

GHEBALLY

MIKE KUCHAR



Mike



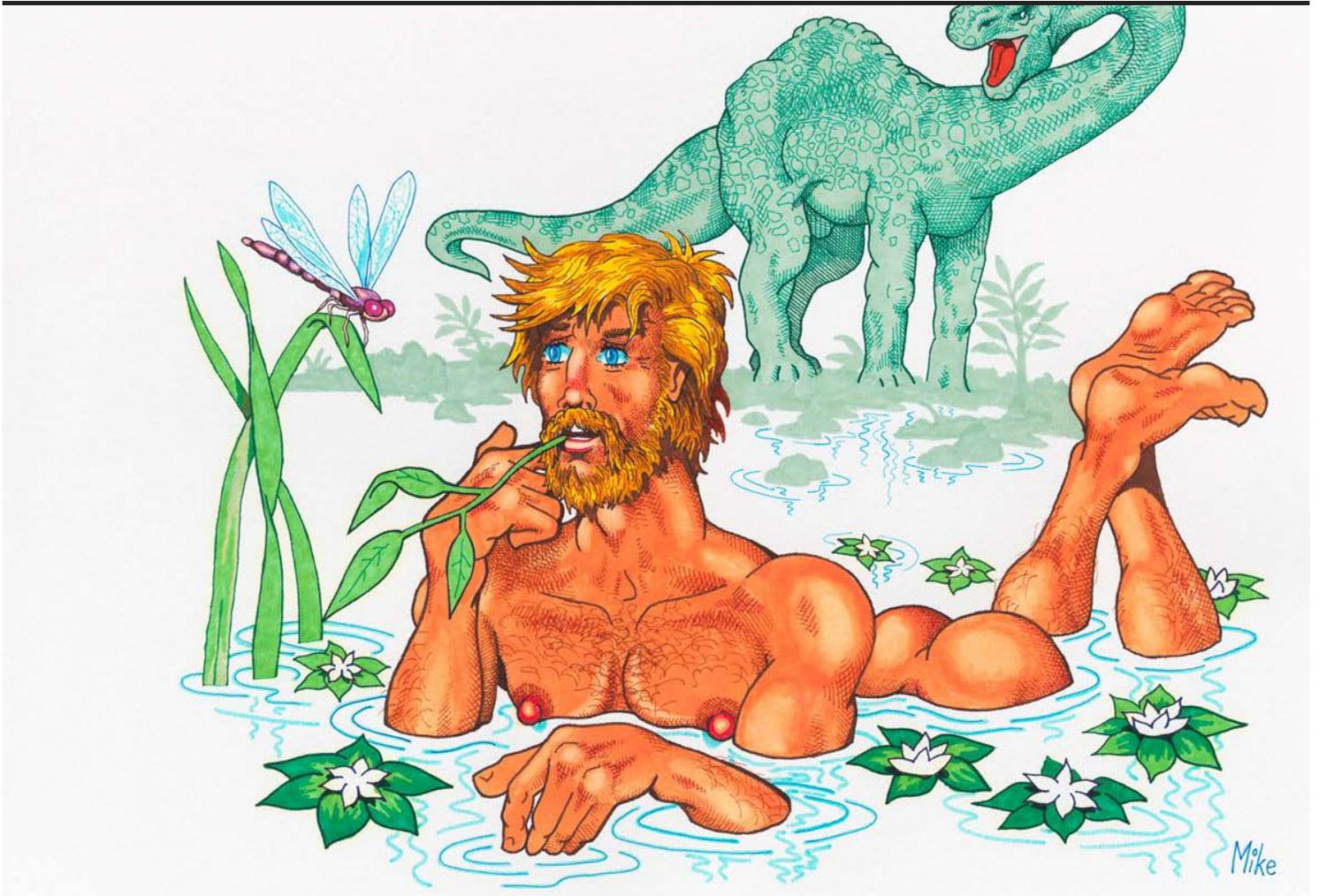
ART

# The Raunchy Splendor of Mike Kuchar's Dirty Pictures

by JENNIFER KRASINSKI

SEPTEMBER 19, 2017





**“Blue Eyes” (1980–2000s)** MIKE KUCHAR/ANTON KERN GALLERY/GHEBALY GALLERY

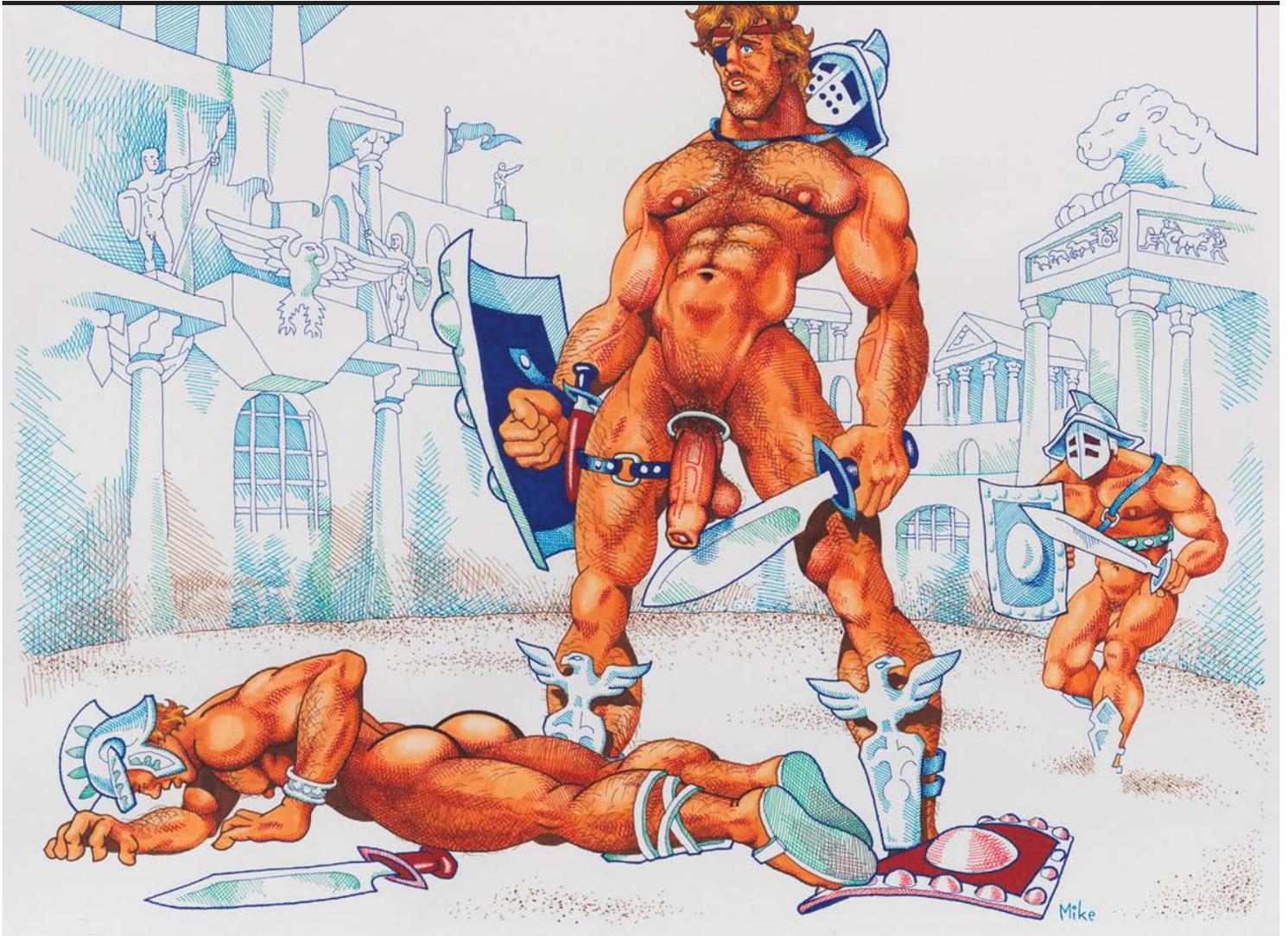
AS AN ILLUSTRATOR, MY AIM IS TO AMUSE THE EYE AND SPARK IMAGINATION, wrote the great American artist and filmmaker Mike Kuchar in *Primal Male*, a book of his collected drawings. TO CREATE TITILLATING SCENES THAT REFRESH THE SOUL... AND PUT A BIT MORE “FUN” TO VIEWING PICTURES — and that he has done for over five decades. “Drawings by Mike!” is an exhibition of erotic illustrations at Anton Kern Gallery, one of the fall season’s great feasts for the eye and a welcome homecoming for one of New York’s most treasured prodigal sons.



As boys growing up in the Bronx, Mike and his twin brother — the late, equally great film and video artist George (1942–2011) — loved to spend their weekends at the movies, watching everything from newsreels to B films to blockbusters, their young minds roused by all the thrills that Hollywood had to offer: romance, drama, action, science fiction, terror, suspense. As George remembered in their 1997 *Reflections From a Cinematic Cesspool*, a memoir-cum-manual for aspiring filmmakers: “On the screen there would always be a wonderful tapestry of big people and they seemed so wild and crazy....The women wantonly lifted up their skirts to adjust garter-belts and men in pin-striped suits appeared from behind shadowed décor to suck and chew on Technicolor lips.” For the Kuchars, as for gay male contemporaries like Andy Warhol and Jack Smith, the movie theater was a temple for erotics both expressed and repressed, projected and appropriated, homo and hetero, all whirled together on the silver screen.

In high school, the brothers studied commercial illustration at the School of Art and Design in Manhattan. After finishing his degree, Mike supported himself retouching fashion photographs for the likes of the *New York Times* and *Vogue*, but in the off-hours he and George pursued their shared passion for film, each writing and directing his very own lo-fi genre pieces — seedy, hilarious takes on the cheapest Hollywood epics. The Kuchars shot most of their pictures in and around the Bronx, recruiting friends and neighbors to join their stable of stars.

world in which robots have become the vessels for feeling. (“Where humans fail to find love,” the movie’s narrator exclaims, “machines have succeeded!”) His *The Secret of Wendel Samson*, made that same year, stars artist Red Grooms (alongside his then-wife, painter/sculptress Mimi Gross) as a man struggling with his homosexuality, running to and from various lovers’ beds. In *The Craven Sluck* (1967), Mike directs the lustful adventures of an unhappy housewife, which come to an end when UFOs attack New York. Without knowing it at the time, the Kuchars would become two of the most revered figures of the American underground cinema. (Side note: A teenage John Waters first learned about the Kuchar brothers by reading Jonas Mekas’s “Movie Journal” column in our very own *Village Voice*. “Here were directors I could idolize,” he wrote in his introduction to *Reflections From a Cinematic Cesspool*, “complete crackpots without an ounce of pretension.”)



**"Brave, Bold and Bare" (1980-1990s)**

MIKE KUCHAR/ANTON KERN GALLERY/GHEBALY GALLERY

Alas, even a master of underground cinema can't quit his day job. When George was hired to teach at the San Francisco Art Institute, Mike followed him, and for decades the brothers split their time between the Bronx and the Mission District. It was on the West Coast that Mike found work in the underground comix scene, which included the likes of R. Crumb and Art Spiegelman. In the mid-1970s, pioneering writer and publisher Larry Fuller hired him to illustrate stories for *Gay Heart Throbs*, the first adult gay comic — and it was a match made in heaven. Mike's hand was the perfect partner for Fuller's giddy tales of steamy hookups featuring men with bods to rival those of Greek deities. Mike's cover for the third issue features a muscular, half-clad hayseed leaning against a tree, his thumbs tucked into the top of his high-high-high-cut jean shorts. "Hi Dwayne.

Kuchar's drawings were a hit, and from then on he continued to illustrate for other pornographic publications, always signing his artwork simply "Mike" — no last name given. "I considered this my extra sort of career," he told artist Matt Borruso and writer Gordon Faylor in an interview for SF MoMA's *Open Space* in the summer of 2016. "My little secret career." The twenty-some pen-and-ink drawings on view at Kern are from more recent years, and seem to possess no secrets at all. (Mike, now in his seventies, continues to draw, and taught filmmaking at SFAI in George's stead for a time.) In fact, they're adamantly open and effusive — as irrepressible, joyful, as they are unabashedly lewd. The types are classic: gladiators, farmer boys, characters of classical and biblical descent. The bodies are nude, or nude-adjacent, their packages thick and uncut. Yet there is a surprising sweetness to Kuchar's dirty drawings, too. For lack of a better word, they're infused with *feeling*, expressed from a tender, lighthearted spot located somewhere between raw libido and romantic ideal.



**"Facing One's Own Demons" (2015)** MIKE KUCCHAR/ANTON KERN GALLERY/GHEBALY GALLERY

In the poster for the show, a dreamy beefcake — his hot, taut buns popping up through the surface of a pond — locks eyes with a frog...perhaps his handsome prince? *Poster Boy* (1980–2000s) features an oiled hunk in a cut-off tank top, his erect nipples piercing its

with a pan flute, cupid's arrow shot right through his heart for the naughty-looking blue-eyed man reclining on the ground. An eye might easily be distracted by the "prurience" of Kuchar's drawings and miss the fact that the artist is not only a singular illustrator, but a masterful colorist as well. Pay attention to the way he handles light on flesh, for example, how the hues shift from, say, sunburnt rose to softest pink depending on the size and contour of a muscle, the subtle layering of pigment giving depth and richness to the skin of his erstwhile cartoonish men. If the devil is in such details, then Mike Kuchar is blessedly damned to hell.

**Mike Kuchar: 'Drawings by Mike!'**

*Anton Kern Gallery*

*16 East 55th Street*

*212-367-9663,*

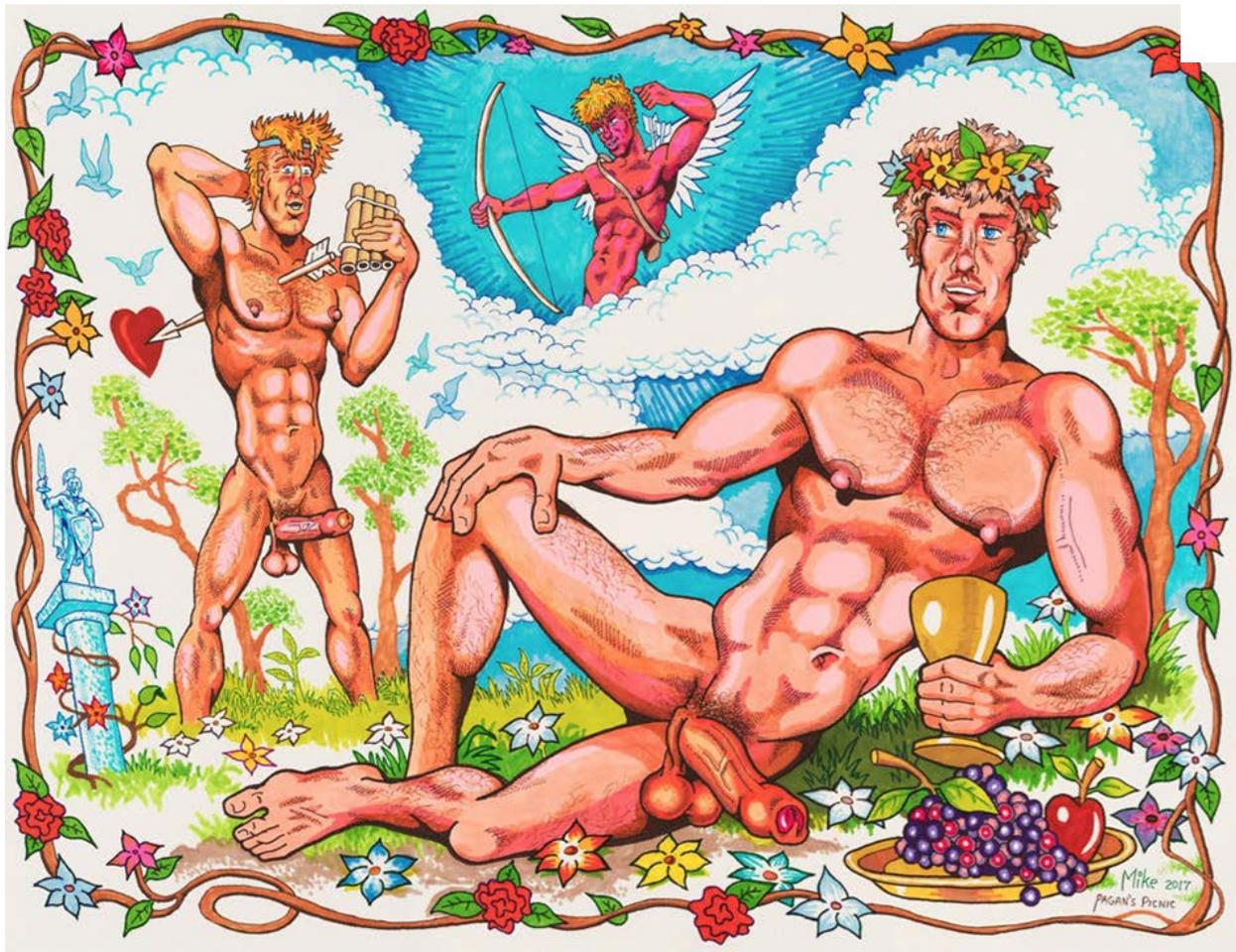
*[antonkerngallery.com](http://antonkerngallery.com)*

*Through October 7*

# Mike Kuchar

## *Ed Halter*

*From naked Odysseus to the penis of Pegasus: pornographic fun at  
Drawings by Mike!*



Mike Kuchar, *Pagan's Picnic*, 2017. Felt tip pen and ink on paper, 29 × 22.5 inches. Image courtesy the artist, Anton Kern Gallery, and Ghebaly Gallery.

*Mike Kuchar, Drawings by Mike!, Anton Kern Gallery, 16 East Fifty-Fifth Street, New York City, through October 7, 2017*

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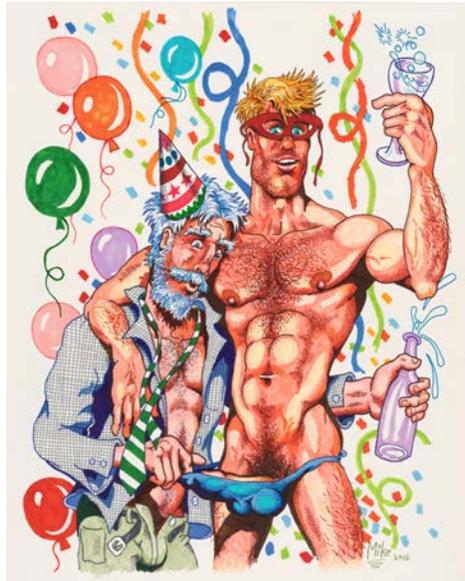
Just around the corner from jewelers Harry Winston, that midtown Manhattan temple devoted to the rituals of heterosexuality, Anton Kern Gallery is hosting an artist whose work could make many a bride blush. Journey up a white marble staircase to the third floor, past the gallery's bathroom and some primly rendered wall text that warns "this exhibition contains graphic imagery," and you'll enter a world predicated on rather different fantasies of coupling.



Mike Kuchar, *Drawings by Mike!*, installation view. Image courtesy Anton Kern Gallery.

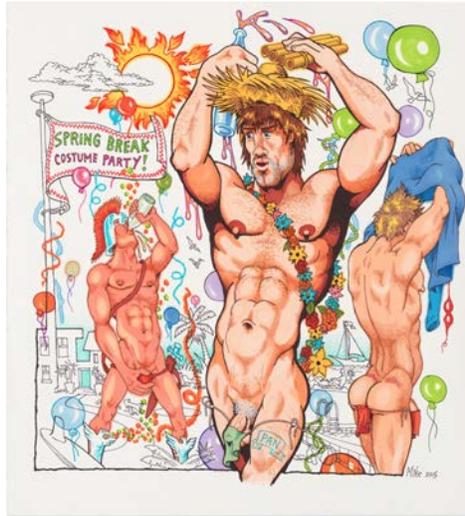
Here, in a show simply titled *Drawings by Mike!*, are twenty-two neatly framed ink-and-felt-tip-pen cartoons of tousle-haired Caucasian bohunks engaged in a variety of joyously, nakedly homoerotic situations: skinny dipping, crotch grabbing, pec rubbing, tit sucking. Their bare asses are, without exception, spheric and shiny, like the juiciest apple you'd ever hope to bite. Their sparkling eyes appear glazed over, staring into daydreams even as the men lick and paw at one another's brawny bodies. Their expressive dicks are thick and veiny: some half-tumescent flesh-tubes flop lazily downward; other stab at the air, yearning toward some object of desire, dribbling semen like a salivating predator.

The eponymous Mike! is Mike Kuchar, best known as a pioneering experimental filmmaker and the surviving half of the fraternal directorial team of George and Mike Kuchar. The Kuchar twins began their careers in the 1950s by making whacked-out 8mm shoestring epics while still teenagers in the Bronx, and then quickly found themselves at the center of the New York underground film boom of the sixties, rubbing shoulders with fellow cinematic visionaries like Andy Warhol, Jonas Mekas, Ken Jacobs, Jack Smith, and many others. Filled with camp and kitsch, and edited to the overblown rhythms of Hollywood melodrama, the Kuchars' movies provided prime inspiration for John Waters's early micro-budget comedies. The brothers collaborated until the mid-1960s, after which they produced films independently for the subsequent decades. Though their work continued to bear many similarities—a wholehearted embrace of non-acting, a comic-strip palette, soaring soundtracks lifted from dime-store record albums—one of the most noticeable distinctions between the two was their attitude toward sex.



