

"You Can't See Your Own Eyes: The Art of Paul Mavrides," Paul Mavrides Interviewed by Rudy Rucker

Copyright (C) Paul Mavrides and Rudy Rucker 2005
Appeared in Mondo 2000, August, 1993

Paul Mavrides is a beatnik artist who lives in the bleeding heart of San Francisco's Mission district. Mavrides is into appropriation in novel ways: his biggest fine-art shockers to date are his velvet paintings of the Kennedy assassination ('63 ELECTION), the AIDS virus (A VIRUS KNOWS NO MORALS), lung cancer (LUNG CANCER), the Challenger disaster (TO BOLDLY GO WHERE NO MAN HAS GONE BEFORE), a glass pipe with crack (STILL LIFE), Jonestown (DEJEUNER SUR L'HERBE), etc., all beautifully painted on black velvet, all based on canonical media images. Mavrides is also known for his work with Gilbert Shelton since the late-Seventies on *THE FABULOUS FURRY FREAK BROTHERS*, and for his output under the name LIES for the Church of the SubGenius. [According to at least one highly placed SubGenius source, the canonical image of "Bob" Dobbs was appropriated from a Bell Telephone book of clip-art for yellow pages advertisers.] He's presently working on *1963 1/2*, a multi-book comic series about the Kennedy assassination. Culturally, the black velvet stuff is perhaps the hottest, and was the reason that the Los Angeles branch of ABC news recently spent seven days filming him for DAY ONE.

Q1) Black velvet is traditionally considered a very low-class art form. What are some of the cultural resonances that you are trying to hit by putting familiar images into this format?

A1)

I select strong subjects for my velvets because they trigger personal and political responses in viewers; reactions that force an internal confrontation with uncomfortable emotions and repressed knowledge. I cut to the chase by reproducing thoroughly digested and recognizable images, visuals that have already been burned into political or cultural mythology by massive media overexposure. No room is left for misinterpretation at the initial level of perception. What you see is what you get.

Success of these pieces depends on a viewer trying to resolve the intellectual contradiction of deadly serious motifs vs. the popular perception of the velvet art-form as

decorative kitsch. I'm trying to take advantage of the cultural echo from all those wonderful Tiajuana tourist velvets— Elvis, Wilma and Fred Flintstone, Jesus, red Devils, bull fights, Naked Aztec Women! What could be a more popular *and* lurid "low art" than velvet paintings? What could be more distressing than the religious Epiphany of Jim Jones' White Night? I've also noticed that the terminally cynical appreciate them because the paintings reinforce their trendy nihilism— the same kind of enjoyment one experiences by picking at a scab.

Q2) Are there any technical plusses in working on black velvet?

A2)

The lush, glowing quality of color against the bottomless black background first involves a viewer in the sensual texture of the physical object itself. But as the viewer is attracted, drawn in by the visually tactile nature of the paint, the actual subject matter pops into intellectual focus and they are then confronted by *what the painting is actually a picture of*. Disasters, murders, diseases... Velvet magnifies that mental push-pull effect. Bright, pretty_ but horrible. The power from this juxtaposition of image and reality, painting as object *and* event, is the force incorporated in this work. Or anyway, that's my theory. One thing's for sure; they don't fade into the decor.

Perhaps the effort of even painting the silly things is unnecessary. The *idea* of a velvet painting of the Zapruder film is more than enough to bring the virtual image of the painting up in one's mind. Just state, "Kennedy assassination on black velvet, Jackie's pink dress, brain bits on the limousine trunk," and you can see it without even actualizing the art.

With all of that, it's just plain fun! There's nothing like applying that final highlight to a cancerous tissue or glowing crack pipe to make it pop off right the wall.

Q3) Your velvet painting based on a frames of the Zapruder film of Kennedy's assassination --- I've heard that some people have reacted to this as being "deeply shocking." Others have been quite outraged by your beautiful, luminous rendering of "A THOUSAND POINTS OF LIGHT - Baghdad by Night," with its dark sky filled with the luminous lines of tracer bullets. How do you react to those who feel your work is beyond the pale of decency?

A3)

On the odd rare occasion, I *am* accused of producing "tasteless" artwork— but hey, I'm only reproducing an *image* of something that actually *happened*. My intent is to shock people, make them *think*. Why isn't there outrage over the *reality behind the symbol*, are people so caught up in *abstracts* that they can only challenge a pictorial representation that is, essentially, a mere reminder, an interpretation, of real life, real death? Folks, it's just paint on cloth.

If looking at a mere *painting* of Kennedy's murder is upsetting, why doesn't this ire translate to social action rather than art criticism? Use that anger and energy to bring the *all-too-real* assassins of an elected *President* to justice. Is it easier to forget, be lazy, protest an uncomfortable *artwork* and *not* the incident? "Oh, we killed all those (fill in the blank) *last year*, old news."

