

# L.A. SNAP / CHICAGO CRACKLE / NEW YORK POP

RICHARD H. AXSOM

Something astonishing in the way of art, music, or literature must one day  
come out of the great wind-bruised city of Chicago.

John Russell, New York Times art critic

Faint praise, indeed, for a city that boasts Saul Bellow, Harry Callahan, Robert Frost, Leon Golub, Ludwig Mies van der Rohe, Carl Sandburg, Studs Terkel, and Frank Lloyd Wright. This litany also could include the Chicago Imagists, who, in 1969, could look back over a remarkable three years of increasing recognition. They originally had begun showing in 1966 at the Hyde Park Art Center, situated on the campus of the University of Chicago. The core members, including Roger Brown, Sarah Canright, Ed Flood, Art Green, Philip Hanson, Gladys Nilsson, Jim Nutt, Ed Paschke, Christina Ramberg, Suellen Rocca, Barbara Rossi, and Karl Wirsum, variously had banded together to present their work in a series of exhibitions titled *Hairy Who*, *Nonplussed Some*, *False Image*, and *Marriage Chicago Style*.

Most of the artists were native to Chicago, in their later twenties, and students who either had or were to earn their BFAs and MFAs at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago (SAIC). They were drawn—like Pop artists in New York, Los Angeles, London, and Paris who were all a generation older—to the everyday urban world and popular culture. But Chicago Imagism, unlike Pop variants elsewhere, was an art of personal fantasy characterized by assertive line, offbeat color, and consummate craftsmanship. The Imagists trafficked in exuberant and irreverent satire that spoke to the social foibles, violence, and absurdities of contemporary life—with the tumultuous late 1960s as backdrop.

The Imagists had been showcased earlier in 1969 at the new Museum of Contemporary Art in Chicago and at the Corcoran Gallery of Art in Washington, D.C. Several from the group also appeared in *The Spirit of the Comics*, an exhibition with other artists organized by the Institute of Contemporary Art, University of Pennsylvania, and in another group show at the Whitney Museum of American Art in New York. At this point, recognition was coming more from out of town than from Chicago itself; not much of a critical art press existed in the city in 1969. Franz Schulze, an art reporter for *Panorama* magazine of the now-defunct *Chicago Daily News*, was an early supporter of what he saw as a second generation of “Imagists”—a name he originally conferred on all postwar Chicago artists with a surrealist and fantasy bent, but later co-opted to refer to the Hyde Park Art Center group.<sup>1</sup>

Despite their acknowledgment and a notable exhibition history during the late 1960s and the 1970s outside of Chicago, the Imagists most usually were sidelined as a local phenomenon and not brought into the mainstream of American art history. Was there no room for a vibrant new art indigenous to Chicago and indicative of broader currents in contemporary art? Why? These questions inform the intention here to situate Chicago Imagism in a larger story and claim for it a more critical position that lifts it out of any insular perspective that regards it only as regional. Chicago Im-



Roger Brown, Eleanor Dube, Philip Hanson,  
Christina Ramberg

*False Image* (price list), 1969  
Offset lithograph on white wove paper  
14 x 8 ½ inches  
Gift of the Roger Brown Study  
Collection of the School of the Art Institute of  
Chicago  
Courtesy of Corbett vs. Dempsey Gallery

agism should be brought into the fold of Pop art. Pop art cannot be defined by the New York Pop model alone; Pop has many voices, which can be heard in New York, Los Angeles, Great Britain, Europe, and, as argued here, Chicago. The differences among all of these variants revolve around issues of style; however, their commonality is a shared embrace of mass media and a drive to mediate between high and low culture.

But any important recognition of a new kind of Pop art coming out of the Midwest in the late 1960s was overshadowed by a blockbuster exhibition that opened in mid-October at the Metropolitan Museum of Art: *New York Painting and Sculpture: 1940–1970*.<sup>2</sup> As one of four major exhibitions to fete the Met’s centennial anniversary, it was organized by Henry Geldzahler, well-known art critic, art historian, and first curator of contemporary arts in a newly formed department. Celebrating a New York–centric triumph of American postwar painting and sculpture, it exalted the achievements of Abstract Expressionism, post-painterly abstraction, Pop art, and Minimalist sculpture. Great prominence was given to such luminaries as Franz Kline and Andy Warhol. Although the exhibition received good press in some quarters, conservative art critic Hilton Kramer at the *New York Times* was chagrined. In three reviews, he charged Geldzahler with personal choices that were “terribly overextended, ill-chosen, and modishly inspired.”<sup>3</sup> “The exhibition was not an account of American art as a whole. It was bound to affect the way a great many people will think about the art of the period for many years.”<sup>4</sup> And it did, confirming the hegemony of the New York School. The exhibition, despite its detractors, ratified a canon of postwar art that is still recited.

The 1960s, however, did produce—more so than any other decade in the twentieth century—the highest number of American artists who can claim historical significance. This congestion of brilliance included John Baldessari, Jasper Johns, Ellsworth Kelly, Roy Lichtenstein, Brice Marden, Claes Oldenburg, Robert Rauschenberg, Ed Ruscha, George Segal, Richard Serra, Robert Smithson, Frank Stella, and Warhol. Not that anyone got this wrong; it was simply that the complexion of contemporary American art was far more varied, if accomplishments west of the Hudson River were taken into account.