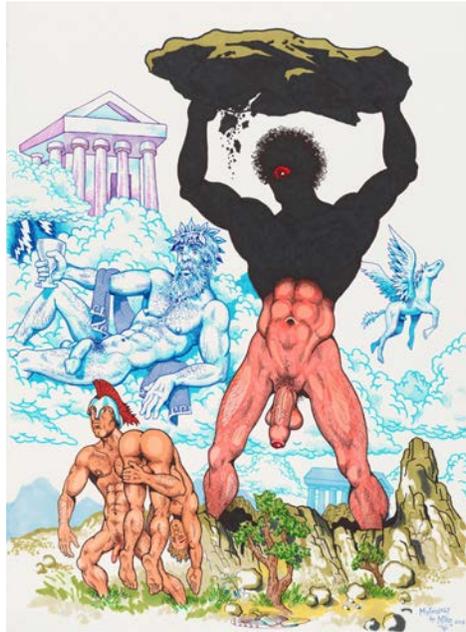
Mike Kuchar, *Party Time*, 2016–17. Felt tip pen and ink on paper, 26.5 × 21.5 inches. Image courtesy the artist, Anton Kern Gallery, and Ghebaly Gallery.

Both brothers were gay, but approached the picturing of their desires in different ways. George's work plays with self-deprecating sexual frustration by indulging in the muffled, ironic eros of a more closeted era. For George, sex is something silly, infantile, and—especially in his later video diaries—neurotic. Mike, however, depicts gay love in a more forthright and robust manner. In one of Mike's earliest solo movies, *The Secret of Wendel Samson* (1966), he casts a young Red Grooms as a hunky artist who's in a relationship with another man. Mike's later videos and films like *Seascape* (1984) or *Blue Vibrations* (2014) frequently center on solitary, largely unclothed ephesbes, letting the camera drink in long moments of unashamed male beauty.



Mike Kuchar, *Spring Break Costume Party*, 2015. Felt tip pen and ink on paper, 24 × 18 inches. Image courtesy the artist, Anton Kern Gallery, and Ghebaly Gallery.

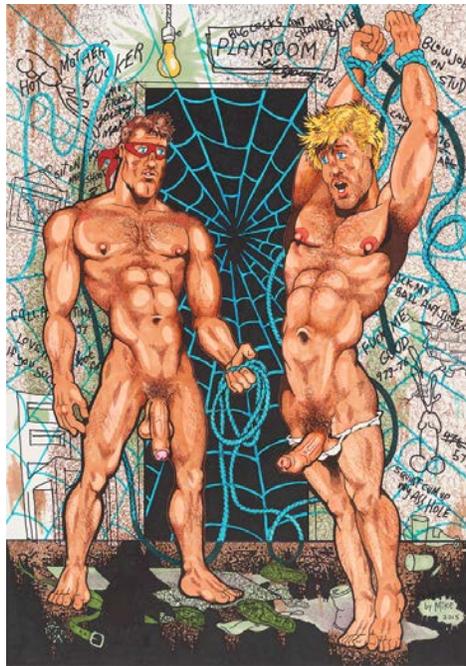
Both brothers drew cartoons, and ran in social circles with Art Spiegelman and R. Crumb in San Francisco during the golden age of underground comix. In this medium too, George's drawings veer toward the comedic and grotesque, while Mike's were always brazenly sensual, leading him to publish early work in some pioneering gay comics of the 1970s like *Gay Heart Throbs* and *Meatmen*, as well as gay porn magazines of the 1980s like *First Hand* and *Manscape*. While some cartoons included in *Drawings by Mike!* were done in the 1980s and 1990s, perhaps for publications like these, most on view at Anton Kern are more recent, made within the past couple of years. Yet Kuchar's style remains strongly consistent no matter the decade.



Mike Kuchar, *Mythology*, 2015. Felt tip pen and ink on paper, 30 × 22 inches. Image courtesy the artist, Anton Kern Gallery, and Ghebaly Gallery.

Many of the pieces here use scenarios reminiscent of movies and books that might have provided safe objects for a teen Kuchar's horny gaze, updated with an adults-only spin: Roman history and Greek mythology, Adam in the Garden of Eden, loin-clothed cavemen and Tarzan types, hirsute barbarians and lusty pirates. In *Pagan's Picnic* (2017), a beefcake Cupid shoots an arrow into the muscular chest of a nude shepherd, causing him to stare longingly at a well-hung, blue-skinned Dionysius lounging in the foreground. A naked Odysseus runs from a similarly unclothed Cyclops in *Mythology* (2015); here, the monocular monster's red eye is rhymed by the ruddy tip of its penis as it peeps out from its foreskin—Pegasus, flying in the background, wields his own hefty schlong. Even the more contemporary situations partake of stock fantasies: a daddy inspecting a male stripper's G-string, for instance, in

*Party Time* (2016–17), or college frat boys indulging in a modern-day Bacchanalia for *Spring Break Costume Party* (2015). *Play Stations* (2015) shows two men engaging in bondage, within a grimy chamber. A blue spiderweb in the background recalls a similar ropy device used to trap the protagonist of *The Secret of Wendel Samson*, while the swears and cocks scrawled on the wall reference the degree-zero pornography of bathroom graffiti.



Mike Kuchar, *Play Stations*, 2015. Ink and felt pen on paper, 34 × 24 inches. Image courtesy the artist, Anton Kern Gallery, and Ghebaly Gallery.

We are sometimes told that great art cherishes ambiguities and enigmas. Great pornography, however, achieves both its formal and erotic powers through the crystal-clear manifestation of desires that otherwise might remain unarticulated. Think how Sade's writing gave a

name to sadism and Sacher-Masoch's to masochism, while Tom of Finland's images inspired real leathermen to walk the earth. Thus the most advanced pornographers produce authorial tics through the repetition of particular paraphilia. The selection of work in *Drawings by Mike!* evidences Kuchar's own fixation on a very specific male form. Virtually without exception, the men here are square-jawed and thickly athletic, with a dusting of hair on the chest, face, and legs. Their cocks are remarkably homomorphic: all of specific tubular heft, uncut, with shaved, low-hanging balls and a landscaped tuft of pubic hair above the base; these erections are mimicked by the men's swollen, pencil-eraser nipples, jutting out from slabs of muscle. Kuchar has remarked that he uses his mirror image as model when drawing. Perhaps then these men are his own ego ideal, multiplied and beefed up via the metamorphoses of fantasy.

*Ed Halter* is a founder and director of *Light Industry*, a venue for film and electronic art in Brooklyn, New York, and Critic in Residence at Bard College in Annandale-on-Hudson, New York. His writing has appeared in *Artforum*, *The Believer*, *frieze*, *Mousse*, *the Village Voice*, and elsewhere. He is the recipient of the Thoma Foundation 2017 Arts Writing Award in Digital Art for an emerging arts writer, awarded the Carl & Marilyn Thoma Art Foundation.

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## Mike Kuchar

GHEBALY GALLERY

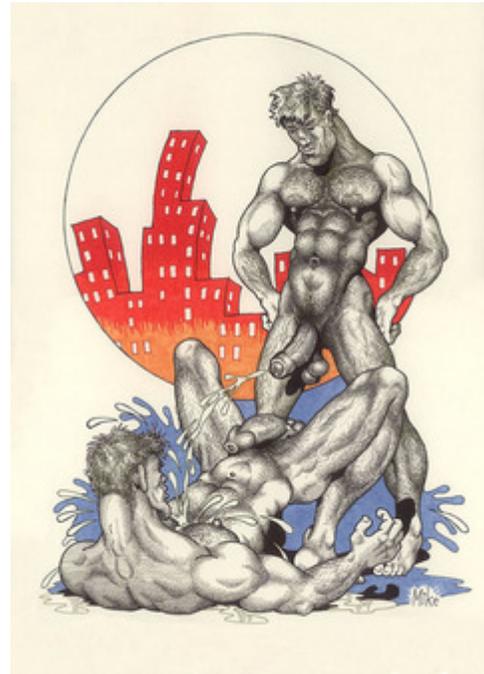
2245 E Washington Blvd.

January 17, 2015–February 14, 2015

Burnished bubble butts beam with unholy light. Cut and uncut, huge, veiny cocks blossom from every angle. Angels and gods, gladiators and cavemen, street hustlers and bodybuilders, S-M beltings and four-way pirate fuckfests are all drawn with the bright hues and hard lines of comic-book superheroes. The Los Angeles debut of underground-film hero Mike Kuchar (best known for collaborations with his brother, George) hangs and screens five decades of lusty illustration and delightfully schlocky film. Kuchar creams and colorizes a tradition set by Tom of Finland's pencil drawings of leathered men and lonely sailors with inflated musculature and fantastically large rods (currently the subject of an exquisite survey across town at David Kordansky Gallery). While such work has a cool, supple-wristed beauty, Kuchar's drawings and film both mock and celebrate the near-comic lust of the former generation. Many might worship the purity of high modernism, but we'd prefer to live in the hot mess of its aftermath.

In one room, Kuchar's first effort without the help of George, *Sins of the Fleshapoids*, 1965 (considered one of the great underground films by none other the pope of trash himself, John Waters), plays on the hour. In the next, amid a dozen leafy potted plants, is a plaster replica of Michelangelo's David, who looks askance at the framed illustrations on the walls around him. This high kitsch makes the gallery more "arty," a classic cover for the homoerotic illustrations and soft-core movies playing on either side (the other video, *Tickled Pink*, 2012, shows in just under nine minutes that Kuchar's cheap, campy charm remained tumescent with time). As with *Sins of the Fleshapoids*, the cut-rate set dressing only deepens my affections for the artist and his antics. With horny glee, Kuchar returns the original seasoning to the normally sexless accolade of "seminal."

— Andrew Berardini



Mike Kuchar, *Liquid Dreams*, c. 1980-1990, pencil, pen, felt pens, ink on paper, 26 1/5 x 20 1/5".

The term "PORNOGRAPHY" is cold and clinical, while the expression "EROTIC ART" suggests ladies too classy for romance novels but too prudish for smut.



Above - Brad Phillips, Personal photograph (source material), 2012. Courtesy: the artist

Right - George Kuchar, *School Daze*, 1997. Copyright and courtesy: Estate of George Kuchar

DICKFACE  
Typography design by Nicolàs Guagnini and Bill Hayden

# ART ABOUT FUCKING

BY ANDREW BERARDINI

"TO FUCK" gets right to the point, and its offensive character disturbs and titillates. Andrew Berardini takes a look at art about fucking and sizes up past masters and interesting newcomers, scouring the entire scene with honesty and scruple. Sontag said consciousness is harnessed to flesh: every work that displays sex given freely can inspire others to take back ownership of their/our bodies.

## He knew the art of sexually pleasing damaged souls.

ANDREA MCGINTY, *God, I Don't Even Know Your Name*, 2015

There has always been art about fucking.

Some of the earliest works of art we know relate to fertility, big-breasted and big-bellied mamas carved to capture the generative spark that makes life possible with each pant.

Besides the fact that sex is fundamental to the human condition and thus worthy of discussion at any time in the context of art, over the last few years one gets the sense that our collective cultural relationship to sex has shifted, if only a little.

Even if only for a few more inches of skin, I'll take it.

**I believe each generation needs a new vocabulary for—and new ways to think about—sexuality. New generations can't use older generations' vocabularies and grammars because new situations come up... Maybe I'm tired of looking at pornography. It just doesn't cut it anymore.**

PAUL CHAN, interviewed by Jennifer Krasinski in the *Paris Review* about his imprint of erotic fiction, *New Lovers*

Pornography and erotica are both artforms about fucking.

Both are words and images explicitly about sex, and more than that, both are about sex in a way that's supposed to turn you on. Some say erotica is about mutuality and pornography is about exploitation. Others that pornography is simply a commercial endeavor while erotica has artistic aspirations; its primary purpose is expression as opposed to simply satiating desire. In the Greek world, porn was about prostitutes and eros was about romantic or sexual love. Do it for money, it's pornography; do it for love (or just lust) and it's erotica.

The publishing house Badlands Unlimited's recently released erotica imprint *New Lovers* came about from artist and editor Paul Chan's affection for Maurice Girodias' mid-century

Il termine "pornografia" è freddo e clinico, mentre l'espressione "arte erotica" parla di signore troppo distinte per il romanticismo ma troppo puritane per il porno. "Scopare", va dritto al punto e la sua natura offensiva disturba e titilla. Andrew Berardini guarda all'arte che tratta di scopate ed esprime un giudizio su maestri affermati e interessanti new entries, perlustrando l'intero scenario, con scrupolo e onestà. Sontag affermava che "la coscienza è saldamente attaccata alla carne": ogni opera che mostra il sesso nel suo donarsi liberamente, è un'ispirazione a riprendere possesso dei nostri corpi.

*Conosceva l'arte di appagare sessualmente le anime danneggiate.*  
—Andrea McGinty, *God, I Don't Even Know Your Name*, 2015

È sempre esistita un'arte dello scopare.

Alcune delle prime opere d'arte di cui siamo a conoscenza ci parlano di fertilità, con madri dai grossi seni e dalle grandi pance scolpite per catturare la scintilla generativa che rende possibile la vita ad ogni respiro.

Oltre al fatto che il sesso sia fondamentale per la condizione umana, e quindi degno di essere discusso in qualsiasi momento nel contesto dell'arte, si ha la sensazione che, nel corso degli ultimi anni, il nostro rapporto culturale collettivo con il sesso sia cambiato, anche se solo di poco.

Se anche si trattasse solo di pochi centimetri in più di pelle, per me è più che sufficiente.

*Credo che ogni generazione abbia bisogno di un nuovo lessico per parlare di sessualità e di nuovi modi di pensare ad essa. Le nuove generazioni non possono usare il lessico e la grammatica delle vecchie generazioni perché si presentano situazioni sempre nuove...*

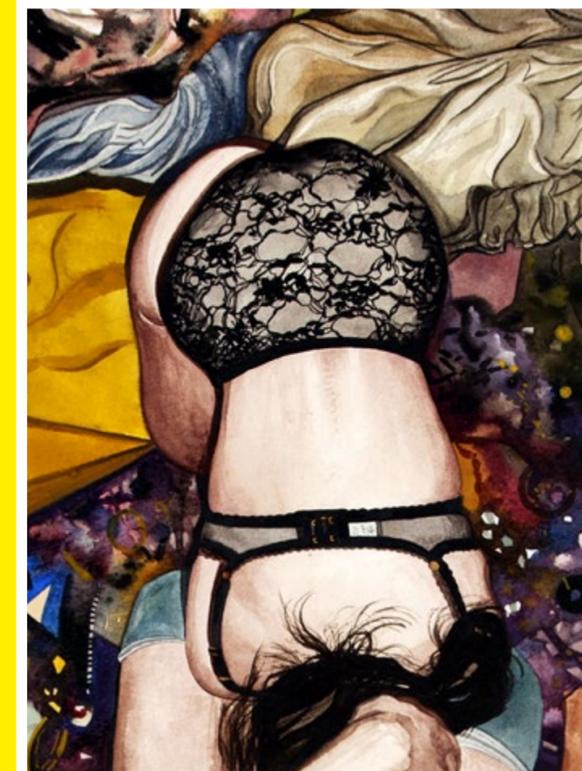
*Forse mi sono semplicemente stancato della pornografia. Non mi basta più.*

—Paul Chan, intervistato da Jennifer Krasinski in *Paris Review* riguardo alla sua serie di pubblicazioni di narrativa erotica *New Lovers*

La pornografia e l'arte erotica sono entrambe forme d'arte che hanno a che vedere con lo scopare.

Entrambe descrivono parole e immagini che parlano esplicitamente di sesso e, ancor più, parlano di sesso in un modo che si suppone possa far eccitare. Alcuni dicono che l'arte erotica abbia a che vedere con la reciprocità e che la pornografia sia una forma di sfruttamento. Altri ritengono che la pornografia sia semplicemente un'impresa commerciale mentre l'arte erotica abbia aspirazioni artistiche e si ponga come obiettivo primario l'espressione in opposizione alla semplice soddisfazione del desiderio. Nel mondo greco, il porno aveva a che vedere con le prostitute e l'eros invece con l'amore romantico o sessuale. Fallo per denaro ed è pornografia; fallo per amore (o semplicemente per lussuria) ed è erotismo.

La casa editrice Badlands Unlimited, che ha recentemente pubblicato la serie di racconti erotici *New Lovers*, è nata dall'amore dell'artista ed editore Paul Chan per la casa editrice di metà Novecento Olympia Press di Maurice Girodias, che metteva insieme narrativa erotica e letteratura proibita, l'occulto e il politicamente radicale, per creare una miscela che ancora gorgoglia in ciò che è rimasto dell'underground. Grove Press e più tardi Semiotext(e), quest'ultima con il suo mix di teoria alta e di soggettività femminile radicale imbevuta di politica militante, hanno proseguito questa tradizione per decenni dopo Olympia Press, e Badlands Unlimited sembra essere un altro capitolo di questa storia senza interruzioni.



Brad Phillips, *33rd Date*, 2013. Courtesy: Jessica Bradley Gallery, Toronto

Olympia Press that coupled erotic fiction with banned literature, the occult and the politically radical to create a brew that still bubbles in what's left of the underground. Grove Press and later Semiotext(e), with its mix of high theory and radical female subjectivity augmented

with radical politics, continued the tradition for decades after Olympia, and Badlands feels like another chapter in this continued story. Chan's prominence as an artist gives his erotica imprint a resonance amongst the intelligentsia that your small-time dirty book dealer can't quite nab (the imprint launched at the Guggenheim Museum, for example).

There are three titles thus far, and they don't all turn me on; but Andrea McGinty's *God, I Don't Even Know Your Name* reads true. Her handling of sex and the words we can use to talk about it doesn't feel fantastic or fake. She talks about it the way real people I know, my friends and lovers, talk about fucking when they're being honest.

Founded in 2013, Sarah Nicole Prickett and Berkeley Poole's *Adult* magazine quickly emerged as the only serious magazine about sex. Artist and writer Brad Phillips published a couple of incredible works about sex and art. He writes in a different register than McGinty, but with the same truth. Publishing sex writing, art criticism, or some mixture of the two combined. With an upcoming book, Phillip and his prose fit into their own bruised literary tradition, but his raw stories locate a strange tenderness, a ravaged love for his subjects that truly elevates them to the level of literature. Dirty as hell, it's certainly not pornography, though I'd be hard-pressed to call what Phillips does erotica.

To me, pornography sounds clinical, a doctor's cold, gloved hand reaching just so. Whilst erotica sounds upper-caste, reading for hausfraus too classy for Romance but too prudish for porn.

In any discussion about sex, I prefer the hard, clean sound of "fucking." The implied offensive nature of the word warmly fingers the exact taboo we have about sex.

**He kept stumbling on strange photographs of young, bruised girls tied to things, chairs, beds; hogtied in closets, always though, smiling. For some reason very often giving the classic thumbs up. He could tell some of the Polaroids had been taken in this very apartment. Some were obviously in hotels. He had never been aware of any deviant sexuality related to his dad, and with his deep knowledge of smack, he knew how very uninteresting sex became to the professional junky. So the Polaroids were slightly confusing. There were about a dozen, never the same girl twice; one Native girl, one black type girl, the rest very similar scrawny white girls in their late twenties or early thirties, all with similarly small breasts, oddly placed bruises, scratches, fat lips, traces of fading black eyes. There was something reassuring about how happy they all looked though. It made the pictures less menacing, less bothersome.**

BRAD PHILLIPS

I don't have enough words.

When you live next door to the mother of your child and you mind her new baby and your mutual child so that she can fuck, is there a word for that?

When a couple has fucked a pick-up third enough times that its no longer casual sex but constitutes some kind of ongoing relationship, what do we call that moment of transition?

What do you call a relationship with someone that is predicated on only being able to hang out with them (i.e. fuck and whisper sweet nothings into each others ears) in cities neither of you live in whilst you see other people where you actually live, both your lives too deeply entrenched to ever live in the same place?

La prominenza di Chan come artista conferisce alla sua collana di letteratura erotica una risonanza tra i membri dell'intelligenza che il vostro editore di libri osceni da quattro soldi non è in grado di ottenere (per esempio il lancio della serie di pubblicazioni al Guggenheim Museum).

Ci sono tre titoli per il momento, e non li trovo tutti eccitanti; ma *God, I Don't Even Know Your Name* di Andrea McGinty ha il sapore della verità. Il modo in cui tratta il sesso e le parole non ha nulla di fantastico né di falso. Ne parla nello stesso modo in cui ne parlano le persone vere che conosco, i miei amici e le mie amanti, quando sono sinceri.

Fondata nel 2013, la rivista *Adult* di Sarah Nicole Prickett e Berkeley Poole è ben presto diventata l'unica rivista seria che parli di sesso. L'artista e scrittore Brad Phillips ha pubblicato un paio di lavori incredibili sul tema del sesso e dell'arte. Scrive in un registro diverso rispetto a quello di McGinty, ma con la stessa verità. Pubblica scritti sul sesso, testi di critica d'arte o una combinazione delle due cose. Con un libro presto in uscita, Phillip e la sua prosa si inseriscono perfettamente in una specifica tradizione letteraria un po' ammaccata, ma le sue storie crude mettono a nudo una strana tenerezza, un amore devastato per i suoi soggetti, che li eleva veramente al rango di letteratura. Per quanto oscene, non sono certamente storie pornografiche, benché avrei qualche difficoltà a definire letteratura erotica ciò che scrive Phillips.

