

Why are cartoons funny? Where does humor come from? The mystery of humor merits whole theses by itself, and it is not one that I can satisfactorily answer here. Comedian Steve Allen remarked that analyzing humor is like trying to grab a bar of soap in the tub – just when you think you have it, it slips away.¹ In an essay on humorous art, Nickolas Roukes describes three methods of classifying humor: incongruity theory, superiority theory, and relief theory.² Incongruity consists of “exploded expectation systems,” or simply put, surprise. Condensation is the root of superiority theory. Relief theory is the Freudian notion that humor allows us to gratify taboos, and achieve catharsis (for which we can look back to Aristotle).

Of these three theories, incongruity is the most fundamental to the cartoon mindset. To even read cartoons requires a leap in logic, and every cartoon is some distance away from reality. (To read images in general necessitates this faculty. We assume *Mona Lisa* has legs, though no one has ever seen them.) When the Coyote paints a tunnel on the face of a boulder, we know rationally that no one could enter into it. Coyote knows that, too, so he is surprised when the Roadrunner runs right into the painting. Then the Coyote tries to act on that illogic, and smashes flat into the rock. The joke is compounded when the Coyote comes away with nothing worse than a flat nose and bruised pride. By accepting a degree of incongruity – for instance, that a collection of oblong shapes on a page represents a human being – our sense of logic gives way to more intuitive, creative interpretation of images.

A sense of superiority allows us to laugh at someone. We would never do anything as stupid as painting a tunnel on a boulder and then trying to run through it. Gary Baseman’s painting *Dumb Luck* (Figure 5) may inspire this kind of superior feeling.

The relief theory may explain why cartoon violence is so funny. Everyone, at some time, slips and falls. So when a cartoon character slips on a banana peel, we laugh. We are in on the joke, because we’ve seen it before, and from personal experience. We can revisit our embarrassment and pain in a safe way. Beetle Bailey keeps right on getting beaten up by Sarge, and we keep chuckling at it. We would not want to be beaten up, or to beat someone up (not really). But we know that Beetle didn’t end up with a broken collarbone or a subdural hematoma, so we are happy to watch him get beaten up again next week. The Coyote falls off the cliff, and at the bottom, when our laughter subsides, the Coyote-shaped pancake gets up on its spindly legs and walks away.

Most cartoons are humorous to some degree. Whether or not a cartoon is really “funny” is a matter of opinion. But every cartoon hints at humor, because every cartoon is a play on reality. Visually, cartoons are safe and inviting, with their appealing round shapes and clear outlines. We are accustomed to cartoons being funny, so we allow them to draw us in (no pun intended).

Cartoons may even be utilized to comment on whether cartoons *need* to be funny. Art Spiegelman’s celebrated *Maus* books are graphic novels about the horrors of Nazi concentration camps. Similarly, Isao Takahata’s 1988 animated film *Grave of the Fireflies* tells the story of two Japanese orphans in the aftermath of World War II. The incongruity of this serious subject matter presented in “comic” form is not what we expect from the cartoon medium. Since they are conventionally humorous, cartoons can easily disarm the viewer, then hit them with unexpected gravity. It is a reminder that cartooning, a versatile language, can be adapted to any message.

Between Disney, the cover of *The New Yorker*, the party game *Cranium*, and sold-out gallery shows, Gary Baseman may be the most mainstream underground artist working today. He has created images for games, magazines, and the Emmy-award winning animated series *Teacher’s Pet* (recently made into a movie from the Walt Disney company). Yet he is not a household name. Here I will discuss his personal work, in which decidedly darker impulses emerge.

Baseman’s style is distinctive. Characters with round eyes and pickle noses gambol across roughly brushed-on backgrounds, flat skies and horizons. These monochromatic settings are reminiscent of backgrounds used in animation. There is so much movement in his compositions that it is easy to see how he made the transition from paintings to moving images. His palette is all sinister reds and mournful blues, swimming with bizarre creatures (some just disembodied intestines). There are flying ghosts wearing Klan masks, skeletons made of rubber, floating heads from clown dolls, mermaids, puppies, and dunces. Everything drips. Some characters are not only candy-colored, but candy themselves, such as the gingerbread men or melting ice cream cones.

Baseman’s paint application is simple, chunky, even rushed. The forms are shaded, but not in a way meant to fool our senses. He doesn’t have to – we see a white globe with two oval eyes, and notice the swipe of blue curving around one side, and we understand it as a three-dimensional form. Again, we know the language we’re reading. We take it for granted that when Baseman paints a circle with a few dots and strokes it represents a living creature. Almost all of his characters come with thick outlines (which seems incongruous in paintings that are entirely in color). These outlines remind us that we’re looking at cartoon characters. They all have big eyes, round noses and bodies, short, ineffectual limbs. They seem born into

Image removed for electronic archival.
Gary Baseman's work can be viewed at www.garybaseman.com

Figure 5
Gary Baseman
Dumb Luck (detail)
Acrylic on wood
Reprinted with permission of the artist

their predetermined poses. Bulbous fingers struggle to grasp objects, which they are not meant to do. It appears that Baseman is playing existential tricks on the characters he creates.

In Baseman's paintings, the worst is always about to happen, or it has just happened. These are children's playthings run amok in hell. Actually, Baseman's vision comes closer to what childhood is *actually* like than any Hallmark card. Being a kid is about repeated failure, twisted humor, confusion, and simplified (but distorted) views of the world. Then we get to be adults, and things mellow out. But not for Baseman.

One of his recurring characters is the *Happy Idiot* – a three-headed snowman holding the object of his desire, a mermaid, in his spindly arms. This is Baseman's fatalistic humor at work. This will never work; they're from two different worlds. In the various iterations of the *Happy Idiot* image, the snowman melts,

or eats the mermaid, or drowns her, or drowns himself (like so many ill-fated sailors before him). But he's the *Happy Idiot*, always with smiles on his three faces.

Dumb Luck (Figure 5) features another of Baseman's tragicomic characters. It's practically a one-liner – the Rabbit wanted a good luck charm, so he cut off his own foot to get it. Other allusions to chance prance through the background. On one side is a die-headed man holding a horseshoe, with a four-leaf clover covering his nether region (a cheeky reference to Adam). His opposite is a black cat, bearing the number thirteen, holding the saw that presumably did the job. The cat winks, suggesting that though he appeared in the guise of a "good angel," his intentions were anything but. Good Luck and Bad Luck got together and made *Dumb Luck*.

The painting is in Baseman's rapid style. Three vague shadows are all that suggest space on the flat red background. The rabbit is all thick outline and chalky filling. Like his cousin the *Happy Idiot*, this character seems proud of his supposed cleverness. He smiles out from the moment before he realizes what he's done. At least he had the foresight to procure a prosthesis.

As is typical for cartoon gallows humor, there is injury here, but no pain or blood. The Rabbit is like the Coyote that fell off the cliff. We don't see the act of amputation – that would detract from the punch line. The round eyes and bright colors draw us right in to the dark humor, to which we respond with an uneasy chuckle. The twinkly stars seem to say, "See? There's nothing wrong here. All the gore has been cleared away, everything's spic 'n' span!" The only traces of the violent incident are a vague stain on the floor and the shining fetish in the Rabbit's hand.

Baseman uses visual humor to make us smile at what would otherwise be horrible. He recalls generations of Western painters whose talents include the combination of beauty and pain. My painting *K Fair* (Figure 6) is loosely based on Giorgione's painting of the Biblical *Judith*. Judith's bloody story has gotten its share of interpretation from painters over the centuries (most spectacularly by Artemisia Gentileschi who, evidently unsatisfied with her first version, painted an even bloodier one years later). Mine is a further toned-down version of the original story. If the legendary Judith was driven by the forces of tyranny, bloodshed, and the enslavement of her people, my Judith is plagued by minor annoyances – noise pollution, petulant bosses, traffic, bills.

