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Recognizing a Vibrant Underground

‘What Nerve!’ at the Rhode Island School of Design Museum

By KEN JOHNSON SEPT. 25, 2014

In 1962 the film critic Manny Farber published the provocative essay “White Elephant Art and Termite Art,” in which he distinguished two types of artists: the White Elephant artist, who tries to create masterpieces equal to the greatest artworks of the past, and the Termite, who engages in “a kind of squandering-beaverish endeavor” that “goes always forward, eating its own boundaries and, likely as not, leaves nothing in its path other than signs of eager, industrious, unkempt activity.”

While White Elephant artists like Richard Serra, Brice Marden, Jeff Koons and a few other usually male contemporary masters still are most highly valued by the establishment, the art world’s Termite infestation has grown exponentially. They’re everywhere, male and female, busily burrowing in a zillion directions. They’re painting, drawing, doodling, whittling, tinkering and making comic books, zines, animated videos and Internet whatsits — all, it seems, with no objective other than to just keep doing whatever they’re doing.

Where did they come from? How did this happen? The history of White Elephant art is well known, that of Termite art much less so, which isn’t surprising given its furtive, centerless nature. So it’s gratifying to see a rousing exhibition at the Rhode Island School of Design Museum that blocks out a significant part of what such a history would entail. “What Nerve! Alternative Figures in American

Art, 1960 to the Present” presents more than 180 paintings, sculptures, drawings, prints, photographs and videos by 29 artists whom Mr. Farber probably would recognize as Termites.

The show was organized by Dan Nadel, an independent curator, co-editor of *The Comics Journal* and author of books about comic-book history, in consultation with Judith Tannenbaum, the museum’s recently retired curator of contemporary art. In his introduction to the exhibition’s invaluable informative catalog, Mr. Nadel doesn’t refer to Farber’s zoological terminology, but he posits a similar set of oppositions. The show, he writes, “proposes an alternate history of figurative painting, sculpture and vernacular image-making that has been largely overlooked and undervalued relative to the canon of Modernist abstraction and Conceptual art.”

Specifically, the exhibition focuses on four groups of artists associated with as many different geographical regions: the six-artist group calling itself the Hairy Who, which exhibited in Chicago from 1966 to ’69; nine artists associated with the San Francisco-born trend known as Funk; the four art- and zine-producing members of the noise band Destroy All Monsters, which disturbed the peace in Ann Arbor, Mich., from 1973 to ’77; and Forcefield, a four-artist collective that made music, videos, sculptures, installations and colorful, knitted costumes in Fort Thunder, a former warehouse in Providence, R.I., from 1996 to 2003.

Many artists in “What Nerve!” have had nationally and, in some cases, internationally visible careers: the Hairy Who’s Jim Nutt, Gladys Nilsson and Karl Wirsum; from Funk, the ceramicists Ken Price and Robert Arneson and the painters William T. Wiley and Peter Saul (represented here by a wacky 1966 sculpture of a man in an electric chair, one of the few 3-D works he made); and Mike Kelley and Jim Shaw of Destroy All Monsters. Forcefield (the Rhode Island school alumni Mat Brinkman, Jim Drain, Leif Goldberg and Ara Peterson) was exceptional in that it achieved national recognition during its own lifetime when the group was in the 2002 Whitney Biennial.

The works in the exhibition, however, are from the times when the groups were active. (In the case of Funk, for which no self-selected group existed, Mr. Nadel picked pieces that were included in a 1967 show at the University of

California, Berkeley, called “Funk,” which was organized by the curator Peter Selz.) This focus on early works catches the artists when they were young, feeding off the creative energies of their comrades and responding most nakedly to their historical times. It gives the show an exciting spirit of discovery that tends to fade when artists mature and peel off into their more individualized, professional careers.

Among the most poignant works are a set of finely made drawings of funny monsters on paperback-book-size cards by Mr. Kelley. These reveal his debt to Mad magazine, underground comics, the cartoonist Ed Roth (a.k.a. Big Daddy) and Mr. Nutt, whose bizarre portraits of imaginary characters painted on the reverse sides of plexiglass panels are also highlights. Mr. Kelley’s drawings show an intimate side of him that almost completely disappeared when he went on to his immensely influential career as a producer of conceptually and materially extravagant multimedia spectacles.

Mr. Nadel has added to the show works by six artists who didn’t belong to any particular group but who influenced or were influenced by the group-affiliated artists. These include a suite of mordantly comical prints called “See America First” by the woodworking genius H. C. Westermann, who was revered by almost everyone else in the exhibition. There are elegantly erotic paintings by the Chicago Imagist Christina Ramberg and ribald, brusquely painted cartoon pictures by William Copley. The painter Elizabeth Murray, who came out of Chicago, is represented by two of her exuberant, Cubist spins on domestic chaos. A series of semiabstract paintings on paper by Gary Panter — the underground comic artist and designer for the TV show “Pee-wee’s Playhouse” — pertain to the extinction of the American buffalo. Most unexpected, there are Cubist-style watercolors portraying heroic imaginary characters and a complicated, panoramic picture of some kind of futuristic machinery by Jack Kirby, the comic-book artist who, along with the writer and editor Stan Lee, created the Fantastic Four, the X-Men and other popular superheroes.

Many more artists might have been included. R. Crumb has certainly been an inspiration for countless Termite-types. The Chicago painters Roger Brown and Ed Paschke would fit right in. San Francisco’s Mission School of the 1990s, which included Chris Johanson, Margaret Kilgallen and Barry McGee, would be another group worth adding, as would the collective around the video makers Ryan

Trecartin and Lizzie Fitch. This is not to quibble, but to observe how suggestively the exhibition samples an extraordinarily lively history that's been hiding in plain sight for half a century.

Correction: October 1, 2014

A picture caption on Friday with an art review of “What Nerve! Alternative Figures in American Art, 1960 to the Present,” at the Rhode Island School of Design Museum in Providence, referred incorrectly to a work in the show. The work, titled “Austin Corbin,” was painted by Gary Panter, not “by Mr. Panter and Austin Corbin.”

“What Nerve! Alternative Figures in American Art, 1960 to the Present” continues through Jan. 4 at the Rhode Island School of Design Museum in Providence; 401-454-6500, risdmuseum.org.

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