Il termine "pornografia", a parer mio, è troppo clinico, fa pensare al movimento freddo e distaccato della mano, coperta da un guanto in lattice, di un medico. D'altra parte l'espressione "arte erotica" richiama un immaginario di classe troppo elevato, ci parla di signore troppo distinte per cedere al romanticismo, ma troppo puritane per il porno.

In qualsiasi discussione riguardo al sesso preferisco il suono duro e nitido della parola "scopare". La natura offensiva implicita nella parola va a toccare proprio il nostro tabù nei confronti del sesso.

*Continuava a imbattersi in strane fotografie di giovani ragazze piene di lividi e legate a oggetti, sedie, letti; legate mani e piedi dentro degli armadi, ma sempre comunque sorridenti. Per qualche motivo, molto spesso, mostravano i pollici alzati. Si capiva chiaramente che alcune delle istantanee erano state scattate proprio in quell'appartamento. Altre, invece, era evidente che fossero state fatte in camere d'albergo. Non aveva mai saputo nulla di una possibile sessualità deviante di suo padre, e con la sua profonda conoscenza dell'eroina sapeva quanto poco interessante potesse diventare il sesso per un drogato professionista. Per cui le istantanee gli creavano una leggera confusione. Ve n'erano circa una dozzina, in cui non appariva mai due volte la stessa ragazza; c'erano una ragazza nativa e una ragazza nera, mentre le altre erano tutte ragazze bianche molto simili tra loro, tipi ossuti intorno ai trent'anni, con gli stessi seni piccoli, e con lividi posizionati in modo strano, graffi, labbra gonfie e tracce di occhi neri che andavano scomparendo. Tuttavia c'era qualcosa di rassicurante nella felicità che mostravano. Rendevo le immagini meno minacciose, meno fastidiose.*

-Brad Phillips

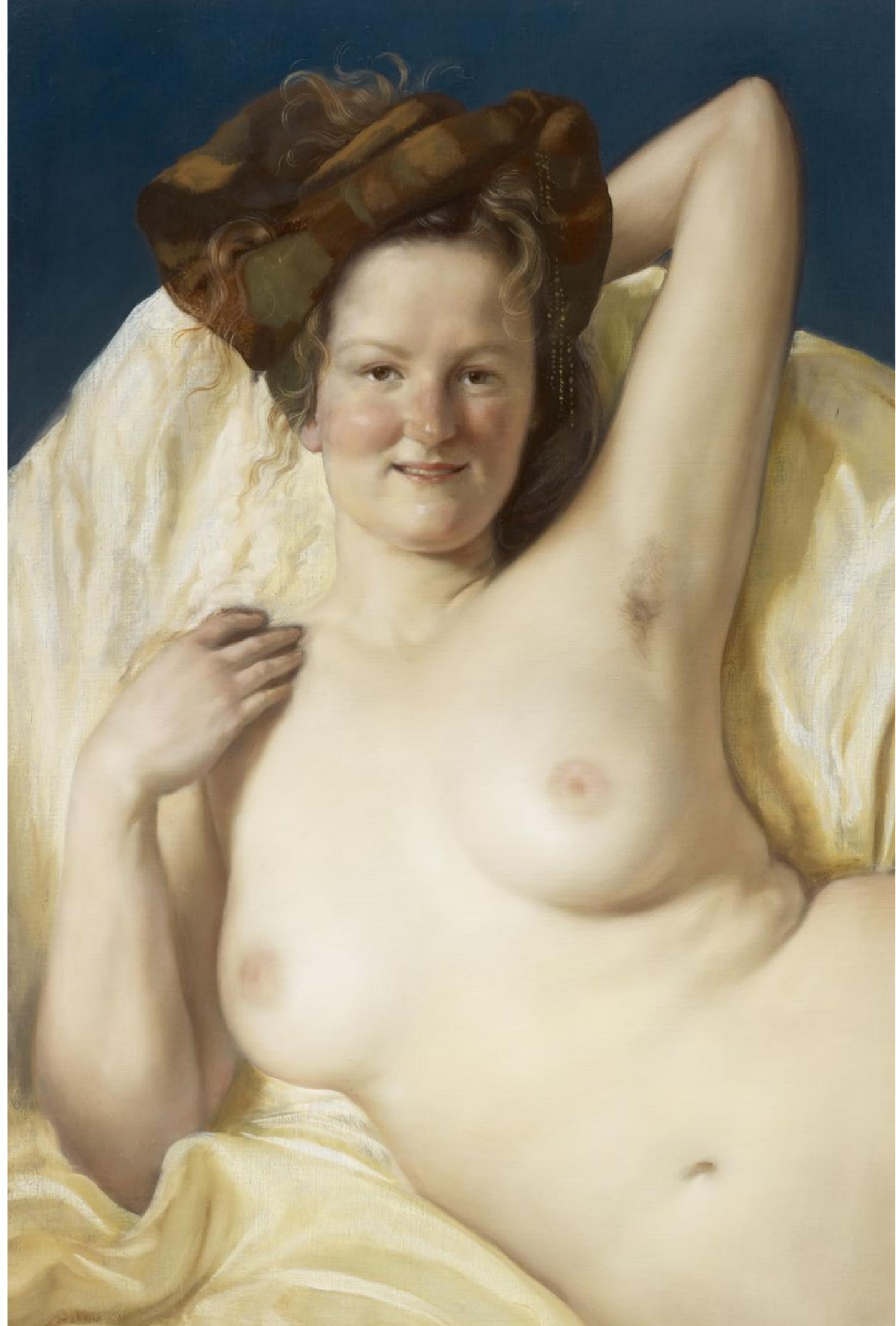
Non ho abbastanza parole.

Quando vivi nella casa accanto a quella della madre di tuo figlio e fai da babysitter al suo nuovo bambino e a vostro figlio affinché lei possa scopare, c'è forse una parola per descrivere questa cosa?

Quando una coppia scopa con un terzo un numero sufficiente di volte da non poter più



Top and bottom - Carlo Mollino, *Untitled*, 1960's. Courtesy: kaufmann repetto, Milan/NewYork



Above - *Good Beer*, 2012. Opposite - *Turban*, 2012.  
Both works by John Currin. © the artist. Courtesy: Sadie Coles HQ, London



Above - Poster Boy, 1980-1990's. Next spread - I Dream of Genie, 2012.  
Both works by Mike Kuchar. © the artist. Courtesy: the artist and François Ghebaly, Los Angeles

What do you call a person who fucks a lot? Slut and/or whore just aren't cutting it anymore.

Polyamorous was a nice new word. Almost everyone I know that is not in an explicitly monogamous relationship practices some version of it. Most people I know are not in explicitly monogamous relationships anymore. That said, few actually own the word.

Where is our art to reflect these changes in the shifting and fundamental aspect of being human? It's not about releasing our inner animal like a bunch of cock-dragging Picassos; the animal is out and is joyfully fucking its way across the landscape in every gender and combination you can imagine.

Take an artist like Araki. He has fully embraced his inner kink with roped-up ladies and I'm hardly the human to yuck another's consensual yum, but there isn't enough juice in his slick pics to get me excited, aesthetically or sexually. Hyper-aesthetizing fucking doesn't make it art. The same can be said for high-80s artists like Helmut Newton and Jeff Koons, though in the latter there was a tickle of good clean raunch that can't be dismissed in his super-sized coupling with Cicciolina, even as his later work almost completely ignores real bodies for the most bloodless of sculpture.

Richard Kern's snaps are very sexy, but there's some whiff of exploitation about them that makes me feel a little sleazy for liking them. Fetish photographers from the '70s like Elmer Batters and Theo Ehret make my heart sing (both enjoying a relatively recent popularity, the latter a favorite of Mike Kelley and Cameron Jamie who co-edited a book of his famous apartment wrestling snaps), but both worked explicitly on a paradigm far from contemporary art, even if I like them much better than most official art. I love their work as they seem to love their subjects on some level, whilst Araki's photographs feel icy, loveless. And then Terry Richardson's just a fucking creep.

The best work of art about fucking of the last year is Lisa Anne Auerbach's artist's book *Knotty*, a volume that in each spread has two magazine images stitched together that have similar poses, one from BDSM, the other from knitting. The simple pun and the natural similarity of the images are silly enough to allow a grin to cover my salacious joy flipping through its pages.

*Thrust after thrust she sucked him to perfection. At last he yelled, "Scheiße!" His whole body jerked backward as his knees buckled. Warm cum filled Eva's mouth. And she swallowed it all. She wanted to feel fucking full.*

**It was as if she followed an ancient dick-sucking handbook someone's older sister had passed down through the ages, one that spilled the secrets to getting your face fucked right.**

ANDREA MCGINTY, *God, I Don't Even Know Your Name*

Susan Sontag said that consciousness is harnessed to flesh.

Our bodies become the first and last site of political rebellion. It is through our suffering that we empathize with others. Your gender, your sexuality, these things have political import. When we've nothing left to lose, it is our bodies we sacrifice.

When a boy gets a hard-on watching men play soccer, shirtless in the sun, his body's sensual joy could get him killed.

**I don't think of the images I use as pornography. I'm more interested in the innocent pleasure of sexuality. That's what I like about early '70s Penthouse. It's coming out of the sexual revolution, a moment when taboos were lifted off sexuality. At that time it was hip to take a date to the adult movie theatre... The women were not innocent—they were women, not girls—it was sex that was innocent. That starts to change in the**

parlare di sesso casuale ma di una qualche forma di relazione, come si può definire quel momento di transizione?

Come definite una relazione fondata sul fatto di riuscire a uscire con qualcuno (cioè di scopare e di sussurrarvi dolcemente nell'orecchio delle sciocchezze) in città in cui nessuno di voi due vive, nonostante vediate altre persone nel posto dove abitate veramente, perché le vostre vite sono così profondamente radicate da non poter vivere nello stesso luogo?

Come definite una persona che scopa molto? Sgualdrina e/o puttana sono termini che non funzionano più.

Il termine "poliamore" è stato un bel neologismo. Quasi tutti quelli che conosco e che non sono impegnati in una relazione monogama ne praticano una qualche forma. La maggior parte delle persone che conosco non hanno più relazioni monogame. Detto ciò, tuttavia, poche di loro si servono di quel termine.

Dov'è la nostra arte nel momento in cui si tratta di riflettere questi cambiamenti in un aspetto mutevole e fondamentale dell'essere umano? Non si tratta di liberare il nostro animale interiore come una squadra di Picasso con i cazzi a penzolini; l'animale è già libero e, a suon di scopate, si sta già facendo strada nel panorama, in tutti i generi e le combinazioni che possiate immaginare.

Prendete un artista come Araki. Egli ha pienamente abbracciato le sue perversioni interiori, con le sue donne legate, e io non sono il tipo da schifare ciò che manda in soluchero qualcun altro, purché consensuale, ma le sue immagini così abilmente costruite non sono abbastanza piccanti da riuscire a eccitarmi, né esteticamente né sessualmente. L'iper-estetizzazione dello scopare non lo trasforma in arte. Lo stesso si può dire di artisti degli anni Ottanta inoltrati, come Helmut Newton e Jeff Koons, anche se nel caso del secondo vi era una dose non trascurabile di buona e sana oscenità nelle gigantesche immagini di accoppiamento con Cicciolina; i suoi lavori successivi, invece, ignorano quasi completamente i corpi reali in favore di sculture di estrema freddezza.

Gli scatti di Richard Kern sono molto sexy, ma hanno in sé tracce di sfruttamento che mi fanno sentire un po' squallido per il fatto che mi piacciono. I fotografi feticisti degli anni Settanta come Elmer Batters e Theo Ehret mi fanno cantare il cuore (entrambi hanno goduto di una popolarità relativamente recente e il secondo è uno dei fotografi più amati da Mike Kelley e Cameron Jamie, il quale ha co-curato un volume contenente le sue famose immagini di donne che lottano in appartamenti), ma tutti e due hanno lavorato esplicitamente su un paradigma distante dall'arte contemporanea, anche se io li preferisco alla maggior parte dell'arte ufficiale. Io amo il loro lavoro perché, per certi versi, sembrano amare i loro soggetti, laddove le foto di Araki appaiono gelide e prive di amore. E poi c'è Terry Richardson, che è solo fottutamente viscido.

La migliore opera d'arte sul tema dello scopare che sia stata prodotta l'anno scorso è il libro d'artista di Lisa Anne Auerbach *Knotty*, un volume che in ogni recto-verso riporta due immagini di rivista cucite insieme e che ritraggono pose simili, una presa dall'ambito del sadomaso e l'altra dal lavoro a maglia. Il semplice gioco di parole e la naturale somiglianza delle immagini sono abbastanza sciocchi da far sì che un sorriso mascheri la gioia lasciva con cui sfoglio le pagine.

*Spinta dopo spinta glielo succhiava alla perfezione. Alla fine lui urlò: "Scheiße!" Il corpo di lui ebbe un sussulto all'indietro mentre le ginocchia gli cedevano. La calda sborra riempì la bocca di Eva. E lei la ingoiò tutta. Voleva sentirsi piena.*



## late '70s with the advent of *Hustler*, when the spirit of the sexual revolution fades away.

BRIAN KENNON, interviewed by Jonathan Griffin, *Mousse*, 2011

Artists that document queer sex lives tend to be way messier and raunchier in their snaps, but also curiously more human. LTTR, founded in 2001, was a sex-positive collection of artists that had a profound impact on my generation. According to their website (which doesn't appear to have been active since 2008), "LTTR is dedicated to highlighting the work of radical communities whose goals are sustainable change, queer pleasure, and critical feminist productivity." This loose collective with its iconic annual art journal brought together and gave a platform to a generation of queer and feminist artists including and certainly not limited to its founders Ginger Brooks Takahashi, K8 Hardy and Emily Roysdon. Pleasure rarely appears in mission statements.

Though quite a few were already deep into their lives as artists, many of those associated with LTTR continued on significant careers that still greatly affect me: Wu Tsang, A.L. Steiner, Anna Sew Hoy, Hanna Liden, Ulrike Müller, R.H. Quaytman, Shannon Ebner, Stanya Khan, and Zackary Drucker, to name only a smattering.

In Los Angeles, local heroes like A.L. Steiner, along with Eve Fowler and Catherine Opie, photograph wonderful real bodies, wearing candid expressions, often caught in ecstatic poses. More than anything, the ladies and genderqueer humans these photographers capture, especially Steiner and Fowler, look like they're really having fun.

Though the gentlemen have not been entirely quiet, the most satisfying sexual imagery about men is coming from the recent upsurge of attention within contemporary art for underground cultural icons like Tom of Finland and Mike Kuchar. Both use rough and raunchy gay subjects that appear to be no longer out— for whatever reason, we now feel comfortable with well-hung hunks and their wet adventures. Though his work is still not quite mainstream, I wholly appreciated the streetlamps hanging with Tom of Finland drawings around Los Angeles during the recent exhibition at MOCA of his work alongside the celebratory bodies of Bob Mizer. But that an explicitly erotic artist, and a queer one, can be featured in an exhibition at a major American museum without prompting protests, without threats from Congress and religious figures decrying our sinking morals, seems like real progress. A progress that affects the pleasures of all of us.

Feminist and queer sex-positivism has made sex a little bit better for everyone.



Math Bass & Eve Fowler, *Gloria Hole*, *Untitled*, 2008. Courtesy: the artists

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*Era come se seguisse un antico manuale su come succhiare i cazzi, un manuale che la sorella maggiore di qualcuno aveva tramandato di generazione in generazione, un manuale che svelava i segreti su come farsi scopare alla perfezione la bocca.*  
—Andrea McGinty, *God, I Don't Even Know Your Name*

Susan Sontag ha affermato che la coscienza è saldamente attaccata alla carne.

I nostri corpi divengono il primo e ultimo luogo della ribellione politica. È attraverso la nostra sofferenza che entriamo in empatia con gli altri. Il nostro genere, la nostra sessualità, queste cose hanno un peso politico. Quando non ci rimane niente da perdere, sono i nostri corpi ad essere sacrificati.

Quando un uomo ha un'erezione mentre guarda degli uomini che giocano a calcio senza maglietta, al sole, la gioia sensuale del suo corpo potrebbe portare alla sua uccisione.

*Non penso alle immagini che uso come pornografia. Mi interessa di più il piacere innocente della sessualità. Ecco quel che mi piaceva di Penthouse nei primi anni Settanta. Era il frutto della rivoluzione sessuale, un momento in cui caddero i tabù sulla sessualità. All'epoca era di moda portare una ragazza con cui si aveva un appuntamento in un cinema a luci rosse... Le donne non erano innocenti – erano donne, non ragazze – era il sesso a essere innocente. Tutto questo comincia a cambiare alla fine degli anni Settanta con l'avvento di Hustler, quando lo spirito della rivoluzione sessuale svanisce.*  
—Brian Kennon, intervistato da Jonathan Griffin, *Mousse*, 2011

Gli artisti che documentano la sessualità *queer* tendono ad essere molto più caotici e osceni nei loro scatti, ma anche curiosamente più umani. LTTR, fondato nel 2001, era un gruppo di artisti *sex-positive* che hanno avuto un profondo impatto sulla mia generazione. Secondo il loro sito web (che non sembra essere attivo dal 2008), "LTTR vuole evidenziare il lavoro di comunità radicali i cui obiettivi sono il cambiamento sostenibile, il piacere *queer* e la produttività femminista critica". Questo collettivo poco strutturato, con la sua iconica rivista d'arte annuale, riuni e offrì una piattaforma a una generazione di artisti *queer* e di artiste femministe che includevano, senza certamente limitarsi a esse, le sue fondatrici Ginger Brooks Takahashi, K8 Hardy ed Emily Roysdon. Il piacere appare raramente tra le dichiarazioni di intenti.

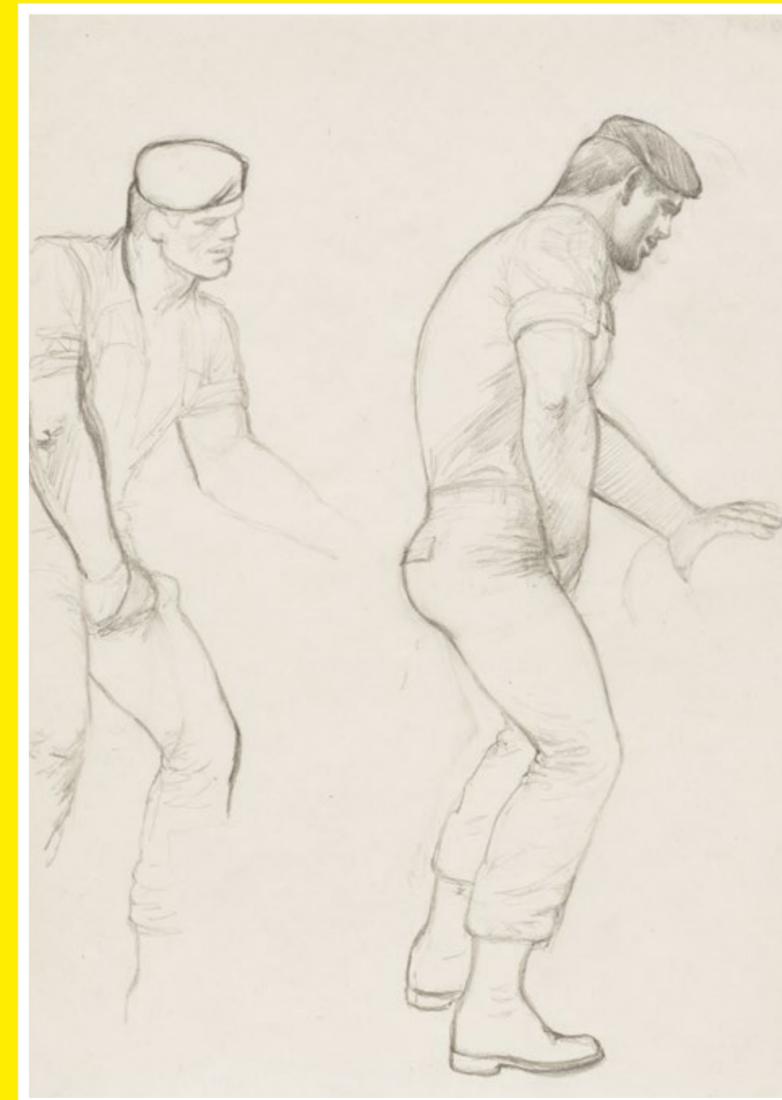
Benché un buon numero di essi fossero già abbastanza avviati come artisti, molti di coloro che si associarono al collettivo LTTR proseguirono le loro carriere in modo significativo, carriere che ancora oggi esercitano una profonda influenza su di me: Wu Tsang, A.L. Steiner, Anna Sew Hoy, Hanna Liden, Ulrike Müller, R.H. Quaytman, Shannon Ebner, Stanya Khan e Zackary Drucker, per nominarne solo una manciata.

A Los Angeles vi sono eroi locali come A.L. Steiner che, insieme a Eve Fowler e Catherine Opie, fotografa stupendi corpi veri, con espressioni candide e spesso colti in pose estatiche. In particolare, le donne e i soggetti *genderqueer* ritratti da questi fotografi, soprattutto da Steiner e Fowler, sembrano davvero divertirsi.

