

# James Albertson



by W. H. H. Rees

*"Pieta"*

## **James Albertson:**

### *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Magnum*

**I** don't think that art is there to teach anyone how to live his life, and anybody who draws any literal, political, or religious or sexual or any other message of a self-help nature, or of a propaganda nature from art . . . is taking guidance from a crazy source.

And so spoke Albertson, in an interview in *Expo-see*. Aman would disagree, standing at the bottom of the spiral; he who invented painting on the walls of West Bank tombs: "Here is an offering to Osiris. And here is a memorial of Pharaoh's feeding the poor. These are his instructions for the journey through the other world. And these are forms in which his soul can freeze itself; he can sing for all eternity, and fish." It was not myth then; nor in the Counter Reformation, when painting was a mystical means to union with



*Sex, Violence, Religion as the Good Life*

God. Rubens would suggest the frailty of human love by having its goddess beg her human lover not to hunt, for an audience who knew that Adonis, after he had died, would return to her for six months of each year, who were in turn reminded of the death and resurrection of Christ. Poussin would have Apollo, the god of poetry, and Calliope, the muse of the epic, arouse in the poet the power of her son, Orpheus, to melt the hearts of the most ferocious warriors, for an audience that believed great paintings and poems were of divine inspiration. The artist would hold his brush with the end pointing to heaven to facilitate the flow. And a succession of kings actually used this painting to stop wars, before the Age of Enlightenment sold cannons to the common man. It's behind bars today.

And now they sell anything: All roads lead to commerce and to full productivity. Albertson looks out on a suburban housewife in a negligee caressing an icon of a leg of lamb; on a child whose banking career is decided while still in diapers; on a culture which holds the cure for polio and the cause for cancer in either hand, whose first and only exposure to art was the Dick and Jane illustrations in early readers; and cries through them, drawing in his tears; indentured by bats, by dopohol, the itch for merit; attacked by being in the black, by inking out a living. It has come to this: Five centuries into the Second Greco-Roman period, begun when men dug up the Belvedere Torso and again looked to the earth for answers, the mushroom cloud



*Planning His Career*



*The Sick Artist, Albertson 83*

*The Sick Artist*

in place of Magi. Almost by way of denial and as a perfect symbol for the age, Albertson has given us the image of the child. In "Venus and Adonis, after Rubens" and in "Inspiration of a Poet, after Poussin", he has copied two masterpieces, omitting the heroic color and canvas and reversing the figures; the putti have become the adults; the lovers and the poet have become the children, all jammed into a small picture space with such refinement that any movement would blow it apart. An irony of direct, original expression, free of tedious detail and finish. And lines, the tactile quality of them, made with the dexterity of an aorta surgeon, each incision swishing to a perfect landing. Yet, all the passengers are at the candy counter. Why is it, dear

reader, they are so queued up? Then, ask yourself: Are you too flying over Russia? Are you too powered by the left side of the brain? Substituting fantasy for myth; using reason in its service only; reliving childhood constantly; rollercoasting in a shell, not a cocoon. The child is more than the father of the man, he is the man; witness our compulsion to hunt boardom; connected with parents by more than genes; and requiring a bite to get our attention, as in "Sex, Violence, Religion, and Good Life", to show us the ought: The girl as gardener.

And has not America been the garden for European seeds? Majority rule; deficit spending; psychic anxiety through sexual repression; the high-rise highway ladder



Rubens: Venus & Adonis

Allen Burt '80

Venus & Adonis, After Rubens

to the stars? It's as though the creative impulse, which began in Ur a millennium or two before Abraham, had followed the sun through Memphis and Athens, through Rome, through Paris and Antwerp, through London, and had finally come to rest on the Isle of Innisfree, leaving America to imitate: The Hudson Valley School, founded by an Englishman, looking to van Ruisdael; American Impressionism looking to Monet; the "291" to Picasso; Abstract Expressionism to the Blaue Reiter thru Hoffman and to Surrealism thru Ernst; even Pop having its roots in Duchamp. In these direct copies, Albertson underwrites this dependence; as well as the Protestant tenet that God creates; man can only imitate; America being a Protestant country, at least on paper in pencil.

And there is yet another level: A challenge to the current aesthetic canon: confronting the perfect private worlds of Capote with pose; the black sheep of Shepard with moral; the dissonance of Carter with echoes; the geometry of Stella with style; the abstract form of Judd with figure; the serenity of Ashbery with angst; the arrogance of I.M. Pei with exaggeration. Too often their sounds have had to be authenticated by the scribes or misrepresented by the Pharisees as delphic. He puts on neo-manneristic armor/amour with satire as a bow and sweetness as the arrow; a Romano alternative to measurement; a Te for two.

Along with something of the very Baroque he seems to reject: the devotional; the didactic, his words to the contrary notwithstanding, and his intent, no doubt, as well. Here is Robert Duncan's put: to be a poet one must first be a child. Ditto the hero; the lover. Here is Christ's call: to achieve salvation one must become a





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*Inspiration of a Poet, After Poussin*

child. It is the little girl in "Pieta" who helps her neighbor in the shadow of the crucifix, while the snake, in this case the symbol of a new life, the caduceus of Moses, climbs from the skull, as clear as any depiction of the Christian ideal since Millet's "Angelus". It seems that Fra Albertson has held his pencil at just the angel angle, for through "Pieta" comes instructions for our Final Judgment; intimations of trust, that special providence of wee people; and paradigms for knowing not the horror of evil but the wonder of helping the wounded. And so, Albertson Magnums us with sacrilege: Suggesting that every advance leads back; that every invention enhances ignorance; that every discovery raises 100 new questions. Our portrait moving inversely to our exponentially expanding knowledge, from the 70 foot statue of Ramses II to this five-inch etching of an infant. Our understanding better helping us to save our agate earth, seen on TV from the moon.

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