

What Manner of Artist Art Thou?

By Holly Willis

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The Hammer Museum is currently home to a 65-minute animated video titled *What Manner of Person Art Thou?* by Erin Cosgrove. It's an anachronistic allegory about two fervent believers, Elijah Yoder and Enoch Troyer, who traipse from one realm of belief into others, subduing anyone they think irreverent along the way. Seemingly set in the distant past, the story suddenly lurches into the present as the two young men encounter a string of characters and question their conflicting beliefs. With a visual style that veers between lush and simple, psychedelic and hand-made, the apocalyptic mash-up of Biblical stories and *South Park* episodes deals with very real issues,

albeit orthogonally, and highlights the peculiar genius of another LA-based artist. Who is Erin and how did this animated project come about?

Erin graduated from UCLA in 2001, where she earned an MFA in the New Genres department. "I did a lot of installation work, and then started on a book project," says Erin. "The project was to write seven romance novels by seven different authors at the same time. One of them is *The Baader Meinhof Affair*, which dissects the tropes of romance, especially the romance of the outlaw." The covers for the books, designed by Erin, feature the artist and Fabio. "It's a strange thing," Erin says of *The Baader Meinhof Affair*. "In some ways, I was trying to write a real romance novel, but then I put in stuff that I'm more interested in, so there's a mix of philosophy and really crummy make-out scenes."

In 2004, after *The Baader Meinhof Affair* was published, The Sundance Channel approached Erin to pitch some ideas for a TV pilot. She says she submitted a few, including one about a cannibal anorexic serial killer, and eventually received funding for a seven-minute live action/animated project called *A Heart Lies Beneath*, which is based on *The Baader Meinhof Affair* and stars Fabio. "It was really hard," says Erin, "because I had a budget and people working with me, but I ended up really liking it. It seemed to be a place where all the things I like to do - writing, creating complicated storylines and drawing - all came together."

Erin says that the events of 9/11 had inspired her to study religion as dogma, and she began researching Christian sects while reading a long list of epics such as *The Decameron*, Dante's *Inferno* and *Don Quixote*. She wrote the script for *What Manner of Person Art Thou?* which is itself epic in proportion, following the two characters on a long and transformative journey of death and discovery. Once she had the script, Erin started making the drawings. "I realized that I didn't have any money this time and I was going to have to do it myself. I used Photoshop to create all the layers and then I used After Effects. It was a ridiculous amount of work. I probably could have needle-pointed the thing more easily. There are hundreds of layers in each scene, and it looks like it was done by a crazy person in her room. And it was."

The project includes what Erin calls "god music," which she says predates jazz and gospel, and isn't quite like country. "I liked this music and the medieval imagery and I think you can embrace these kinds of human expression and these intense feelings without embracing the dogma."

When asked about the strange project's placement within a museum, Erin admits that she's not really sure where the video belongs. "It's something that wouldn't really work on TV; it's not a proper animation, so it doesn't really work in festivals either. As an art project, it almost has too much content - I was shocked that the Hammer chose it, partly because that's the place where I wanted it to premiere."

Last Saturday, *What Manner of Person Art Thou?* expanded beyond just a single video to a series of artworks currently on view at the Carl Berg Gallery. The additions include a 15-foot scroll that could be the basis for the animation, as well as a short documentary video about the possible maker of the scroll, and a series of paintings about Yoder and Troyer. With this extension of Yoder and Troyer's story, Erin crafts an even larger and more elaborate world for her characters, inviting us to explore the layers of authorship as they loop from one gallery space to another. As with her *Seven Romance Novels* project, *What Manner of Person Art Thou?* becomes a meta-meditation on the artwork as object, raising questions about its own origins and fictionalizing the maker's role. "I like pseudo-didactics and questionable narrators," says Erin. Thanks to her peculiar take, her intense stylization and handiwork, and her elaborate storytelling, the whole project grows increasingly interesting as it gets bigger.

The video will screen at the Hammer Museum until March 15; the show of artworks at Carl Berg Gallery will be on view until March 14.

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