

CHICAGO IMAGISM

THE DERIVATION OF A TERM

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The term “Chicago Imagism” has a clear origin, but what is also clear is that the term was not coined to describe that which generally comes to mind when this stylistic description is employed: figurative artists who emerged in Chicago in the mid-1960s, who used vibrant color and depicted the human body grossly distorted, highly stylized, or even schematicized. Needless to say, this has caused confusion in the years since the term came into common use—roughly the early 1970s.

Chicago art historian Franz Schulze invented the term, but it was to describe his peer group, artists who emerged in the years after World War II. In his classic book on Chicago art, *Fantastic Images*, published in 1972, Schulze writes, “The first generation of clear-cut Chicago imagists—nearly all of whom were students at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago (SAIC) in the middle and late 1940s—were unqualifiedly opposed to regionalism, to [Ivan] Albright, and in fact to just about anything else in the history of American art.”¹ And the term “imagism” originated, as Schulze explains, in the fact that these artists saw utterly no sense in painting a picture for the picture’s sake, as they associated this with “decorative” artists. In Chicago, Schulze writes, “the image—the face, the figure, often regarded as icon—was considered more psychologically basic, more the source of expressive meaning, than any abstract configuration of paint strokes could possibly be.”²

Schulze noted that the New York avant-garde had largely rejected “imagistic art”; it was made “obsolete, so to speak” by the inventions of Jackson Pollock and Mark Rothko. In New York, the practice of art was seen as existing “independently of other histories—political, spiritual, or biographical,” the image being seen largely as “an anti-historical phenomenon to be assessed in the context of art history.” For Chicago-trained and based artists, the image was “conceived and judged as a psychological or metaphysical entity, not merely an item of art subject matter.” He goes on to point out that these artists were deeply interested in psychological material, magic, and “abnormal” states of mind such as irrationality and neurosis. In short, Schulze did not offer a nutshell definition of Imagism, but rather a cornucopia of tendencies, many of which, like “conceived and judged as a psychological or metaphysical entity,” are undeniably subtle. Other “isms,” such as Abstract Expressionism or Impressionism, yield their meaning with a bit of musing on the terms themselves. As a term, Imagism is a cipher.

Another fact about the term that causes confusion is that the first mature works produced by the generation Schulze identified as Imagist were from 1948–49. The immediate postwar scene was an obscure and ancient history in 1970s Chicago when Chicago Imagism was first being employed to describe the generation then currently emerging. Nothing had to be put aside in order to adopt the term. Furthermore, Schulze had initially dubbed the postwar generation the “Monster Roster,” a term he



Ivan Albright
Into the World There Came a Soul Called Ida, 1929–1930
Oil on canvas
56 ¼ x 47 inches
Gift of Ivan Albright, The Art Institute
of Chicago

Leon Golub
 Running Man, ca. 1969–1970
 Lithograph on paper
 22 ¼ x 30 inches
 Collection Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago,
 Gift of Samuel W. and Blanche M. Koffler
 Art © Estate of Leon Golub/Licensed by VAGA,
 New York, NY
 Courtesy Ronald Feldman Fine Arts



first used in a “Letter from Chicago” published in the February 1959 issue of *ARTnews* to acknowledge the artists’ predilection for grotesquely rendered figurative imagery. Another commonality was that most of the so-called Monster Roster artists attended SAIC (many on the GI Bill), exposing them to specific teachers and similar experiences, especially those afforded by the Art Institute of Chicago’s exhibitions and collections. Those artists now internationally known include Leon Golub, June Leaf, Nancy Spero, and H. C. Westermann. Those known best in the Midwest or to aficionados of the Chicago School include Robert Barnes, Don Baum, Cosmo Campoli, Ellen Lanyon, Irving Petlin, Seymour Rosofsky, and Evelyn Statsinger.

