

Framing an abstract expressionist and comics maestro in the entrance to the subway

In the late 1930s, Mark Rothko used the New York City subway as a departure point for his greatest paintings. Two decades later, Bernie Krigstein concluded his most visionary period on the A-train platform. Unknown to each other, they found similar inspiration, both below- and aboveground. When Rothko was 10, in 1913, his family immigrated to

America to escape the czar's pogroms. By the early '20s, despite a clumsy drawing hand, he resolved to become a painter, working in his uncle's garment business to support himself. As a youth he dreamed of being a labor leader and in 1936 helped with preparations for the American Artists' Congress—one of the group's stated goals was opposing the "destruction of culture by fascism and war." A few years later, after scant success at the easel, Rothko wrote "The Artist's Reality," a recently discovered manuscript that seeks a synthesis of Western philosophy and artistic motivation. Here he is on the then new rage, Surrealism: "They are attempting to bridge the impassable darkness between the world of the mind and the world of emotion." Steeped in Russian austerity and European art history, he disdains "enshrin[ing] as real art . . . popular arts such as the cartoon and comic strip" even as he acknowledges the laudable goal of using such forms as a "reinforcement of democracy." (Meanwhile, the new comic-book sensation Superman was crusading for mine workers' rights.)

Rothko continued painting, creating a number of scenes set within that great democratizer, the subway. Populated by figures as featureless as the columns and railings imprisoning them, the blocks of paint represent a major step toward the amorphous rectangles of exquisitely pitched color that would define his mature abstractions of the 1950s. *The Artist's Reality* hints at these contemplative, enveloping canvases when Rothko notes that the Renaissance invention of oil paint allowed Leonardo "to render the infinite nuances of forms passing from light into darkness, to give tactility to atmosphere." (Years later, the ethereal *Entrance to the Subway*, 1938, was one of the few paintings Rothko would pull from the racks as an example of early work.)

Krigstein, born in 1919 to Russian-Jewish

GOING UNDERGROUND

BY R. C. BAKER



Yale University Press (above), Fantagraphics Books (top right)

Rothko's 1939 *Untitled (Subway Entrance)*; Krigstein's "Master Race"

immigrants, studied art at Brooklyn College, emulating Cézanne, de Chirico, and Picasso, eventually stumbling into commercial work drawing comic books. After wartime service, he threw himself back into that throwaway medium. The 34 stories lovingly reproduced in *B. Krigstein Comics* (a companion to the 2002 bio *B. Krigstein, Volume One*) document an artist quickly evolving beyond hack scripts by giving each tale a distinct character—wobbly, surrealistic geometries for "Murder Dream"; a downpour of Zip-a-tone for the grisly cop caper "In the Bag." After he demanded the right to ink his own pencils (a rarity in such an assembly-line industry), Krigstein's drawing became more sure and lively. In "More Blessed to Give . . ." he surrounds a murderous suburban couple with suave, archly modern backgrounds and uses his painter's eye to build full-page compositions out of panels that slyly

mirror one another. Comics historian Greg Sadowski, author of both volumes, quotes Krigstein's deeply held conviction that comic panels are "individual works of art [that must] also exist as a unit." Krigstein's magnum opus "Master Race" (reprinted in *Volume One*) transports the cattle cars of Auschwitz to the Far Rockaway local. Wheedling two extra pages out of his editor, Krigstein chopped all eight into panels with recurring elements: Faces hemmed in by subway windows become inmates-line framed by barbed wire, and in a deadly pas de deux, a camp survivor struggles through closing car doors while on the facing page the same diagonal composition sends his Nazi tormentor to death on the tracks. Friezes of bored commuters open and close the story.

Krigstein and Rothko were both widely read and politically engaged, but Krigstein went Rothko one better—not just joining but forming and presiding over a union of comic-book artists who demanded better pay and health benefits. In those red-baiting times, the group lasted six months. By 1954, the cultural fascism the Artists' Congress had warned of arrived in the form of Senate hearings that scapegoated comic books as a major cause of juvenile crime; while Rothko was being feted worldwide, Krigstein was losing his livelihood. Reduced to working in his father's dress factory, he eventually got a job

teaching illustration, and until his death in 1990, basically disowned his comic-book achievements. Unfortunately, the loud colors that energized his comics turned cacophonous in his late paintings, while sprightly figures on the printed page slowed to sluggish lumps in oil.

Rothko and Krigstein staked out opposite ends of an art spectrum that bent in upon itself during the '60s to create pop art. Rothko now resides firmly in the pantheon, but the lesser-known Krigstein may have been more farseeing when he stated, "I never felt that comics was a diversion or digression. It's all part of the one big thing."