

The WHO in this case: six Chicago pop artists. Shown here is the cover of the comic-book catalogue they used for their "Hairy Who" exhibition.

Since the late 1940s an expressive strain—one that periodically appears, dies away, reappears in different form and expires again—has run through Chicago painting. Properly speaking, it is not a style but a preoccupation and an order of values, close to the esthetic of surrealism or expressionism but of a character more rude and hermetic than the "classical" varieties found in New York and Europe. Now it is back again, suddenly emerging in group shows by a cluster of young local painters. To call them pop artists is to reveal something about their work but to conceal something else. It would be fairer, at the very least, to amend this to read Chicago pop, and since a

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unique Chicago factor appears to be involved, some brief historical notes on the last twenty years of Chicago art may be in order.

It was in the middle 1950s that certain shared attitudes were first noted among the generation of Chicago ex-G.I.'s, who, upon returning from World War II, had entered the School of the Art Institute. "Monster Roster" was the name later affixed to them, a bit of jargonese that sought color at the cost of accuracy. None of that group, which included Leon Golub, George Cohen, H. C. Westermann, Seymour Rosofsky, June Leaf and Evelyn Stasinger, painted monsters, in the sense of hideosities and freaks, so much as a variety of stark or mysterious heads and figures, dark fantasies, irrational and pre-rational images and myth symbols, whose sources lay more

CHICAGO POPCYCLE

It's mad, it's monstrous, it's how a group of midwestern individualists rejected the Paris, New York or West Coast mold to form a school that is distinctly its own

Franz Schulze

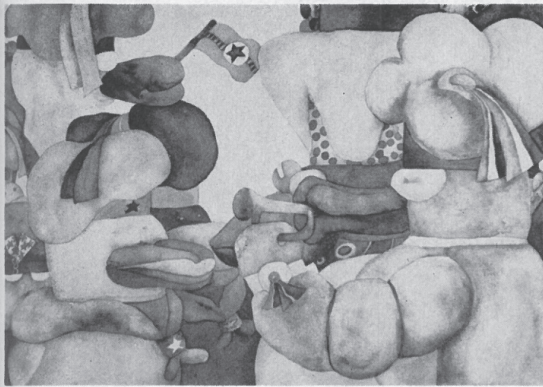
in ancient, primitive and psychotic art than in modern European painting.

The distinction is important to the fate of the group. Several of the "monster" artists appeared in the 1959 "New Images of Man" show at the Museum of Modern Art, one of the first exhibitions organized by the museum's then new curator, Chicago-trained Peter Selz. The Chicagoans, indeed the show as a whole, encountered a chilly reception in New York, where a prevailing formalist viewpoint inherited from Paris precluded acceptance of the insistent atavistic content, static composition and dun coloring that characterized most of the Chicagoans' works. Any hope for a "Chicago alternative" to the New York school vanished; the "Monsters," embarrassed by their label, went their individual ways, each seeking fulfillment on a personal rather than communal basis. (Most of them have done rather well for themselves.)

Since that time, many Chicago observers have shied away from attributing common or unique qualities to the young painters and sculptors who have matured here. Behind this may lie the fear of being branded provincial (a perpetual worry in this city), for historically, Chicago painters are uneasy, self-doubting and prone to an ambivalence toward New York that ranges from belligerent rejection to slavish mimicry. There is, and nearly always has been, an identity problem among painters here.