Beyond the tendencies that caused Schulze to wax poetical with the term Monster Roster, the characteristics that bound them were a tendency toward surrealist content, painterly method, and subject matter that was personally expressive. Yet, to emphasize the uniqueness of these artists, Schulze took pains to differentiate the Surrealism of Chicago from that of Paris or New York, and point out that the Expressionism of Chicago’s painters and sculptors was not that of the German Expressionists of the 1920s. He only briefly mentions the Expressionism that would have been most recent at the time of the writing of his book, that is Abstract Expressionism. Given that the majority of Chicago’s artists were figurative, the practice had little relevance in an analysis of the nature of Chicago art.³ He does point out that “this is one of the few respects in which [Chicago’s artists] can be likened to the New York painters who were developing abstract expressionism at roughly the same time: both groups were reacting against what they believed to be a tradition of American parochialism, and were seeking a radical new expressive language in models taken from outside American art.”⁴

But perhaps the most important point for Schulze in defining his Imagist art was this:

Insofar as there is a tradition of logic, clarity, and reason in the modern plastic arts, Chicago has contributed impressively to it and gained a noteworthy reputation in the process. Yet that reputation is utterly contradicted by the temper of the painting and sculpture produced in this city . . . “Chicago-type” art is not only not rational, it is anti-rational to the point of perversity.⁵

Yet at the same time, he writes, for the Chicago artists, art is seen as “an activity of some essential and serious existential import,” perhaps to dissuade readers from thinking that if Chicago art is “anti-rational to the point of perversity” it might not be very serious.

It is important to remember that the Monster Roster would have been “pre-youth culture”; the immediate postwar generation may have launched the sexual and youth revolution, but those ten years their junior—the next half generation who would be in their seventies today—lived the youth culture lifestyle fueled by pot, free love, rock music, and opposition to the Vietnam War and the “establishment” in general. In terms of Chicago Imagism it is interesting to think of the Monster Roster as those who built the house, but the noisy, far more colorful tenants—the Hairy Who, Nonplussed Some, False Image, Chicago Antigua, etc.—who moved into the house got the lion’s share of the attention. The “house,” in a real sense, was the Hyde Park Art Center, during the years Don Baum, a Monster Roster-generation artist, served as exhibitions director at this important community art center on Chicago’s South Side.



Irving Petlin
 Rower of the Season ... New Stone Ring, 1975
 Oil on canvas
 63 x 47 ½ inches
 Collection Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago,
 Gift of Alexia Quadrani in memory of Federico
 Quadrani



June Leaf
 Ascension of Pig Lady, 1968
 Acrylic on canvas with hand-sewn and stuffed
 figures, wood, and tin
 123 ¾ x 174 ¾ x 8 ½ inches
 Collection Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago,
 Gift of Herbert and Virginia Lust

Famous now for discovering the young talent who are what people think of when they hear the term Imagist, in actuality Baum freely mixed the generations. He placed student alongside teacher in numerous HPAC exhibitions before the first *Hairy Who* show was mounted in 1966, including those who would become the Hairy Who, notably Gladys Nilsson, Jim Nutt, and Karl Wirsum.⁶

Despite its lack of clarity, it is not difficult to understand why the term Imagism would have been seized upon to describe those artists who emerged, accompanied by considerable excitement, in the mid-1960s. Many of the characteristics that Schulze identified in the *Monster Roster* can also be seen in these artists. And he included Nutt, Nilsson, Paschke, Brown, and others in *Fantastic Images*, making it all the more understandable that the book's readers would have extended the term to the younger figures. Schulze himself pointed out the similarities: They were influenced by ethnographic art, Surrealism, and they were contrarians, not at all concerned that they were not producing art in the "accepted" mode of the day. For the Imagists that would have been Pop art, with which they are often, and carelessly, aligned by those outside Chicago.⁷

Leading art historian Robert Storr, who had the good fortune to be educated at SAIC where he encountered Chicago's artists firsthand, wrote recently in an essay on Ed Flood that "Chicago artists in the late 1960s were of an especially contrarian bent and had a penchant for joining forces just to prove how much of a movement they were not."⁸ This observation goes a long way to clearing up other confusions about the Imag-



Don Baum
The Apparition, 1988
 Canvas board and wood
 19 1/2 x 14 x 18 inches
 Purchase, through National
 Endowment for the Arts grant with a matching
 gift from the Rudolph and Louise Langer Fund,
 Madison Museum of Contemporary Art

ists, especially for those outside Chicago, namely, how to interpret the fact they emerged in groups, and how the different groups relate.

