Going for the Jugular of Sensation: Art Imitates Lowlife at the Brooklyn Museum of Art

PULP RELOADED

BY R.C. BAKER

PULP ART
Brooklyn Museum of Art
200 Eastern Parkway
Through October 19

Violent, sadistic, lustful, and wildly entertaining, America's id is on parade at the Brooklyn Museum. "Pulp Art: Vamps, Villains, and Victors," an exhibition of paintings made for the covers of pulp magazines during a period roughly spanning both world wars, plumbs the depths of American pop culture. Hard-bitten blondes, hard-boiled dicks, hard-hitting caped crusaders—no matter your age, these images roil your DNA. Whether it was Sam Spade then or Easy Rollins now, Doc Savage or Indiana Jones, Buck Rogers or Han Solo, the Shadow or Neo, the Spider or Spider-Man, our collective alter ego sprang in large part from the detective, sci-fi, adventure, and horror pulps that sold by the millions during the Depression. Cheap paper, bottom-barrel printing, and a 10-cent cover charge led to ferocious newsstand competition; publishers pushed the bounds of accepted taste, depicting starlets in distress (and not much else), brawling gangsters, leering freaks, and gibbering aliens.

Pulp artists worked under blunt constraints: When a publisher theorized that red and yellow enticed men, artists ladled those colors onto *Dime Detective* and *Dime Western*; romance magazines went with green and blue for the ladies. Often the action drifts into flat color or inert shadow to allow space for titles such as *Captain Satan*, *King of Detectives* and story teasers like "Drunk, Disorderly, and Dead!" Under brutal deadlines, artists boiled the cover story down to one eye-grabbing scene. As Robert Lesser, the man who amassed this singular collection, points out in the show's catalog, "It's like walking into a movie in the middle. [The artists wanted] to create sufficient curiosity to get your dime." In a defining example by Norman Saunders, a woman bathed in red darkroom light develops an 8 x 10 glossy of a shooting; behind her, the photogenic gunman bursts through the door, .45 automatic leveled at her head. Art imitates lowlife.

It's this surfeit of narrative that stakes these paintings' claim to art. Don't expect such rarefied pleasures as sensuous surface, refined color, subtle patina, grand scale, or tasteful elephant dung. Pulp painters had little interest in the soulful sublime—they went for the jugular of sensation. Many learned their visual storytelling skills at fine-arts training grounds such as the Pratt Institute in Brooklyn, and references to old masters abound in their works. J. Allen St. John ransacked a classic Hellenistic sculpture, *Laocoön*, transporting its writhing composition two millennia to pit Tarzan and his ape sidekick against a fearsome serpent. Compared to the elegant, intensely knotted proportions of the Greek original, Tarzan's struggle seems tame, but the printed version (in almost every case vintage pulps are framed alongside the bleached rib cage; fine artists from Stuart Davis to Jasper Johns to Barbara Kruger have long dined out on such formal miscegenation.

Photograph by Robin Holland

Rafael de Soto's 1947 *Detective Tales* cover (left) alongside an anonymous piece

Frank R. Paul, the virtuoso of the show, who was recognized as a visionary by the industry, was sometimes spared the battle with text by attaining the back cover of *Amazing Stories*, the granddaddy of sci-fi pulps. He filled that blank 10 x 7 opportunity with glittering quartz cities inhabited by beguiling aliens and robot bumblebees, all bathed in the light of multiple moons. A master of the unforgiving medium of watercolor (which, unlike oils, cannot be easily reworked), Paul used fine stippling to create gradated airbrush effects. His paintings, untethered to the gritty realities of gumshoes and murdered showgirls—or NASA's later confirmation of the bland sterility of Mars—used strong, colorful, abstract frameworks to underpin galactic dreamscapes.

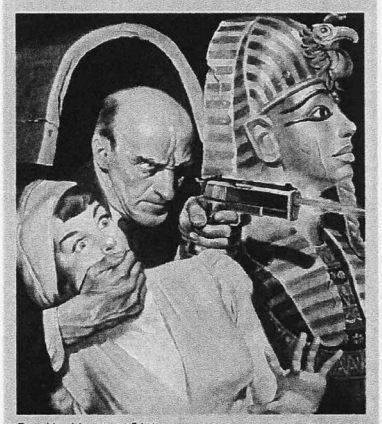
Unlike Paul, many of the artists refused to sign their work, considering it art for hire. As Rafael de Soto, one of the best pulp practitioners, once told Lesser, "If a pretty girl says, 'I want to go to bed with you, because I like you,' that's fine art. If a pretty girl says, 'I want to go to bed with you, but it's a hundred bucks,' that's commercial art." Still, these artists were consummate professionals, and often painted beautiful passages despite time and creative limits. They were carrying on a classical figurative tradition fast disappearing from museums and galleries, as American artists were pulled into the orbit of all the modern isms.