As in Giorgione's original, a single figure is framed by a vertical space. A few details in the background (a horizon, some tree forms) allude to landscape. A quality of Renaissance (and some contemporary) painting that I enjoy is a balance between turbulence and calm. I worked to give flatness and complexity equal weight in *K Fair*. Giorgione painted his *Judith* stepping on Holofernes' severed head,



Figure 6
 Sarah Atlee
K Fair
 Acrylic and graphite on wood, 2005
 8 x 22 inches

and holding the sword that did the deed. She wears a beatific expression that belies her violent actions. Neither the sword nor the corpse's head are to be found in my painting. Perhaps the head of Holofernes has slipped out from under Judith's foot and transfigured into the cloud of yellow meanies that surrounds her.

The cloud of graphic information is a device I use in several paintings. As the boxes in *Margaret IV* and *Maggie* indicate the presence of information without pointing to specific content, these swirling shapes represent the free-flowing swirl of information that surrounds us in contemporary life. It is the visual equivalent of a miasma of barking dogs, honking horns, ringing phones, the six o'clock news, crying babies, dust, clutter, eczema, cigarette smoke, and swearing. Filling up areas with visual information is not my forté, so I made a tool to help me do it. I constructed a collage of cartoons from various sources (including classic drawings from the Fleischer studio, various *New Yorker* cartoons, and even some Audubon birds). I made copies of this collage, and further collaged those into the maquette for *K Fair*.

I drew upon the graphic versatility of cartoons to create an abstraction of our info-rich world.

If the clouds are the detritus of everyday life, then the floating heads are furies released from Pandora's box. Considering the story of Judith, I imagine the heads rushing to fill the void left by the violent demise of Holofernes. Would Judith have felt triumph, or guilt, regret, horror? Having dispatched her enemy, would she be left feeling empty? What happened after the initial rush was over? These nagging doubts enter the holes in Judith's psyche. As any good martyr would, she tries to rise above it all.

As with the *Margaret* paintings, this figure's dress is more important to me than the body underneath. I have played with the distortion of the figure,³ elongating certain passages and truncating others, but most of *K Fair*'s body is hidden beneath her curiously geometric gown. I have combined the Italian Renaissance tendency toward sensual figuration with the Flemish proclivity to render folded cloth in tedious detail. To emphasize the importance of the figure's accessories over the character herself, I drew in her head with minimal detail and no color. The floating heads that surround her seem to loom forward because of the bright yellow I used to paint them in.

My painting is not as funny as *Dumb Luck*. But I have attempted to mix serious content with whimsical representation. The elongation of the figure is more for aesthetic pleasure than for the sake of humor, but I think of her as a cartoon. I am allowed creative distortion of the human figure because I have seen so much of it, growing up on a steady cartoon diet. Sure, she has only one foot, and bulging eyes, and hands like paws. Not once did I think "I'm not allowed to draw that way." By cleaning up the gore of the original Judith legend, I've opened the door for levity.

It is supposed that play-time is reserved for children. Gary Baseman's creations insist that we hold onto this aspect of childhood. Baseman's visual style is simple, immediate, and playful. Fortunately he has had opportunities to create objects we can actually play with. He designed graphics for the wildly successful board game *Cranium*, and other games since then. Along with fellow painter Tim Biskup, he produced a set of postcards called *The Modular Populous*. These cards, when arranged exquisite-corpse style, form composite creatures created by the two painters.

Our desire to play is similar to that which draws us in to the funny pages – the promise of a little fun in an otherwise serious, adult existence. There is an emerging trend of artists producing limited-edition toys⁴ based on their painted characters. (Gary Taxali has released collectibles based on the *Toy Monkey* image.) This is a new way for artists to market "reproductions" of their work to the art-collecting public. These figures are more expensive than mass-market toys, and are highly valued by collectors.

Juxtapoz magazine, the publication of choice for cartoon-influenced art⁵, now runs a monthly feature on new toys from the art world.

The aesthetic and commercial links between cartoons and toys are plain to see. Toys are like three-dimensional cartoons – round outlines become smooth surfaces, saucer-shaped eyes become bulbous button-like protruberances. Toys have the roundness, wit and playful whimsy of drawn and painted characters. They invite the viewer (that is, the viewer not afraid to be caught playing with toys) to extend the creative fiction found on the canvas. Play, like humor, is a way of making art safe.

Game play is a special category of experience. Games come from every culture and every era of history. We think of games as belonging to childhood, but play is a vital part of adult thinking. There are games of chance, speed, logic, skill, war, and so on. Author Marcel Danesi proposes that all humans instinctively invent games and mental challenges. In his book *The Puzzle Instinct*, he notes puzzle master Will Shortz calling for a culture-wide study of puzzles. Shortz calls this “enigmatology,” acknowledging the human fascination with mystery, which is both intriguing and frightening (like art).⁶ When we play a game, we give ourselves permission to enter a safe version of the mystery, conquering the unknown by solving a puzzle.

When viewing cartoons, we suspend disbelief and dwell in creative fiction. We willingly believe that the Coyote will not fall into the canyon until he looks down and realizes he is standing on air. Game play offers a similar suspension of the rules of reality. While in play, game rules are inviolable, and we accept them. We abide by the belief that that the knight can only make L-shaped moves on the chessboard. Breaking the rules destroys the illusion that the game’s fiction provides.

My creative transition into making games was gradual. It began with placing rows and columns of boxes in my images (see Figure 2) and breaking up the space into grids. This compositional device, combined with bright colors, began to resemble game boards. In making games from an artistic perspective, I am providing viewers with something to do and something to look at. Board games always involve graphic concerns, such as composition, color, pattern, and visual clarity. A game that is visually uninviting is unsuccessful. Making a painting that is a game board is also a design project.

Bored Game (Figure 7) began as a one-panel piece. After reaching a frustrating impasse with the right half, I decided to expand the painting onto a second panel. I consider the left side a variation on the original painting’s theme. (As in other paintings, I am subverting the Western viewer’s tendency to read from left to right.) By continuing the parade of boxes around the second panel, I reimagined the work as a board game. Pieces can move throughout the image just as the viewer’s eye does.



Figure 7
 Sarah Atlee
Bored Game
 Acrylic, oil, collage and graphite on masonite
 2005

There are rules for *Bored Game*, but they are secondary to the viewer's visual experience. When I display this painting in galleries, I encourage viewers to touch the painting and handle the pieces (mostly a collection of colorful found objects). When a gallery visitor touches a work of art, an important shift occurs in their relationship with that object. Physical contact allows the viewer to personalize their experience. They change from a passive spectator to an active participant. The distance that typically separates viewers from art in a gallery or museum can be very intimidating (though it is appropriate in some contexts). I am interested in reducing or dispelling the tension between what the viewer thinks they *should* do with the art and what they *can* do. With an interactive art object such as *Bored Game*, I can break the rules of the gallery experience, and replace them with another set – the rules of the game.

The worlds of games, toys and cartoons have rules, but they are also *fun*. Humans continue to play games as a way of exercising the mind, but also to pleurably pass the time. This is part of why cartoons find themselves at home on game boards and in our hands. Cartoons are pictures at play – we feel safe within their stories and games.