Benché nemmeno gli uomini se ne siano stati del tutto tranquilli, l'immaginario sessuale più soddisfacente riguardo ad essi ci è offerto dalla recente impennata di attenzione, nell'ambito dell'arte contemporanea, per icone culturali underground come Tom of Finland e Mike Kuchar. Entrambi si servono di soggetti gay rudi e osceni, che non ci appaiono più eccentrici – qualunque sia

Art about fucking is different everywhere, so it's easier for me to focus specifically on American artists where I live, but these trends and realities are shifting all over the place. Radical religious groups everywhere still try to trample sexual rights, mostly at the expense of women, though all free expressions of sex outside of prescribed dictates are caught in their dragnet. They'd probably shoot me just as quickly (if not faster even) as they would any woman who didn't obey their rules.

Every artist and writer that shows sex given freely and with eager consent inspires others to own their bodies. Like most photos with raw nudity and fucking, I'm not sure if I'd say that any of the above artists' works turn me on exactly, but they certainly make me feel more comfortable in my skin, more heady and ready to pursue my own desires, vanilla or kinky, raunchy or sweet, with whoever I choose and who also chooses me, with a little more joy and a little less fear. Our current moment hasn't gone far enough to constitute a sexual revolution quite yet, but every orgasm given freely and with joy brings us one slippery body closer.



Above - Tom of Finland, *Untitled* (preparatory drawing), c. 1975. Courtesy: David Kordansky Gallery, Los Angeles. Photo: Brian Forrest

Right - Tom of Finland, *Untitled*, 1947. © Tom of Finland ® Foundation, Incorporated



mostra di un importante museo statunitense senza scatenare proteste, senza minacce da parte del Congresso e senza che delle figure religiose denuncino la decadenza della nostra morale, sembra essere un progresso reale. Un progresso che ha effetti sui piaceri di tutti noi.

L'atteggiamento favorevole al sesso delle femministe e degli omosessuali ha reso il sesso un po' migliore per tutti.

L'arte che parla dello scopare è diversa in ogni luogo in cui si va, per cui per me è più facile concentrarmi specificamente sugli artisti statunitensi, cioè della nazione in cui vivo, ma queste tendenze e realtà stanno cambiando ovunque. Dappertutto i gruppi religiosi radicali cercano ancora di calpestare i diritti sessuali, per lo più a spese delle donne, benché tutte le libere espressioni del sesso al di fuori delle prescrizioni finiscano nella loro rete. Probabilmente mi sparerebbero con la stessa velocità (se non addirittura più velocemente) con cui sparerebbero a qualunque donna non rispetti le loro regole.

Ogni artista e scrittore che mostra il sesso nel suo donarsi liberamente, consensualmente e con entusiasmo, è un'ispirazione affinché gli altri possano riprendere possesso dei loro corpi. Come avviene con la maggior parte delle fotografie che mostrano immagini di nudo e di persone che scopano in modo abbastanza crudo, non sono sicuro di poter dire che il lavoro di nessuno degli artisti citati in precedenza mi faccia veramente eccitare, ma certamente mi fanno sentire più a mio agio nella mia pelle, più caparbio e pronto a soddisfare i miei desideri, convenzionali o perversi che siano, osceni o dolci, con chiunque io scelga e a sua volta scelga me, con un po' più di gioia e un po' meno paura. Il nostro momento presente non si è ancora spinto abbastanza avanti da poter costituire una rivoluzione sessuale, ma ogni orgasmo donato liberamente e con gioia ci porta un po' più vicini a quel traguardo.

la ragione ora ci sentiamo a nostro agio con uomini superdotati e con le loro lubriche avventure. Benché il suo lavoro non sia ancora diventato del tutto *mainstream*, ho molto apprezzato i disegni di Tom of Finland appesi ai lampioni in giro per la città di Los Angeles durante la recente mostra, tenutasi al MOCA, del suo lavoro, esposto accanto alle immagini di Bob Mizer e alla loro celebrazione dei corpi maschili. Ma il fatto che un artista esplicitamente erotico, e un artista *queer*, possa essere ospitato in una

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## The Now Futurism and the Then Zeitgeist

J. HOBERMAN ON MIKE KUCHAR'S *SINS OF THE FLESHAPOIDS* (1965)



Illustration from *Here Is a Foretaste of Tomorrow*, promotional pamphlet for General Motors' Futurama II, World's Fair Pavilion, New York, 1964–65.

*Some artists see an infinite number of movies. . . .*

—Robert Smithson, "Entropy and the New Monuments," *Artforum*, June 1966

THE ATOMIC WAR of October 1962 had been averted. There was a heady moment—presaged by the New York World's Fair that opened in the spring of 1964 and heralded by the appearance of Roy Lichtenstein's drawing *Great Rings of Saturn!!* on the cover of *Art in America* that April: Pop Art merged with Science Fiction, and the Future was Now.

This was not necessarily perceived as a Bad Thing. The celluloid harbinger of the Now Futurism was Michelangelo Antonioni's *Red Desert*. "My intention was to translate the poetry of [the industrial] world, in which even factories can be beautiful," Antonioni said of his first color movie—a chic, gorgeous, supremely alienated evocation of poison smog and toxic waste as filtered through Monica Vitti's ontological hysteria.

*Red Desert* won the Golden Lion at the Venice Film Festival in September 1964. Interviewing Antonioni for *Cahiers du Cinéma*, Jean-Luc Godard (who was particularly intrigued by the Italian director's research into cybernetics) wondered whether the contemporary world had altered his aesthetic. "Pop art is proof that we are looking for something new," Antonioni told him, hardly unaware that the Venice Biennale only just concluded had been dubbed "the Biennale of Pop art," attacked by the Vatican press and *Pravda* alike. "Pop art should not be underestimated," the director continued. "It's an 'ironic' movement, and a conscious irony is extremely important." In that sense, *Red Desert* was, at least for Antonioni, a hopeful movie. Echoing the Futurists of 1909, he maintained that, seen as "lines and curves," a factory chimney might be preferable to a grove of trees.

Antonioni was articulating something that Americans already understood. Technology had subsumed nature and repackaged it as a theme park or consumer commodity. General Motors' Futurama II, the most expensive and popular World's Fair pavilion, gave visitors a trip to a benign, macroengineered 1984 of total automation, undersea vacations, and moon trips—a universal, "more machined environment," as a writer for *Industrial Design* put it. The Futurama provided Andy Warhol with his most vivid memory of the fair (which had commissioned a mural from him, as it had from Robert Indiana, Lichtenstein, and James Rosenquist, and then, because Warhol's contribution represented the FBI's thirteen "most wanted" men, painted over it). "Sitting in a car with the sound coming from speakers behind me," the artist recalled, "I got the same sensation I always got when I gave an interview—that the words weren't coming out of me, that they were coming from someplace else, someplace behind me."

Warhol's experience of alienated automation notwithstanding, we might date the Now Futurism to the day in February 1965 that *Red Desert* had its US premiere at a posh Upper East Side venue, or to two weeks later, when, under the rubric "The Responsive Eye," the Museum of Modern Art in New York endorsed Pop's putative successor, Op, with an extensive survey of optical-illusion-based painting—both cited as happening events in the opening sentence of the *New York Times Magazine's* March 21 zeitgeist piece "Not Good Taste, Not Bad Taste—It's 'Camp.'" Or perhaps the moment arrived that April when the Leo Castelli Gallery unveiled Rosenquist's *F-111*, 1964–65, the monumental mural (tasteless triumphalism or deadpan critique?) that the onetime billboard painter wrapped around the gallery's four walls. Certainly, the Now Futurism was official that September, when the Third New York Film Festival opened with Godard's *Alphaville*, blurbled in the program notes as the "first successful incursion of pop art into the cinema."

Where Rosenquist turned a slightly larger-than-life-size image of a jet bomber into an airbrushed field for tire treads, lightbulbs, a cake, a plate of canned spaghetti, a mushroom cloud, a scuba diver, and a smiling child beneath a hair dryer, Godard extrapolated the ready-made cinema icon Lemmy Caution (played here, as in a long-running series of French detective flicks, by American actor Eddie Constantine) into a future populated by comic-book characters. An assemblage of pop-culture artifacts, *Alphaville* was shot like a documentary on high-speed black-and-white film with available light; it unfolded almost entirely at night in an assortment of "new" Paris locations, including hotel lobbies, office buildings, shopping plazas, and the four-lane *périphérique* that encircled the city. "We are already living in the future," Godard had told the press.



Mike Kuchar, *Sins of the Fleshapoids*, 1965, 16 mm, color, sound, 43 minutes. Xar (Bob Cowan).

*Alphaville* was neorealist sci-fi, or, as Andrew Sarris would later describe it, "science fiction without special effects." Cinema itself was the special effect. Godard represented everyday objects as futuristic gadgets. A Wurlitzer jukebox was a surveillance device, a Zippo lighter a secret radio transmitter; Alpha 60 (the computer that controlled the city of Alphaville) was, per the filmmaker, "a little three-dollar Philips fan, lit from below," while the computer's croaking voice was supplied by a man with a prosthetic larynx.

But really, the Now Future arrived in late '64, when Castelli showed Andy Warhol's "Flower Paintings" and David Bourdon began his *Village Voice* review of the show with a lengthy account of Wesley Barry's *Creation of the Humanoids*, a sci-fi cheapster nearly as color-coded as *Red Desert* and more impoverished than *Alphaville* that hadn't even been reviewed in the *New York Times*:

*In "Creation of the Humanoids," the survivors of World War III solve their labor shortage by creating humanoid robots. These "clickers" are blue, hairless, and often dangerously good-looking. Narcissistic women fall into programmed "rapport" with their humanoids. The big problem comes when the R-70s steal other robots off the assembly line and further humanize them into R-96s, which lack only four points to be human. The R-96s are sent out to infiltrate human society. The denouement comes when the heroine and the hero (a militant anti-humanoid who goes around throwing bombs at uppity "clickers") discover themselves to be machines. This is the happy ending of what Andy Warhol calls the best movie he has ever seen.*

And thus Barry's movie became a Warhol film.

*Sins of the Fleshapoids is my most movie movie. It is a monument assembled to glorify Hollywood and the "star" image that people can radiate.*  
—Mike Kuchar, 1965

**AN ENIGMATIC PIECE OF WORK** that bears a 1960 copyright but officially opened in Los Angeles during the summer of 1962 and seems to have circulated for several years at the bottom of various double bills, *The Creation of the Humanoids* was directed by a former child star of silent pictures from a script by Jay Simms, who soon after wrote the more hysterical postapocalyptic American International thriller *Panic in Year Zero!* (1962).

*The Creation of the Humanoids* was entirely devoid of exteriors and, for the most part, action. The set was thrillingly barren, partaking of a style that might be termed Moldy Danish Modern. As Robert Smithson wrote of the new shopping malls, "the lugubrious complexity of these interiors has brought to art a new consciousness of the vapid and the dull." *The Creation of the Humanoids* was shot by a distinguished cinematographer, Hal Mohr, but the camera seldom moved. Rather, it considered performances that were at once utterly perfunctory and weirdly bursting with conviction, underscored by a looped, wailing sound track that suggested a soprano's impression of a theremin.

Barry's opening montage of mushroom clouds and persistent analogizing of the Order of Flesh and Blood's vigilante hostility toward all clickers (particularly in matters of "rapport") with racial hostility and the struggle for civil rights imbued *The Creation of the Humanoids* with a measure of social criticism; yet, scarcely more than a series of conversations, the movie offered satire without affect. The clickers were smug enough to be denizens of the Factory ("Don't put me on," one deadpans), and the dialogue was often hilarious. "I've given

you a negative feeling—I must apologize. . . . Shall I turn myself off?” a gallant clicker asks his human mistress; the anticlicker threat “I’ll have your memory pulled so fast you’ll never forget it” is worthy of Sam Fuller. A social call is paid at 3 AM (“I really just came by to apologize for being so late”) in a picture that might have been made to be seen at that hour on TV.

The inept, mechanical quality of the movie’s meditation on the quality of robot and human love is hardly inappropriate to its subject and almost poignant in its earnest irony. In the winter of 1964–65, even before *The Creation of the Humanoids* was listed, along with feather boas and Warhol’s *Sleep* (1963), in a random list of things the *New York Times Magazine* deemed as “generally agreed” examples of “Pure Camp,” Mike Kuchar—a twenty-two-year-old photo retoucher living in the Bronx—conceived his own 16-mm version of Warhol’s favorite movie.

An amateur effort starring the filmmaker’s friends and shot, without a script, mainly on weekday nights in various Bronx and Brooklyn apartments, *Sins of the Fleshapoids* (1965) has the effect of making *The Creation of the Humanoids* seem as monumental as a Cecil B. DeMille superproduction and itself seem merely the idea for one. Like Kenneth Anger’s *Scorpio Rising* (1964), *Fleshapoids* has the look of a home movie, having been shot on the amateur reversal stock Kodachrome II and all the more richly saturated for having been printed on Kodachrome as well; no less than Antonioni’s in *Red Desert*, Kuchar’s “specific aim,” the filmmaker maintained, was “to bombard and engulf the screen with vivid and voluptuous colors.”



Still from Wesley Barry's *Creation of the Humanoids*, 1962, 35 mm, color, sound, 75 minutes. From left: Esme (Frances McCann) and Pax (David Cross).

Set “a million years in the future” and chronicling the conflict between indolent humans and their robot “fleshapoid” slaves, Kuchar’s epic is in essence a silent movie with a tremulous voice-over narration (supplied by Bob Cowan) and a more or less continuous montage of movie music (also compiled by Cowan and including, among many other things, snippets from Bernard Herrmann’s score for *The 7th Voyage of Sinbad* [1958]). The action is punctuated with strategic sound effects and occasional superimposed speech balloons, the movie directed as a silent movie would have been. “Intensive rehearsing was not necessary,” Kuchar recalled in an early interview. “In fact, sometimes what I did was to yell out directions of what the actors should do while the camera was on and the film was rolling.” Decor is all. *Fleshapoids*’ true ancestor is *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari*.

Kuchar’s vision of a fully machined environment was primitive yet au courant. In the recent tradition of John Cassavetes’s *Shadows* (1959), another movie embarked on without a scenario or an ending, Kuchar assembled his narrative from scenes of people swanning about or striking poses. Where Cassavetes used eager acting students, Kuchar employed exhibitionist friends and their friends in an atmosphere of friendly fooling around: “Love is in the air, not only for the humans, but for the Robots too.” Eventually, the film coalesces into a narrative contrasting the decadent humans—the sneering Prince Gianbeno (George Kuchar); his unfaithful consort, Princess Vivianna (Donna Kerness); and her equally voluptuous, if less expressive, lover Ernie (Julius Mittelman)—with a pair of pure-hearted fleshapoids, Xar (Cowan) and Melenka (Maren Thomas), who have sex through the exchange of electrical charges (represented by scratches on the film emulsion) rather than of bodily fluids.

Like *Alphaville*, *Fleshapoids* repurposes ordinary objects, but Kuchar’s substitutions are more pragmatic than programmatic—Christmas-tree ornaments augmenting Vivianna’s jewels, a light meter doubling as Melenka’s internal-control mechanism. The sole instances of sci-fi modernism are supplied by Cowan’s herky-jerky constructivist moves, suggesting those of the Martians in the 1924 Soviet space opera *Aelita*, and his headgear, which appears to be a fascist military helmet.

Just as the fleshapoids struggled for their right to an erotic life, so the Kuchar brothers’ earlier 8-mm movies had asserted every American’s right to be a public spectacle. There are no bad performances; everyone has the opportunity to live in a garish Hollywood melodrama. Their characters’ amorous adventures are imbued with cheesy glamour. (*Fleshapoids*’ copious seminudity, play of textures, use of turbans and scarves, and omnisexual display recall Jack Smith’s *Flaming Creatures* [1963].) In a similarly democratic spirit, Mike Kuchar coaxes Egyptian-Greco-Roman motifs out of lower-middle-class furnishings—leopard-skin throws, bowls of wax fruit, fat candles, plaster busts, plastic goblets, giant urn-shaped planters. The characters are garlanded with artificial flowers. The murals drawn on the whitewashed walls would not be out of place in a neighborhood Greek taverna.

Tacit acknowledgment of how close the world came to mutually assured destruction, nuclear war is a given in the Now Futurism. *The Creation of the Humanoids*, *Alphaville*, and *Sins of the Fleshapoids* are all explicitly postapocalyptic. That the *Fleshapoid* Future, basically imagined in terms of Mediterranean antiquity, is Now is reinforced by the various brand-name snacks (Clark Bars, Wise potato chips) lying casually around the set, as well as by the toy robot to which, enthusiastically writhing on the palace floor, the female fleshapoid gives birth in the movie’s climactic scene.

As befits its punning biblical title, *Fleshapoids* is essentially a gloss on the book of Genesis. The title card represents the s in SINS as a snake. The humans are said to “live in a true paradise.” The first shot is a close-up of a woman taking a chomp out of an apple. Still, it is not the humans who learn to procreate but

the fleshapoids. Kuchar's narrative is the precise opposite of *Alphaville*'s. In his world, the robots prevail: "Where the humans failed to find love—the machines have succeeded."

*Alphaville* and *Sins of the Fleshapoids* were in near-simultaneous production during the winter of 1965. Kuchar's film appeared first, unveiled April 15 at the City Hall Cinema in New York on a bill with Rudy Burckhardt's bucolic Frankenstein riff *Lurk* ("World premiere of two BEAUTIFUL AND SHOCKING SCIENCE FICTION MOVIES like never before," per the ad that the Film-Makers' Cinematheque took out in the *Village Voice*), even as *F-111* went on display and some ten weeks before Godard won the Golden Bear at the 1965 Berlin Film Festival; it was revived in August at the Players Theatre on MacDougal Street, showing there intermittently (sometimes at midnight) into October. By that time, *Alphaville* had opened the New York Film Festival, to a mixed response, and even the Film-Makers' Cinematheque was showing old Flash Gordon serials.



Still from Mike Kuchar's *Sins of the Fleshapoids*, 1965, 16 mm, color, sound, 43 minutes. Prince Gianbeno (George Kuchar).

Was it thanks to Warhol or Kuchar that *The Creation of the Humanoids* was name-checked by Susan Sontag? Her canonical essay "The Imagination of Disaster," originally published in the October 1965 issue of *Commentary*, cites the movie as an example of what she deems the "most fascinating" of science-fiction-film motifs: dehumanization. Not even nine months later, *Creation of the Humanoids* (identified as "Andy Warhol's favorite movie") headed the list of landmark sci-fi films Smithson included in "Entropy and the New Monuments," the definitive articulation of the Now Futurism that he detected in the work of Donald Judd, Sol LeWitt, Robert Morris, and Dan Flavin (who might have supplied the lighting for *Alphaville*): "Many architectural concepts found in science-fiction have nothing to do with science or fiction," Smithson wrote; "instead they suggest a new kind of monumentality which has much in common with the aims of some of today's artists."

Judd's "pink-Plexiglas box" struck Smithson as "a giant crystal from another planet." The "obstructions" of LeWitt's first one-man show projected "an ersatz future very much like the one depicted in the movie 'The Tenth Victim,'" Elio Petri's comic adaptation of Robert Sheckley's science-fiction novel, which, set in a world where assassination is a spectator sport, had opened in New York in December 1965 (in that film, 1960s New York and Rome represent the Future, as '60s Paris did, if more programmatically, in *Alphaville*). "LeWitt's show has helped to neutralize the myth of progress," Smithson claimed. Time similarly stood still, he thought, in Morris's lead-embedded sex organs ("mixing the time states or ideas of '1984' with 'One Million B.C.'") and Claes Oldenburg's "prehistoric 'ray-guns,'" not to mention the Museum of Natural History, where "the 'cave-man' and the 'space-man' may be seen under one roof."

Progress was also liquidated in the postatomic world of *Sins of the Fleshapoids*—made by an individual who, as Smithson approvingly noted of one artist he considered in "Entropy and the New Monuments" (sculptor Peter Hutchinson), rather than go "to the country to study nature, will go to see a movie on 42nd Street, like 'Horror at Party Beach' two or three times and contemplate it for weeks on end."

*The science fiction film (like a very different contemporary genre, the Happening) is concerned with the aesthetics of destruction, with the peculiar beauties to be found in wreaking havoc, making a mess.*  
—Susan Sontag, "The Imagination of Disaster" (1965)

**WITH ITS HOMEMADE COSTUMES**, thrift-shop clutter, comic violence, grotesque sexuality, and mix of desultory and hamming performers, the *Sins of the Fleshapoids* mise-en-scène is analogous to Sontag's 1962 characterization of the Happening style—"its general look of messiness, its fondness for incorporating ready-made materials of no artistic prestige, particularly the junk of urban civilization."

Kuchar himself linked *Fleshapoids* to another form of avant-garde theater by employing the phrase "cinema of the ridiculous" in a press release, when, a year after its initial screenings and now billed as an "underground classic," his "legendary and lavish" movie enjoyed a commercial run at the Bleeker Street Cinema on a bill with Jock Livingston's *Zero in the Universe* (a low-budget science-fiction "head" movie, made in Amsterdam in 1966 and most notable for its Don Cherry score). This was followed by a move to the Gate, a hippie hole-in-the-wall on lower Second Avenue.