By the later 1960s, Chicago could lay claim to a postwar avant-garde of two generations that mirrored the scene in New York and Europe. The city’s Monster Roster, a group of artists including Leon Golub, June Leaf, Nancy Spero, and H. C. Westermann, worked in a manner that linked them to a figurative expressionism prevalent in Europe (Karel Appel, Francis Bacon, Jean Dubuffet) and to Bay Area Figuration in Northern California (Elmer Bischoff, Richard Diebenkorn, David Park). Although there was no significant manifestation of a post-painterly or formalist abstraction during the sixties in Chicago, there was the appearance of the Imagists, whose paintings, sculptures, works on paper, and ephemera were allied in spirit to Pop art.

An infrastructure for the support of modern art also crystallized in Chicago during the postwar years. The Art Institute of Chicago increased its coverage of contemporary art, continuing to highlight all the achievements of important modernist artists such as Francis Bacon, Max Beckmann, Max Ernst, Jean Dubuffet, and René Magritte. The Arts Club of Chicago, under the enlightened direction of Rue Winter-

botham Shaw, presented, among others, Balthus and Rauschenberg in exhibition. New galleries devoted to modern art also were established, notably Allan Frumkin Gallery (1952), with its emphasis on Surrealism and German Expressionist prints; Richard L. Feigen & Co. (1957), also specializing in Surrealism and German Expressionism; Richard Gray Gallery (1963), featuring New York School painting and sculpture; and Phyllis Kind Gallery (1967), the earliest commercial champion of Chicago Imagism. These galleries fostered a local enthusiasm for modern and contemporary art, particularly a taste for fantasy art, which enlightened general audiences, collectors, and art students. In addition to the Art Institute, the Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago (MCA), opened in 1967. It was among the first institutions in the United States devoted solely to contemporary art. One of the first two exhibitions at the MCA was *Claes Oldenburg: Projects for Monuments*, featuring the New York sculptor whose early drawings and soft sculpture paralleled the funky sensibility of the Imagists. Oldenburg’s later Large Scale projects of the 1970s and on were more congruent with the bright colors and hard-edged forms of New York Pop. But as will be argued later, the Pre-Pop work of such artists as Claes Oldenburg and Jim Dine provided an important bridge to the Imagist work of the later 1960s.

At first blush, though, Imagism did not seem to accord with standard issue New York Pop despite a shared sensibility that drew all of these artists to popular culture. New York’s critical reactions to Imagist work were infrequent, indifferent, or mixed. However, when John Canaday reviewed a smaller version of *Chicago Imagist Art*, organized in 1972 by the MCA, and presented at the New York Cultural Center on Columbus Circle, he was not uncharitable, mocking the supposed bruises to the sensitivities of his fellow Manhattanites by titling his piece “No Need to Man the Barricades.”<sup>5</sup> Canaday prized the exhibition’s raucousness (better seen in its fuller version in Chicago, as the critic had), and he knowingly perceived the crossbreeding of Pop art and Surrealism. Canaday’s comment suggests an art critic who could think outside the island. He appreciated Chicago’s attraction to the fantastic in art, exemplifying what Schulze described as a tradition of eccentric individualism, favoring the personal and the dream.<sup>6</sup> Canaday saw this as a “viable alternative position to that of single-axisied [sic] New York–West Coast.” Ten years later, John Russell, however, still could not conceal his irritations. In his review of *From Chicago* at the Pace Gallery in New York, which presented the work of Hairy Who artists, he certainly had barricades in mind: “Whenever new art is coarse and tacky in substance, all-embracing in its range of demotic allusion and frankly hostile to accepted high art, there are likely to be affinities of one kind or another with the ‘Hairy Who.’”<sup>7</sup>

Because of New York’s clout, Pop art had been anointed by 1963 the gold standard of the new—more so than post-painterly abstraction, which quickly assumed its place in a tradition over a half century old. Like the power base historically known as the East Coast establishment (with its symbiotic intermingling of media, Wall Street finance, Ivy League schools, and legal and business structures), the New York art establishment was also a coterie of aligned interests—art criticism, art magazines, art galleries, auction houses, and museums that since World War II has formed a critical



**Franz Kline**  
*Conrada*, 1960  
 Oil on canvas  
 91 3/4 x 79 inches  
 Grant J. Pick Purchase Fund, The Art Institute of Chicago  
 © 2008 The Franz Kline Estate / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York



mass hard to contest. In its complacency, ironic but not uncommon in cosmopolitan centers, New York proceeded as though nothing of real import could happen west of itself. In the 1960s, there was a specific constellation of older and new regulars that brilliantly promoted the New York brand of color abstraction and Pop art—heavyweights including the art magazines *Art in America*, *Arts Magazine*, *Artforum*, and *ARTnews* and their able editors and smart contributors, counting, among others, John Coplans and Clement Greenberg with his entourage of formalist critics Michael Fried and Rosalind Krauss from Harvard University. Before World War II, there were few galleries devoted to modern art; now there was a slew aggressively selling contemporary American art—Betty Parsons Gallery (1946), Sidney Janis Gallery (1948), Martha Jackson Gallery (1952), Stable Gallery (1953), Leo Castelli Gallery (1957), Green Gallery (1960), and Allan Stone Gallery (1960). Joining the Museum of Modern Art in showcasing new American art were the Whitney Museum of American Art (housed in a new landmark Marcel Breuer building that opened in 1966) and the Guggenheim Museum (with Frank Lloyd Wright as architect, opened in 1959). By the 1960s, Christie's and Sotheby's, long-established auction houses in New York, were directing their energies toward postwar American and European art, a new burgeoning market.