Notes

1. Roukes, Nicholas. *Artful Jesters: Innovators of Wit and Humor*. Berkeley, California: Ten Speed Press, 2003. p. 5
2. Ibid
3. I looked at the work of New Mexico painter Sam Flores for this piece. His paintings can be viewed at www.samflores.com.
4. Or call them small sculptures, or figurines.
5. Further discussion of *Juxtapoz* appears in Appendix B.
6. Danesi, Marcel. *The Puzzle Instinct: The Meaning of Puzzles in Human Life*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2002. p. ix

Truth

Cartoons as Mirrors of Reality

Cartoons are often used to make us laugh. Humor holds up a mirror to life as we know it. We have to see ourselves before we can laugh at ourselves. Cartoon humor is a safe place from which to view misfortune and folly. As a child, art critic Dave Hickey had a peculiar experience when cartoons collided with society at large. He writes of being brought before a June Cleaver-like woman at his school, who asked him how he “felt” about the cartoons he watched on television. He answered that he liked Donald Duck, identified with Wile E. Coyote, and laughed at the fictional violence of *Tom & Jerry*. To Hickey’s surprise, his answers and those of other children were compiled in a study with the aim of denouncing cartoons as harmful. (What would those women think of Gary Baseman’s work, I wonder?) Hickey recalls that he and his peers knew perfectly well that cartoons weren’t reality. He was incredulous that adults couldn’t give children credit for this awareness. Of the violent material in question, he writes, “It was funny *because* it wasn’t real!”¹

In his essay “Pontormo’s Rainbow,” Hickey goes on to reminisce about the seductive vibrancy of television cartoons, the bright colors and funny situations that created a safe arena for things he didn’t want to *actually happen* (such as a cat being run over by a lawnmower). He notes the critical difference between “what we want to *see* and what we want to *see represented*” that cartoons allow.² Shows such as *Tom & Jerry* were funny because Hickey knew that real animals were vulnerable and mortal, just like people. He loved the cartoons because they did not and could not represent real life.

So are cartoons a reflection of the truth, or a refutation of it? Either, or both? Whatever the answer, the fact remains that cartoonists must acknowledge reality in order to comment on it. Cartoons are images, and images lie, but they lie to tell the greater truth. The master, in my opinion, of truth disguised as quiet cartoon humor is Saul Steinberg (1914-1999).

There is not much I can say about Saul Steinberg that has not been said many times by fine writers such as John Updike and Harold Rosenberg.³ Permit me a few moments of hero worship. Steinberg’s art is the cleverest art I have ever seen. But clever, witty, and smart do not describe the joy I get from looking at his drawings. There is a special sense one gets in the brain, the release of some chemical, when one solves a puzzle. Every Steinberg drawing is a puzzle, some twist on truth. Turning the pages in a book of Steinberg’s, solving those puzzles one after another, I get high. I reach some head space in which I am the world’s smartest five-year-old.⁴ Steinberg’s words are pictures, his pictures are metaphors, his

Image removed for electronic archival.
This image can be found in *Steinberg At The New Yorker*
(Abrams, 2005)
Visit the Saul Steinberg Foundation at
www.saulsteinbergfoundation.org

Figure 8

Saul Steinberg, Untitled c. 1960

Ink on paper

Originally published in *The New Yorker*, September 10, 1960

c. The Saul Steinberg Foundation / Artists Rights Society (ARS), NY

metaphors (if translated into the tedium of words) are cumbersome and unnecessary in the face of his perfectly succinct images. His simple, elegant works are ripe for interpretation. Yet they need none.

Rather than describing Steinberg's biography blow-by-blow, I'll turn him into a metaphor: Twentieth Century Man. (On the stair-stepped evolutionary pedestal, he stands between Old-World Provincial and Postmodern Unperson.) Twentieth Century Man begins life in Europe, is exiled, journeys to America with his historical baggage. He goes off to war, survives through luck, broadens his view of the world and comes back with a new paranoia to accompany him into the Atomic Age. He lives in New York City, the cultural hub of Modern America. He marries and attends cocktail parties. He looks around, looks within. If this Man happens to be Saul Steinberg, he builds a successful artistic career in print as well as in galleries and museums. As an artist, Steinberg picks up, examines, wears, and discards the myriad movements of twentieth century art for what they are – things that come and go. He prefers the edge of the art world, where he is decidedly more comfortable. He remains, along with his work, uncategorizable.

Another challenge in writing about Steinberg is resisting the impulse to over-metaphorize (which I have already done). Adam Gopnik identified a similar impulse, writing that Steinberg possessed “a sense of metaphor, through which everything became, in his experience, something else.”⁵ I want to use his *Untitled Drawing* (Figure 8) to represent Steinberg the person, Steinberg's world-view, the worldview of Twentieth Century Man, Man's impulse to create language, language itself. Steinberg acknowledged that he and the viewer collaborated to form the meanings of his works, and I am only too happy to participate. Steinberg's drawings fit the technical description of cartoons (stylized line drawings often incorporating humor and text). A more forgiving description is art filtered through the cartoon worldview.

Steinberg did consider himself a cartoonist. He said that his artistic development “started at the bottom, with cartoons,” nodding to the traditional placement of cartoons below fine art.⁶ Joel Smith writes of Steinberg's preference for the printed page over gallery display.⁷ Smith agrees that “Steinberg's idiom was grounded in the cartoon.” He developed his style avoiding “some of the vulgarities of humorous drawing and the banalities of commercial art, while still preserving a little of that element of mediocrity – I'd almost say vulgarity – that I wouldn't care to give up.”⁸ This almost naïve quality is one of the hallmarks of Steinberg's style. His individuality has not been “corrected” out of his very personal, human hand. (His work would become rougher and more satirical as he aged.) His drawing is immediate and as personal as a signature. When drawing, Steinberg communicated directly from head to hand to paper, with little filtering to interfere.

Steinberg developed a symbolic vocabulary that he used to interpret the collision between the

cartoon world and the observable one. Many of his drawings explore the fused relationship between words and images. Words become characters that act out their own meanings, while pictures sit in sentence-like rows, patiently explaining themselves in order. Steinberg created his own gallery of symbols, and borrowed others from art and culture. He took conventions of the cartoon language (traditionally the realm of banal humor) and used them to pick apart topics as esoteric as man's role in the universe. Smith notes the difference between the work of traditional cartoonists and Steinberg, who "drew in the language of comics insofar as he portrayed things not as they appear but as the multisensory mind pictures them."⁹

Rosenberg writes that Steinberg felt a proprietary hold on the use of the speech bubble as a visual and metaphorical device.¹⁰ I have trouble attributing this to Steinberg, and so does Joel Smith. Smith describes the influence of one of Steinberg's New Yorker predecessors, Sam Cobean:

When Sam Cobean's people sprouted thought-balloon desires and calculations more real to them than reality, the conceit not only influenced Steinberg's vision of speech and thought as physical entities, but gave rise to a whole genre of cartoon humor about contests between mind and matter.¹¹

Smith maintains that although Steinberg disliked the spread of his ideas into the work of others, the use of the bubble as a symbol was a *New Yorker* convention that other cartoonists were "constantly reinventing."¹²

During the 1930s, Steinberg studied architecture in Milan. At this time he began making observational drawings. He recalls that he "learned to draw by drawing, [and] had so far thought mostly of imaginary drawings, things you invent."¹³ Steinberg's "imaginary" drawings cut close to the bone by first acknowledging visual reality, then telling the deeper truth behind it. Art makes us look, and Steinberg helped make the invisible visible. He noted "how hard it is to do a drawing from life, and how important to understand the nature, the truth of reality...it isn't a visible, superficial truth."¹⁴ Cartoons, like other art forms, remind us that what we see with our eyes is only one telling of the story. Steinberg sought to illuminate "something more than what the eye sees" with his art.¹⁵

Consider the scene in *Untitled Drawing* of Steinberg's Everyman, Twentieth Century Man, Abstract Man, the Funny Little Man. He stands inside a theoretical cube, recalling another drawing of Steinberg's in which Man thinks "Cogito, ergo Cartesius est." We could call this character Cartesian Man. Or is it the nature/culture divide writ small: man imprisoned by the knowledge he sought. His enclosure separates him from the natural world outside, which consists of grass, shrubs, trees, clouds, and the moon, jotted off in Steinberg's unique hand. As a draftsman, Steinberg identified more with man-made forms than natural ones, employing a vocabulary of dots and dashes to indicate nature.