It's so much more pleasant to sleep, believe in lies, evade responsibility. Too much trouble to actually do *something*, more balming to spend one's time being uplifted by safe, orthodox art. People like that will *always* be sick-at-heart unless they can just manage to forget *the bad things*... aesthetically escaping through fine art in the same manner a drug addict chemically evades distress.

However, I must add that, to my point of view, a toaster oven or Polaroid camera can be just as disturbing and horrifying as a space shuttle blowing up. Go figure_

Q4) You recently completed a large canvas with images of virtually all the famous comic-book characters. This is a different kind of image appropriation. Where is this work being shown?

A4)

Words & Pictures is a comic art museum in Northampton, Massachusetts, founded by Kevin B. Eastman (of Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles fame). They commissioned a large canvas, titled "AND SO_", of sixty-six different comic book characters in essentially a dog-pile composition, for permanent display. Since this piece has been acknowledged as "quotation" rather than "swiping", I can get away with calling it a "homage" and retain my "reputation" as a "mimic".

Q5) Speaking of popular culture, I notice around your studio a number of altered "snow domes" --- those little plastic hemispheres filled with water and floating snow. One of your snow domes shows Santa with a see-through belly that reveals his viscera. Your walls are covered with plates that have your colored images laminated onto them. Is this Dada, low art, or fine art?

A5)

There's an unnameable quality that impregnates certain 'ordinary' things with meaning, no matter how valueless they may appear to The Others. It's found in such icons as skate board decals, low-budget exploitation movies, lunch boxes, lurid comic books, all-nite cable TV, toy robots, plastic dinosaurs, sleezy paperbacks, bubble gum cards and so on— stuff that a museum director might say is to fine art what the Weekly World News is to the New York Times.

It's this hidden significance I try to bring forth by using Melmac plastic dishes, snow domes, bubble gum cards, comic books as a medium. We're drowning in an imagery ocean. The best defense is to tear off huge hunks of it and recycle at top speed.

All you have to do is step back and take an unbiased look at ART. What kind of ART makes the lasting cultural impression, after all? Take any average United States junior high school kid and show them the 100 most famous paintings and sculptures of all time, excluding contemporary packaging graphics and music videos. Our Hope For The Future will likely stare blankly at these triumphs of the human spirit, unable to identify a single one by title, period, or artist. Leonardo DaVinci will only be recognized for the similarity of his name to one of the Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles. For that matter, most of them think the sun revolves around the Earth and that Death is something that can be avoided. You gotta love these kids!

Q6) How do you relate your work to the image appropriation techniques of Jeff Koons?

A6)

Koons is an interesting case. He manages to simultaneously embody what I most love *and* hate about modern contemporary art. On one hand, he transforms the perception of common (and often ridiculous) objects by the simple act of altering context and texture and he does this while earning absurd amounts of money for little or no actual

labor on his part. On the negative side he panders to a venal, commercial gallery scene, cynically adding to the vapidness and general inconsequentiality of contemporary art and he does this while earning absurd amounts of money for little or no actual labor on his part.

Only a couple of years back, greedhead financiers came up with the perverse conjecture that, since the act of making money (and nothing else) was an "art", it followed that they were "artists." In the end, what can one say about Koons, a stockbroker-turned-artist, that isn't already painfully obvious, except, possibly the maxim, "You'll *pay* to view what you really SEE!"

It's almost enough to make me nostalgic for the good old days of the two-fisted, square-jawed, testosterone toxified, cut-and-dried Art Scene, where, off in isolated playpens and coffeehouse asylums, self-inflated painters and pompous sculptors would literally come to blows (and sometimes even *murder*— a form of expression whereby they commendably transcended their mundane work) over quaint, microscopic trivia like color theory and abstract expressionism. Hard to believe, isn't it? I guess if you're really wistful for that kind of dead-end nonsense, hang out with contemporary poets.

Q7) In a coconutshell, what is the Church of the SubGenius, and what is it that they teach?

A7)

The Church's unique offer is one of total control over your life and morality. Eternal Salvation through SLACK or triple your money back. All the Slack anyone could desire and then some. All the other competitor Conspiracy religions try to match our guarantee but down there in the fine print they keep *all* of your mind, letting you lease back a mere %5 as a "rebate" and that at an outrageous interest rate. We *want* you to keep your soul. We don't even need that pathetic %5 chunk of grey matter. All you have to do is grab your brain, run off with it and don't look back — good riddance to you. If you must have a religion, it might as well be the Church of the SubGenius because it does the least harm.

One tedious notion, cherished by many immature intellects, that the Church of the SubGenius is itself some kind of "art statement", must be dispelled here and now. "Bob" Dobbs' ministry reaches far beyond any manner of "statement" of any kind, even

philosophical; it is exactly what it says it is— a religion. The art and styles associated with it serve solely to buttress it. Just as the Catholic Church sponsored both the monstrous Inquisition *and* the magnificent Sistine Chapel ceiling, this faith has promoted both frenzied Head Launchings and the heavenly DX-15 computer virus (which irrevocably infects both the computer *and* user).