Even though New York Pop was swamping all competition, Pop art's elevation of popular culture had its beginnings in London in the mid-1950s in the hands of such artists as Richard Hamilton and Eduardo Paolozzi. A second wave appeared in the early 1960s, including David Hockney. All of the artists in question took a keen interest in the stuff of everyday commodities and commercial advertising. Despite the use of the term "Pop Art" at this time by the Independent Group in London, especially as linked to the milestone *This is Tomorrow* exhibition (1956) and its appearance in the writings of British art critic Lawrence Alloway, it was appropriated in the early 1960s by American writers to apply to developments in New York. Related developments abroad carried other names, for example *Nouveau Réalisme* (France), *Polymaterialism* (Italy), and *El Equipo Crónica* (Spain). Early names for a so-called Pop art in the United States were *New Realism* and *Neo-Dada*, its artists *Factualists*, *Sign Painters*, and *New Vulgarians*. In the New York art press during the early 1960s, Pop art as the official term established its permanence in the art history lexicon with "A Symposium on Pop Art" that was held at the Museum of Modern Art on December 13, 1962. Organized by Peter Selz, curator of painting and sculpture exhibitions, the panel consisted of invited participants from the New York art world.<sup>8</sup>

What sealed the deal for the primacy of Pop art in New York was an exhibition at the Sidney Janis Gallery in the fall of 1962 titled the *New Realists*, borrowing in name from the French *Nouveau Réalistes*. Epic in scope, it represented fifty-four artists, including Jim Dine, Robert Indiana, Roy Lichtenstein, Richard Lindner, Claes Oldenburg, George Segal, Wayne Thiebaud, Tom Wesselmann, Andy Warhol, and contingents from England, France, Italy, and Sweden. With its emphasis on American artists, the exhibition clearly meant to demonstrate who was leader of the pack.

New York Pop set the pace with its borrowings and stylistic transformations of motifs from popular culture—ordinary objects and signs of consumerism drawn

from newspaper illustrations, movies, television, advertising, comic strips, and tabloid magazines. With saturated color flats, simplified form, design techniques drawing on the commercial layouts of Madison Avenue, and working on a large scale, the New York Pop artists created secular icons for a consumer society. Here were ironic signs—both celebratory and critical—of an American identity to be reckoned with. Adlai Stevenson, the American Democratic Party's nomination for president in 1952 and 1956, lamented in 1960: "With the supermarket as our temple and the singing commercial as our litany, are we likely to fire the world with an irresistible vision of America's exalted purpose and inspiring way of life?"<sup>9</sup> For better or worse, the answer was an emphatic yes.

Was Pop only a New York phenomenon in the United States, the city our sole ambassador for an international Pop art? To answer this question, variables of subject matter, style, and place are at stake. There was, without doubt, activity in Los Angeles that suggested Pop was alive and well in the City of Angels. Cécile Whiting in her examination of artists and Pop art in Los Angeles during the 1960s argues for surprising and illuminating relationships. She sees the city providing artists linked to Pop art with subject and mood—in its landscape, freeways, motorcycle culture, suburban comforts, signage, and mass marketing of desire in the glamorization of objects and Hollywood movie stars. Everything, in the land of the unreal, held the promise of a close-up.<sup>10</sup>

Ahead of the national curve in presenting Pop artists, the Pasadena Art Museum opened the first Pop art museum exhibition in September 1962, predating the historic Sidney Janis Gallery's *New Realists* show by a month. Curated by Walter Hopps, *New Painting of Common Objects* included Dine, Lichtenstein, Ruscha, Thiebaud, and Warhol. Earlier in July, Irving Blum, director of the Ferus Gallery in Los Angeles, had given Warhol his first solo exhibition and first gallery show with the presentation of 32 *Campbell's Soup Cans*. In the following year, although to the north in the Bay Area, the Oakland Museum presented *Pop Art USA*, curated by Los Angeles critic and art writer, John Coplans. Seeing the Pop impulse as more ecumenical, Coplans sought to reveal the nationwide character of Pop art by including artists from the East and West Coasts.

Ferus Gallery and Dwan Gallery were among a new set of art galleries in support of contemporary art that recently had begun to appear in Los Angeles. In addition to the opening in 1965 of the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, reincarnated in a new building and now devoted exclusively to fine art, a new arts infrastructure in Los Angeles could brandish, by the mid-1960s, a respectable roster of art critics—John Coplans, Philip Leider, and Peter Plagens, among others—and host the headquarters of *Artforum* before it gravitated its operations to New York in 1967. The city's new generation of artists linked to Pop art—and the implicit rejection of lingering Abstract Expressionist styles—included native sons (Billy Al Bengston, Ed Kienholz, Ed Ruscha, Kenneth Price, Mel Ramos, and Wayne Thiebaud, albeit the latter two with roots in Sacramento) and artists in short- and long-term residencies (Claes Oldenburg, 1963–64; David Hockney, 1963–2005). Additionally, artists who were primarily based in New York intermittently came and went, particularly those artists who made printed editions at the newly opened print publishing workshop Gemini G.E.L. By 1970, Lichtenstein, Oldenburg, Price, Rauschenberg, Ruscha, and Thiebaud had made their first editions