Thus *Fleshapoids* was the junkyard analogue to a cycle of European films that, in addition to *Red Desert*, *Alphaville*, and *The Tenth Victim*, includes Antonio Margheriti's mid-'60s "Gamma One" movies; Joseph Losey's *Modesty Blaise* (1966), which, Monica Vitti and extensive Op art furnishings notwithstanding, may be less an instance of Now Futurism than of Austin Powers retro mod *avant la lettre*; and two tawdry outliers, veteran exploitation producer David Friedman's low-budget soft-core porn film *Space Thing* and

Roger Vadim's even smarmier Jane Fonda vehicle, *Barbarella* (both 1968), the latter dismissed by Jonas Mekas in the *Voice* as a "rich man's science fiction movie," as well as a *Fleshapoids* rip-off.

As if to prove Mekas's point, Kuchar's exercise in sci-fi *povera* was revived again in New York, the very month that *Barbarella* opened, on a bill of "Underground Exotica" at the Gate, having established itself alongside *Scorpio Rising*, its partner in ultrasaturated Kodachrome II, as a perennial underground crowd-pleaser. Indeed, *Fleshapoids* left an impression sufficiently strong and favorable for the *New York Times*' senior film critic, Vincent Canby, to use it as a stick with which to bash *Krakatoa, East of Java* in June 1969 and *Pink Narcissus* two years later. But not all critics were amused.



Jean-Luc Godard,  
*Alphaville, une étrange  
aventure de Lemmy  
Caution, 1965*, 35 mm,  
black-and-white, sound, 99  
minutes. Lemmy Caution  
(Eddie Constantine).

In fact, Mekas's colleague at the *Voice* Andrew Sarris, who wrote briefly on the occasion of *Fleshapoids*' 1966 release, found the movie worse than distasteful. It struck him as physically disgusting, the product of "that generation of New Yorkers that grew up in the foul incense of movie theatres without ever really outgrowing the fantasies on the screen." *Fleshapoids* seemed to Sarris both decadent and self-loathing. "The spoofing is so sickeningly serious," he sniffed, "that what starts out like satire degenerates into the documentary of an addiction." (The same could be said of *Modesty Blaise*, a movie to which the critic was far more generous and that he took far more seriously.)

Sarris allowed that, as in earlier Kuchar films, this desecration was *sui generis*. "We are now in the age of the moviepoids," he lamented, "the strange creatures who flaunt their own ugliness in the very medium that once transformed the ugliness of the spectator into the stuff of redemptive fantasy spectacle." Wreaking havoc, making a mess, *Sins of the Fleshapoids* was something far worse than science fiction without special effects. Scarcely a utopian fantasy, or a movie in which Hollywood's consumers took the fantasy mechanism into their own hands, it was the nightmare intimation of a post-Hollywood future.

*J. Hoberman's most recent book, Film After Film: Or, What Became of 21st Century Cinema?, was published by Verso last year and is due out in paperback this fall.*

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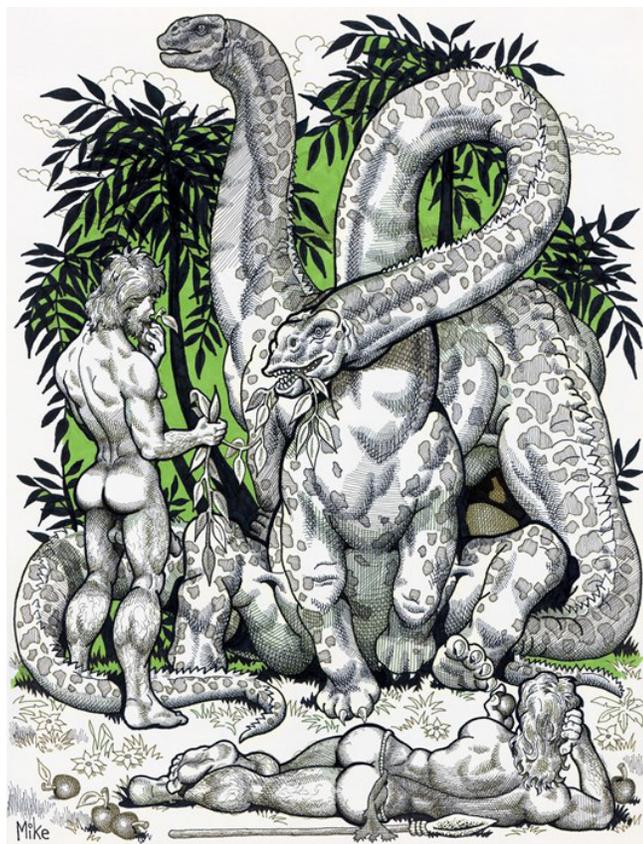
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# DAZED

## Cult VIP: Mike Kuchar

The lurid homoerotic comics of one half of 1950s underground cinema's visionary twins

Text David Dawkins



Gatherings happened in lofts, apartments or unused shops. But the particular loft apartment of experimental filmmaker and New York tastemaker Ken Jacobs was the place to be. "Yeah, he enjoyed our pictures and said, 'Come back next month,' and invited Jonas Mekas, who had a column in *The Village Voice*. (Mekas) also liked our pictures and wrote a big raving review. It was a great time to be making pictures; we knew Andy Warhol, Jack Smith, Kenneth Anger, Allen Ginsberg, they'd all come to our shows and say 'hi'. It was a very exciting time. It was a real exchange. Everyone worked separately, everyone had their own vision, but we'd all meet up at the premieres."

Mekas, now considered a godfather of avant-garde cinema, remembers what he thought when he first saw their work: "These two kids from the Bronx arrived on the New York film underground scene with a bang. The 8mm film camera, relegated to filming honeymoon trips or first steps of babies, was almost overnight changed into a means of creating these huge neo-Hollywood pop spectacles. And even more incredible: they did it in their kitchen!"

But the passionate, human colour-dramas made by the Kuchars during this period were very different to the formal, avant-garde approach of their contemporaries. "They were minimal," Mike says, explaining the difference between the styles. "They aimed a camera at a crack

in the wall for like, a half hour. Maybe there would be a slight light-change. We just did what was natural to us, what felt right. Our films were a regurgitation of the pop culture we are all submerged in. We were beginning to see a certain appreciation for 'camp'. For me 'camp' means that you set up your tent on some established recreation ground – in this case Hollywood – and you have a little fun with it. It's about taking the language of movies and making it so overblown it's glorious."

Cult VIP: Mike Kuchar



Most recently, Mike's artistic vision has infiltrated the world of underground comics. Some of his homoerotic illustrations have taken 20 years to emerge, but are now being shown, most notably at last year's Frieze London. The majority of his new artworks apply the same camp sensibility of his films to still images of muscular men, dinosaurs and neolithic imagery. There's a direct link between the Kuchars and the American underground comic scene. "We were all friends!" Mike says. "Art (Spiegelman) lived next door to my brother for a few years." It was natural that Mike moved towards comics, and like all his projects, it started in a typically Kucharian manner. "So I got recommended by a friend to submit for this underground comic-book called Gay Heart Throbs. It did very well – I drew it better and knew the subject better than the other guys. Other editors saw it and got in touch, so I started making more and that got me back into drawing."

Mike's illustrations and films are thematically connected. "I never can separate one from another," Losier says. "If you look at Mike's muscular drawings of men with giant penises in fairytale landscapes, surrounded by peace and joy, pleasure, you'll find the same in his films!" Sam Ashby, editor of queer film-zine Little Joe, says, "I would say the form of comic-making allows his more unattainable sexual fantasies to exist, while the films exhibit a more poetic longing, often exploring forms of male portraiture that diverge significantly from the comics while retaining something uniquely 'Mike' about them."

Mike has now picked up where his brother left off at the San Francisco Art Institute, teaching George's famed Electrographic Sinema course and passing on this poetic, low-budget and gloriously gaudy tradition of filmmaking. In a way the circle completes itself, as a new generation of film students are forced from their comfort zones and challenged to create frenzied, budget-less, DIY movies in the manner that the Kuchar brothers started out. And Mike Kuchar's influence is global. As Ben Rivers, the experimental English filmmaker behind *Two Years At Sea* (2011), explains, "There's absolutely no doubt about it, the Kuchar brothers helped me down the path I now walk. Their films were the first experimental films I saw, and in a flash I knew that there were no limits to what could be done! I eventually met Mike Kuchar in the 90s – he'd just shown *Sins of the Fleshapoids* – and already being a massive fan, I was blown away by seeing this film for the first time on the big screen. I accosted him in the aisle and he gave me his address on a piece of paper which I still have in a frame."



“The way I see it, movies had always been made about crazy people. When we came along you had the crazy people making the goddamn movies. So you got the real stuff.”

While not as famous as such peers as Warhol and Anger, Mike Kuchar's work captured the poetic traits of filmmaking in their earliest and purest form. His pictures are unabashed, uniquely his own and an entirely captivating part of a seminal time and place in 20th-century art. But Mike is in every way a gentle giant, never wanting to boast or overstate his importance. "The way I see it now, movies had always been made about crazy people," he says. "When we came along you had the crazy people making the goddamn movies. So you got the real stuff. But it was always fun. Me and my brother, we kept up that tradition. John Waters hates it when I call it a hobby and he's got a point. I guess I could call it a vocation, a way of speaking, a way of coming to terms with existence. But when we were young it was all about having fun, and it's still that way now."

decoy  
magazine

## GAY-ZAR, LORD OF THE AMERICAN SAVAGELAND: MIKE KUCHAR

By: Miguel Burr May 17, 2012

Primal Male – Illustrations by Mike Kuchar @ [The Apartment](#), May 03-August 15, 2012



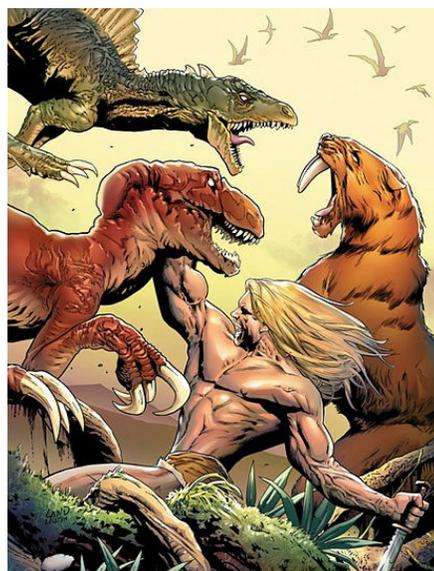
Mike Kuchar. HE-MEN! 24 x 18 in.

Tor, Conan, Ka-Zar, Jesus Christ: Loin-clothed men fighting, conquering or simply riding dinosaurs have captivated young minds ever since the two were first anachronistically depicted in scenes together. The quintessentially perfect visual pairing of cavemen and dinosaurs, not unlike peanut butter and chocolate or Texas and capital punishment, ranges from pulp comics of the 1930's to pro-creationist Christian propaganda of today.

Somewhere between pulp and propaganda exists the lavishly-fantasized prehistoric queer erotica of Mike Kuchar.

Anyone interested in superbly rendered fantasy illustration (a la Heavy Metal Magazine) will feel a sudden rush of blood to the groin at the sight of seven felt-pen and ink drawings from well-known filmmaker Kuchar's personal collection, now on display at The Apartment through August 2012. Kuchar is an internationally renowned queer filmmaker, half of the Kuchar Brothers (with his late twin George) who inspired notables such as Andy Warhol and John Waters. After viewing these drawings, it's fair to say that Kuchar has as much creative talent coming out of his fingertips as he does the camera lens.

Although there are only seven works in this show, running concurrently with two other shows in the adjoining project space The Commons (a collection of abstract painters and an installation by Rebecca Belmore), there is a lot going on here. These works are highly accessible on various levels. The illustrations themselves are lovingly, painstakingly rendered. Gorgeous gesticulation and sketch strokes full of aplomb abound, from perfectly crosshatched shading to eye-popping two-tone felt marker backgrounds of Paleozoic flora; as much Joe Kubert in their dramatic comic book anatomy as Robert Crumb in



the audacity department. Come to think of it, the exaggeratedly thick and erect nipples on all the male figures are completely Crumb.

Consider the posing of these prehistoric characters; cavemen in positions of tenderness and vulnerability; call it Lowbrow-Sentimental. In A “Lost Love” Found, two cromags kiss dearly while one pops an erection beneath a scanty loin cloth and his bearded lover drops his leather-bound mallet in surprise. In Man and Monster, a Simon Bisley-esque take on anatomy, our primeval friend has a giant uncircumcised dong hanging well below his knees, this sexual organ more menacing than the roaring tyrannosaurus he hunts with a stone-tipped spear. But mostly, these are tender depictions of primal males loving one another like they probably did long before words like ‘sexuality’ and ‘gender’ were invented. All of this man-love is counterbalanced by various dinosaur species rendered in badass detail (i.e. Man and Monster’s tyrannosaur stomping on bones).



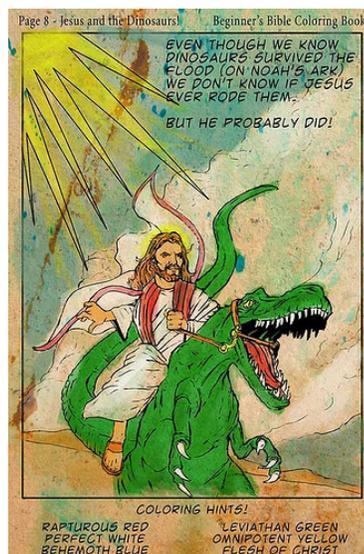
Bearing particular mention is Kuchar’s Teddy Boy, the single anomaly of the collection; the only illustration that is not of prehistoric times, but rather of a lad holding a teddy bear in one hand and clutching a rocket ship under his other arm. He gazes up into the darkness as a foreboding tree seemingly threatens to come alive and ensnare him in its branches. It is a scene of innocence lost. This singular ink drawing stands apart in its Norman Rockwell-like nostalgia, truly the wide-eyed soul of Kuchar’s small-but-mighty show.

Finally, there is a glaring topmost layer of meaning that coalesces around these drawings, like a rank, clam dip long overdue, reeking from behind the stereo after the party’s been over for a while: the pre-information age of ‘80s and early ‘90s America; the era to which Kuchar’s paeans to hairy, full-contact man-love belong. They stand tall as a personal and direct reaction to the Culture War raging throughout these decades.

Clearly drawn for no reason other than personal gratification, these are exquisite, solitary, masterworks by a mature artist. They are meandering love letters from a man with time to roam the ages inside his own mind. After all, if Jesus can ride a brontosaurus in the personal belief system of millions, why also can’t the alarmed lover-man of a hirsute hunter-gatherer who is about to be attacked by swooping pterodactyl!?

—

Mike Kuchar is represented by [2nd Floor Projects](#) in San Francisco.





## GEORGE & MIKE KUCHAR

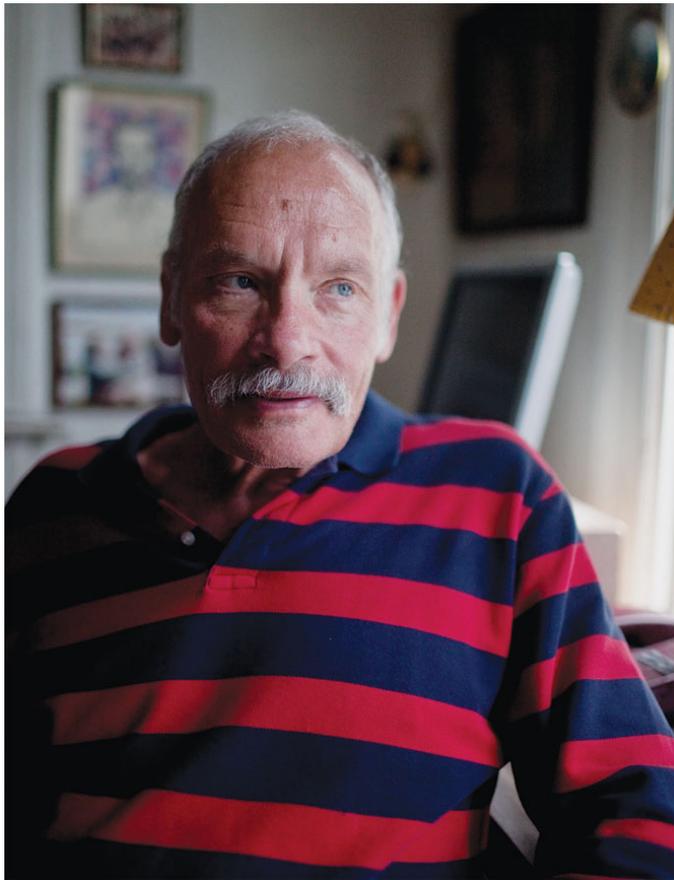
INTERVIEWS BY STEVE LAFRENIERE | PHOTOS BY JEFF ENLOW

September 1, 2009



In the history of experimental film, George and Mike Kuchar stand out like a luridly lit, throbbing purple thumb. Along with Jack Smith, Andy Warhol, Ken Jacobs, et al., the twin Kuchars are among the most emblematic avant-garde filmmakers of their generation. Unlike some of their more educated fellows, their careers began in 1954 when they tore the wrapping paper off an 8-mm camera on their 12th birthday. They quickly taught themselves to use it and set about shooting brilliant, exotic, absurd features starring their friends, inspired by the Hollywood blockbusters and B movies they obsessed over at their local theaters in the Bronx. George and Mike were still in their teens when, years later, serendipity brought their work to the attention of the Manhattan underground-film world, where they were championed by none other than Jonas Mekas, said scene's godfather. Their films were also the central inspiration for another young filmmaker—John Waters refers to the Kuchars as “my heroes.” More than 50 years later, they haven't stopped. At last count George has over 200 movies under his belt, and Mike, an illustrator and painter, continues to make video shorts starring people he meets along the path of his life.

We were going to interview them in a conference call, but as their voices sound so much alike, we realized it would be a transcribing nightmare. So let's do George first, then Mike.



**GEORGE KUCHAR**

**Vice: Were there a lot of big movie palaces in the Bronx when you were teenagers in the 50s?**

**George Kuchar:** There were a lot of theaters, and a lot of people in the Bronx went to the movies. The big one was the Paradise. It was on the Grand Concourse near Fordham Road, and that was quite a spectacular theater. It looked Roman. They had stars twinkling on the ceiling and clouds moving by. There was another theater around Southern Boulevard that played foreign pictures, Antonioni movies. I remember going there and the place was packed to see L'Avventura. And they always had a sign that said "Air-Conditioned." You'd walk by in the summer and, man, the blast of cold air that came out of that place.

**How often did you go?**

Three times a week. Sometimes we'd see the same movie three times.

**Do you remember the ones that made you want to make movies?**

I went to see a lot of Douglas Sirk. That was like going to see work by adults. You felt like it was grown-ups making those pictures, and they really looked good. But then there were the Roger Corman pictures. They were done cheap and we thought, "Gee, it could be fun making those." They would be double bills. Sometimes there would be pictures about Indians with Marla English, and then one of the low-budget horror movies. I used to love seeing those.

**Marla English is criminally forgotten. Did you follow certain stars?**

Yeah. And it didn't have to be the big ones, sometimes it was the stars of the B movies. Or a lot of times I went to a movie because they had listed who did the music. If Bernard Herrmann's name was on the ad, I went to the movie. I loved the sound of the score in the movie theater.

**You and Mike started making movies when you got a camera for your 12th birthday. Was it expensive to process the film?**

The film was \$2.65, and the developing couldn't have been more than that. You'd bring it into a drugstore, and they would process it at a place locally. But it wasn't very good. After a few years it would crack, the emulsion would come out, and it would look like a fresco. So we would send it to Kodak. They did a much better job. A projector didn't cost that much money in those days. They were kind of tin-looking things, with little plastic reels. If you got a better projector it could take bigger reels, so you could make longer movies.

**How did two teenagers from the Bronx connect with the underground-film crowd in Manhattan?**

We had friends, like bohemians or whatever they were called. A friend of mine, Donna Kerness, she was very pretty. We went to high school together, and then I started putting her in pictures. She made friends with this man, Bob Cowan, who was about ten years older, an artist. He came down from Canada with two other Canadian artists, Mike Snow and Joyce Wieland, to get into the culture scene. He was infatuated with Donna, and she introduced me to them, and they introduced my brother and me to that whole art world in New York that was going on.

**Ken Jacobs helped you guys out, right?**

We went to Ken Jacobs's loft because Bob Cowan, I think, was acting in his 8-mm movies. At that time it was like a little theater there, and every Friday or Saturday night he would play underground movies. So my brother and I came with our pictures, people liked them, and we were asked to come back. Ken Jacobs told Jonas Mekas about us, and that's how the whole ball started rolling.

**Even though you were teenagers and didn't have an art background like those other people, you were accepted?**

Yeah! That place used to be full of painters and other artists making movies. We sort of became part of that crowd and began showing at the same venues, and an audience developed. But we had never known anyone like this. These were crazy people. They didn't behave like the people we were working with at our jobs. A lot of them had never grown up. They were sort of fun, wild, and free.

**Where was Warhol in all of this?**

I would see him on the street with his entourage, and then he would come to our shows. I remember him coming once with a whole group of people five minutes into the screening. At that time I was also friends with Red Grooms, who was making some 8-mm movies. He asked me if I wanted to go to a luncheon that Harry Abrams was holding for pop artists. Since I'd just finished *Hold Me While I'm Naked* in 16 mm, he asked me if I'd like to bring a projector. Warhol was there, and Rauschenberg, and Oldenburg. We showed the movie, and afterward Warhol said, "It's good, George. It's too good. Go back to your old style with the 8 mm."



