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## **Humankind just tends to tickle Erin Cosgrove**

**by Holly Myers December 26, 2010**

In the early years of her career, in the mid- to late 1990s, Erin Cosgrove made mixed-media conceptual works with a droll feminist bent. She produced a mock-informational video for women on how to dress so as to not provoke men, for instance, and devised a "Do-It-Yourself Beauty Make-Over and At-Home Plastic Surgery Kit," complete with a paint scraper and instructional photos.

In 2000, in her second year of UCLA's MFA program, the work took a peculiar turn: Cosgrove decided to write a romance novel. In fact, she decided to write seven romance novels. "I just started writing down titles," she says, speaking in a small, clean studio behind the Altadena home she shares with her husband, artist Hirsch Perlman, "and some of them cracked me up, so I thought I should write them. And then there was the thought: Anyone can write a romance novel, but if I write seven ...."

She devised seven plot lines, wrote two, and has — the project is ostensibly ongoing — published one: "The Baader-Meinhof Affair" (Printed Matter, 2003), an entertaining if none too subtle satire about a lonely college student's romance with a band of would-be revolutionaries. The project speaks to both her restless ambition and her taste for the absurd. (Why seven? "Because it's ridiculous," she replies.) It also marked a significant turning point in her process and her thinking.

She'd been frustrated in the past, she says, working within the relatively minimal formal parameters that had become common currency for conceptual work. "What came out didn't have the nuance I was projecting onto it," she says, "because an image can't necessarily retain a complicated narrative. And guess what can? — narrative. It also seems less pretentious to me, in a way, coming out and giving the information instead of projecting theory onto nebulous who-knows-what."

Since embracing narrative, her work has grown only broader in scope and sharper in its satire. In her next major project, the animated epic "What Manner of Person Art Thou?," she turned from romance to religion to tell the story of renegade members of a Hutterite sect who set out on a mission through a secular world they find awash in corruption and debauchery and to which they respond with violent indignation. It is a bizarre, hilarious and bloody spectacle, rendered in a stiff but fantastical visual style that combines elements of medieval manuscripts, Colonial-era Americana and "South Park." (She taught herself to animate as she went along, using a combination of Photoshop and After Effects. "It starts out looking like it's made by a bunch of monkeys," she says, "and then eventually, I think, some of it looks quite nice.")

Around the film she concocted a flurry of pseudo-historical artifacts and commentary, including a scroll depicting another version of the story, "starting from the beginning of time and ending in apocalypse," a filmstrip-style documentary speculating on the meaning of the scroll's imagery and paintings made on clear film resembling pages from illuminated manuscripts. (In this and other recent projects, the works are sold individually, the videos issued in small editions.) The project was exhibited in early 2009 in simultaneous shows at the Hammer Museum and Carl Berg Gallery.

Raised in Minnesota, the 41-year-old artist grew up Catholic — which, she says with a laugh, "I always thought meant that you became an atheist. But apparently that's not always the case."

While she does now consider herself an atheist, it seems only to have fueled her fascination with religious history, a subject she researched extensively for this project. "Religion is an incredibly rich place for humans," she says. "People are throwing the most important things on religion: their hopes and their wish thinking, their fears and love and creation — it's all being thrown into this one word. That's good stuff."

In conversation, Cosgrove is strikingly literate and highly opinionated, with a deadpan demeanor and a sarcastic edge. In the work, these qualities are refracted through the prism of the fiction, tempered with silliness, irony, moral ambiguity and an often trippy visual style.

"I'm actually very polemical," she admits. "I think that there are parts of religion that are stuck in medieval times, if not worse. The Bronze Age. But me just saying that is really annoying." She laughs. "So, you know, I do something like this."

Five years in the making, "What Manner of Person Art Thou?" was an arduous endeavor. ("I could crochet this project faster," she says.) Her current project, titled "The Living Book," is shaping up to be even bigger.

The premise concerns a spaceship embarked on a multi-generational journey whose inhabitants are obliged to rewrite the history of the world when someone happens to spill coffee on the ship's cultural files. She has three "chapters" completed: "Happy Am I," a singalong animated video that "compresses all of human history and evolution" into a tidy three minutes (it appeared, along with an assortment of prints, in LA Louver's 2009 "Rogue Wave" show); a live-action video in which a scholar defends the existence of ghosts (read: God) and outlines their role in the shaping of American history; and a mock-documentary that ponderously contemplates history's philosophical implications.

"Are we talking about history or history, as in the subject history?" muses the host, played by the actor Peter Altschuler. "There's history versus historicism, history as compared to the historiography of history. Don't forget history's historicity, the histrionics of history, the historical versus the hysterical, and the purging of all history via historectomy — not to be confused with hysterectomy, with a Y, which apparently involves nonmetaphorical wombs."

She plays the rough cut on the computer where she does her editing, in a book-lined office in one of the bedrooms of the house. She's drawn to video and animation, she says, for their utility more than the pleasure of the process itself. She takes more enjoyment in writing. In her playful yet substantive use of these media, she brings a bright perspective to what can be a dour — or, on the commercial side, fairly shallow — field.

"A lot of video art is nebulous and tedious," she says, "and you do sort of wonder: Are we trying to be boring? I mean, is that the intention? Why is it that to be serious you can't have a sense of humor? It seems to me there's this idea that the truth sometimes is ugly, but more often it's actually kind of funny."

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