**Martial Raysse**  
 Untitled from *Das Grosse Buch*, 1963, published 1964  
 Screenprint with feather additions, from an illustrated book  
 16 7/8 x 14 3/8 inches  
 Publisher and printer: HofhausPresse, Dusseldorf  
 Edition: 100  
 Linda Barth Goldstein Fund, The Museum of Modern Art, New York  
 © ARS, NY



**Andy Warhol**  
 Campbell's Soup Can, 1964  
 Oil on canvas  
 36 x 24 inches  
 Gift of Robert H. Halff through the Modern and Contemporary Art Council, Los Angeles County Museum of Art  
 © Andy Warhol Estate/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York





**Edward Ruscha**  
*Large Trademark with Eight Spotlights*, 1962  
 Oil on canvas  
 66 ¾ x 133 ¼ inches  
 Purchase, with funds from the Mrs. Percy Uris  
 Purchase Fund, Whitney Museum of American Art,  
 New York  
 © Ed Ruscha

there; in the next decade, Hockney, Kienholz, and Rosenquist were added to the list. It was somewhat hard to know where New York left off and Los Angeles began.

Without wishing to establish an aesthetic category of L.A. Pop (witness the inverted title of her book), Whiting stresses the role of the city in the florescence of Pop art. She does not see a discernable style, although stylistic commonalities have been argued else-

where.<sup>11</sup> A vernacular dialect, however, may suggest itself in the work of Hockney, Ruscha, and Thiebaud with more subdued palettes admissible of pastels and darker colors, a greater pictorialism, and a more suggestive, even cinematic narrative. There is more stylistic coherence than may first meet the eye. L.A. Pop is as real as New York Pop.

So Los Angeles, so Chicago? When Lucy R. Lippard wrote her classic *Pop Art* in 1966, an early and still insightful examination of the movement, she invited two writers to relate Pop art to developments outside New York, namely in Great Britain and California.<sup>12</sup> The Imagists just had begun to show their work at the Hyde Park Art Center, so there was no mention of activities in Chicago. Nancy Marmer, an arts editor in Los Angeles, wrote in her chapter “Pop Art in California” of a disparate range of expression in Los Angeles and Sacramento that paralleled varying aspects of New York Pop yet with its own distinctive, indigenous inflections in subject matter, style (less “brassiness”), and less interest in mechanical reproduction and the “found object.”<sup>13</sup> Casting about unsuccessfully for specific influences on California Pop—local antecedents, a national reaction in the arts against the expressionist modes of the postwar period, or the example first and foremost of New York—she states:

Whatever and whenever the ultimate sources, it is beyond question that in the work of such artists as Billy Al Bengston, Edward Ruscha, Joe Goode, Wayne Thiebaud, and Mel Ramos Pop Art did take root easily, early, and that it has flourished smartly, if diversely, in a milieu in which it could well have been invented.<sup>14</sup>

Marmer does see a California Pop, diverse in expression, different from New York Pop. But is there a commonality that ties Left Coast Pop to Right Coast Pop, one that might net a Midwest Pop in the Chicago Imagists? Marmer sees a “return to life” underscoring a general shift in the visual and literary arts beginning in the late 1950s and taking hold in the critical press by 1962. And yet, she is right to observe that this aesthetic is a native American mode that has run cyclically through our national art history: early nineteenth-century genre and Romantic landscape painting, Ashcan School,

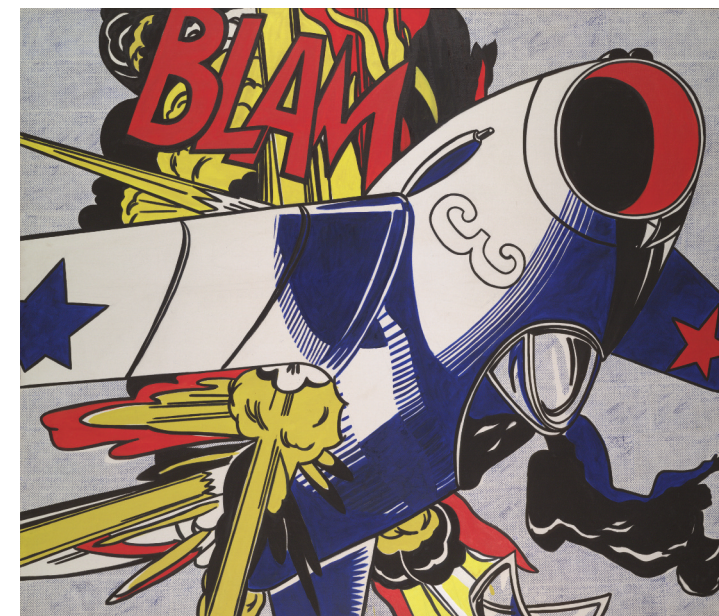
the American Scene painters and Social Realists, and Pop art. A major shift in artistic sensibility did occur here and abroad in the late 1950s—in an embrace of the ordinary. But Marmer sees a fundamental common denominator that goes beyond a concentration on common objects to situate itself in a “sanction of advertising, illustration, and commercial art conventions as well as techniques for the presentation of these . . . in the context of ‘high art.’”<sup>15</sup> To what extent do these currents pull in the Chicago Imagists? They had their major group shows at the Hyde Park Art Center when Pop art was fully established and already being challenged by new directions in the later 1960s—Minimalism, Process art, Earthworks, and Photorealism. Was Imagism poised more toward a pluralistic contemporary art scene of the 1970s, or can it be brought into the fold of American Pop to good effect?<sup>16</sup>