**He got a lot of his ideas from you and Jack Smith.**

Actually, at that time there was a big crosscurrent of people looking at Jack's work. But he was an odd character, Jack Smith. He was way off in left field or something. He was very talented and all, but he had no stability. The rug was pulled. I put him into a movie because he was living next door to the guy that I was using as the star. Jack was going to the Factory one afternoon and he took me along. Warhol was doing a silk screen when we got there. Jack Smith had acted in a Warhol picture and he was mad because he had been off-camera during his biggest scenes and Warhol never told him, "You're out of the frame." Warhol didn't seem to get too disturbed. He just kept silk-screening.

**It's funny that right after the macho Beat era, here come all these queeny guys like Smith and Warhol.**

It was just what was happening. Around the Beat time they all wore ties and shirts and jackets. They're kind of dressed up, you know what I mean? But then this other thing, this strange exotica, came in. It just happened.

**Was it hard to direct actors to work so over the top? I'm thinking of Bob Cowan as the android in Sins of the Fleshapoids. Or Donna Kerness in anything.**

At first I would try to show Donna facial movements I wanted, and she would try to do them. It looked preposterous. So after a while I would just try to guide them, but they had their own ideas of how to do a scene. They didn't want to be told or wouldn't pay attention. They had their own style. It got to the point that they were all on the same wavelength anyway.

**Floraine Connors is one of the most compelling actresses ever put on-screen. I honestly used to think she was a guy in drag.**

She's still around. I've been making video diaries with her. She likes acting, so I make these diaries but then I add in an element of a story with her. She was in a wheelchair for a while, but she's doing OK now.

**She's in California?**

No, she's in Manhattan. Floraine doesn't like flying. She once went on an airplane where someone had a hand grenade. There was a battle, and the hand grenade rolled down the aisle. It traumatized her.

**One more—Francis Leibowitz, the heavysset woman that played your and Mike's mom in Corruption of the Damned. That scene where she commits hara-kiri at the town dump is like Kurosawa directing Red Desert or something.**

Yeah. She could drive a car, so she took us out there. That woman was a lot of fun. She wasn't a stodgy mother. She never tried to stop us from doing anything.

**What happened to all these people when you moved to California in the 70s?**

Bob paints and he also composes music. He's got one of these machines you do the music on... a synthesizer. He makes these home movies where he goes to a shopping mall and shoots Peruvian bands and stuff like that. Donna Kerness is doing a painting class. But after me nobody put them in a picture.

**Do you prefer editing to shooting?**

I like it all. I like shooting because it's like one big party. You get a chance to do compositions, lighting, and your wardrobe and makeup. It's excitement. But it can be hell too, especially if you're doing a scene and the question arises, "What do we do?" I don't know what the hell to do.

**You improvise that much?**

Yeah. So you have to say, "Excuse me, I have to go to the bathroom," and then you can get your thoughts together. When the cameras were bigger and I didn't know what to do to progress a scene, I'd just hide behind the camera. It was big enough to hide your face and you'd make believe you were adjusting the framing.

**Maybe it's because the plots are so much about your own, uh...**

Probably obsessions. They always peek out. Sometimes there's a seam of something that's on your mind or bothering you. Or else you find somebody interesting and you wind up putting them in a plot, and somehow the plot unravels in the picture. But it's other people playing them, so it's all sort of dressed up. And 15 years later you realize what this picture was about, or that it was a pre-shadow of something. Pictures are kind of spooky. Especially when you handle the film yourself, and you got yourself in there. I compare them to little voodoo dolls.



**Kenneth Anger believes that film collects more than just light and shadow. He said it made it hard to tell when they were finished.**

Sometimes I finish a picture I'm working on and I think, "What a monstrosity." Then I play it for a group of people and they sit there like, what just happened? And I think, "Uh-oh, what have I unleashed?" But if there's something wrong with the picture, I fix it. The thing never gets finished unless it gets my complete seal of approval. Otherwise I'm haunted by it.

**I looked on IMDb, and apparently you've made 215 films. What kind of magic energy do you have?**

It's weird. Sometimes years later I look at a movie and say, "Gee, how the hell was I able to do this?" You realize it's kind of massive and where the hell did you get the energy to finish the damned thing? Why did you even start it? The trick about moviemaking is don't think about what you've got to do until you get it all finished. Once you start there's a whole bunch of processes, and with me each one is tackled anew. I never know how to edit them until I get the footage shot. The same thing with what kind of music goes on here and there. And sometimes even, what's the name of the picture? Even while you're making it, what's going on with this film? How come so-and-so got on the phone? And who's on the other end?

**Are the films you make in your production classes at the San Francisco Art Institute all improvised?**

I make my diary movies—portraits of animals, portraits of people and places—but at the school I still make story pictures too. We're all together there and we concoct these things.

**Give me an example.**

Recently there was some guy in the class and he brought in a friend. The friend was very striking looking. I said, "I gotta get you in the picture." He said, "Well, I can only stay 20 minutes." We got the camera out and he became this sailor. The light was terrible. I was just fumbling along. At the time there was some union thing going on at the school, and there were these union buttons. So I had him hand this girl—the star of the picture—this button and she puts it on. Later I took this footage and wove it into the plot, so it

became a scene where this girl gives a button to another girl, and she has a flashback to when she knew this sailor, who gave her a button. So it turned out she was jilted by someone she loved very much and so she wound up in the plot hooked up with this dope addict, trying to forget this doomed romance with the sailor. So from this lousy footage that I put together and saved, I got something else.

**Aren't all your films diary films, then?**

Yeah, you could say that. In the past, when I had to leave an apartment, I would specifically make a film there a few days before, so I could record the apartment. And if I'm going on vacation somewhere, I bring the camera and try to get the vacation into the plot.

**One of my favorite things in your old films is the special effects. There were two kinds: lightning storms and UFO invasions. You had an endless repertoire of ways to pull them off.**

Thanks, I'm glad you liked them. There was a documentary recently made about me and my brother, and they had one of the premieres at Skywalker Ranch. The big special-effects artist who did Jurassic Park and all, he came, and he got a kick out of ours. He said, "Nothing stopped you! You needed a big scene where a flying saucer crashed into a building and you had a budget of a few dollars. Very good."

**I think they're scarier than digital effects. I'm also fascinated with your films about animals. The Mongreloid, the one about your dog, is hilarious.**

With Mongreloid we got stuck there in the country because Curt McDowell, who was in the movie, didn't put antifreeze in the car and the temperature dropped below freezing. We were stuck in a motel, and he had to walk to another town. He was angry at me, and I didn't know if he was going to come back and pick me up, or go back to San Francisco and leave me in this small town with a dog. I only had 15 cents, you know what I mean? That's why you have to have a happy set, because every time you look at a movie later you recall the time that you had making it.



*The hysterical and beautiful films of George Kuchar.*

**You were involved in Curt McDowell's notorious underground film Thundercrack!**

Strange era, the 70s. The bottom fell out, sex-wise. There was a great sense of craziness and freedom here in Frisco. But then it also had its problems. I wrote the script for Thundercrack!, and I wanted it to be literate. I didn't want to use any four-letter words. [laughs] Curt very much saw sex as a celebration and stuff. I always saw it as a horrible trauma in people's lives. Feelings they couldn't control. We were very opposite.

**It looks like everyone in it was tripping their tits off. Pretty wild time on the set?**

Actually, no. Some people who acted in porn movies were in it, but between scenes they'd just be reading a paperback. And you had certain rules. Like if you were in a room and they were doing a sex scene in the other room, you couldn't tell jokes because they'd hear you laughing and think you were laughing about them. I was lighting scenes and it made it difficult for them—to see some lighting guy going around while they're trying to get in the mood and do some humping.

**McDowell was a student of yours when you started teaching at the Art Institute. How were you received there?**

This would have been in 1971. At that time it was OK because they all wore prairie dresses. The hippie era. Then as it went on, art became maybe more serious and some members were thinking, "Get him out of there." He's a nonartist. They would try to poison the other faculty, but it didn't work. The other students got wind of it and said, "We want him here."

**That's pretty nice.**

But yeah, you weather everything, including the way certain people develop tunnel vision, depending on the era they were trained in. You fall out of favor. Then it's "He's hopeless, he's beyond help. You can't possibly straighten this guy out." So, luckily, you're completely ostracized. Therefore you go on and you make your stuff, and you even make stuff to ostracize yourself more from that whole group. Which gives you incentives to make more pictures. Then eventually that falls apart and then there may be more interest in you again. It just goes on like that.

**Do you like working with students?**

Oh yeah. A colleague of mine who was teaching for a long time, she said, "How do you make films with all these different students? I'd blow my top." Like students would have strange accents because they came from other countries and so on. But I'd say, "No, the thicker the accent, the more it makes the pictures seem international. It has more prestige."



**MIKE KUCHAR**

**Vice: What were your early influences?**

Mike Kuchar: In the early days I was more struck by the visual presentation of pictures. The movie theaters back then were temples. I mean, there were goldfish ponds in them. I would go and see these biblical epics and costume spectacles. They impressed me a lot—the sets, the glamour, the music. It was like another world was going on simultaneously with this one. There were certain people who inhabited it that you would see again and again. I didn't realize it at first, but as I was watching them, I was studying the vocabulary of these two-dimensional spectacles. Later on I'd go to a picture if I saw a particular director was involved. But that was later.

**Who directed wasn't such a big question at first?**

No, it was just the effect of entering this other world of big glamorous people. And when I started picking up the camera myself I began to reflect on these things. Of course in my movies they go somewhat wrong.

**I'm not so sure they do.**

Well, my pictures are considered somewhat camp.

**Critics label any Kuchar film outrageous and camp. It's pretty offensive.**

My definition of "camp" is setting up a tent in a recreational area. But yeah, I'm aware of that aspect of them.

**There's something else going on there that pushes the same buttons as von Sternberg. They wouldn't be so good if they were just camp.**

I'm interested in lush escapism and a kind of joy. When I make these pictures I take them seriously. I can't help it. I go into a trance. All my pictures are self-motivated—something might haunt me and I try to capture it. Or certain people have a quality I can use. There are all kinds of reasons, but they're very deep to me. I have to do it. Or sometimes... mmm, yeah. Go ahead, you talk.

**No, all of that comes through. Even just the way you juxtapose shots. Do you work intuitively?**

It's intuitive, but I am conscious of what I'm doing. What I feel, I see, and what I see, I feel. I like to work with colors, but they just kind of fall together.

**Once you got into color, the influence of watching all those Technicolor movies became obvious.**

Other filmmakers asked, well, what are you photographing in? I'd tell them Kodachrome, this home-movie film with a thick emulsion. You could get really dense colors. And they'd say, oh no, when you bring it to the lab the contrast is going to gather, and they won't be able to control the color. And I thought, yeah, that sounds good.

**Is your work more intuitive than George's?**

I guess I'd leave that up to you or other people to figure out. Feel free to.

**OK, are your movies as improvised as his?**

My pictures are never written out beforehand. There's always a start, and from there I'm bringing out things that are in my subconscious. There are all kinds of stories in there. I have certain urges, or the way I react to people. And then it begins to snowball and as I work on it I begin to realize what it's gaining momentum toward. And then I can start to see a kind of conclusion or solution to it.



**Is it easier to work with actors this way than in the context of a more scripted film?**

You know what it is? They're not actors. You know what they do? They give themselves over to me completely. I guess because they respect what they've seen that I've done. And I can't pay them, so we work fast.

**Were you a fan of your fellow underground filmmakers in the early 60s?**

I found it inspiring because we were all busy on our visions. We wouldn't hang out and have conferences. We'd meet each other in the lobbies when we saw each other's pictures. But I enjoyed Gregory Markopoulos.

**Yeah, I thought you might.**

I liked his attitude, his very dignified approach toward his medium. He had a vision and he was so dedicated to it. Very inspiring.

**I used to buy Gay Heartthrobs comics. Those were hilarious. But it wasn't until I was researching you that I realized you used to draw their covers.**

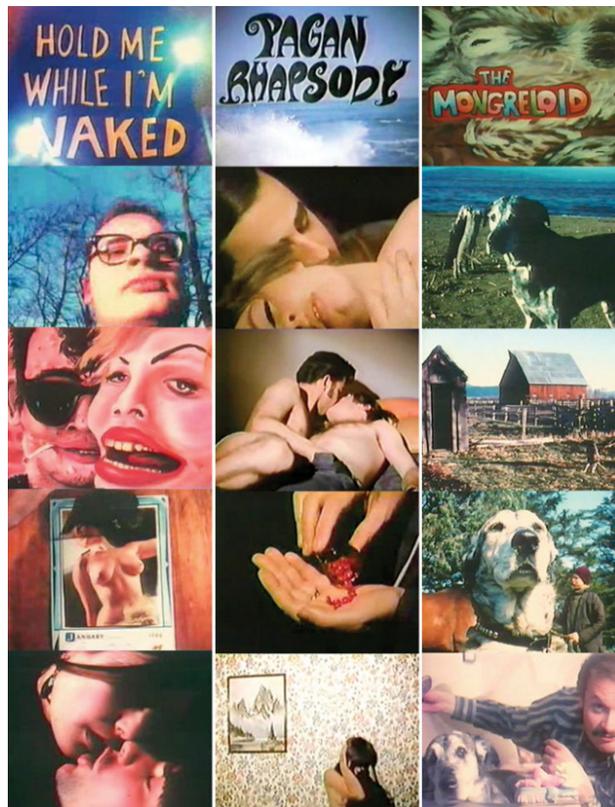
That was back in the 70s, but I did continue on drawing.

**Do you show this work?**

Yes. A couple of years ago there was a show at Matthew Marks Gallery in New York, a summer show with five of my illustrations in it. They all sold.

**They're beautiful, horny, and really funny. A lot like your film work, actually.**

I always think a table should have many legs to stand on. There's the story, also there's the way you're doing it, and hopefully there's also the craft, and there's the humor. Also, to have things that you don't see in that genre. Like I would put glasses on the nude guys, or have them forget to take off their tie. In real life these things tend to happen.



## George and Mike Kuchar

### 2ND FLOOR PROJECTS

From Auguste and Louis Lumière and Warner Bros. to Ethan and Joel Coen and the Farrellys, brother acts have had a mighty influence on the history of film. Commandeering the foundational basement of the frat house of cinema, twins George and Mike Kuchar have long wreaked havoc, creating fetid splendors too numerous to list, the titles of some of their earliest collaborations (*The Wet Destruction of the Atlantic Empire*, 1954; *A Tub Named Desire*, ca. 1956; and *Pussy on a Hot Tin Roof*, 1961) providing only a glimmer of the kind of sexy delirium that would influence Jack Smith, Andy Warhol, John Waters, and David Lynch, among many others. Certainly this tale is by now well known in the experimental film world, but in the art world?

While the Kuchars were making their mystic, mischievous movie (and video) magic out of and in response to the gamut of Hollywood genres, the brothers were, especially during the 1970s and '80s, creating parallel worlds of marvels in oil, watercolor, pastel, acrylic, and ink. George has said he made his work "ambiguously," because he liked painting; Mike liked to draw, but his work was, as Eileen Myles confirms in a sharp essay published to accompany the show, "largely commissioned": "A roommate had a friend who needed art for some gay publications. Mike did a few for them, got paid, and the word got around that he was good." Myles notes that George told her "he learned about oil paintings from the Walter Foster books you'd find in Woolworth's as a kid."

Mike's mid-1970s to mid-'80s drawings (all pen and ink, felt pen, or watercolor) are gonzo allurements that do for all the paradoxical curvaceous va-va-vaoom of the well-built male physique what R. Crumb does for his dames' bosoms and booties. In these works, Mike escapes into a bawdy

George Kuchar,  
*Bocko*, 1970, oil on  
canvas, 24 x 36".



fantasy of pirates taking shore leave for a raunchy romp (*Island Interlude*, 1988) or of one uncircumcised Tarzan swinging another Tarzan, pietàlike, through the jungle (*Jungle Jeopardy*, 1985). With huge cocks, used nipples, and taut musculature, the dudes are hirsute brutes. But in one strange, seemingly innocent idyll, *Take Me to Your Leader*, 1985, a tyke in loose striped T-shirt and shorts pauses, a teddy bear snug beneath his arm, a toy rocket cocked in his hand, as a willow tree bends its limbs to embrace him. Desires, even those too nascent to name, are simultaneously naturalized and interspecies.

In George's watercolor *The Jersey Devil*, 1982, under the glare of a firestorm, a bat-winged goatish creature, his fur glistening, jet, purple, crocus, and smalt, gets ready to make a ginger buxom beauty in a purple halter top and green shorts reclining on a picnic blanket his Leda. Somehow a beach ball marks the ominous, unlikely, and yet ribald horror-movie vernacular George both mimics and turns strangely poignant. For *Going to California*, n.d., vibrant tempera cutouts of George reading a book, his faithful dog, Bocko, and a mountain view seen through a window are fixed on plain brown paper; black outlines turn it into a train cabin. For *Bocko*, 1970, George's pet happily snoozes—hind legs splayed, setting off his pert, plum balls, his coat a palomino storm—tuckered out from playing with a reddish-orange toy ball, which echoes his testicles and the earthquake-cracked pinkish-orange wall. Whatever hues this inverted Bresson of hotel rooms, potent stinks, and shadow realms used, it's as if his brush were also dipped in pure soul—which sounds like a strange and highfalutin conceit, given all the bawdy Kuchar fun, but it's exactly that unexpected soulfulness amidst the erotic (so-called) gimcrackery which makes him and his brother two of the most important artists this country has ever produced.

—Bruce Hainley

## The Day the Bronx Invaded Earth: The Life and Cinema of the Brothers Kuchar

*Jack Stevenson* November 11, 1999



*Forget all those other boring indie brother teams – these guys were the original geniuses of cinema’s bargain basement.*

The sudden death, disappearance, or withdrawal of a key actor during the shooting of a big Hollywood movie is the kind of Industry debacle that drives producers into a panic, capsizes multi-million dollar productions, and sends studio flunkies scrambling for damage control with press and investors alike.

Low-budget Hollywood directors working away from the glare of publicity are often able – and forced – to come up with cheap solutions to keep their productions going. Bela Lugosi died in 1956 during initial shooting of Ed Wood’s trash classic *Plan Nine from Outer Space*, and Wood merely grabbed a chiropractor friend to finish Lugosi’s role with his face hidden in a cape. New York City independent filmmaker Amos Poe lost his male lead, John Lurie, well into the filming of *Subway Riders* (1981). Lurie simply disappeared. Poe himself stepped into the lead role of the saxophone-playing serial killer, even though he looked nothing like Lurie. Since he also couldn’t play the saxophone, he just held it.

Underground filmmaker George Kuchar goes one step further when confronted with the loss of a key actor: he writes the event into the film and actually finds it inspiring. Instead of substituting a cape-draped face à la Wood, he substituted his own naked buttocks when the Puerto Rican lead actress refused to do a nude scene in his 1962 film *Night of the Bomb*.

It would not be the last time an actress refused to shoot a provocative scene for George, but no roadblock erected by feminine modesty could impede the steamrolling progress of one of his scripts once a downhill momentum had been gained and the brakes had been greased by reams of florid dialogue. No setback was insurmountable.

In fact, setbacks could be turned into successes, as George went about the black magic of low-budget filmmaking. In his 1987 film *Summer of No Return*, George had to make the beautiful lead actress disappear, as he remembers, “because she didn’t trust me – she thought I made dirty movies. She thought I was trying to get too much *flesh* from her. So we had her character burned in a fire and put in a hospital, and that advanced the plot because now we knew that her beautiful young suitor was to struggle to become a plastic surgeon and fix up her from now on bandage-draped face. He had to get money so he delved into the underworld, became a hustler and a drug addict and then had to clean up his act – all to get money so he could train as a plastic surgeon to rebuild her face. So, thanks to her, the plot advanced *considerably*.”

In George’s best-known film, *Hold Me While I’m Naked*, the lead actress caught pneumonia after spending hours in a drafty shower, and left. The scene was filmed and written into the movie to help add drama and direction.

No art form demands as much spontaneous, imaginative improvisation as low-budget filmmaking, and no American low-budget filmmakers are as imaginative as George Kuchar and his twin brother Mike. Major figures in the American Underground film movement of the ’sixties, they are the acknowledged pioneers of the camp/pop aesthetic that would influence practically all who came after them, from Warhol and Waters to Vadim and Lynch. That influence is still being felt.



### *In the Beginning God Created the Bronx*

Born in Manhattan in 1942, the brothers moved to the Bronx at an early age. There the tenement blocks, TV-antenna-studded rooftops, bleak blue winters, and littered streets of New York City’s northernmost borough would become their familiar world. A world that they, like most adolescents, wanted to escape. Failing that, they would remake it, colorize it, drape it in cheap tinsel and leopard skins.

The nearby Bronx Park and the Bronx Botanical Gardens offered temporary refuge from the hostile city streets. George would take long, solitary walks in the wilder, more remote areas of the park, to discover idyllic waterfalls and fast-running streams splashing over rocks.

Young George was also keen on violent storms. “Since I was born in a city and lived in a city, New York, all my life, I worshipped nature and storms – anything that disrupted the city in a ‘nature way’.” Tornados were a particular fascination that would figure literally and metaphorically in his cinema. (George’s 1961 film *A Town Called Tempest* has a remarkable sequence of a tornado destroying a town.) “I think in the ’50s a big tornado had gone through

Worcester, Massachusetts, and there was talk about it in New York. It was in the news and for some reason it excited me. The great storm smashing up towns and blowing into people's lives, changing them."