Pulp art is the American Century through a funhouse mirror, Norman Rockwell's apple-cheeked children and cracker-barrel farmers reflected back as floozies, gunsels, and masked avengers. Without the pulps there would be no Superman, no *Matrix*, perhaps even no Andy Warhol. Pulp art is America. Love it or leave it.

originals) gains strength from the swirling curlicues of the *Lord of the Jungle* logo echoing the looped coils of the serpent.

This powerful convergence of graphics and painting is one of the show's unexpected delights. W.F. Soare was a smart artist who took into account the huge red-and-yellow X of the *Secret Agent X Detective Mysteries* logo: He purposely repeats it in a struggling woman's bare arms and the knife between a skeleton's shoulder blades. An anonymous art director provided the finishing touch with lines of white type that emphasize the

PULP CULTURE



Brooklyn Museum of Art

De Soto's *Blood on My Doorstep* (1947)

Why wasn't this art saved? Why is it so hard to find today? Because pulp art is, to many, offensive art. Its pictures are filled with pain, torture, violence, and the threat of sexual violation and death in motion. . . . Pulp art is hard whiskey: men's art fueled on testosterone. Unknown and unrecognized, without a deep anchor sunk into the marketplace, it has remained—until the very present—a unique American heritage that burned brightly on newsstands for two decades, a lost inheritance future generations might never see or be able to claim.

—Robert Lesser in *Pulp Art* (Castle Books)

Curatorial Challenge: Separating Artistry From Misogyny

FROM SPICY TO SUBVERSIVE

In 1942, Mayor Fiorello La Guardia spied a *Spicy Mystery* magazine on a New York City newsstand. H.G. Ward (a pulp cover artist who never missed the chance to lovingly delineate a mons veneris under clingy fabrics) had portrayed a woman strung up in a meat locker and threatened by a hunchbacked butcher. Apparently missing the compositional nod to Caravaggio's *Abraham and Isaac*, Hizzoner forced the publisher out of the pulp business.

The *Spicy* line was not alone in the battle for down-market sales: Along with more subtle male fantasies, women were strangled ("Two Hands to Choke"), immersed in steaming vats ("Black Pool for Hell Maidens"), and branded ("Six-Gun Saga of Blue Strange"). So, for the "Pulp" show, the BMA wanted a female curator who could separate the artistry from the misogyny. It might also have specified that she be a bug-eyed alien and hail from the mysterious East, since tentacled blobs, bucktoothed Japanese soldiers, and long-taloned Chinese gang lords menace many a pale ingenue, justifying the righteous beatdowns they receive at the hands of vengeful white guys. (Finally, the BMA has a show Rudy can love!) Independent curator Anne Pasternak (who curated the "Tribute of Light" memorial after 9-11) took on the challenge, happily finding some images "imbued with subversive content." When not being exploited, women were acknowledged to have their own sexual desires, a vital assertion at a time when female suffrage, and later, easy access to birth control, were political dynamite. And as Pasternak points out, Franklin Roosevelt, the progressive who appointed the first ever female cabinet officer was also "a huge pulp enthusiast."

Amid the glow of New Deal promise, a future giant of American painting, Philip Guston, was making sincere but clunky frescoes warning of hooded conspirators. The pulp artists unveiled the Klan's villainy in a more lurid fashion: H.L. Parkhurst's *Monster Fringe* depicts one of these self-proclaimed defenders of female virtue dragging a screaming blonde to her death (or perhaps just her desecration). In a contemporary addendum to the show, Pasternak uses two 1990 Andres Serrano photographs to update this theme. The disturbingly blank eyeholes in *Klansman (Great Titan of the Invisible Empire)* convey true malice, an evil more pathetic, and more perverted, than anything the pulps ever dreamed up. R.C.B.