Nevertheless, whenever inter-

esting new groups of artists have appeared in postwar Chicago, they have always had several things in common—training, for instance. Usually the artists have been graduates of the School of the Art Institute, where most of them, over and over again, have sought out the same two teachers—Paul Wiegardt, German-born and Paris-schooled, extraordinarily devoted to his students, and the American Kathleen Blackshear, whose ideographic style betrays a fundamentally surrealist sensibility. Furthermore, the work of the majority of good young Chicago artists had been at least tinged, if not saturated, with surrealism, qualified at times by overtones of either dada or expressionism. The private fancy, the obsessive or magical motif, the haunted narrative or the formal *double entendre* have dominated subject matter, and in turn subject matter has tended to dominate form. In the middle fifties Irving Petlin, Robert Barnes and Robert Post initiated a highly evocative kind of imagery that was more colorful and abstract than the painting of the earlier Chicago generation, but at the same time dreamier and more dependent on ambiguities of content and structure. Though basically mindful of pictorial architecture, Kestutis Zapkus invariably built his abstractions of the early 1960s out of a complex seime of associative symbols. In the past several years a more unadulterated narrative fantasy has returned anew in the figure paintings by Ray Reshoft and the tumultuous drawings of



Gladys Nilsson: *Duck Troops*, watercolor, 1966. Dell Gallery, Chicago.



James Falconer: *Morbid Sunshine*, oil, 1966. Collection of the artist.

Irene Siegel, Georgia Jannes and Mary McCarty.

As to the current group, until about two years ago pop art had been pretty well ignored both by local artists and local galleries. Whenever pop art *did* turn up, it was usually little more than a rude version of New York models. Thus, last season's first "Phalanx 3" group show produced a group of young artists who looked as if they had been memorizing Peter Saul and William Copley. Their subsequent showings, however, have revealed something else: a gradual but distinct articulation and refinement of manner suggesting that these painters are something more than imitators and are, indeed, worth a studious look.

Late last season Don Baum—

himself a Chicago surrealist sculptor of considerable power—staged "Hairy Who," an exhibition at the Hyde Park Art Center which featured six Chicagoans still in their twenties: James Falconer, Art Green, Gladys Nilsson, James Nutt, Suellen Rocca and Karl Wirsum. The marked stylistic kinship among the six made it possible for them to publish a show catalogue that took the form of a comic book; its episodes were conceived and drawn by each of the exhibitors. Such a device, not to mention the pop content of their work would hardly distinguish them from many American artists currently caught up in the esthetic of banality; but to a man, this Chicago group seeks out an exceptionally base and regressive kind of popular im-



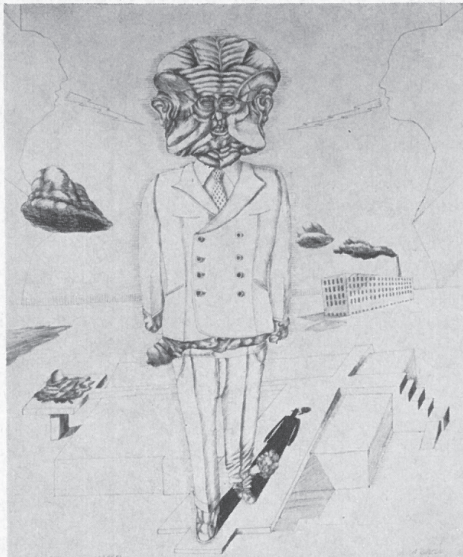
James Nutt: *Back Man*, acrylic on plexiglas, 1966. Dell Gallery, Chicago.

agery. Its members derive their content and much of their form, not from the average newspaper comic strip or TV commercial, but from wrestling magazines, truss ads and hair-straightener come-ons, schoolboy dirty books (in Chicago, they are called "eight-pagers"), cheap novelty house mailers, the walls of the public latrine. The styles are mostly brutish and closely akin to the spastic drawing of illiterates and junior-high-school students.

