ARP!

ART SHANTY PROJECT INSERT

A REAL PUBLICATION

vol. 1. issue #3

PROCESS vs PROGRESS

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The Dream Girls
Jay Gabler

The Dream Girl: Classic American Illustration
Red Wing Framing Gallery
September 13 - October 23, 2007

To understate a point, it's been some time since a Red Wing art show attracted as much big city buzz as *The Dream Girl*, an exhibit of illustration art at the Red Wing Framing Gallery. Fortunately, the quality and historical importance of the work on display ensured a rich reward for road-trippers attracted by the work's high-profile owner (Soul Asylum guitarist Dan Murphy) and sensational subject matter (curvaceous women in varying states of undress). Even on the show's final day, the works displayed in the gallery window continued to exert a pull on tourists strolling through town. "Oh *honey!*" gasped one woman to her husband as she stepped through the gallery doors. "Look at the *colors!*"

Catching the eye is precisely what the pictures on display were designed to do. Most of the pieces in this eye-catching show were created from the 1920s to the 1950's, the decades just before color photography became versatile and affordable enough to be the dominant medium for commercial illustration. During those decades commercial illustration flourished in America; especially in the upper Midwest, home to major clients including St. Paul Calendar publisher, Brown & Bigelow. Many of the best illustrators—most famously, Gil Elvgren, known to historians as "the Norman Rockwell of Cheesecake"—lived in Minnesota and surrounding states. Some lived up to their reputation as womanizing playboys, but illustration was a daily grind for most of the artists, who had to work quickly and prolificly to make a living.

The subjects of commercial illustration ranged from wholesome scenes—families enjoying Coca-Cola, Eskimos profferring club soda—to randy tableaus playing on sex appeal, meant for publication on calendars or in men's magazines. This latter end of the spectrum was particularly well-represented at the Red Wing show, which featured exclusively images of women. Typical of the works on display was Edward D'Ancona's "*Handle With Care*," in which a buxom brunette feigns surprise at being caught with her skirt up while stenciling the eponymous phrase on a packing crate. Sexual suggestion was a crucial element of cheesecake illustration art, but regardless of the sort of scenario a viewer might be inspired to imagine when presented with an image of a smiling cowgirl displaying her barely-covered derriere in the middle of a starlit dessert, the illustrations were typically kept suitable for the coffee table—or at least the garage wall—by the artists' restraint from depicting anything overly naughty.

Most commercial art of the time was executed in oil or pastel, both of which reproduced well on calendars and magazine covers. One of the revelations of the Red Wing show was its evidence of the power that artists like Henry Clive and Earl Moran packed into work they knew had to survive this diminishment. In many cases the reproductions were also on display, making it apparent that, say, a shocking shade of yellow on a magazine cover had been translated from what was practically a nuclear flash on the original canvas. A giggling beauty who might have been alluring on a calendar was positively riveting at half the size of life. What elevated the show's artists above the level of the competent hack was the talent required to capture desire in the subtle flush of a cheek, to pack an entire smutty novel into the bend of a black-stockinged knee, and to create compositions that would effectively attract the notice of a patron encountering the work in a drugstore rather than a gallery.

Do the images feel dated? Yes, and no. On the one hand, there remains a booming market for images of women that are suggestive without being outright pornographic—the circulation of *Maxim*, a publication that displays acres of cleavage while revealing nary a nipple, is approaching that of *Playboy*. On the other hand, the artists represented in the Red Wing show were able to generate *frission* by teasing at a Madonna / whore distinction that has lost much of its organising force. Elvgren was infamous for his boundless creativity in devising ways to "accidentally" lift women's skirts—by contrast, when Christina Aguilera goes bottoms-up in *Maxim*, there's not the least bit of pretense that she's been caught unaware.

Driven by commercial mandate rather than intellectual agenda or private muse, the work of illustration artists has been largely excluded from mainstream art histories. The lovingly curated Red Wing show may prove to be among the heralds of a welcome rediscovery. +

Image Credits

Handle With Care
Edward D'Acona
1950's
oil, courtesy Red Wing Framing Gallery

Title Unknown
Haddon Sundblom
1950's
oil, courtesy Red Wing Framing Gallery