As with most of Steinberg's earlier published works, line is the defining element in *Untitled*

Drawing. (He would later incorporate other media, such as watercolor, crayon, collage, and three-dimensional objects.) In this drawing, texture and tone are created with line only. There is no modeling on the forms.

Steinberg employed different levels of representation, as if to remind us that we are always looking at something man-made. Though the figure and the cube are constructed from line only, the natural scene outside displays a variety of textures, suggesting varied forms (and even intangibles like breeze). Steinberg's use of an assortment of pictorial modes signals his understanding of differing degrees of symbolic representation. The man in the cube is more abstract, more symbolic than the landscape. The letters are abstract to begin with, and are further abstracted by their use in demarcating points on the cube. (These letters are not even used representationally, as in a for apple and b for banana. The alphabet, usually used for constructing words and phrases, is used here arbitrarily, to name mathematical points.) The more realistic drawing of the "outside" world contrasts with the less specific man. Here we see Steinberg's personal vocabulary of symbols, borrowed and invented. He created stylized notations for jacket, tie, shirt, and shoes. Even the man's ear, eye and nose are reduced to geometry.

This little character is a "mute, open-eyed urbanite" echoing incarnations of other *New Yorker* cartoonists.¹⁶ The man's expression is blank, like a mask. It is safe to suppose that this is a sort of self-portrait. Like many of his artistic contemporaries, Steinberg was aware of art as autobiography. Rosenberg recognized the mutable anonymity of this character, calling him "Abstract Man, Mr. Anybody...[in] countless poses, self-disguises and self-creations."¹⁷ Steinberg was a famous artist, but rather than showing off some invented rock-star version of himself to the public, he seemed to disappear behind this blank face.

In one emblematic photograph, Steinberg appears wearing a mask he made, a paper-bag version of ...himself. Unlike his own, human face, the paper bag mask is controllable, fixed and unchanging. Steinberg spoke of feeling intimidated in front of a camera, though he was able to relax behind the mask.¹⁸ The word *persona*, originally from Greek theater, means *the mask through which the voice comes*. Steinberg's persona is blank, ready to have any interpretation projected onto its surface. The resemblance of this mask to his Funny Little Man is hard to ignore.

One could argue that all art is autobiographical in that it reflects the hand that made it. Steinberg's work is particularly personal, since every drawing is a direct record of his unique hand, filtered through his invented pictorial vocabulary. My painting *Sparky* (Figure 9) is of an alter ego of my own – a projection of my personality into fictional space.



Figure 9

Sarah Atlee

Sparky

Acrylic, oil, graphite and silverpoint on masonite, 2005

14.5 x 20 inches

Winner of the 2005 RIT Wallace Memorial Library Purchase Prize

In *Sparky* I use various modes of representation such as realistic drawing (though of an unrealistic subject), symbols, line drawing suggestive of natural forms, graphic embellishments, abstract elements, swashes, dabs, blocks, and geometric shapes. This painting is constructed of many layers. There is a broad, colorful underpainting (little of which made it to the final layer). I made a collage of the collected source material that I wanted to include in the painting. I made this collage very quickly, cutting and tearing rough shapes out of paper. I enjoy the arbitrariness of these shapes, as it is like drawing with scissors, so I took pains to recreate those shapes (abstract but specific) in the final image. The figure's skirt, for example, is not shaped from observation, but rather through layers of paper collaged quickly. Different shapes also demarcate areas in which I use different techniques. The figure contains only gesso and silverpoint. I use abstract painting for areas around the borders. The inverted heart-shape (or is it a letter P?) is where I

experiment with graphic elements unseen elsewhere in the painting. I want the viewer to be conscious, as I am, of employing different kinds of picture-making in this single image.

There are green shapes, grey shapes, pink shapes. All of these go together to form a kind of pictorial map. The large symbol, along with the small ones, suggest text (but are not actual words). They indicate that a story is being told here, without explicit narration. Having looked at many Saul Steinberg drawings, I am aware that I can tell a story through simple elements such as line, shape, and texture.

In *Sparky* I use a variety of media to create a complex image, quite apart from the simplicity of Steinberg's untitled drawing. *Sparky* also shows a figure boxed in, closed off from nature, in which the kitten sits in self-imposed exile. In both images, the things of the man-made world separate us from our natural origins. Neither character seems particularly surprised at their surroundings, but rather they are wistful, resigned, aware, as though they each stepped into their box and closed the door. Rosenberg writes that "Steinberg projects an alter ego who is detached, curious, passive and fearful."¹⁹ The kitten in *Sparky* bears a similar passivity – she knows her situation, and she knows she put herself there, but she's helpless to escape it.

I often use color symbolically, rather than attempting to paint realistic scenes. Green stands for nature, pink for femininity, white for purity and chastity. Since I am not an expert at painting vegetation, I have used areas of green to suggest plant life. The short, controlled brush strokes around the borders of the image suggest a walled-in space, an enclosed garden surrounded by pruned hedges. The quasi-architectural, rust colored shapes jutting from the bottom edge might suggest steel beams. These elements pair with the vegetation to reinforce the nature-culture collision embodied in a planned garden. Enclosed gardens are traditionally used in Western painting to represent the Virgin Mary, and I have alluded to that metaphor here.

The dominant colors of *Sparky* are pink and green. In my original sketches for this painting I had planned a background of pale pinks and lavenders. In the subsequent collage stage, I used some paper that had been printed with a bright magenta ink. At first I imagined that magenta to stand in as shorthand for a paler hue of pink. But I came to enjoy it so much that I included it in the final painting. If the color pink is a signifier for femininity, then perhaps magenta can represent girlhood with the volume turned up, the kind of hyper-feminine glow than emanates from the Barbie aisle at toy stores.

The girly pink, along with controlled and controlling foliage, centered on a figure dressed in white, tell the story of some kind of vestal virgin. I have always enjoyed fairy tales. Like many children, I loved to read them over and over again. I reveled in their repetitive, sing-song narratives. I imagined



Figure 10
 Sarah Atlee
Let's Make Some Undies!
 Acrylic, ink, graphite and silverpoint on masonite
 2004
 Official entry in the 2005 Society of Illustrators Scholarship Competition

myself a neglected Princess awaiting rescue by some handsome Prince from a far-off land. (I believe this phenomenon is known as the Cinderella Complex.) As I have grown older, I have replaced the figure of the imprisoned Princess with a different one, more like a nun – a woman who has decided to remove from larger society to live a life of simplicity and introspection. Like the Princess, my idea of the cloistered nun is also generalized, a symbol.

The figure in *Sparky* is a bride of solitude, in self-imposed exile, for better or worse. Her wedding dress indicates lifelong commitment. She has a kitten's head: my reference for this is a picture of a new kind of cat, bred to have extra-long fur from birth. This kitten is more kitten than kitten, softer, cuter, hyper-delicate. Her gesture is like that of a martyr in prayer (another of my favorite themes) or of lovelorn damsels. I think of Rapunzel (who, in my opinion, never did come to her senses) and Juliet adopting

this posture. She has made her choice, though she cannot help longing for what else might have been. Is this an alter ego of mine? The idea of cloistered life is understandably attractive as a way of getting away from it all. Peace and quiet, coupled with spiritual study and compassionate service, make Getting Me to a Nunnery sound like a nice idea. *Sparky* is a picture of the girl inside me who wants to seclude herself to remain innocent and untroubled by the outside world. Sure, she gets lonely, but at least the neighbors aren't partying in the middle of the night.

