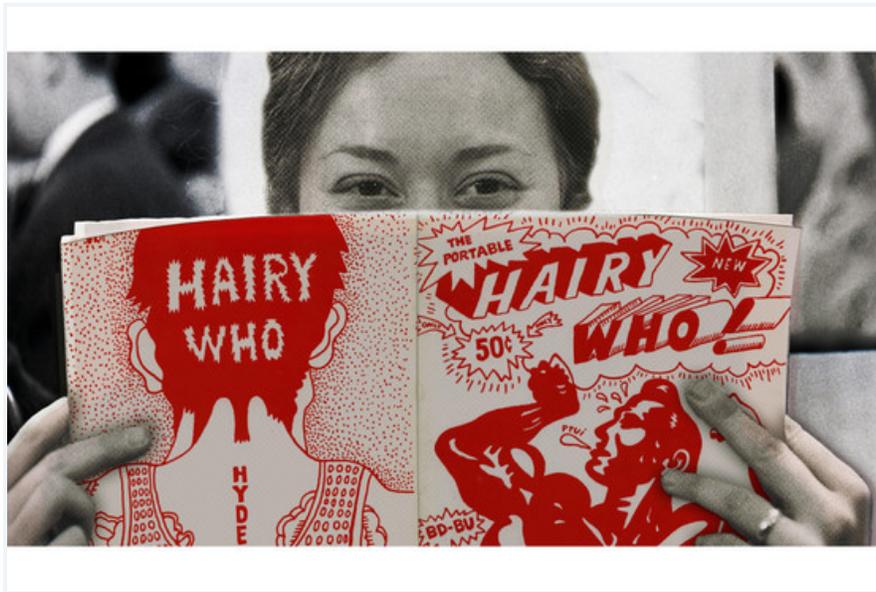


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A Spotlight on Chicago's Imagists

By KYLE MACMILLAN
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Hyde Park Art Center's 75th anniversary and other events celebrate the 14 artists



Between 1966 and 1973, a group of 14 artists produced an earthy, vernacular brand of art that drew on comic books, surrealism and fetishism. *William Arsenault*

A series of exhibits between 1966 and 1973 at Chicago's Hyde Park Art Center featured wacky titles like "Nonplussed Some," "Marriage Chicago Style" and "Hairy Who?" The shows would become the foundation for the Chicago Imagists, a group of 14 artists who produced an earthy, vernacular brand of art that drew on comic books, surrealism and fetishism.

This year's 75th-anniversary of the Hyde Park Art Center and a confluence of other events is refocusing attention on this loose-knit group. Roger Brown, Gladys Nilsson, Jim Nutt, Ed Paschke, Karl Wirsum and the rest of the group bucked abstract-expressionism, minimalism and other New York-centric art trends of the time. The Imagists have become an important face

of Chicago's art scene even as the city's art-world standing has fluctuated up and down through the years.

"They're coming of age—again," said Leslie Buchbinder, director of "Hairy Who & The Chicago Imagists," the first-ever documentary on the group. The film is screening around the country at film festivals and art fairs and will have its international premiere Sept. 16 at the Liverpool Biennial in the U.K. In conjunction with the movie, the filmmakers established a website on the group—chicagoimagists.com.

In June, the Ed Paschke Art Center opened on Chicago's northwest side, featuring work drawn from the estate of one of the most celebrated Imagists, with its immediately recognizable electric colors, bold compositions and outré subject matter.

The Hairy Who is one of four groups featured in an exhibit at the Museum of Art Rhode Island School of Design entitled "What Nerve! Alternative Figures in American Art, 1960 to Present," which will go on view Sept. 19.

Don Baum, Hyde Park's curator in the 1960s and 1970s, was among the first to sense the Imagists' potential and agreed to present their work in small group shows. Far from expecting to change art history, the upstart artists just wanted a place to exhibit at a time when venues were hard to find.

"I had no conception of this being some kind of movement," said Mr. Wirsum, one of six members of the "Hairy Who," the most famous of the Imagist subgroups. "For me, it was just an opportunity to show work and to have a really fun experience and just do our own thing."

Kate Lorenz, Hyde Park's current executive director, described that time as pivotal in establishing the identity of the South Chicago art space. It looms large as the facility prepares for a Sept. 13 block party and other events marking its 75th anniversary.

"It allowed people to not just think of us as a community-based art center, but it made it a place where artists were really launched," Ms. Lorenz said.

Even with all the recent attention, Robert Cozzolino, senior curator at the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts and a Chicago native, believes the Imagists should be better known. "They're still not widely accepted," he said. "They'll have had the success they deserve when

you walk into a museum in the country that has a modern or contemporary collection and their work is seamlessly integrated into the installations."

Ms. Nilsson, a member of the "Hairy Who," is always happy when the Imagists are recognized. But she says she learned long ago that there was little she could do about how others view the group.

"The artists just go in their studio and do their work," Ms. Nilsson said. "Like anything across the span of time, things fall out of favor and then somebody rediscovers them. It's kind of nice to have these things happen, but I don't have any answer as to why favor comes and goes."

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