

Art History

Van Arno's thoughtful 'lowbrow' art is highly cool and eminently collectible.

By Katherine Turman

Van Arno is surrounded by crazy women. But they're all of his own creation, and, beer in hand, the gangly artist with a shock of graying, spiky hair is musing on the genesis of the 10 tortured women hanging on the walls of Silver Lake's Ghetto Gloss Gallery.

"My grandmother was in a mental institution in Wisconsin when I was a little kid," recalls Arno, who was born in Chattanooga, Tennessee and grew up in St. Louis. "And our family would go there to visit her. I think possibly the first naked woman I saw was there. I think I was very afraid, very freaked out. I was like 6 and 8; we went a couple times."

In creating his latest themed paintings, appearing collectively as "No Atheists in the Nuthouse," Arno drew on some of those haunting childhood memories. "I vividly remember a lot of the people there," he says. But, like much of his work, this latest group, all 20" by 32" in size, is also historical and carefully researched.

"The inspiration was a book; I really wanted to do something about mental illness in the institutions. I wanted to tackle a series of images, because I'd been learning a lot from this book, "Women and Madness"; it's a '70s book [by Phyllis Chesler], and a kind of feminist cornerstone of 'the patriarch has led us to this.' I paint mainly women, and I wanted to paint nutty women," he says, smiling. "It was very historical, so a lot of that has been reflected in this series, where women will have this hardware on."

He gestures to a woman with a painful contraption around her neck. "She has a big wooden collar, which people would wear to prevent them from sleeping, because sleeping was the problem," he says ruefully. He walks thoughtfully around the gallery, bright with sunlight, gazing at the pained, strained, mostly naked women portrayed against institutional green backgrounds. "Some of them are crazy, and some of them are probably not. A lot of women ended up in the custody of mental institutions for being frigid. I was interested in stuff like how people ended up in New York's Riker's Island because they couldn't speak English. It was a weird catchall for people society didn't know what to do with. I set out to paint all these different types of people. I didn't get to all of them all, and I may still continue. I still have some of that green paint mix!"

Arno, who moved to L.A. in the '80s to attend Otis Parsons School of Design, where he studied under Carol Caroompas and Lita Albuquerque, has carved an impressive niche in the "lowbrow" art world, becoming recognized for what he calls his "heroic" figurative works featuring religious and folk heroes from Christian, Mayan and American history.

Several paintings at Ghetto Gloss are not part of the "Atheists" series, but are classic examples of Arno's work, which has appeared in Juxtapoz Magazine, at L.A.'s La Luz De Jesus Gallery, as part of Nashville's "Pop Icons" show and several times at New York's CBGB Gallery. "The fun

thing about New York is people come up to you and go ‘what in the hell are you thinking?’ In Los Angeles, people are like, ‘oh, you must be so interesting.’ Then they walk away. and I’m like, ‘I am, I am interesting, come back!’ In New York they take art really seriously. Almost everyone feels very confident in their ideas about what art is about and what should or shouldn’t be happening. It’s a much different environment.”

Several works at Ghetto Gloss depict pop culture icons, including Courtney Love, Iggy Pop and lesser-known luminaries, such as late Cramps guitarist Brian Gregory, who appears in “Cockayne,” a twisted pastoral scene inspired by 16th century Flemish artist Pieter Brughel the Elder. While he’s a fan of such classic artists as Thomas Hart Benton, Giambattista Tiepolo, Anton Wiertz, and Diego Rivera, Arno acknowledges that he’s “really influenced a lot of by music — and they’re cultural references people understand. If I was painting in 1500, I’d paint Venus and Apollo and the things that cultured people liked and wanted to see depicted. Now a lot of that stuff is popular culture stuff.” Then there’s one of the biblical Noah, drunk with pink elephants, part of his “paintings in five colors” series, and an intensely detailed and colorful work entitled “The Queen’s Pregnancy is Threatened When Sunlight Ignites Her Hair,” piqued by musing on an incident described in a European history book.

While all different, they’re clearly from the same busy mind and hand. “I like to think of myself as an artist who is engaged in issues, but a lot of people who are political or issue artists are very much about having an opinion and stating it: ‘greed is bad,’ ‘corporations are evil,’ but I’m more about asking questions, more so than supplying answers,” he explains. “That’s the goal of my work. Or maybe I’m just not confident enough to have strong opinions!” he laughs. “I think I’m able to see lots of sides to things, and I think that’s a good way to approach painting. When I use a figure like Courtney Love, it’s a figure I’m using because she’s exciting to look at and very physical, but she’s a person people have opinions about... very negative, usually. So I thought about that, and I have her eluding The Rapture, which I think would be a great, heroic act, refusing to go.”

For Arno, softspoken, smart, self-deprecating and thoughtful, much of his art is about learning and teaching. “I think one of the great things about history is that it’s a great lesson in cause and effect. I like to paint things that maybe teach people or get them to become more interested in some historical event. A lot of times I stand at the opening and explain, over and over, ‘this is John Brown, he’s blah blah...’”

The well-read artist attended a Christian Science school from kindergarten through high school, and believes that students “suffer” in America trying to learn history. “It’s not taught in an interesting way. You’re not supposed to find anything of meaning for you in it. It’s good to understand it; like, ‘how did the Holocaust happen?’ There were reasons, it’s not a mystery! That’s a lot of how I come up with ideas, I think, ‘what is the cause of this?’ ‘What are we seeing?’”

While many may not fully comprehend what they’re seeing in a historical context in Arno’s work, they are nonetheless affected by the powerful images and scenarios.

“One of the coolest things about my work is probably over half the paintings I sell, when I

actually meet people who buy them, they come up to me and say, 'I've never bought a painting before!' And that really makes me happy. I think that's remarkable. Or it means the collectors are really avoiding me!" He also has advice if you're thinking of buying Arno art: it's not complete until it's hanging in your house. "I've had stuff on the walls at galleries that I've taken home and worked on more. So I tell people, 'you should buy it if you like it, 'cause I'm just going to take it home and fuck it up.'"

"No Atheists in the Nuthouse" runs until June 20 at the Ghetto Gloss Gallery, 2380 Glendale Blvd., Silver Lake. (323) 912-0008. Closing party for the artist on Friday, June 18, 8-10 p.m. Public welcome. Painting prices: \$350-\$3,500.

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