Other, less naturalistic forms of destruction were then taking place in the Bronx as whole tracts of land not far from the Kuchar home were being cleared to make way for the construction of the infamous Cross Bronx Expressway. Debris-strewn blocks of abandoned buildings waiting for the wrecker's ball provided illegal recreation for George, who delighted in pushing rusty refrigerators out of top floor fire exits to watch them explode in the rubble below.

George's own neighbors were being pushed out of upper-story windows on the pages of his actively cluttered drawing pads where he developed a comic-book drawing style, and later, a style of painting that might be called "Vulgar Humanism au naturel." Mike also displayed drawing talent at a young age, and likewise eventually took up the painter's brush to create a series of pictures in the vein of "Mystic-Classical." (Mike's apex as a painter came with a series of compelling oil portraits that evoke a satanic eroticism at once evil and pleasurable, with muscular, leering jinns rendered in glowing bright colors.)

Mom was a housewife and Dad, as George describes him, "was a virile, sex-crazed truck driver who slept all day semi-nude, and lusted after booze, bosoms, and bazookas (having served in the Second World War)."

His dad's taste in literature and cinema would have a profound effect on George, as he recalls in a 1989 interview: "In New York there were a lot of trashy novels on the bookstands, and my father was into reading trashy novels, or at least novels that were exciting to me – the artwork on the covers. That inspired a lot of imagery in my head. I loved the kind of sordidness of what it was like, evidently, to be grown up. It was a turn-on for me, I'd get excited looking at those paperback covers. And also the comic books. I think they twisted me also. I remember I used to be real disturbed when the heroes were captured, and whipped ... and beaten, and ...

"My dad also used to belong to a little film exchange group, he used to bring home the 'red reels' – red plastic reels of 8mm pornography. He had some pornographic books stuck away in his drawer, too, and when I was a little kid I used to find them, and look, and was amazed and would laugh ... these adults. The world of adults."

George's later literary reminiscences of a Bronx childhood would throb with the same lurid glow that characterized his films. In an excerpt from a 1989 essay titled "Schooling," George relates: "Going to elementary school in the Bronx was a series of humiliations which featured Wagnerian women in an endless chorus of: 'Keep your mouth shut,' 'Where's your homework?', and 'Spit that gum out!' The male teachers were much shorter than the females and whatever masculine apparatus they possessed was well concealed amid the folds of oversized trousers. After school my twin brother and I would escape to the cinema, fleeing from our classmates; urban urchins who belched up egg creams and clouds of nicotine. In the safety of the theater we'd sit through hour upon hour of Indian squaws being eaten alive by fire ants, debauched pagans coughing up blood as the temples of God crashed down on their intestines, and naked monstrosities made from rubber lumbering out of radiation-poisoned waters to claw the flesh off women who had just lost their virginity.

“When three hours were up we would leave the theater refreshed and elated, having seen a world molded by adults, a world we would eventually mature into. At home, supper simmered on the stove, smoking, bubbling, and making plopping sounds as blisters of nutritious gruel burst just like the volcanic lava in those motion pictures. Oh how I wanted to grow up real fast and be one of the adults who sacrificed half-naked natives to Krakatoa or dripped hot wax on a nude body that resembled Marie Antoinette.”

The brothers virtually lived in the theaters, seeing everything that came out, seeing the same movies over and over (“We saw Douglas Sirk’s *Written on the Wind* something like 11 times when it first came out,” says George) ... rolling under the seats, climbing through the balconies, making games.

### *Bedsheets, Bathtubs, and the Bomb: First Film Productions*

The brothers’ introduction to hands-on filmmaking came courtesy of an aunt who let them loose in a closet full of her 8mm vacation reels which they would watch and edit in sequences that followed their own logic.

For their 12th birthdays, they were given an 8mm DeJur movie camera. They immediately began to stage productions inspired by the epics they saw on the big screen. In a 1964 interview with critic Jonas Mekas, George describes one of these first films. “At the age of 12 I made a transvestite movie on the roof and was brutally beaten by my mother for having disgraced her and also for soiling her nightgown. She didn’t realize how hard it is for a 12-year-old director to get real girls in his movies. But that unfortunate incident did not end our big costume epics. One month later Mike and I filmed an Egyptian spectacle on the same roof with all the television antennas resembling a cast of skinny thousands. Our career in films had begun.”

In a 1993 interview, Mike reflects on these earliest productions: “I forget what is actually the first one. Some of them we threw away. We did one, *The Wet Destruction of the Atlantic Empire* (1954) [often cited as the first. -Ed.], which had a flood at the end. We did matte paintings of the city and we stuck it in a fast-running stream and ran the camera in slow motion and it was like a flood. We had some friends dressed up in costumes which were really bed sheets.”

These first films were largely improvised. *Screwball* (1957) was envisioned as one continuous love scene, but that got boring so they had the hero go insane and strangle the leading lady. *The Thief and the Stripper* (1959) typified a lasting Kucharian penchant for peddle-to-the-floor melodrama: an artist murders his wife after falling in love with a stripper, while the stripper falls in love with a burglar. All die violently as it turns out that the stripper is actually the sister of the murdered wife.

Meanwhile, “real life” occasionally intruded on the brothers’ activities. In an excerpt from the essay “Schooling,” George remembers his teenage years and the emergency brake his Catholic upbringing tried to apply to his sex drive: “Eventually I had to leave the Church as one warm, lonely afternoon I found myself kneeling in a pew praying for wild, disgusting sex. I was a



teenager with a heavy inclination to explore my own groin, and the emissions threatened to put out the fire in the sacred heart of our Lord. I looked around me at the elderly ladies scattered here and there throughout the shadowed house of God and knew that they at least were in peace because they didn't possess a big piece that defiantly poked holes in Christian dogma, demanding lubricated shortcuts to the Kingdom of Heaven. I fled from that place of holiness that warm, lonely afternoon and God answered my prayers: a young, suffering Christian was granted wild, disgusting sex. Praise be the Lord!"

Mike and George were both enrolled at the Manhattan School of Art and Design, which specialized in training for commercial art. Mike, who matured faster than George, eventually got his own apartment and adopted a "swinging lifestyle," as George terms it.

If George's teenage years in the Bronx were the essence of adolescent desperation, he did find an emotional outlet in making movies. "I was social making movies. It was my one connection with other people. I used to show my pictures at friends' houses, at parties. I'd go to the house of friends, they'd be in the cast and I'd shoot the film. A week later we'd come back with the film developed and show them the rushes and shoot more, then maybe a week after that I'd edit it all together and we'd have a party and show the finished film."

Many of these film parties were held over in Queens, at the house of a high school classmate who would later become their best-known "movie star": Donna Kerness. A dancer and aspiring model, Donna had a way of moving and expressing herself. She had an indefinable resonance onscreen, but also other more definable attributes: "She had big bazooms," recalls George, "and she had a very nice face. She could act. She had a style about her. So I put her in movies. All my Bronx buddies were excited about her – they thought her a great sensation. So I milked her: I went over to her house and we began to put her in bathtub scenes, where she wore a bathing suit, of course – the straps were pulled down. We simulated the tawdry stuff that I used to see on the big screen."



Some of the topical scandals and phobias of the day found expression in the brothers' films. Their film *Night of the Bomb*, for example, plays as an 8mm take on the Cuban Missile Crisis that ends in an all-destroying explosion. "When the bomb was supposed to go off, all we did was put chairs on top of the actors as if they were debris – we tried to tangle them up in chairs," Mike says.

Such violent, apocalyptic endings were common to most of their early 8mm films, for example the all-consuming fire at the end of *Pussy on a Hot Tin Roof* (1961). "All those movies end in fire," recalls George, "horror pictures ... the house collapses. We tried to make big spectacular endings."

"The bomb in *Night of the Bomb*," adds Mike, "was a vehicle to use as a spectacular image – people in conflict – otherwise it's hard to make a narrative if something dramatic doesn't happen."

The brothers scored these 8mm films with soundtracks laid down on reel-to-reel tapes that ran in loose sync. The music they chose reflected their love of '50s big screen composers like Bernard Herrmann, Franz Waxman, and Alex North, but all sorts of other audio oddities ended up mulched into their soundtracks, oddball cuts pillaged from a vast record collection they began amassing in their early teens which is still a resource in scoring productions.

The tape soundtracks to some of these earliest films have badly degraded. "It's been many years," says Mike, "they're like mummies now." George recently began transferring some of these 8mm films onto video in San Francisco. The original and sometimes defective soundtrack tapes were in the Bronx in his mom's closet (along with the original prints), so he ended up composing new soundtracks for *Pussy on a Hot Tin Roof* and *Tootsies in Autumn* (1963).

These 8mm productions (1954-1963) percolate with the influences of just about everything that hit the screen during this period. Of the Hollywood directors, Douglas Sirk was a major inspiration, along with Otto Preminger, Howard Hawks, and Frank Tashlin, to name but a few. Special effects artists like Ray Harryhausen and Willis O'Brien also had a big impact. But just as important, if not more so, were the B and Z grade horror and sci-fi films of directors like Roger Corman, Albert Zugsmith, and Jack Arnold. Studios like Allied Artists, Astor, and especially American International Pictures (AIP) were key to this exploitation boom that would reach a peak in 1957-58. AIP alone released 42 pictures over this two-year period, including titles like *Voodoo Woman*, *The Astounding She Monster*, *Attack of the Puppet People*, and *The Screaming Skull*. Mike and George saw most of them as their gray matter grew as polluted as the nearby Harlem River.

The brothers' first public screenings took place at the 8mm Motion Picture Club, which met regularly in the function room of a Manhattan hotel. "It was run by fuddy-duddies," George recalls. "Everybody got dressed up and they showed their vacation footage. There'd be old ladies, and the old ladies would be sitting next to old men, and their stomachs would be acting up and making noises. And the old ladies would get offended at my movies because they were 'irreverent,' I guess. I was looking for ... *subject matter* ... and I'd pick anything out of the newspaper. That was after the Thalidomide scare came out and ladies were giving birth to deformed babies, and I made a comedy out of that (*A Woman Distressed*, 1962) – that was the last time I was at the 8mm Motion Picture Club, and it was the only time they ever gave a bad review to a movie."

#### *Slouching Toward Avenue A: The Underground Unchained*

The early '60s would witness the emergence of the underground film movement (aka "New American Cinema") on New York's Lower East Side, centered around venues like the Charles, the Bleecker Street, and the Gramercy Arts theaters. For a while in 1963, informal screenings were also held at filmmaker Ken Jacobs' Ferry Street loft located downtown between the Fulton Fish Market and the Brooklyn Bridge. At the suggestion of filmmaker Bob Cowan, an actor in the brothers' movies whom Donna Kerness had brought into the scene, Mike and George took *I Was a Teenage Rumpot* (1960) and some of their other films down to Jacobs' loft. That was the night the Underground met the Kuchar brothers.

The fey, decadent milieu of the Underground, populated by dilettantes, beatnik intellectuals, and gay artistes was spiritually a million miles away from the workaday tenement neighborhoods of the Bronx – not to mention well over an hour distant by subway. This first encounter was one of mutual incomprehension. As George recalls, “There were all these underground people. We came in suits and we showed these 8mm movies, and I guess I was kind of a bit square-looking but the movies took off. I wasn’t always *liked* at that time, I know, because I guess I appeared kind of snotty sometimes to those people. I was just ... callously irrelevant, maybe? But they were kind of snotty, too, some of those people.” (In an article on experimental cinema in the April 1967 issue of *Playboy*, authors Knight and Albert wrote, “The Kuchars take neither themselves nor their movies too seriously. For the most part the Underground is a dreadfully intense bunch of people.”)

Jacobs, also a tireless promoter and programmer of underground film, liked the movies and put them on the “circuit” – whenever there was an 8mm show, the Kuchar brothers were usually on the bill. Mentor and critic Jonas Mekas began to write regularly about them in the *Village Voice* and *Film Culture* magazine. Mike and George were now officially part of the Underground, a rising movement that had ideas, energy, and a following of righteous supporters. Perhaps most importantly, because so many of the films flaunted an in-your-face sexuality, the movement attracted publicity and created an audience far beyond its original borders.

The brothers were now exposed to a whole new world of independent filmmaking which they would influence and in turn be influenced by. They saw the films of Andy Warhol, Stan Brakhage, Kenneth Anger, and others. “I met Warhol a few times,” recalls Mike. “‘Hello, how are ya?’ and I used to see him coming out of my shows. I would go to see his shows and sometimes he would bring his films into the booth where I’d be, ’cause at the time some of the projectionists were my friends – he had to give directions to the projectionists. And Kenneth Anger, we saw *Scorpio Rising* when it first came out ... met him a couple times. It was like ‘Oh – we finally meet!’ – ’cause we’d heard of him and he’d heard of us.”

“That was kind of an exciting period,” says George. “One foot in the lobby, one foot in the street. The street was full of people in business suits, and they’d be coming in, and there’d be more ... bohemians inside. A mixture.”

The early 8mm films were shot on old Kodachrome stock that tended to bleach out, but by 1963 Kodak had changed their 8mm stock to Kodachrome-2, which gave a richer, finer image, and the brothers took advantage of it for one of their more lurid plots in *Lust for Ecstasy*, which premiered at New York’s New Bowery Theater (later named the Bridge) in the early spring of 1964.

“*Lust for Ecstasy* is my most ambitious attempt since my last film,” George said to Jonas Mekas at the time. “The actors didn’t know what was going on. I wrote many of the pungent scenes on the D train, and then when I arrived on the set I ripped them up and let my emotional whims make chopped meat out of the performances and story. It’s more fun that way and then the story advances without any control until you’ve created a Frankenstein that destroys any subconscious barriers you’ve erected to protect yourself and your dime-store integrity. Yes, *Lust for Ecstasy* is my subconscious, my own naked lusts that sweep across the screen in 8mm and color with full fidelity sound.”

The brothers playfully satirized the underground in their final production of 1963, *Lovers of Eternity*, an overcooked ode to bohemian decadence and artistic angst on the Lower East Side. The film starred several noted underground filmmakers, including Jack Smith and his neighbor Dov Lederberg. Lederberg was notorious for cooking his 8mm film in the oven until it assumed the texture of eggplant and then projecting it.

*Lovers of Eternity* was also the last 8mm film the brothers would make before switching to the 16mm format in response to the better detail and clarity they saw that other filmmakers were getting in that format, and the fact that you could put the sound right on the film. Ironically they had inspired other filmmakers to switch from 16mm down to 8mm (Super-8 wouldn't arrive until the early '70s). 8mm became more "underground" to filmmakers seeking the ultimate in a personal, anti-commercial form of expression. The home movie was suddenly cool, prompting from the more verbose members of the movement – Mike and George included – satirically pompous manifestos on the revolutionary purity of 8mm film. (Jack Smith changed from 16mm to 8mm, too – but only because his 16mm equipment had been stolen.)

The brothers began work on their first 16mm production, a black-and-white noir action drama called *Corruption of the Damned* (1965). Mike starred, garbed in a trench coat and embroiled in long chase sequences. A marvelously filmed brawl in a flour factory recalls the plaster warehouse punch-up in Kubrick's 1955 noir *Killer's Kiss*. (The Pacific Film Archive in Berkeley recently undertook *Corruption* as a preservation project, assembling a compilation print from which they struck a new negative, salvaging the film for posterity.)



With their jump to 16mm, the brothers developed individual, if similar, styles, and would eventually go their separate ways – although they continued to assist on each other's productions when needed. *Corruption of the Damned* began in the usual collaborative fashion of the 8mm films, but Mike abandoned it mid-production to embark on a color science fiction film, and George finished it. "That movie is 80% George's," Mike estimates.

The color science fiction film, financed by paychecks from Mike's day job as a photo retoucher, was *Sins of the Fleshapoids* (1965). *Sins* would stand as Mike's best-known film and the single most significant, creatively realized example of '60s camp cinema sensibility. Pulsating with excessive colors, *Sins* unfolds while the camera's eye floats indulgently over bright flowing fabrics, jewelry, tropical plastic foliage, and platters of glowing fruit that evoke a corrupt paradise.

"My specific aim was to bombard and engulf the screen with vivid and voluptuous colors," said Mike of *Sins* in a 1967 *Film Culture* interview, "because *Sins* is a fantasy of science fiction. So I tried to boost the colors according to its category: 'fantastic' or 'unreal.' I intentionally used a color film that when reproduced in the final print becomes 'unnatural' and 'souped up,' especially in the reds."

*Sins* starred Gina Zuckerman, Maren Thomas, Donna Kerness, and Julius Middleman (who later became a cop). Bob Cowan, who narrated the film and chose the music, gives a jerky, deadpan performance as the lead male robot, and George steals the show as Gianbeano, evil prince from the future.

The story transpires a million years in the future, after “The Great War” has depopulated the earth and ravaged the landscape. Mankind, reduced to a debauched few, has forsaken science for greedy indulgence in all the carnal pleasures afforded by art, aesthetics, and lust, leaving work to be done by a race of enslaved robots. One rebellious male robot (Cowan) tires of pampering his lazy masters and murders a human woman after a failed rape attempt, then engages in successful robot sex – the touch of fingers – with a female android. Thus the Fleshapoids join their human masters in sin ... and in procreation, as the female android gives birth to a baby robot.

Although *Sins* is set in the future, there is a classical look to the costuming and set designs that foreshadows Mike’s fondness for an ancient, muscular, Roman sexuality that he would elaborate on in later films and in his published gay pornographic comics.

*Sins of the Fleshapoids* played midnights for three weeks at an established theater in Greenwich Village and went on to become a staple of the underground. Mike was now able to quit his day job and live for six years off the income of his films, which included, among other things, sales of prints to museum archives worldwide and honorariums for presenting his work at university and film society screenings. (This was more a testament to Mike’s modest expenses than to any vast sums generated by the films.)



Along with Anger’s *Scorpio Rising* (1964) and Warhol’s *The Chelsea Girls* (1966), *Sins of the Fleshapoids* remains one of the three most influential works of the ’60s American Underground, if one of the least self-consciously scandalous. It was never busted like *Scorpio Rising* (for a snippet of frontal male nudity), nor did it have the aura of fashionable decadence that radiated from everything Warhol attached his name to and that propelled *Chelsea Girls* to heights of fame and financial success arguably greater than the film’s value. (At a sold-out 1991 screening of Warhol’s film in Boston, the entire audience left during the unannounced intermission.) That *Sins* achieved the influence and success it did without sexual scandal or the scenester celebrity that many other underground films exploited is notable.

#### *Subway Auteur: The Sound and the Fury Signifying Something*

Fresh from his performance in *Sins* and with *Corruption* behind him, George launched his first 16mm color production, *Hold Me While I’m Naked* (1966), a 10-minute piece that would become his signature film. An abstract meditation on the emotional and technical traumas of making a low-budget movie, *Hold Me* was a deft parody of Hollywood stylization. With its aura of personal frustration and loneliness it was also a direct read of George’s then-current mental state. In fact, while this and other of George’s mid-to-late-’60s films invariably provoke laughter from audiences, George never considered them comedies.

In 1988, he reflected on the paradox: “My movies were playing in New York City once, and this woman I know said ‘Let’s go to your show – they’re having a night of your movies at the Film Forum.’ And I said, ‘No, I don’t want to because I don’t want to relive all the pain.’ I realized my career has all been based on pain. Those movies, even the funniest ones, had this horrible pain behind them. And I know exactly why they were made. I didn’t want to go because I didn’t want to relive that – I didn’t want to relive the main motivations of those pictures. (But then I went and there were people laughing, and I was even laughing, having a good time. And I forgot about the pain.)”

At this point, George was financing his films with “paychecks from hell” that he earned as a messenger for Norcross Greeting Cards in Manhattan. George recalls the place was run mostly by women. They were “amazons ... large, frightening, terrifying amazons that walked the halls all made up and smelling of perfume. Madison Avenue type women, clacking down the halls. Frightening, terrifying figures. I don’t know what was wrong with those women, but ... I do know what was wrong with those women, they had ulcers, some of them were eaten up alive ... they were like men with wigs on. And in fact some of them looked like Glen Strange, the Frankenstein monster. Their faces were horrid ...”

After Norcross, George got a job as a chart illustrationist for NBC’s weather show. His daily subway commutes to Manhattan sparked his writing, which resembled the style and vocabulary of his cinema as revealed in an excerpt from his 1988 essay “Early Role Models”:

“It was thrilling to ride the jam-packed subway trains to work in the morning: discreet perverts would reach out for some sort of stabilizing support so as not to lurch over and fall in the rocking cars and they’d grab onto your private appendages. Full-figured señoritas would mash you against metal partitions using flesh of such abundance that no amount of latex rubber could suppress the meat into trim decency. Fights would suddenly break out with alarming ferocity but there could be no room for swinging fists and so the squeeze of the traveling mob would suffer further, violent escalations. In those subway train cars the hot, metallic-smelling air was supercharged with the most primitive of living emotions. We would all spill out of these cars (some of us being pushed or thrown out) and climb the stairs into the canyons of dark glass and gargoyle stone which housed the machinery of commerce and coffee breaks, industry and indigestion, finance and fiscal flatulence that smelled of syndicated corruption.”

The 1966–67 period was a busy time for the brothers as they honed their individual styles and saw their films go into wider distribution, due to the continuing momentum of the Underground.

Of the three films George made in 1967, *Eclipse of the Sun Virgin* was probably the stand-out. Starring Larry and Francis Leibowitz, *Eclipse* was similar in pacing, length, and style to *Hold Me While I’m Naked*, but throws up more extreme imagery and ends with George and Larry watching found tracheotomy footage on George’s projector. On the surface it plays as a colorful, bawdy burlesque of life, love, and supper in the Bronx, with George caught between the many-headed hydra of lust and the bony grip of Catholic guilt.