Q8) Can you tell the story of how High Scribe Stang and Philo discovered the Church icon of "Bob" Dobbs?

A8)

"Bob" posed for the 1947 yellow-page portrait. He went to some effort to make this known among his friends. In the post-Hiroshima 40s "Bob" was a drifter earning his way by such day-wage means as modelling. I bought the handgun used to assassinate him in 1984, the less said about *that*, the better. J.R. "Bob" Dobbs is a mystery enfolded by an enigma bound by a puzzle wrapped in a strip of bacon surrounded by creamy nougat and a rich, milk chocolate coating held together with a toothpick, served on a greasy paper napkin— an indigestible canape for the No Age.

Q9) Where did you first hear of the Church of the SubGenius?

A9)

During a particularly dull and uneventful day at Rip Off Press back in 1979, I fished SubGenius pamphlet #1 out of a wastebasket (where it had been discarded by Fred Todd, the president of R.O.P.) and my life changed forever. Now I owe a lot more money than I used and have to work harder than ever. Well, what else did I expect from religion, anyway?

Q10) What has it been like working with Gilbert Shelton on the Freak Brothers? Why does this comic have such longevity?

A10)

It'd be easy to roll off a high-minded phrase about how the Freak Brothers are outlaw archetypes that embody the dionysian viewpoint, taking great pleasure in lawbreaking while tweaking the noses of evil authority figures, but basically I think the Freaks have remained popular because Gilbert's a master satirist and a fiendishly brilliant cartoonist— in other words, he's *funny*. We try to amuse ourselves. If we can work on a

strip for six months, stare at it for hundreds of hours and still chuckle at when it's done, then we let it out of its cage.

Q11) Can you tell us a little about your work in progress, *1963 1/2*?

A11)

Co-written with Alex Cox and Dick Rude, our full-color comic story is a rather twisted six-issue take on the Kennedy assassination, filtered through greasy sci-fi (not to be confused with the high-minded and generally dull "science fiction"). The first chapter's release by Tundra Publishing will coincide with the 30th anniversary of the hit. I wish someone would *solve* that crime so I could stop making JFK snuff satire and move on to something else.

Q12) I notice you have a new Mac IICx. What are some of the directions that interest you regarding computer art?

A12)

It's not the potential advancements of VR or computer art in general that I find exciting. Rather, it's the unintentional screwups, malfs and jerry-rigged equipment disasters awaiting us that fascinate me. Flash effects— so what? Every innovative trick or tweak that programmers come up is instantly subverted, slaved to advertising the same old useless crap, politics and social roles as soon as it hits the art director circuit.

VR is all very well and good but who wants to spend the equivalent of the annual budget of a small third-world nation just to put on a foul smelling helmet to "experience" the digital gusto of being inside a Super Mario Brothers game?

My real interest is in the computer's potential for dissolving the barriers holding apart art and artifice, counterfeit and original. As an appropriationist's tool computers are beyond comparison— and a nightmarish disaster for the hoarders of intellectual property (myself included) — although smoothing out the legal speed bumps is going to make fortunes for office blocks of copyright attorneys. By translating knowledge, experience and reality to digital information, originality, truth and even lies become relative concepts (which they always were).

Comforting and stable consensus reality is currently fragmenting beyond recall and the humble silicon chip is speeding the process along. Absurd juxtapositions are the

background white noise of a self-absorbed humanity tripping barely ahead of civilization's exploding core.

ALL ART IS LIES, *ALL* of it. What else did you suppose it to be? *Reality??*

BONUS ANSWER IN SEARCH OF A QUESTION:

The California State Board of Equalization has determined that my comic book royalty earnings (and those of all other relevant creators) created for my California publishers are *sales taxable*. In order to justify this unprecedented form of taxation, the tax board has decided that original comic pages are considered, without exception, "camera-ready artwork" rather than "author's manuscripts."

The social value and First Ammendment protection comics receive as a valid form of literature is being ignored or downgraded by the State in this precedent setting action against me. Because author's royalties are exempt from sales taxation, the Board has decided that the literal format of my work (combinations of drawing and lettering on paper), as submitted to my publishers, does not grant me the status of "author" and thus, in their view, I am nothing more than a mere commercial artist when I create comic literature.

Their ruling, if allowed to stand, will have a chilling effect on this form of modern literature within California. I believe that the State's novel and dangerous definition of comic book creators as commercial artists will damage or destroy the ability of independant comic publishers and creators to fiscally survive through defacto censorship by this selective application of sales tax law.

I am currently pursuing every available means at my disposal to challange this ruling, with the aid of the Comic Book Legal Defense Fund, a national anti-censorship legal group.