

James Albertson



By W. H. H. Rees

Pieta (T. P. etching/paper, 3 1/2" x 4 3/4")

James Albertson:

A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Magnum No.2

Jim Albertson was “bad” painter, a really “bad” painter, who made art from kitsch, from Dick and Jane illustrations in books for first and second graders, enabling him to prosecute surrealism and the then current American vogue of Abstract Expressionism. His eccentric style and incongruous content earned him inclusion in the “*Bad*” *Painting Show*, the inaugural exhibition in January-February 1978 of the New Museum, in New York City, founded by Marcia Tucker, an exhibit of works by several other artists working in that garish and sentimental pasture.



Sex, Violence, Religion as the Good Life

Sex, Violence, Religion, and Good Life (pencil/paper, 11" x 15") could very well have been a stereotypical, suburban scene in a book for early readers: a housewife and four children eating around a table in a modern kitchen. It is, however, light years from Dick and Jane: the children are dispatching their dinner like pigs at the trough and the housewife in a transparent negligee with a silly grin, caressing a leg of something, with the door on the refrigerator open to provide for easy access, a portrait of a smiling pig on the front, and two crucifixes, a picture on the wall and the crossed knife and fork on the

table. The shocking scene thumbs its nose both at the modern art and at certain classical compositions. Jim speaks to a culture that has a partial cure for cancer in one hand and the largely cause of cancer in the other. While mocking the puerile society in which he finds himself, he does offer an alternative: in the corner, through a window, there is a young girl tending a garden.



Planning His Career

Planning his Future (T.P. etching and watercolor/paper, 4 3/4" x 6 1/2") presents us with another suburban scene: a business man, holding a diapered child on his lap, beside a man and a woman, the probable parents. The title tells us he is there to help program the baby's future, most likely by involving the purchase of a product, such as a life insurance policy, with his brief case ready on the nearby table, filled most likely with

applications and brochures. Buying and selling is everywhere; all roads lead to commerce and productivity. The professional balances a small bird-style house on the baby's chest and holds a female doll, presaging marriage and perhaps a family in the future. Through the window there is a partially, damaged structure and in the far distance the mushroom cloud of an atomic blast. Jim might be implying the result of working and saving for the Good Life, beginning when ones is in diapers, has often led to destruction and war. The child seems to understand this and protests by kicking rationality in the face.



The Sick Artist

The Sick Artist (ink/paper, 14" x 17") is a graceful, almost sublime self portrait despite the devils stabbing him, as bats in black for inking out a living. Most artists make self portraits looking in a mirror; rarely do they draw themselves in the act of drawing. By so doing, Jim confronts traditional, figurative art, the art-for-the-sake-of-art art, by a *doppelganger* depicting his tears. Creation seemingly stimulates serenity and compensates for the whips of culture-scorn and the shame of compulsive appetites.



Inspiration of a Poet, After Poussin

Inspiration of a Poet, after Poussin (pencil/paper, 11" x 15") is the title of this drawing, although it does not appear on the drawing. The original painting, currently known as *Inspiration of a Poet*, by Nicholas Poussin, on

which this drawing is modeled, was owned by Cardinal Mazarin and listed in his inventory as *Apollo with a Muse and a Poet crowned with Laurels*. Poussin has Apollo, the god of poetry, either attempting to arouse or succeeding in arousing divine inspiration in the poet with the assistance of Calliope, the muse of the epic, for an audience that believed great paintings and poems could be so aroused. The artist/poet would hold the brush/pen/pencil pointing to heaven to facilitate the necessary grace. Almost by way of denial and as a perfect symbol for the age, Jim imitated Poussin's masterpiece with several, important differences: the large oil painting on canvas is here a small, pencil drawing on paper; color has disappeared; the god, muse and poet are children and the putti are adults with an irony of direct, original expression, free of tedious detail and finish. It confirms the admonition of Robert Duncan, a Bay Area poet, that to be a poet one must be first a child. The tactile quality of the lines is made with the dexterity of an aorta surgeon, each incision swishing to a perfect landing. At the same time, Jim tips his hat to the Old Masters' methods using blue-print cartoons to build paintings, the first a simple sketch, then followed by others, each developed from the one before, with all the configurations copied by paint onto a canvas, until the last sketch completes the process, and the painting stands on its own, the cartoons/drawings discarded or are sometimes tucked away in a drawer.