Like so-referenced Pop artists elsewhere in the United States and Europe, the Imagists held popular culture as the foundation of their art. They were not, however, drawn to consumer goods and mass marketing as much as life on the street, not life as witnessed from a speeding car on a Los Angeles freeway or from a yellow cab honking its way through Times Square. The Imagists were taken with the gritty, rough-and-tumble “Black City” descriptive of Chicago in the late nineteenth century that was contrasted to the “White City” of Daniel Burnham’s Columbian World Exposition of 1893, with its culmination in the rational International Style architecture that Mies van der Rohe visited upon the city after World War II.

The Imagists’ Chicago was dilapidated painted-brick and neon signage, old buildings, storefronts, neighborhoods, Maxwell Street Market, corner gas stations and grocers, the ethnic and racial mix of peoples relaxing and playing on the north and south beachfronts—haunts, in other words, off-limits to the genteel folk of the Gold Coast and Lincoln Park. Into this mix of inspiration drawn from popular culture, the Imagists also drew upon imagery from placards, posters, pinball machines, broad-

(from left)  
**Roy Lichtenstein**  
*Blam*, 1962  
 Oil on canvas  
 68 x 80 inches  
 Gift of Richard Brown Baker, B.A. 1935,  
 Yale University Art Gallery  
 © Estate of Roy Lichtenstein

**Roy Lichtenstein**  
*Drowning Girl*, 1963  
 Oil and synthetic polymer paint on canvas  
 67 ¾ x 66 ¾ inches  
 Philip Johnson Fund and gift of Mr. and Mrs.  
 Bagley Wright, The Museum of Modern Art,  
 New York  
 © Estate of Roy Lichtenstein





sides, vintage postcards of Chicago, decals, tattoos, and cast-off toys. These objects and visuals are not those of Madison Avenue; they are not slick objects of desire to seduce the pocketbook.<sup>17</sup>

Another source of imagery were the comics of an older stripe: Elzie Segar's *Popeye* (1929); Chester Gould's *Dick Tracy* (1931), originating in the *Chicago Tribune*; Marjorie Buell's *Little Lulu* (1935); and Max Gaines's *EC Comics* (1944). A comparison between Lichtenstein's approach to comic strips as an appropriated source and that of the Imagist Jim Nutt is telling. With few exceptions, the image is isolated as a single frame. But in *Drowning Girl* (1964) and *Blam* (1964), Lichtenstein quoted directly from a specific comic strip source, with speech balloons and text intact, if abbreviated. Although a single cell, a before-and-after narrative or story line still is suggested in both paintings. Lichtenstein simplified form to a high degree of abstraction, intensified color, emphasizing the primaries, and realized the image on a large scale. The Imagists, on the other hand, were attracted more to the visual character of the comics, not to an actual cartoon cell. Big, bold paintings with no evidence of hand drawing held no interest.

In Nutt's *Toot 'n Toe* (1969), for example, which is characteristic of the Imagists' non-nostalgic, often sexualized approach to comic book imagery, the male figure is aggressively caricatured and body parts vulgarized with oozing fluids [p.55]. Avoiding speech balloons, Nutt incorporates conventionalized action lines to suggest his subject's ascension through turquoise ether, littered with fragments of ladies' shoes and female bodies drawn from girlie comic strips and advertisements. If Lichtenstein assigned titles to his comic strip paintings, he usually took the first sentence in the speech balloon. Imagist titles, like *Toot 'n Toe*, are plays on language that can add scabrous wit. Text does play an important role in the Imagists' cartooned images, but it can be freely inscribed throughout a composition, very seldom contained in speech balloons of varying kinds. If Lichtenstein's paintings clearly connect to older comic book style, the Imagists convey the look of underground comix, a tradition emerging in the 1960s. Yet, in speaking about the influence of R. Crumb, the founder of underground comix, Nutt states, "I wanted something that was more evocative and suggestive than literal. I wanted more use of formal elements (i.e., dot, line, plane, color, etc.) toward an expressive end rather than an emphasis on the descriptive and narrative."<sup>18</sup> With the exception of Lichtenstein's comic book paintings of aerial combat, one clear distinction between the New York Pop artist and the Imagists is the Chicagoans' insistence on dynamic forms in motion, in some instances nearly convulsive.