John Waters’ oft-repeated statements that “Beauty is looks you can never forget” and that “A face should jolt, not soothe” were ideas George was already drawing on in *Eclipse* where he pays sincere homage to rotund Bronx babes and facially imperfect others.

*Movies of the Moment: True Underground*

Mike followed *Sins of the Fleshapoids* with *The Secret of Wendel Samson* (1966), casting famous avant-garde artist Red Grooms in the lead role. *Secret* is a personal story told in the vocabulary of expressionism and pop fantasy. Entrancing use of dreamlike musical collage merges with fluid hand-held camerawork to express the inner turmoil of Wendel, who is caught between his diminishing sexual interest in a current girlfriend and unfulfilling gay relationships. Set largely in a series of spare interiors and on a desolate, snowy plain – in contrast to the lavish sets and atmospherics of *Sins* – *Secret* is a surreal, troubled rumination on sexual need and the entanglements of relationships. It remains one of the most uniquely personal and overlooked works of the '60s underground.

*The Secret of Wendel Samson* illustrates Mike's philosophy that a film is the unchartable confluence of personal inspiration and all-important "chemistry" – a creation of the moment unrelated to what had come before or would come after.

In a 1988 interview, Mike reflects on his approach to filmmaking: "I can only do a film when I feel really inspired or when I really want to. What mood I'm in determines what I'm going to do. For every film, if the chemistry is just right, then I'm able to make it. It's very hard to make a film like *Sins of the Fleshapoids* again because I don't fall back into that chemistry – where everything comes together. You meet these kinds of people and they're just right to fill the parts for this film that you've always had in mind. I have a few films that I want to do, and they're not really related to each other, but then I'll make them when I meet the right people or discover the right place to film it in. It's a matter of chemistry. Then it works and stands on its own, unto itself. Then life goes on ... until something else brings out something that you've always wanted to make. You know when it's right and then you go out and buy the film and make it."

Mike's straightforward approach to filmmaking, obviously antithetical to commercial cinema or the "careerism" seemingly endemic to every form of human endeavor today, encapsulates the transitory nature of true underground. His refusal to work within an identifiable genre and produce films synonymous with audience expectations, or films that are predictable or "characteristic," precluded his achievement of the fame of many of his contemporaries, including George. This is also why he is one of the very few pure underground filmmakers.

In its truest sense, "underground" was not a genre but an anti-genre. Underground was an image-negative term that refuted, denied, and disowned definition rather than encouraged it. A thing underground was a thing unseen, something ominously "other" happening in the darkness. The underground film movement was never more than a collection of individuals who never quite collected. As with any creative cultural movement with claims to revolutionary purity, it was threatened most by its own success – the blacklisting of venues, censorship, and police harassment pale by comparison. Popularity breeds pressure. Public demands for follow-ups and remakes from the often more-than-happy-to-oblige stars of the movement suck it dry of any spark or spontaneity as it ossifies into paid entertainment, and the movement rolls over and dies in a cloud of financial squabbling and superficial notoriety. In a milieu rife with spotlight-hogging enfant terribles, prima donnas, and media-savvy mythmakers, Mike never "followed up" and never sought celebrity – he just made his movies.

### *Overexposed Personas: Hold Me While I'm Desperate*

In *Hold Me While I'm Naked*, George framed certain scenes by turning the camera on his own face from low or straight-on angles, putting his personal stamp on a shot that might be called "house- of-mirrors close-up." Used occasionally in his '60s 16mm shorts, George emerges via these intimate portraits as something of a graceless, overgrown goofus with mild acne and hair that "sticks up like a toilet brush," as he describes it.

There were other sides to George, however, and a radically different persona is captured in Michael Zuckerman's lost 12-minute nugget from the psychedelic underground, *Soul Trip Number Nine* (1969). As Zuckerman describes it, *Soul Trip* is "a story of burned out love ... taking the viewer to the shadow world of dreams and yearnings that hover in the psychedelic twilight of the turned-on mind. Slowly, as the lovers sink deeper into a drugged state, their unconscious desires rise to the surface. In brilliant colors the images tumble across the screen to reveal the feelings evoked by this, their last trip together." George, smoothly done over in pancake make-up, a Beatles wig, and mod clothing, cuts an effectively dashing and soulful figure as leading man in his nonspeaking role. A bevy of topless young women cluster and swirl around him in kaleidoscopic fashion via masterful superimpositions and other hallucinatory effects.

*Portrait of Ramona* (1971) signaled a major turning point in his life and filmmaking. George recalls this, his last New York film, in an interview from January 1989.

"At that time Mike was friends with this deaf guy. He could speak fairly well but he knew this other guy who was also deaf, I think from birth, and he learned how to talk just by watching people's mouths open or something. Listening to him speak was the most amazing thing, you couldn't really understand it but it was an interesting combination of sounds. And I wanted him to narrate *Portrait of Ramona*. But some of my friends looked at me with shock, like, 'How could you do such a thing?!' I actually thought it would be interesting to hear his voice on the soundtrack. It wouldn't matter if the audience understood it or not because they would be hearing a narrator and they would know the thing is somehow being explained, even though they didn't understand it, and so they'd accept the visual format of the film better.

George unfailingly refers to *Portrait of Ramona* as a "desperate scream for help." It was time to move on to new things, to start a new chapter – to get the fuck out.

It was time to leave the Bronx.

### *California (Wet) Dreamin'*

In 1971 George attended a film festival in Cincinnati where he made the acquaintance of fellow filmmaker Larry Jordon, who was (and still is) teaching film at the San Francisco Art Institute. Jordon began in film as a compatriot and disciple of Stan Brakhage but would himself become a major figure in the underground for works that spanned a remarkably wide range of styles. He would become best known for a series of animated collages, most notably *Duo Concertantes* (1962–64).

Larry asked George if he wanted to teach film at the San Francisco Art Institute (S.A.I.) as a visiting artist for a one-year period. George accepted the offer and packed his bags. He moved out to San Francisco and never left.

George remembers his first student on that opening day of school. The young man had actually beaten him to class and was sitting on a desk in cut-off jeans and sandals, swinging his feet, when George walked into the room that morning at 8:45. From first impressions, this bearded, sandy-haired kid seemed “like a nice, playful person.”



The punctual student was Curt McDowell, and sitting on a desk in film class was one of the lesser dictates of cinema he would go on to break.

Born and raised in Indiana, Curt never lost his Midwest mannerisms. “He was a pumpkin-pie type of person,” George recalls. “You know, cooking food, being social, a real Indiana transplant, sewing costumes and telling us stories about his mother ... he was also a catalyst; he brought people together and got them involved in situations they normally wouldn’t have gotten involved in, sexual and otherwise. Well ... like, I never cared for bowling, but when you went out bowling with Curt it was fun. But he was also this kind of lewd, crazy person who went on binges.”

Enrolled at the San Francisco Art Institute in the late ‘60s on a painting scholarship, Curt was turned on to movies by instructor Bob Nelson and switched to the film department. “And so,” George remembers, “we began to share each other, first literally then on the screen. He would use me in his pictures, in musicals and stuff like that – which gave me an opportunity to sing even though I can’t hold a note.”

Curt circulated a petition to get George hired on a permanent basis, arguing that the school needed new blood from outside, new influences. George was hired. Mike also began to spend time in San Francisco.

Starting out as a protégé of George’s, Curt quickly found his own style and began to incorporate a large circle of friends, artistic collaborators, and virtual strangers off the street into the more than 30 films he would make. “He made friends everywhere,” recalled companion and lover Robert Evans in 1987, “and he eventually talked most of them into taking their clothes off and appearing in his movies.” A host of his friends, including George, Mike, and his own sister Melinda, were featured in his poetic 1975 film *Nudes: A Sketchbook*. A stylistic departure from the grainy, rough-hewn pornographic look Curt often favored, *Nudes* is a gentle homage to the sensuousness and physicality of those close to him.

From the outset George would find San Francisco planets apart from the Bronx, especially when it came to the libido. “The City was considered an outdoor bordello at that particular time,” he muses today as if looking back at another century. Indeed, San Francisco in the early ‘70s was capital of the booming hardcore porno industry which native sons Alex DeRenzy and Jim and Artie Mitchell had pioneered in 1969, and the gay underground was pulsing with energy. A not-yet-famous Divine could be found holding court down at the Palace Theatre in North Beach,



starring in stage productions like *Vice Palace and Divine* and *Her Stimulating Studs*, while across town the Castro was beginning to coalesce into a major gay enclave. In the Mission district, a dank, narrow 200-seat theatre showed non-stop porno flicks. (In 1976 Robert Evans took over this theater, the Roxie, and turned it into one of the most important indie rep venues in the country, still going strong today.) A hothouse atmosphere saturated the City, and the Art Institute served as a clearinghouse for the out-of-control libidos of the artistically inclined.

McDowell was not the only Art Institute student bent on exploring the limits of erotic cinema. In a 1988 essay called “California Concoctions,” George describes a typical student film of the period and the effect that all of this was having on him:

“Young people in the City by the Bay were aiming their movie cameras at exposed chakras left and right as the Sexual Revolution was in full swing at that time. One female in my class was up on the silver screen being sodomized by a latex novelty while indulging in a coke of non-carbonated powder. The person on the other end of that rubberized intrusion was a female classmate of lesbian persuasion obeying the direction of a unisexed university urchin who looked like Hermaphroditos incarnated ... Eventually I fell victim (happily) to this quagmire of humping and heaving viscosity and embarked on an orgy of flesh-debased delinquency that knew no bounds...”

Meanwhile Mike would continue back east through the '70s with a slew of his own films: *Aqua Circus* (1971), *Digeridoo* (1972), *Faraway Places* (1972), *Death Quest of the Ju-Ju Cults* (1976), and *Dwarf Star* (1977) among them.

#### Factory of Desire: The Low-Budget Ecstasy of the Class Films

George's own filmmaking now took two distinct directions: the class films he supervised at S.A.I., and his own personal films.

The class films were cast and crewed with the students who took George's course, many of whom had specifically enrolled at S.A.I. to study film with him, some coming from Europe and Latin America. These class films tested George's resourcefulness since he was confronted on the first day with up to 30 students, each of whom had to be involved in some way, some speaking limited English.

Facing a linguistic gridlock that would give other instructors an ulcer, George leaned into it with gusto and actually sought out students with pidgin-English-speaking abilities for starring roles. “In those days,” he recalls, “James Broughton was teaching at the school, and always complaining. He had a screenwriting course and he was always complaining that the class was full of foreigners who could barely talk English, much less write it. And I was always sayin’, ‘Well, send them to me!’, because I loved those accents – they gave the pictures a continental flavor. They had strange pronunciations of words and they made the screenplays come alive in weird ways.”

The budgets were always small for these class films and George's talent for spontaneous improvisation was constantly tested, distilling the productions down to the essence of low-budget filmmaking. He often wrote the dialogue and scripts on the spot, locked in a nearby closet so he could concentrate. Once, lacking dialogue for an actress, he told her to recite Shakespeare. She did. It worked.



George's approach to directing a student cast was to create custom-tailored scenes and roles that would best exploit the multifaceted talents and looks before him, playing to individual strengths and enthusiasms, freeing the energy rather than subjugating it within the disciplined context of polished scripts, storyboarding, and rehearsals. It was all about chemistry cooked up among the actors themselves and among actors, scene, and setting. It was about spirits, energies, mixtures, and unplanned moments captured.

Instead of trying to compensate for lack of formal structure by coming to class overprepared as many a nervous director might, George turned unpreparedness into an art form and a modus operandi. "In being unprepared you are never sure of what you're going to do and the sudden chance for discovery and inspiration becomes greater," he would write. If the productions that resulted bore no resemblance to classical Hollywood narrative film, they did move with a bracing energy and flamboyance. The pacing of the class films would always tend to be uptempo, but from the mid-'80s on they became even more fragmented and episodic as George adjusted to what he believed were the shorter attention spans of the MTV generation. *We's a Team* (1989), for example, is a series of vignettes and rapidly executed skits.

Lack of funds also forced him into unheard of technical improvisations. Unhappy with one roll of film that had a kind of orange tint because he lacked the proper lens filter when it was shot, George gave it to a student who soaked it in a plate of bleach. George declared himself happy with the results: she'd fixed the color and also brought in unexpected flashes of lavender into the bargain. Another time, shooting outdoors in sunlight too bright for the film stock – even after cutting down on the aperture – they stuck sunglasses on the lens and it worked. "You could see the two lenses of the sunglasses," testifies George, "and we positioned each actor so that one would be in the right lens and one would be in the left lens, and they did their scenes. Everything else around them is bleached, but you can see them well enough through the glasses."

The constant flow of new students assured that each film would have its own personality, though invariably stamped in the Kuchar mold. Some students would take more than one class and so "stars" would emerge over an "era" of several productions. Sometimes people not enrolled at S.A.I. would drop by and be cast in a film, and George would also cast faculty members, visiting artists, or people wandering by who looked right for a particular role.



*The Desperate and the Deep* (1975) opens with a striking credit sequence filmed through an aquarium. An enduringly popular film, this talkie drama at sea was designed and photographed in low-budget minimalist style, with everything taking place at night against black backgrounds. The effect of deckside ocean spray in people's faces was supplied by a student off-camera throwing a dixie cup full of water.

Heated dialogue was needed to fuel these films as well as distract from the scaled-down sets and lack of professional effects. George was always more than equal to the task – sometimes crediting his script to a pseudonym when he deemed the dialog too florid.

One could always count on action in these class films, along with an unhinged exuberance, in contrast with George's own usually more contemplative, mysterious, or atmospheric personal films. Brawls often erupted in the class films and George himself could occasionally be seen tumbling over cheap furniture and stage sets, as for example in *Remember Tomorrow* (1979).

*Symphony for a Sinner* (1979) was a long, lavishly photographed color film generally considered the magnum opus of the class productions. New York critic and coauthor of *Midnight Movies* J. Hoberman would rank it as one of the ten best films of the year, while Stan Brakhage would call it "the ultimate class picture." John Waters, who now visited George regularly whenever he passed through San Francisco, envied the lurid color photography and wanted George to shoot his next picture (which would have been Polyester and didn't happen). *Symphony*, Waters said, had the look he craved for *Desperate Living* (1977).

Perhaps the real gem of George's class filmmaking can be found in a forgotten film from the following year, *How to Chose a Wife* (sic), the concluding third of which features a bizarre wedding chapel scene complete with stumbling, heavily pregnant bride and mystified Arab onlookers. An apocalyptic earthquake erupts – the ground trembles and the chapel walls crumble and crash down in a hallmark scene of mass destruction. George recalls the budget at around \$300. Everything was done with inventive camera effects and a keen sense of staging and scoring.

Mike also made a number of class films under the auspices of the San Francisco Art Institute during the '70s: *The Masque of Valhalla* (1972), *The Wings of Muru* (1973), *Blood Sucker* (1975), *The Passions: A Psycho-Drama* (1977), *Isle of the Sleeping Souls* (1979), and in 1984, *Circe*.

George's most sustained class film in a narrative sense is probably *Summer of No Return* (1988). A year and two films later George would start shooting the class films on video due to the rising cost of working in film and his shrinking budgets. It became impossible to conduct a class of 20 to 30 students all semester, all day Fridays, on a budget of \$300. Jean Cocteau said that "the cinema will only become an art when its raw materials are as cheap as paper and pencil." Apparently Kodak wasn't listening.

#### *White Elephants on LSD: Personal Films and Collaborations*

The fresh inspiration George found in San Francisco gave his own films a distinct personality from that point on, although his general style would be forever linked to his "Bronx hyper-reality" roots.

Completing *The Sunshine Sisters* in 1972, George began work on his *Gone with the Wind*– or what he terms his "white elephant": the 1973 black-and-white production of *The Devil's Cleavage*. Consisting of a series of episodes totaling 21/2 hours, *The Devil's Cleavage* was a recreation of '40s and '50s black-and-white melodramas that combines heartfelt *homage* and deft parody. Curt McDowell excels in the male lead as the putz sheriff spouting bald Kucharian dialogue with a deadpan delivery.

In return for Curt's help on this film, George assisted Curt on his 1975 feature *Thundercrack!* This would be their glorious gift to posterity – the world's only underground porno horror movie. George titled and wrote the film, did the lighting, made up and costumed lead actress Marion Eaton, and acted the role of "Bing," the psychosexually troubled gorilla keeper who attempts suicide by crashing his circus truck in a thunderstorm. Rumor had it that George wrote the script during a thunderstorm

in Nebraska while tripping on LSD. Actually he wrote the 192-page script during a prolonged stay at an Oklahoma YMCA where he used ballpoint pen to preclude erasures and the specter of eternal rewrites.

George wrote the part of Bing, he recalls, “for someone a bit more aesthetic looking – in an Austin, Texas kind of way. I’m sort of bulky but they asked me to do it. Unfortunately I never had time to memorize my lines, which was a great source of embarrassment since I wrote the damn thing! But it seemed to give the character a little edge.” To say the least. George’s performance is one of the most maniacal in the annals of the Underground, ranking alongside his role as Gianbeano in *Sins of the Fleshapoids* as his most twisted screen appearance.

*Sparkles Tavern* was Curt’s next feature film and would employ many of the actors from *Thundercrack!* McDowell wrote the script, George says, while high on LSD in Yosemite National Park. George was cast as “Mr. Pupik” – a mystical stranger with intuitive powers and Dadaist mannerisms who



peddles bizarre but effective remedies for personal troubles. George was required to sing, execute arcane dance steps, and play the saxophone (actually the “air saxophone”). Shot in 1976, *Sparkles* was not edited and released until 1984. Three years later, on June 3, 1987, Curt McDowell died of AIDS at 42. (The original negatives of both *Thundercrack!* and *Sparkles Tavern* have since been lost or destroyed, apparently due to oversights by the Curt McDowell Foundation.)

### *California Abnormal: Invasion UFO*

George’s 1979 film *Blips* would initiate a six-part UFO series inspired by UFOs he was spotting at the time. In a 1988 interview, he says, “In the mid-’70s I found out that UFOs are real. Whatever they are – I don’t know what they are. But there was a big rash of them and they were in California, in San Francisco. I happened to fall into the mess ... or mystery, by viewing what were UFOs. They were of different colors and they came in a series that lasted about a year and a half. Also in different sizes and shapes ... and they have strange mental effects on you. They interact with you in a personal way, although I can’t see how extraterrestrials would have that much interest in you. But from the stories you hear and my own personal experiences, it’s very *personalized* and *bizarre*. I began to investigate it in the films.”

Set in several barren, debris-littered rooms, *Blips* plays as impressionistic soap opera, equal parts *Phantom from Outer Space* and *Waiting for Godot*. George was more concerned with portraying the psychic effects UFOs had on people, on their libidos particularly, than with the overworked science-fiction images of UFOS delivering mass destruction. Special effects were minimal.

The UFO sextet continued with *The Nocturnal Immaculation* (1980), *Yolando* (1981), *Cattle Mutilations* (1983), *The X-People* (1984), and *Ascension of the Demonoids* (1985), which is George’s last personal film to date.

George received his only funding grant for *Ascension of the Demonoids* (\$20,000 from the NEA), and so, freed from the usual financial restraints, he was determined to have a good time and make a “spectacle” with “tons of color” and dazzling superimpositions and other camera effects. “I wanted to look away from the subject,” George said in a 1988 interview, “so the movie looks away from the subject towards the end. In fact, it completely drops the subject, basically ... goes to Hawaii and examines the scenery, forgetting about what had previously happened or what the picture was about. That was my intention. I wanted to get off the subject.”

George gave another inspired performance in the 1984 black-and-white feature *Screamplay*, an unjustly overlooked ode to silent movie making that featured some astonishing montage and superimposition. Cast against type by Boston-based writer-director Rufus Butler Seder, George plays a dour, reclusive superintendent of a courtyard motel with a convincing sense of menace – a persona in fact recognizable to anyone who has seen George sullenly loping down San Francisco’s Mission Street to the 19th Street flat where he lives today.

These days Mike splits his time between San Francisco, where he shares the flat with George, and New York City, where he works in season at the Millennium Workshop. He periodically tours his films in Europe and the U.S. and works as cinematographer on independent Dutch and German films. In December 1993 he premiered his new video feature film, *Purgatory Junction*, at the Millennium to a full house. Mike has also given a name and enduring inspiration to the New York City underground-punk band The Voluptuous Horror of Karen Black, fronted by nude body-painted singer Kembra Phafler and her guitar-playing Japanese husband.



George, with over 60 films and 100 videos now to his credit, has a higher profile. He was the subject of recent retrospectives at The Museum of the Moving Image in Queens and at San Francisco’s palatial Castro Theater, which staged a joint George Kuchar/Curt McDowell retrospective in November 1993. George also continues to teach guest film courses and workshops at universities and film societies around the U.S., but seldom travels abroad. He works almost exclusively in video today.

Since the late '70s, George has been a regular May visitor to an unremarkable little roadside motel in El Reno, Oklahoma. He’s become friends with the motel’s owner, who now picks him up at the airport. With each visit he produces a “Weather Diaries” video as he kills time in El Reno. He spends his time there filming daily life, clearing his head of psychic flotsam accumulated in San Francisco, and waits for tornados to strike.

The tornados, still ...

Has it ever happened?

“When one finally came,” laughs confidante John Waters, “he ran and hid. I’m not sure – he might have been joking.”