For Jim the cartoons/drawings are themselves works of art, sharing the same stature as the finished painting.

The exquisite drawing under consideration, the last he completed for his oil painting, is where fantasy subordinates Greek myth, where vibrancy replaces that which is no longer vibrant, where childhood is revived as roller coasting in a shell, not a cocoon, and where he has extended Duncan's dictum to Christ's: one must be like a child to enter the Kingdom of Heaven.



Rubens' Venus & Adonis

1680

Venus & Adonis, After Rubens

Venus & Adonis, after Rubens (pencil/paper, 14" x 17"). Perhaps Peter Paul Rubens might have meant his painting (*Venus and Adonis*) to be about the frailty of love by having the goddess beg her human lover not to hunt,

for an audience who knew the myth that Adonis will be killed by a boar in a hunt. Against the aesthetic canon and this particular, perfect painting, Jim, with his neo-mannerist armor/amour of satire as a bow and sweetness as the arrow, asserts: "I have seen the Rubens painting; this is not a Rubens; this is my version of Rubens". This drawing is similar to that of *Inspiration of a Poet, after Poussin*: both are smaller than the respective Rubens and Poussin paintings; in both the figures are reversed, the adults are children and the cherubs are adults; both exude exaggeration. While the Rubens' painting pulsates with exuberant color, both of these two drawings are done with a lead pencil by which he gives to the American appreciation of childishness something childlike, something done with the same tool used by children learning to write or draw, whereby mistakes can quickly be erased. Neither imitation was meant to ridicule the paintings of Rubens or Poussin; on the contrary, Jim admires the culture that had refined taste and respect for the classical tradition for which each of their paintings were done. In contrast, he loathes the contemporary cultivation of the American mind, which lacks good taste and awareness of the classical tradition. Jim's child is more than the father of the man or the mother of the woman; he is the man; she is the woman. Yes, but there is so much more here: the faces of Venus and Adonis are drawn to overlap and form a Saint Valentine's Day heart, identifying Venus and Adonis as true lovers who must abandon adult vices and follies: one adult/cherub holds the leg of Adonis to prevent him from hunting game for sport

while another covers Venus' vulva to keep her from lasciviousness. The meaning is profound: we must love like little children to enter the Kingdom of Heaven.



Pieta (T. P. etching/paper, 3 ½" x 4 ¾") delineates Christ after the crucifixion lying on his mother's lap. Jim presents us with a little girl helping a wounded neighbor beside a snake rising from a skull, which could refer to the bronze serpent Moses fixed on a pole that cured those with snake bites when they looked thereon and a symbol of a new life. The caduceus and the nursing child are linked, while the crucified man in the background is Christ, giving of himself as does the child/nurse. The snake can also be seen as Satan who tricked Eve and Adam to eat the apple from the tree of knowledge of good and evil that brought death and skulls into the world. Then, the figure cradled by

the child is not a wounded man but the dead Christ and the man on the cross in the background is one of the two robbers crucified next to him: this interpretation simulates Michelangelo's awesome *Pieta*. While Jim might be considered to be parodying Michelangelo, he is actually bringing him up to date. Tradition has it that Mary was very young girl when she accepted the invitation of the Archangel Gabriel to be the mother of God. She would have had to be childlike; it's highly doubtful any adult woman would ever have agreed to such a thing. Jim likewise characterizes her as she grieves for her deceased son. Therefore, it can be argued that his representation of Mary in his version of *Pieta* is more spiritually accurate than is Michelangelo's adult woman, even though his magnificent statue is aesthetically beyond compare.

Many condemn Jim's work as irreverent, bordering on sacrilegious. This defense posits the opposite: Jim Albertson magnums us with a clear depiction of the Christian ideal, the intimations of trust that are the special providence of children and the paradigm for the wonder that comes by gardening, by being free of domination, by solace during torture, by writing poetry, by loving neighbors, by helping the wounded and grieving for the dead.

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