With *Sparky*, I draw upon the cartooning mentality, in which a kitten can be anthropomorphized into a small symbol of myself. I know that I can safely do so, considering the long precedent set by cartoons in the past. I have confidence in the viewer's ability to read and interpret non-realistic images.

In *Let's Make Some Undies* (Figure 10) I actively explore the myriad ways in which cartoons are manifest in visual culture: as playful characters, symbols, graffiti, and so on. The main figures are simplified and distorted into cartoon-like characters. They stand upon calligraphic cloud forms influenced by Jeff Soto's work. The crowd of figures in the background is even simpler – featureless bodies made using only line. With these I examine the bare essentials of representing a figure – a box for a torso, a circle for a head, sticks for legs. Arms, hands, necks, clothing and feet are extra.

Around the borders of the painting I placed a series of boxes. These rectangles contain symbols I borrowed from knitting instructions. By my original definition (simplified images using line), these symbols are cartoons. Interspersed with the knitting symbols are ideograms representing girls' underwear. Again, this symbol works by using minimal information to convey maximum meaning.

Though I did not intend it, this image inevitably recalls *Alice Through the Looking Glass*. My source imagery included Lewis Carroll's photographs of the real-life Alice. The mirror theme bears greater importance in this painting than I originally planned.

I composed *Undies* as if it were the cover of a book. It is organized around a central vertical axis. The two halves are similar but not exactly symmetrical. They do reflect each other. Each half contains a girl wearing a dress, striped stockings, and Mary Jane shoes. Above and behind the girls' heads are two stripes: one straight, the other swooping wave-like around it. The title "Let's Make Some Undies" (taken from an actual book) travels in and out of this path.

The girls are stepping toward something. They are really two views of the same girl, mirror images approaching one another, as though they could step through to the other side. I present some elements facing forward, and others turned around. Usually, I am the only person who sees the inside of my paintings, since I am there during their creation. Traditionally we see paintings as windows, with the

inhabitants inside, and the viewers without. Here I offer the viewer an “inside” view of the image. Thus the girls are mirrored, but the surface of the painting becomes a mirror as well. The viewer is on the inside, looking out.

I explore the transposition of backwards and forwards in other ways. Part of the book title is backwards, to emphasize the importance of the word as a formal device. I also like to give the viewer the choice of whether or not to read the words I show them (assuming that people will read text in paintings is presumptuous). If one took a book jacket and laid it out flat, the “front” would be on the right-hand side, and the “back” on the left. I turned the “front” figure around so we only see her back. Through these changes in direction I hope that the viewer’s gaze would bounce back and forth within the two sides of the painting. This composition reverses the Western way of reading things left-to-right. By reversing that tendency in this painting, I reconsider the act of reading. I draw attention to the fact that we “read” pictures as well as words. By literally reflecting figures and words in this composition, I can metaphorically reflect on the process of seeing, reading, and interpreting images.

In *Undies* I am not attempting to represent any specific, step-by-step narrative for the viewer. Rather I collect and arrange a variety of images, *re-presenting* them in a meaningful and aesthetically pleasing way. When creating an image, I am conscious of my role as a visual communicator. I understand that viewers comprehend various types of information – words, pictures, symbols, etc. I recognize the difference between a realistic image, a stylized image, and a cartoon. I am at liberty to combine forms of representation the same way I combine techniques and materials on the canvas. I remind the viewer that they are looking at an artifice, a set of information, a visual text. I know they can read it and interpret it for themselves.

Notes

1. Hickey, Dave. "Pontormo's Rainbow." *Air Guitar: Essays on Art and Democracy*. Los Angeles: Art issues. Press, 1997. p. 47.
2. Ibid.
3. Some excellent books include:
Rosenberg, Harold. Essay in *Saul Steinberg*, exhibition catalog. New York: Whitney Museum of American Art, 1978.
Rosenberg writes at length about the autobiographical nature of Steinberg's work.
Steinberg, Saul, with Aldo Buzzi. *Reflections and Shadows*. Translated by John Shepley. New York; Random House, 2002.
- Smith, Joel. *Steinberg at the New Yorker*. Introduction by Ian Frazier. New York: Harry N. Abrams, Incorporated, 2005.
4. Author and mathematician Marcel Danesi calls this feeling the "aesthetics of mind" achieved by solving a puzzle.
He writes that some puzzles are more aesthetically pleasurable than others, and that "puzzles with simple yet elegant solutions, or puzzles that hide a nonobvious principle, have a higher aesthetic index" (227). Steinberg's art, being elegant on both visual and intellectual levels, has a very high aesthetic index indeed.
Danesi, Marcel. *The Puzzle Instinct: The Meaning of Puzzles in Human Life*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2002.
5. Gopnik, Adam. "Steinberg's Gift." *Saul Steinberg*, exhibition catalog. New York: Pace Gallery, 1987, p.4
6. Steinberg, Saul, with Aldo Buzzi. *Reflections and Shadows*. Translated by John Shepley. New York; Random House, 2002, p. 71.
7. Smith, Joel. *Steinberg at the New Yorker*. Introduction by Ian Frazier. New York: Harry N. Abrams, Incorporated, 2005, p. 13.
8. Buzzi, 72
9. Smith, 30
10. Rosenberg, Harold. Essay in *Saul Steinberg*, exhibition catalog. New York: Whitney Museum of American Art, 1978, p. 27.
11. Smith, 23
12. Smith, 100
In the memoir *Reflections and Shadows*, Steinberg describes a 1926 Magritte painting he owned:
"It's a double portrait of Andre Breton: two profiles, one saying 'Le piano' and the other answering 'La violette.' The speech balloons coming out of the two mouths are of a dense and opaque salmon-violet color, and are fairly elongated in shape. Maybe in choosing this color, Magritte meant to show a continuation of the two tongues. It's probably a joke on the comic strips." (Buzzi, 58)
It is undeniable that Steinberg made great strides with the bubble motif, but we may not attribute its invention to him.
13. Buzzi, 69
14. Buzzi, 71
15. Ibid
16. Smith, 23
17. Rosenberg, 10-11
18. Rosenberg, 24
19. Rosenberg, 12

Looking Forward

“What are letters?”

“Kinda like mediaglyphs except they’re all black, and they’re tiny, they don’t move, they’re old and boring and really hard to read.”*

In his novel *The Diamond Age*, science fiction author Neal Stephenson envisions a future in which most of the world’s population is familiar with technological media, but cannot read. Stephenson does not describe “mediaglyphs” in great detail, but the reader may infer that they are a visual language, easier to read than words. Characters in the novel, entertained mostly by moving pictures, navigate life with the help of the easy-to-understand mediaglyphs. These mediaglyphs use pictures to communicate where words fail. They sound to me like cartoons.

Is the cartoon language easier to learn than written words? We read cartoons easily because we have seen them so many times before. But we also read them because they are *easy to read*. Children “read” picture books before they learn written language. As I mentioned earlier, written language is inherently abstract, in that words do not resemble the things they represent. “Apple” does not look like an apple. A smiley face does not really resemble a human face, but it is just close enough for us to understand, in part because we have seen it thousands of times. Add a few lines to the smiley, and you have a body, limbs, means of locomotion – a person. A little visual representation goes a long way.

