

LOWBROW ART: UP FROM THE UNDERGROUND



Robert Williams, *Vanity of the New*, 1991, oil on canvas, 30 x 36", Collection of Scott Fletcher

**FEBRUARY 24 TO
APRIL 16, 2000**

**Art and Culture Center
of Hollywood, FL**

WHAT IS LOWBROW

Answering the question “what is lowbrow art?” is difficult, and as far as I can tell no one has successfully defined the term. So I asked artists represented in this



Christine Karas, *Ultravixen in Sad Clown Trailer Park*, 1998, acrylic on canvas, 20 x 16", Courtesy of the Artist

exhibition to answer the question for me. Anthony Ausgang comments: “Lowbrow art is essentially the poor cousin of Highbrow art [or]...what appears on the walls of mainstream cultural institutions.” Admitting he does not have a specific answer, Van Arno adds: “There is no manifesto...There are absolutely no rules [in lowbrow art]. Nothing is forbidden.” Isabel Samaras concedes: “I don’t know if anyone has yet been successful in ‘defining’ [lowbrow art] but I think that’s part of its appeal or maybe even the point—it’s very much an all-inclusive genre

of art that embraces a lot of different styles.” Christine Karas likens lowbrow art to pop music, in that it “is easily understood by and appealing to the masses.” In a similar vein, *The Pizz* calls it “a populist art” that is “pop-culture driven.” Finally, Mark Ryden—who dislikes the term “lowbrow,” which he finds “inaccurate and unappealing”—thinks that work in this category is “a response to the painfully boring abstract and conceptual art that is devoid of thought-provoking imagery and has been the status quo for much too long.”

The history of lowbrow art has not yet been documented fully. Although some artists such as Ausgang and Samaras believe that lowbrow’s roots can be traced back to early twentieth-century modernist trends and exhibitions (i.e., Dada, 1913’s Armory Show),



Anthony Ausgang, *Why Walk When You Can Drive?*, 1999, acrylic on canvas, 33 x 42", Courtesy of the Artist

ART?

there is a general consensus among the artists that the major progenitor of lowbrow art is Robert Williams, whose work is included in this exhibition. It was in the 1940s and '50s, during Williams' Alabama childhood and young adulthood, that the future artist first became enamored of customized hot rods and stock cars. In the early 1960s, having traveled to Southern California to study art, he ended up getting a job with Ed "Big Daddy" Roth, a legendary figure in the world of customized cars (and whose work is also included in this exhibition). At Studio Roth, a loosely structured art factory of sorts, Williams was given the opportunity to expend his creative juices in a variety of ways, such as drawing monster T-shirt designs and ads, and custom-painting actual cars. Williams' career as an artist was boosted further when he became a cartoonist for *Zap Comix*, a highly influential underground comic book first printed by Robert Crumb in 1967.

It was in this fertile Southern California counterculture of customized hot rods and underground comics that Williams' offbeat visions and exaggerated commentaries on contemporary life sprouted, and from there would go on to influence countless artists, whose work is now categorized as "lowbrow." Today Williams comments that lowbrow art has been "brewing for the last thirty years, unrecognized by the academic art world," and he hints that lowbrow's status is about to change for the better, if it is not changing already.

In addition to acknowledging the influence of underground comic books and customized cars on the development of lowbrow art, artists in this exhibition cite myriad inspirations, including: Pop art, movies, Sigmund Freud, music (a variety of preferences), surfboard decorations, graffiti, tattoo art, rock-and-roll graphics, kitsch, Nostradamus, advertisements, commercial art, and especially cartoons and television. Most artists agree that lowbrow art is representational, as opposed to abstract. The use of bright, bold colors by many lowbrow artists is often mentioned as well. The Pizz, for example, comments: "Coloration is saturated and heavy. We're talking eye candy here." Arno concedes: "The only generalization I can make about



R. K. Sloane, *The Rat Fink Experience*, 1994, acrylic and oil on canvas, 28 x 24", Collection of Douglas Nason



Isabel Samaras, *Dejeuner*, 1996, acrylic and enamel on tin, 15 1/8 x 21 1/8", Collection of Jean Paul Leonard

[lowbrow art] is that it looks finished [as opposed to painterly]." Referring to the location where most lowbrow artists live, Samaras states, "Lowbrow gave birth to itself in the West and seems to still primarily be a West Coast party."

Karas notes that lowbrow "is often humorous, sarcastic, crass or sexual in nature," and Ausgang acknowledges lowbrow artists' "affinity for depicting the profane." In other words, many lowbrow artists tend to address subjects and ideas that, up to this time, have been considered taboo, improper, or too insignificant for a work of art. It also should be noted that most lowbrow artists have come of age after the 1960s, in a time when computers and multiple television sets are staples in the modern American household, providing easy access to a multitude of potential inspirations.

Despite their irreverence and hip I-don't-care-what-you-think attitudes, many of these artists seem to share a desire for recognition in

the mainstream art world (and several like Robert Williams have already gotten attention). Perhaps Ausgang sums up this feeling best when he says that the lowbrow artist's "goal is not



Shag, *The Tantrum*, 1998, acrylic on illustration board, 25 x 37", Collection of Victor Lee

to destroy the art shown in bastions like MOMA [Museum of Modern Art] in New York, [but to] just muscle in and hang with some very good company." Those of us at the Art and Culture Center hope that our efforts will provide a forum in which the lowbrow phenomenon can be explored and perhaps better understood.

Laurence Pamer
Curator of Exhibitions
Art and Culture Center, Hollywood, FL





Mark Ryden, *Saint Barbie*, 1994, oil on panel, 32 x 20".
Collection of Andrew and Nicole McWhorter

PARTICIPATING ARTISTS:

- | | | |
|-----------------|---------------------|-----------------|
| Kevin Ancell | Von Franco | Isabel Samaras |
| Van Arno | Christine Karas | Kenny Scharf |
| Anthony Ausgang | Arthur Katz | Shag |
| Sadow Birk | Frank Kozik | R.K. Sloane |
| Chaz Bojorquez | W Kelley Lucas | C.R. Stecyk III |
| Jamie Burton | Liz McGrath | Trader Van |
| Kalynn Campbell | Stanley Mouse | Eric White |
| Lynn Coleman | Skot Olsen | Robert Williams |
| Dan Collins | The Pizz | XNO |
| Coop | Ed "Big Daddy" Roth | |
| Michael Farr | Mark Ryden | |

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Douglas Nason, Copro/Nason Gallery, Culver City, CA.

Art and Culture Center of Hollywood, FL

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