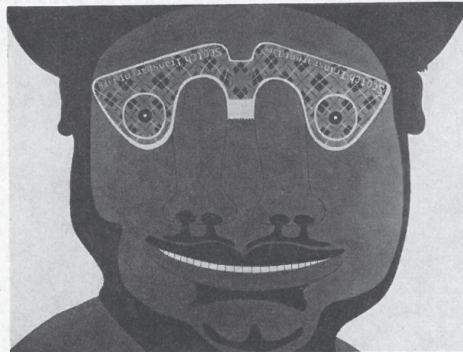
In the works of Rocca, Nilsson and Nutt, rumped human figures have the shape of ash heaps and the consistency of cysts; they are given features only if some mutative mischief can be done them. Rocca compulsively sows endless picture-fields with miniature creatures and objects (evoking the pages of a pulpy trade catalogue); elsewhere, he limns the episode of dog-faced "Poodle Woman" lost in the steaming desert (her armpits graphically disclose the effects of her ordeal). Nilsson's anti-heroine is "Gee Enn the Aquarell Woman"—fat and

freckled, with an elephantine nose—the protagonist of a totally incomprehensible story. Nutt's people are even more assiduously varicose, and Falconer's are the most abrasively expressionistic of a raucous lot; both young men have clearly studied their share of graffiti and have a vigorous taste for puns and misspelling ("Morbid Sunshine by a Miner Artist"). Wirsum's variations on the theme of a broken balloon approach a posterish sort of abstraction, but they never stray too far from their true source, which is all the shoddy printing ever done. Green faintly recalls de Chirico and Magritte, but the crassness he shares with all his colleagues is unquestionably stronger than any reference to museum painting.

This is not pop art, then, so much as sub-pop, the conscious reinterpretation of the unconscious and unregenerate iconography of the lower classes and early adolescent cultures. Comparatively speaking, pop art in New York and on the West Coast appears to be derived



Art Green: *Occupational Hazards*, ballpoint pen on paper, 1965. Collection of the artist.



Karl Wirsum: *Son of Sol Moscot*, acrylic on canvas, 1966. Dell Gallery, Chicago.

more often from the standards and values of the middle and upper classes, which to Chicago eyes would account for its crisp, well-tailored elegance and its ready sociability.

Chicago sub-pop, on the other hand, is private and inner-directed, caring less for clarity of communication than for intensity and directness of feeling—a reminder all over again of the perennial Chicago indifference, if not hostility, to formalism in painting. A persistent local view tends to regard New York pop as slick, steely and handsomely non-committal—"objective." This "subjective" Chicago pop, because of its concern for story and feeling, takes a cue less from New York pop than from surrealism, especially of the marginal, primitive, idio-

syncratic kind that stands outside the mainstream of modernist tradition. Several of these young Chicagoans insist they never knew of Peter Saul before their own styles developed and, indeed, one is impressed by a certain general innocence of art history and art politics among them. They all stress the autobiographical aspect of their imagery, contending that it is neither violent, nihilistic, scabrous, nor even slumming, but rather nostalgic and endearing, echoing the neighborhood candy store and hours of childhood solitude. And they like to laugh at it, because they think it's funny. Their wit has a coarse and crinkled edge, but it is wit, nonetheless.

The quality of painting, so far, has been inconsistent, and

each artist has managed on at least one exhibition occasion to look gratuitously crude and not a little affected. But there have been other times, especially at the "Hairy Who," show, when their paintings jelled more or less communally and seemed the most original and exciting to appear on the Chicago scene in years. At their best, they have displayed an ingeniously ferocious personality in their work, auguring a weird and fantastic new species of pop art or possibly a gamier kind of commercialized surrealism.

Despite a fair number of excellent and durable galleries, and the Art Institute's program in contemporary art, Chicago artists have been able over the years to view only a slight amount of good vanguard art

while it was still fresh enough to be considered vanguard. Either they have seen it here when it was already growing safe, soft and stale, or they have been forced to look at it and read about it in the journals, an insufficient way in itself to grasp what is going on. Hence the quantity of mediocre Chicago art cast in old New York and Parisian molds. Hence, likewise, the abundance of talented young local artists who in the past two decades have formed their own styles by drawing on and emphasizing internal and idiosyncratic states of mind. Fantasy grows out of alienation, and alienation from the mainstream has a long and interesting history in Chicago art, a history that apparently is still being written.



Suellen Rocca: *Curley Head*, oil, 1966. Collection of the artist.