Painters are making use of the cartoon language every day, but they are not alone. Cartoons are now at home in every area of visual culture, including fine art. (For more on cartoons in the art world, see Appendix B.) Cartoons are visually immediate and instantly gratifying. Their whimsy is disarming, and they can make any content palatable. Their simplicity and ubiquity cross linguistic barriers all over the world. They are the closest thing we have to a universal language. Artists, writers, and communicators of all kinds keep using cartoons, because they work.

*Stephenson, Neal. *The Diamond Age*. Bantam trade paperback reissue. New York: Bantam Books, 2003. p. 46.

Appendix A

Cartooning as a Visual Language

Cartoons are everywhere in contemporary American culture. They draw our attention to advertisements, diffuse the seriousness of world events on the editorial page, instruct and inform us on food packaging and in how-to manuals, direct us on the highway, provoke us in the gallery, and entertain us in the funny papers. Cartoons are the fundamental elements that form comics, another of today's most interesting forms of expression. Having blossomed all through the twentieth century, cartoons are now firmly established in contemporary visual culture.

Cartoons employ a distinct style and vocabulary of signs that are easily recognizable, fairly unchanged over the last century, adaptable to any kind of content, and accessible to a wide audience. Because of this accessibility, cartoons are at least palatable and often humorous. These characteristics make cartoons a highly effective means of communication.

The artist is the origin, the individual creator of the cartoon. His tools may be nothing more than ink and paper. His primary visual tool is the line. He draws the cartoon for the viewer, his audience. The viewer sees the cartoon, and reads it as an image. This image is perceived in the mind of the viewer. This action is almost automatic, but depends on the viewer's ability to see and certain cultural conditioning. The viewer then interprets what they see, assigning meaning and content to the drawn image. This meaning may depend on context, as in a political cartoon, or if context is minimal, on the viewer's familiarity with the cartoon. Whether any particular image is called a cartoon is a matter of opinion, but certain visual characteristics can be identified.

The medium of cartooning is best suited to suggesting form with minimal detail. The power of a cartoon lies in the viewer's ability to understand it without a great deal of information.

Definition

The visual style of cartoons can arguably be traced back to prehistoric cave paintings. Since humanity's early times, cultures around the world have developed art forms similar to cartooning, which are often classified as graphic arts.

The original meaning of the word cartoon, according to the *Oxford Dictionary of Art Terms*, is "A full-sized drawing used by an artist to transfer a design to a large, finished work" such as a fresco, tapestry or sometimes an easel painting. The connection between this tradition and humorous drawings comes

from parodies found in the British magazine *Punch*. Certain of these 19th-century drawings satirized designs submitted for frescoes in London's House of Parliament.¹

Arthur Asa Berger, in one of his many books analyzing visual culture, defines a cartoon as a "drawing, usually in one frame, depicting some kind of humorous situation, which is generally accompanied by a caption."² Mort Walker uses the example of a child drawing a dog to define cartoons. He supposes the child's parents to gush over the drawing, proclaiming, "Look! A doggie!"³ The dog drawing probably isn't realistic in the conventional sense, and yet the parents recognize what the child has drawn. The drawing was "a distillation of the shape of the dog, one that was easily drawn and instantly recognized. It was a cartoon because cartoons are essentially just a group of universally understood symbols put together like a jigsaw puzzle to convey an idea."⁴ I will define a cartoon as **any stylized drawing using line as its principal formal element**.

Definitions of cartoons typically mention two elements: text and humor. Yet cartoons can exist as such without the inclusion of either. Text and humor affect the content of a cartoon, but a cartoon image can exist apart from situational content. Cartoon images, alone, still carry meaning, due to their consistent presence in our visual culture.⁵

It is also necessary to distinguish between cartoons and comics, as the two terms often refer to the same thing. Cartoons are the building blocks of comics. Comics are typically sequential, a means of storytelling. Text is more integral to comics than to a single cartoon. Cartooning is a visual style, a means of creating, and comics are a medium utilizing that style.⁶

Creation

Let us imagine an artist creating a cartoon. Line is the defining formal element in this kind of drawing. Tone, texture, and in most cases, color, are not nearly as important. Drawing a line is a simple yet visceral act, one connected with humanity's earliest expressions. The simple stroke of a pen is all that's necessary to suggest, but not depict, a form. Other tools that the artist may use are negative space, contrast, and stylization for humorous or other effect.⁷ If this artist has a style or character already established in our visual culture (for example, in the funny papers or an animated cartoon), he has the power of repetition on his side.

As mentioned above, the definition of a cartoon can be as broad as all line drawing. But there are a variety of visual elements that often appear in cartoons. These elements form a subset of the cartoon language, and they enhance the familiarity of cartoons. They have become conventions of the genre that

are easily recognizable despite their abstract nature. Mort Walker devised humorous names for these elements.⁸ For example, the beads of sweat that fly from an excited cartoon character are called *plewds*. *Emanata* indicate lust, intense interest, or rage. *Maladicta* are the typewriter-key nonsense characters that replace a cartoon character's curses. *Hites*, *vites*, *dites* and *briffits* are lines indicating swift movement. *Fumetti*, or speech balloons, are the most recognizable hallmark of funny-page cartoons. Walker's book *The Lexicon of Comicana* details these symbols and their applications.

The prevalence of cartoons in visual culture today has allowed this drawing style to become a visual language unto itself. Author Robert E. Horn defines visual language as follows:

1. The integration of words, images and shapes into a single communication unit.
2. The use of words and images or words and shapes to form a single communication unit.⁹

This is a concise definition of a broad form of communication. However, by this definition Horn would not classify cartooning as a visual language.

Horn, like Berger and others, includes text in the identity of a cartoon. But any number of examples can be used to support the effectiveness of cartoon images without text. For example, a flip-book may have a cartoon but no text (though this is a form of animation, a time-based medium). Cartoonist Gary Larson has perfected the visual one-liner – his single panel cartoons sometimes have neither text within nor caption below. Roy Liechtenstein made many paintings without the benefit of words. Even his works not explicitly based on comics, such as a still-life or a parody of a Mondrian painting, are made cartoon-like through the painter's use of Benday dots as a visual tool.

The examples listed above are taken from animation, comic strips, and painting, respectively. Here is another, perhaps the most recognizable cartoon in the world:

Figure 1: *Mickey Mouse*. Image withheld for publication.

This is a cartoon with no words. It is a familiar image, recognizable without any other information. A viewer can look at this image and understand it without the benefit of words. This cartoon *communicates* through its constituent elements. This image speaks as though it was a word, made up of the alphabet of line and tone. This cartoon doesn't need words, because its visual elements function in place of words. Another example could be the contents of an airplane safety brochure. These drawn instructions were developed explicitly to transcend the need for text so as to communicate to as many people as possible. Cartoons clearly are their own visual language, independent of the written word.¹⁰

Vision and Audience

One could argue that *Mickey Mouse*, above, is recognizable principally due to a great deal of cultural conditioning. We recognize *Mickey* because we have all grown up seeing his image on television, in the movies, and plastered upon a world of objects for sale. This character is not only a cartoon, but a symbol. Here is a more abstract example, with which we are all familiar.



Figure 2

This is a cartoon. Taken in and of itself, this image is no more than a circle, two dots, and a curved line. This is a representative image, but just barely. It represents (but doesn't depict) a human, with a head, two eyes, and a mouth. Almost everything about it is communicated by association and depends on what the viewer already knows. By acknowledging that this is a drawing

of a person, the viewer assumes other physical realities: body parts, a brain, an identity, a society; this character's whole world is implied in four marks. Seeing is believing.