The Chicago Imagists took from their very specific urban environment a world of things to create a highly fantastical art—in distinction from the feel of L.A. and New York Pop. With none of the anonymous qualities that can describe more familiar aspects of Pop art, as epitomized in a Warhol Campbell's Soup can, Chicago Imagism takes pleasure in the autographic gesture of the artist's pen, pencil, or brush, and in private links between artists and subject. In speaking to the importance of certain images, drawn from popular culture, Suellen Rocca observes for herself and colleagues that "they were all part of our personal histories either in the past or present. I will say

that I wasn't in any way making a comment. Somebody could say, 'Well maybe she was commenting on the commercialism of our culture.' It wasn't that at all, it was more about personal history, and about how all of these things were a part of it" [p.52].<sup>19</sup>

With no interest in mechanical reproduction of media images to create deadpan commentaries on American life, the Imagists, in idiosyncratic variations unique to each, created a rambunctious art of vibrant oddball color and free line, with links to surrealist automatic writing and its connotations of the unconscious, dream, and personal gesture. Although bold forms are simplified in contour, detail can run rampant. Nothing minimalist here—all is maximalist with a relentless horror vacui. Subjects can be centered and frontal, lending the image an iconic presence that enhances its direct, even confrontational impact as in Art Green's old building and ice cream paintings with their baroque embellishments [p.2].

Imagist palette held none of the seductive colors of commercial advertising associated with New York Pop, nor pastel summer colors identifying a be-palmed Hockney suburban lawn. Bright, yes, often flat, but Imagist color revels in nonspectral, achromatic, secondary colors, pastels as well as punchy color: blaze red, pumpkin orange, gold yellow, acidic yellow, pea green, khaki green, teal green, ice blue, indigo, pink, turquoise, the purples (magenta, fuchsia, lavender), and full use of the gray scale from white to gray to black. The range of color is idiosyncratic to each of the Imagists. Gladys Nilsson's pale blues, pinks, and lavenders in *Landed Bad-Girls with Horns* (1969) [p.64] play against Roger Brown's forceful blacks, yellows, and ice blues in *Sudden Avalanche* (1972) [p.70]. There can be an amusement park stridency, a psychedelic cast to color that sets Chicago apart from Los Angeles and New York—a younger palette for a younger generation.

Graphic strength is a hallmark of the Imagists. The fluid drawing of the Imagists, free yet deliberate, animates images with an energy and motion that evades L.A. and New York Pop. It primarily is enlisted for caricatures of the human figure, with attendant satirical overtones, although it can become nearly abstract in a painting such as Barbara Rossi's *Eye Deal* (1974) [p.74]. Chicago Imagism, however, is essentially figurative, its male and female types presented in portraiture, alone, or in exchange—in suggestive and enigmatic narratives. Figures are caught in calamities, brawls, circus antics, scatological awkwardness, mysterious places, and gendered confrontations. Danger can lurk around the corner. Men and women alike are subjected to bodily deformations, transformed into grotesqueries, and must often fend for themselves, which they do with great brio. Sometimes the figure is absent a scene, yet the Imagist argument is still in place. Philip Hanson's *Mezzanine* (1969) takes us into a theater lobby recalling in its vacancy of objects and people an open piazza by the Italian Surrealist Giorgio de Chirico. Who knows if the stairs will take you to some darkened place above where you will sit, perhaps not alone, bathed in the sound and flickering light from the movie below [p.58].

Despite hints of threats and collapse in Imagist works, humor—nearly vaudevillian—leavens most dramas. The Imagists, like Lichtenstein, Oldenburg, and Ruscha, incorporated the printed word directly into their works of art, also concocting titles



(opposite, from top)  
**David Hockney**  
*We Two Boys Together Clinging*, 1961  
 Oil on board  
 48 x 60 inches  
 Courtesy David Hockney, Inc.

**Red Grooms**  
*City of Chicago*, 1968  
 Offset lithograph on yellow wove paper  
 28 3/4 x 22 inches  
 Gift of Alice Adam, The Art Institute of Chicago

**H. C. Westermann**  
*Death Ship of No Port (Red Death Ship)*, 1967  
 Lithograph  
 18 x 24 1/2 inches  
 Purchase, through Rudolph and Louise Langer  
 Fund, Madison Museum of Contemporary Art  
 Art © Lester Beall, Jr. Trust/Licensed by VAGA,  
 New York, NY



whose groaning puns and silly double entendres identify their paintings, drawings, prints, and sculptures as quickly as any other element. This is art that in many cases guffaws with fits of laughter—much as the Imagists themselves did when gathering in meetings.<sup>20</sup>

One of the most trenchant ironies of Imagism is that the near chaos, irreverence, over-the-top antics, and sometimes gross impoliteness always is given form with the greatest craftsmanship. Imagist works of art have no intention of aping the machine-made, hands-off appearance of Pop art in New York or Los Angeles. Imagists worked in a broad range of media: painting, sculpture, and works on paper, including drawing, collage, etching, lithography, screenprinting, woodcut, Xerox, watercolor, and ephemera (posters, announcements, decals, and comic book catalogues). The artists took an experimental approach to media. The use of unorthodox materials and formats—acrylic on Plexiglas and Masonite, handcrafted frames that extended the painted image, enameled found objects, paper mâché, painted-wood constructions, quilted-fabric sculpture—landed them on the far side of the more conventional choices of Pop artists elsewhere. What truly separated them from the pack was their dedication to the handcrafted object. The Imagists produced works of art that always and ostensibly are handmade—adding a signature dimension of the personal.

