

Unhappy Artists

by Joan Altabe



Is it possible that unhappy artists do better work?

History seems to say so. Consider some Old Master malcontents:

The monk Fra Filippo Lippi painted sacred images with a worshipful grace but, all riled up, he abducted a fully pledged nun from a church of which he was chaplain and impregnated her.

In a fit of jealous rage, Pietro Torrigiano, known for giving sensitive faces to the likenesses of Henry VII and his wife Elizabeth of York, broke Michelangelo's nose, permanently disfiguring him.

Agostino Tassi, a landscape painter with a knack for rendering serene and illusionist architecture settings, savagely raped his 17-year-old student, Artemisia Gentileschi.

Caravaggio, master painter of devoutly religious work, was a malcontent with an uninterrupted record of crimes, including murder.

Alfonso Cano, known as the Spanish Michelangelo, was often expelled from a city – on one occasion for the suspected killing of his wife.

Anton Raffael Mengs, leader of the Neo-Classical reform movement, envious of fellow

painter Giovanni Battista Tiepolo, hired two thugs to beat him up in order to prevent him from painting for a while.

Unhappy modern masters fit the great-artist mold, too.

Edgar Degas, a painter of delicate ballet scenes, was a well-known Jew-hater, who made a vociferous defense of the anti-Semitic French military court when it falsely charged, convicted and sentenced to life on Devil's Island an army captain, Alfred Dreyfus, an Alsatian Jew. Even when the real traitor was identified and the French army suppressed the evidence, refusing to free Dreyfus, Degas continued to rail publicly against Dreyfus.

And despite having abandoned his first wife and six children to run off with the wife of a client and neighbor, Frank Lloyd Wright – cited for wife-beating in a divorce proceeding with a second wife – designed buildings that are celebrated for their sensitivity to the land around them.

Whole groups of artists, reacting to bad times, have distinguished themselves. I'm thinking of the Chicago Imagists of the 60's at the moment. Most of their city went up in flames in 1871 and for a long time since, the art of Chicago artists has been unlike any

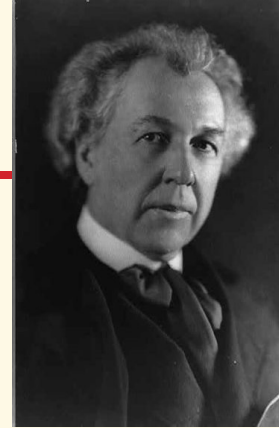
Degas



Mengs



Wright



other – jarring and wacky and very, very good.

How good?

Think of realism

unfettered not only by trend, but also by objective truth. Think of artists unafraid to take chances. Imagine ad-art - cool, cartoon-y and full of the icons of popular culture, but make it hotter to the eye, more impassioned, more heart-rending. Then add: surrealism’s odd juxtapositions of recognizable forms.

Chicago artists are not only unlike those in other places, they also seem to have little interest in wanting to be. Rather than pop artists or surrealists or expressionists, they are all of these at once (note they have their own special classification, “Imagists”), with the result being that while their work looks slightly familiar, it’s also – well – strange.

Ever see Roger Brown’s *Tropical Storm*? It’s a depiction of a high-rise and all around it, people, cars and trees blowing in the wind like so much debris. The style is cartoon-y, but the image moves you, makes you feel sad as no Sunday comic strip will. Maybe it’s the fact that the people, cars and trees are tossed about so rhythmically, they come across as almost pretty. And you feel guilty for admiring the prettiness.

In *I Don’t Hear Anything* by Jim Nutt, you see people in pieces on a flowery floor. On a wall is

written, “Words escape me.” Your guess is as

good as mine as to what it means. But the image disturbs. To see familiar forms hacked up and positioned picturesquely is like watching an ax murderer making neat arrangements of the results of his work.

In *Partial Evidence* by Ray Yoshida, the top parts of leaves and clouds and people are lined up row after row on horizontal edges that look like those in penny-arcade shooting galleries. I don’t know about you, but seeing this one I had an impulse to pick up a rifle and mow down what I see.

The Hog Butcher for the World, as Chicago has been called, has turned out some pretty gritty art – far from the pop art world it resembles. It’s as if these artists hear some music – sadder, screwier and more strident – that others in the art world don’t, and they’re trying to show you how it feels to hear it.

I think you know where I’m going here. If not, here’s the point: If you’re feeling low, it’s probably a bad idea to wait until you feel better before you make your art – as long as you don’t beat anybody up or commit murder. 🐷