Four ways in which this image communicates are resemblance, cause and effect, convention, and signification.¹¹ Resemblance is the literal connection between the image and its real-world counterpart. In this case, resemblance is present but minimal. *Smiley* looks *just enough* like a human face for us to recognize it. Cause and effect, or logic, dictates that the viewer reads the *Smiley* as a head, eyes, and mouth, and thus infers a whole person. The viewer also knows the *Smiley* as a popular symbol, though it is far less specific than *Mickey Mouse*. This is convention. Signification, a process couched within semiotic theory, is further discussed below.

Perception

Berger defines *sight* as the ability to see, *seeing* as the process of using sight, and *perception* as the ability to apprehend and know the world by means of sight.¹² Vision is the process involving light hitting the retina of the viewer, receptors in the back of the eye transmitting information to the brain, and the brain processing that information.¹³ But seeing is not automatic, and the viewer never sees without doing any thinking.¹⁴ Since the viewer is accustomed to looking at images, he knows what to expect when he sees a picture of an object. In the Western world, this viewer tends to focus on that object, to the exclusion of the space and information around it.¹⁵ The resulting perception is an active function of the brain.

Human beings can look at a drawn image and perceive a form. We are capable of understanding (and creating) representation. We look at an image, be it a simple line drawing or a *trompe l'oeil* oil painting, and believe it to represent things that are not there – forms, space, events, living creatures. We accept the illusion of the two-dimensional image.¹⁶ As soon as the viewer sees an image such as the *Smiley*, he perceives that which is represented (a face) and is free to interpret any number of ideas relating to that representation.

Interpretation

As with perception, the interpretation of images is also a function of the brain. How exactly the viewer interprets an image depends on his “preconditioning, intelligence, and physical and emotional state.”¹⁷ The viewer’s individuality determines his interpretation, which stems from his perception like cracks in a sheet of ice.

Semiotics, the science of signs, is a useful tool for charting the interpretation of images.¹⁸ A sign is anything that stands for something else.¹⁹ A sign can be a thing in itself, or an indicator of another thing. Berger writes that an image “is a collection of signs and symbols” that can be read and interpreted.²⁰ He supports this with the example of Jan Van Eyck’s *Arnolfini Wedding*, itself a veritable gold mine of symbolic meaning. But when simplified or stylized, as in the case of a cartoon, an image can also *be a single* sign. The *Smiley* cartoon above signifies a human face, *Mickey* signifies the Disney empire.

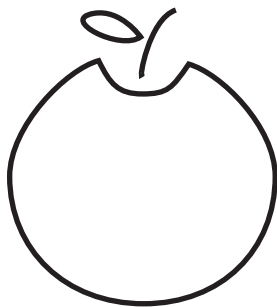


Figure 3

This is a sign for an apple. This image is so simplified, so fundamental, that it could be called a symbol. This symbol, modified in a certain way, would resemble the logo for Macintosh computers. A logo is a symbol that represents a commercial or corporate identity.

apple

Figure 4

This is also a sign for an apple. The word “apple” bears no resemblance whatsoever to the actual fruit, yet we know what the word means because we know the English language. The cartoon language often functions in this way, in that we recognize single abstract elements as representative of specific real-world objects, concepts, or actions.

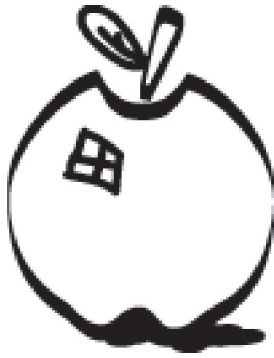


Figure 5

This is a cartoon of an apple. It, too, is a sign. This could have been created with any number of media, and it doesn't necessarily have to be called a cartoon.

What distinguishes it from the symbol in Figure 3? One could confidently call this image a cartoon due to its simplicity of line, exaggerated shape, symbols for stem, leaf, shadow and highlight. In other words, for the style of the image, which includes conventions of the cartoon genre. This image is both sign, and a

set of signs.

A set of signs can also be called a code. Codes are “systems of conventions that we are taught or pick up from our culture” and that allow us to make sense of certain signs.²¹ (For example, the English language is a code. English speakers use this code to communicate thoughts from one individual to another. Inevitably, some things are lost in the translation.) The set of funny-page symbols that Walker named in his *Lexicon* is a code. They belong to the larger code, or language, of cartooning. Our knowledge of this language allows us to decode – to read – cartoons.

Imagine this apple cartoon set before the viewer. The viewer sees this picture, drawn on paper. He focuses on the line, ignoring the quality of the ink, the space around the drawing, the paper, the table on which it is placed. He perceives instantly that this is a picture of an apple. Now the process of signification begins. The viewer may interpret this image as representative of the fruit, and imagine the color of apples, the heft of an apple in the hand, the taste, texture, or smell of it. He may “hear” himself biting into an apple. Or, the viewer may interpret the image as a symbol with various mythical, political, or social connotations. He may think of the story of Adam and Eve, mankind's legendary fall from grace, the notion of original sin. He may recall the logo for Macintosh, and by association the age of computer technology, or global commercialism. A simple image can signify all this, and more. And why shouldn't this image be a cartoon? The power of cartoons lies in their simplicity, and the ability of the viewer to absorb them immediately.

The cartoon language is a rich field of signs and meaning. Cartoons are so deeply embedded in our common knowledge that we apply their vocabulary to all forms of visual expression, whether humorous or serious. They are an extremely powerful tool of communication, working through a symbolic language that can be universally learned and understood.

Notes

1. Clarke, Michael and Clarke, Deborah, eds. *The Oxford Concise Dictionary of Art Terms*. edition. London: Oxford University Press, 2001: 41.
2. Berger, Arthur Asa. *Seeing is Believing: An Introduction to Visual Communication*. New York: McGraw Hill, 1998: 191.
3. Walker, Mort. *The Lexicon of Comicana*. Port Chester, NY: Museum of Cartoon Art, 1980: 10.
4. Ibid.
5. Whether humor, or at least whimsy, is innately present in the cartoon style is a topic for further study.
6. Scott McCloud, Arthur Asa Berger, and others have written excellent books examining comics as an art form.
7. Berger, Arthur Asa. *Signs in Contemporary Culture: An Introduction to Semiotics*. New York: Longman, 1984: 133.
8. Walker, Mort. *The Lexicon of Comicana*. Port Chester, NY: Museum of Cartoon Art, 1980.
9. Horn, Robert E. *Visual Language: Global Communication for the 21st Century*. Bainbridge Island, Washington: MacroVU, Inc., 2002: 8.
10. Horn diagrams visual language in three categories: words, pictures or images, and shapes. He places a heart shape in the "images" section, though it is not an image. It neither depicts or resembles the cardiac muscle; rather it is a symbol. We attribute so much meaning to this symbol that we can "read" it the same way as we can a word or picture. We cannot "read" a shape such as a square or circle, because those shapes alone do not have the same associated meanings as a heart shape.
11. Berger 1998: 34.
12. Berger 1998: 24.
13. Ibid.
14. Berger 1998: 49.
15. Berger 1998: 16.
16. This central mystery of the human eye, as well as the language of cartooning made possible by that organ, are not usually discussed in art criticism.
17. Berger 1998: 31.
18. I won't delve into semiotic theory here. For an good introduction to semiotics, I recommend Berger's *Signs in Contemporary Culture*.
19. Berger 1984: 1.
20. Berger 1998: 45.
21. Berger 1998: 38.