Like Pop in all its guises, Chicago Imagism is a mediation between high and low culture. In commenting on the Imagists as a group, Art Green observed, “I think we share an interest in looking at various levels of artifice in both high art and in the lower depths of popular culture.”<sup>21</sup> Their well of sources and influences was deep. The permanent collection, exhibition program, and faculty of the School of the Art Institute of Chicago played a significant role. Of all their instructors, Ray Yoshida factors in most importantly for his art and teachings, especially his love of collectibles and junk

in the shops of Maxwell Street and his incorporation of actual comic strip fragments into his collages. Instructors in art history also directed the students to the Field Museum to study its celebrated collections of East Asian, ancient Egyptian, West African, Oceanic, and Native American art. As BFA and MFA students at SAIC, the young Imagists had a rich exposure to an encyclopedic range of art in the Art Institute, with their interests fixing on artists in the expressionist tradition from the Northern Renaissance to the twentieth century and, especially, on the rich trove of surrealist material that came into the permanent collection in the postwar years. With commercial deal-

ers such as Allan Frumkin and Richard Feigen fostering and catering to local collectors’ taste for Surrealism and German Expressionism, the young Imagists could satisfy their interest in the fantastical and psychological. For more contemporary work, the Imagists earlier in the 1960s could see in the art galleries, the Arts Club of Chicago, and in exhibitions at the Art Institute works by Robert Rauschenberg, H. C. Westermann, the Swedish Pop artist Öyvind Fahlström, and Peter Saul. Westermann was of particular importance for Nutt and Wirsum in his cartoonlike drawing, violent and sexualized subjects, and his use of language as epitomized by the lithograph *Death Ship of No Port (Red Death Ship)*, (1967).

If Chicago Imagism finds common ground with L.A. and New York Pop in popular culture, it also has ties in style and expressive content to what is called Pre-Pop and Hand-Painted Pop that preceded a full-blown Pop art by 1962.<sup>22</sup> In this formative period, artists with interests in the commonplace realized their subject matter with spontaneous gesture linked to postwar expressionist styles, both abstract and figurative. This identifies the early work of Johns and Rauschenberg and describes the Mickey Mouse drawings of Lichtenstein and the idiosyncratic drawings of Oldenburg and Dine, all of which were executed in 1958, as well as the “rough” drawings and paintings of David Hockney from the early 1960s. This type of drawing also characterizes the early achievements of Red Grooms, whose works on paper—here the offset lithograph *City of Chicago* (1968)—and later installations have affinities in style and spirit to the Imagists.

The style of this body of work is more raw than the fluid, continuous line of the Imagists, which in contrast could be described perversely as elegant. Yet the personalizing of the everyday conjoins them. Both Grooms and Oldenburg had ties to Chicago. Grooms had studied briefly at SAIC in the early 1950s and Oldenburg was a bona fide native son.<sup>23</sup> Although sharpening his taste for urban culture as a cub reporter for the City News Bureau, Oldenburg decided to become a professional artist through intensive self-education and intermittent enrollment at SAIC. Leaving for New York in 1956, he nonetheless took with him a sense of the city that always has permeated his more freely rendered drawings. His early drawings,





including the works on paper shown at the Judson Gallery in 1959 and 1960, show a roughness of imagery and a nervous line that alludes to street writing and graffiti. For his first major installation, *The Store* (1961), he displayed and sold sculptures of dry goods and foods made of chicken wire and muslin constructions covered with plaster and painted with loosely brushed applications of enamel. As a part of his self-promotion he created a letterpress poster and a lithographic *Store Poster*, several impressions of which he hand colored with watercolors. In this small-editioned fine art “poster,” with its rambling and ballooned comic strip letters, the Imagists could find sympathetic company. Oldenburg, as well as Hockney, denied early on that he was a Pop artist. In



Claes Oldenburg  
*Store Poster*, 1961  
 Lithograph with watercolor additions  
 20 x 25 15/16 inches  
 Publisher: Claes Oldenburg, New York. Printer: the artists at Pratt Graphics Center, New York. Edition: 6. The Associates Fund, The Museum of Modern Art, New York  
 © 2011 Claes Oldenburg

identifying his art as “objective expressionism,” he disassociated himself from his New York Pop colleagues. He sees his drawings and sculptures as too personal to fit a New York definition, an attitude toward the world of ordinary things that allies him with the Imagists. Oldenburg’s early Pre-Pop works on paper, happenings, installations, and the painted cloth soft sculptures take relish in the gritty, messy life of the street. This sensibility was shaped in Chicago for further elaboration in New York. Oldenburg is an informative “missing link” between Chicago Imagism and New York Pop.

New York notion of Pop, measured against Lichtenstein, Rosenquist, and Warhol may also help explain why. But there is no single Pop style to be discerned when canvassing developments in New York, Los Angeles, or abroad. Critical language, with few exceptions, has reified a tendency that should admit more variation.<sup>24</sup> And the exchanges between the various centers complicate matters more. The common denominator of Pop art, however, is mass media culture. But like a faceted crystal ball, Pop art catches different lights. If Chicago Imagism can be usefully integrated into the fold of Pop art, it nonetheless holds special distinction in being Janus-faced. It looks back to that which paved its way; it looks forward to what follows in style and attitude. Its legacy, if measured in precedents, is the formulation during the later 1970s of Pattern and Decoration and New Image art (personalized subjects in open-ended, ambiguous narratives); Low-brow art, also known as Pop Surrealism, in Los Angeles at the same time; and Graffiti art and the East Village scene of the early 1980s in New York.

Chicago Imagism assumes a place in the history of Pop art, although historically it has been left out of any pertinent discussion. It may have been too after the fact. A toast, then, to Chicago Imagism and to an American Pop with showrooms on the East Coast, West Coast, and Third Coast.

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<sup>1</sup> See Franz Schulze, *Fantastic Images: Chicago Art Since 1945* (Chicago: Follett Publishing Co., 1972) and *Chicago Imagist Art*, exh. cat. (Chicago: Museum of Contemporary Art, 1972). In the latter exhibition catalogue, the term Chicago Imagism is used for the first time in an institutional setting. Schulze, however, still adheres to his broader understanding of a tradition that includes both the Monster Roster and the Hyde Park Art Center groups. Schulze’s endorsements later waned. See *Who Chicago? An Exhibition of Contemporary Imagists*, exh. cat. (Sunderland, England: Ceolfrith Gallery, Sunderland Arts Centre, 1980).

<sup>2</sup> The exhibition opened on October 18, 1969, and closed on February 1, 1970. See Henry Geldzahler et al., *New York Painting and Sculpture: 1940–1970*, exh. cat. (New York: E. P. Dutton & Co., Inc., 1969).

<sup>3</sup> Hilton Kramer, “Ascendancy of American Art,” *New York Times*, October 18, 1969.

<sup>4</sup> Kramer, “A Modish Revision of History,” *New York Times*, October 19, 1969.

<sup>5</sup> John Canaday, “No Need to Man the Barricades,” *New York Times*, July 23, 1972.

<sup>6</sup> Schulze, *Fantastic Images*, 5–39.

<sup>7</sup> John Russell, “‘The Hairy Who’ and Other Messages from Chicago,” *New York Times*, January 31, 1982.

<sup>8</sup> Participants included Henry Geldzahler, assistant curator of American Painting and Sculpture at the Metropolitan Museum of Art; Stanley Kunitz, critic and editor; Hilton Kramer, art critic of the *Nation*; Leo Steinberg, associate professor of art history at Hunter College; and Dore Ashton, critic and author. *Arts Magazine* published the papers of the panelists, April 1963, 36–45.

<sup>9</sup> Adlai Stevenson (1900–1965), U.S. Democratic politician, *Wall Street Journal*, June 1, 1960.

<sup>10</sup> Cécile Whiting, *Pop L.A.: Art and the City in the 1960s* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2006).

<sup>11</sup> In 1989, the Newport Harbor Art Museum presented *L.A. Pop in the Sixties* with an accompanying catalog. Artists included Baldessari, Bengston, Wallace Berman, Vija Celmins, Robert Dowd, Lynn Foulkes, Joe Goode, Phillip Hefferton, and Ed Ruscha.

<sup>12</sup> Lucy R. Lippard, *Pop Art* (New York: Frederick A. Praeger, Inc., 1966).

<sup>13</sup> Nancy Marmer, “Pop Art in California,” in *Pop Art*, ed. Lucy R. Lippard (New York: Frederick A. Praeger, Inc., 1966), 139–61.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 139–40.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 148.

<sup>16</sup> Shortly after the Imagists first began showing their work, Schulze compared artists of the Hairy Who with Pop art, but found no common link. They were “more idiosyncratic, alienated, and low down.” *Art International*, May 1967.

<sup>17</sup> This inventory of sources and influences is taken from Russell Bowman, “Chicago Imagism: The Movement and the Style,” in *Who Chicago? An Exhibition of Contemporary Imagists*, 21–28. Also see Jim Nutt’s and Karl Wirsum’s list of sources in high art and popular culture that interested and influenced the Imagists, with Nutt’s correction of earlier texts that inaccurately posited the impact of outsider art on the group. For this, see Dan Nadel, “Hairy Who’s History of the Hairy Who,” *Ganzfeld* 3 (2003): 110–46.

<sup>18</sup> Nadel, “Hairy Who’s History of the Hairy Who,” 120.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 38.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 128. Gladys Nilsson gives an account of the “laugh fests” that group meetings often became, noting the hilarity of Art Green reading the phone book.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 137.

<sup>22</sup> *Hand-Painted Pop: American Art in Transition, 1955–62* (Los Angeles and New York: Museum of Contemporary Art and Rizzoli International Publications, 1992).

<sup>23</sup> Born in Sweden, Oldenburg moved to Chicago in 1936, where his father began a long tenure as Swedish consul general. Attending Yale University, he returned to Chicago in 1950 to pursue a career in journalism.

<sup>24</sup> Very few texts have speculated on a larger understanding of American Pop. In 1987, Sidra Stich curated an exhibition for the University Art Museum at the University of California at Berkeley entitled *Made in U.S.A.: An Americanization in Modern Art, '50s & '60s*. In the accompanying catalogue, Stich wrote, “This study shows the beginnings and expansions of the attention to American mass culture in postwar art. It moves well beyond the usual Pop art focus and concentration on the early sixties and on New York to include art of the fifties and late sixties and to recognize the equally significant contributions of California and Chicago artists who were simultaneously creating art derived from and related to American mass culture. *Made in U.S.A.: An Americanization in Modern Art, '50s & '60s* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987), 4.