Appendix B

Cartoons and the Art World

The increasing presence of cartoon-influenced fine art merits some discussion. To call this new art “Pop”—anything is to unwittingly refer to Pop Art of the 1960s. Certainly Warhol, Lichtenstein and Rauschenberg left very big footprints on the art world, but I believe the new wave of pop-influenced art has little to do with that previous movement. Their work is steeped in irony, depending on the shock value of placing “low” artifacts and images in a “high” art context. The current generation of cartoon painters don’t need to spend time engaging in the high-low debate, because the debate is over. (If any movement of the twentieth century can be credited with influence, it’s Surrealism.) There are growing numbers of galleries in New York City, Los Angeles, and elsewhere devoted to new painting featuring the use of cartoons and other pop-cultural elements.

Juxtapoz magazine, published in San Francisco for twelve years strong, has climbed in circulation to be second only to *Art in America*. This magazine began as an outlet for primarily west-coast “underground” art, steeped in surf, skate, hot-rod, tattoo and tiki subculture. Cartoons naturally fell right in with these idioms. *Juxtapoz* has undoubtedly played a role in the growth of cartoon-influenced fine art across the United States (generally spreading outward from California). This movement has helped to take down the last bricks in the wall separating high and low culture.

Considering all the cultural influences at work in the art of *Juxtapoz*, it seems that naming cartoons as their genesis is inaccurate. Yet founder Robert Williams did exactly that in 1996. For the first issue of that year, Williams wrote a pithy essay titled “Half-Assed, or Maybe Three-Quarter-Assed” in which he lists some of the various terms that have been thrown his way in an attempt to describe the style of art found in *Juxtapoz*. These include Underground Art, Lowbrow, Artoons, Cartoon Surrealism, and even Neo-Bodacious. He notes that all of these labels “fail miserably to encapsulate a form of art that has spontaneously mushroomed up from popular culture.” But Williams continues to affirm that “the one common thread that holds these diverse art forms together is the use of cartoon imagery.

The cartoon idiom is the international graphic language of the 20th century and *Juxtapoz* has tried to create a forum to enlighten the art aficionado of this new proliferation. ... Unfortunately for the formal art dilettantes, cartoon art means art for children, art that’s almost art, a half art or demi art, half-assed, or at best, three-quarter-assed.”¹

At the time, Williams may have felt a chilly reception among the so-called “art world.” But the climate ten years later is noticeably different.

A recent issue of *Juxtapoz* features a full-page advertisement for artist Ray Caesar at Jonathan Levine Gallery in New York City. This image featured, titled *Sweet Victory*, is of a Little-Lord-Fauntleroy-type figure toting a toy ship on a string. The figure’s costume, toy and the surrounding beach scenery are highly realistically rendered (Caesar uses a digital process). Where, then, is the influence of cartoons? It shows itself in this particular gallery (formerly Tin Man Alley of Philadelphia) and its affiliates, and the advertisement’s presence in *Juxtapoz*. But Caesar’s approach to the figure speaks loudest. The figure’s proportions resemble a child’s, though the distortion goes beyond that. The head is too big, the eyes too far apart, the mouth too small and cute to be realistic. Caesar’s indebtedness to cartooning is evident in the image, even setting aside his background in computer animation. Further study of Caesar’s work reveals his equal interests in cartoon culture and traditional painting.

Work like Ray Caesar’s indicates that the “*Juxtapoz* style” has branched out beyond any one style. Celebrated artists such as Gary Panter, Todd Schorr, Gary Baseman, Mark Ryden, Sas Christian, Jeff Soto, Niagara, Joe Sorren, Robert Williams, and many others demonstrate widely diverse possibilities for cartoon-tinged painting.

Recent exhibitions featuring cartoon-influenced art have been too many to enumerate here. But some major shows in recent years stand out, both as showcases for this type of work and as leading examples in the fine art world. In 2001, Dave Hickey curated the SITE Santa Fe Biennial, which he titled *Beau Monde: Toward A Redeemed Cosmopolitan*. In a city known for its tourist-trap art machine, SITE has become a respected outpost of new contemporary art. *Beau Monde* was among the first major exhibitions to step away from the geopolitically focused snooze-fests of the 1990s into something shockingly colorful. Critic Christopher Knight, in a review for the *Los Angeles Times*, described the viewer’s role in *Beau Monde* as “Dorothy Gale at the moment she opens the door...at the edge of Munchkinland. The black and white world of ordinary experience falls away, erased by a Technicolor haze.”²

The show included artists such as Takashi Murakami, whose Anime-inspired creations recently invaded the UN headquarters, Gajin Fujita, whom Hickey chose to create the show’s graffitied logo, and Darryl Montana, whose elaborate Mardi Gras costumes transform their occupants into fantasy characters. Murakami is the most obviously “cartoony” artist in this crowd. But the show as a whole was characterized by bright colors, mesmerizing visual fields, whimsical characters, and a pervading sense of play. (Even

Ellsworth Kelly's flat canvases joined in.) Retinal gratification replaced identity politics for this refreshing show.

If SITE dipped its toes in the water with *Beau Monde*, it dove head-first into the cartoon mentality with its 2003 Biennial, *Disparities and Deformations: Our Grotesque*, curated by Robert Storr. Elizabeth Murray, Peter Saul, Lisa Yuskavage, Gary Panter, and others explored the distortion of our familiar selves to humorous, beautiful, and disturbing ends.

If the SITE shows were unconvincing to the "art world," then cartoons landed firmly in its mainstream with the 2004 Whitney Biennial. The two-volume show catalog echoes the immediacy of the cartoon medium. One book is packed with short, punchy essays printed in candy-colored inks, the other an interactive catalogue-cum-hobby-kit including postcards, stickers, and other visual bytes. (It reminds me of the temporary tattoos created for the 2001 Biennial at SITE.)

Zak Smith's ambitious *Every Page of Gravity's Rainbow* stands out from this show. Smith decided (not because anyone told him to) to illustrate Thomas Pynchon's novel in obsessive detail, page by page. The pages, all 760 hung together for the exhibition, form a kind of comic book, a visual novel without words. Smith's work fits under any number of labels, such as fine art, illustration, comics, graphic novel, or sequential art. The drawings are varied in technique and medium, but bear hallmarks of the cartoon mentality. This work is now housed in the permanent collection of the Walker Art Center in Minneapolis.³

Other participants in the Whitney's 2004 show include Amy Cutler, whose stylized gouache paintings play with strange yet whimsical visual puns, and Laylah Ali, who uses cartoons to express less-than-savory aspects of the human condition as seen through current events.

It has been said that drawing and painting, or the hand-made image, are making a comeback (though where they went seems unimportant). With them have been a surge of cartoon memes, propagating like viruses across canvas and wall.

The question remains, what is the "fine art world"? Who is in it, who is not? Well, who cares? I return to Robert Williams, who helped celebrate *Juxtapoz*' tenth anniversary in 2004. To mark their anniversary, the magazine's staff organized an exhibition at the 111 Minna St gallery in San Francisco. Williams writes that the list of participants "read like the tiki, Rat Fink, and dysfunctional illustrators' association Who's Who. ...But remember, none of us were gracing the walls of the omnipotent San Francisco Museum of Modern Art down the street, just 300 yards away."⁴ This is not to say that the two worlds are mutually exclusive. Sometimes that 300 yards is felt more distinctly than others.

Notes

1. Williams, Robert. "Half-Assed, Or Maybe Three-Quarter-Assed." Juxtapoz, v. 3 no. 1, Winter 1996, p 4
2. Knight, Christopher. "A World Of Pleasures." Los Angeles Times, July 17 2001.
3. Each page can be viewed on the web at www.themodernworld.com/pynchon/zak_smith.htm.
4. Williams, Robert. "The Results of the 10th Anniversary Art Show." Juxtapoz, v. 11 no. 4, Jul/Aug 2004, p 4

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