In Chicago the tendency to come together in groups is different than the tendency as seen elsewhere. (Dating back to the nineteenth century artists often did not have any other choice but to band together and take matters into their own hands, lacking an infrastructure of commercial galleries, institutions, and an effective art press.⁹) Loose, self-named groups such as Exhibition Momentum are an example. These groups generally resulted from the bonds of friendship and respect with the goal of furthering each individual's interests and not from a desire to subsume oneself in order to market a group identity. In short, to use popular cultural references that were contemporaneous with the emergence of the Imagists, it is the difference between the Beatles and the Monkees. When self-selected, there is real vitality and an undeniable authenticity. When a third party is involved, either through the packaging of artists into groups or by coming up with "isms," the manifestation in the world is very different.

This is not to say the Monkees phenomenon and by analogy, the various monikers that describe Chicago art, whether Imagism or the *Monster Roster* or the Chicago School, are not useful in understanding the arenas in which they exist. But Imagism defines something very different from what *Hairy Who* defines and they are not interchangeable. The "ism" in this case comes from the outside and is an attempt by those not engaged in the artistic process to understand what it was they were seeing and feeling. The artists who emerged through the Hyde Park Art Center grouped themselves for their own purposes, not for the purposes of the group. Jim Nutt has been especially clear on this, reiterating as recently as December 2010 that the *Hairy Who* shows grew out of a group of individuals who as they matured as artists, felt representation with one or two works in large group shows no longer served their interests.¹⁰ An exhibition of five or six individuals would allow each to show five to ten works, an appropriate challenge as one matured as an exhibiting artist.

The group identity was completely secondary, and the joking manner in which the moniker *Hairy Who* was derived demonstrates this. Numerous first-person testimonies confirm various titles were proposed during various get-togethers, and that Karl Wirsum, who at that point was not close with any others of the group (Jim Nutt, Gladys Nilsson, Jim Falconer, Art Green, and Suellen Rocca) did not understand their references to "Harry" and finally asked, "Harry who?" Harry was Harry Bouras, an artist of the preceding *Monster Roster* generation. He had an influential radio program broadcast by the classical station WFMT on which he reviewed artists and exhibitions. Given the penchant for puns and wordplay of these individuals, Wirsum's question morphed into *Hairy Who*.¹¹

Yet the notion that these quirky Chicago artists had packaged themselves was almost immediate. One non-Chicago author, writing in 1969, went so far as to opine that the *Hairy Who* and other groups formed precisely to attain a group identity and effect change in a collective manner—an assumption an outsider might make in light of the Chicago backdrop of the era: radicalized politics and youth revolt as typified by the events around the 1968 Democratic Convention.¹²



Karl Wirsum
Mr. Pain Close Maan, 1965
 Oil on canvas
 38 1/2 x 21 1/2 inches
 Collection of Artist

In an interview published in the *Ganzfeld 3* in 2003, Nutt describes the “after-math” of the Hairy Who this way:

There have been many that have tried to make the [Hairy Who] group into something that it isn't, i.e., a tight-knit philosophical group, or that we saw ourselves as similar to rock music groups, or that we “positioned” our work in opposition to work being done in New York at the time, or that we shared ideas with Bay Area funk . . . We have been lumped with lots of diverse stuff and it with us, work that has no business being linked. Basically we were individual artists who saw an opportunity to make an impact and have fun with what we produced by exhibiting together.¹³

By the early 1980s the term Chicago Imagism had come into widespread use in Chicago.¹⁴ In the 1990s, as the art world expanded and the Internet came into being, it spread to national and international usage.¹⁵ Today it is a common term, the Bill McClain Collection of Chicago Imagism being yet one instance of its widespread usage. If it can be argued that Chicago Imagism has become a useful term for describing certain stylistic predilections as exemplified by certain Chicago-based artists who emerged in the 1960s, then the works by these artists of the 1970s, '80s, and into the present seem even more appropriately described as Imagism.¹⁶ While it is indisputable that the Imagists chafed under this moniker and certainly did not pander to it, other factors were in play to codify the artists as interrelated. Imagist collectors, like Bill McClain, are not uncommon. Generally those who acquired, say, Roger Brown, especially in the 1970s and 1980s, were also likely to acquire Paschke, Nutt, Nilsson, and others deemed Imagist, as well as various folk artists, such as Joseph Yoakum, erroneously ascribed as having been influential upon the development of these individuals.

From the 1980s to the present, a number of museums, especially in the Midwest, have shown interest in exhibiting and collecting Imagist artists, further codifying the term. These public collections include the Smart Museum in Chicago, the Kresge in East Lansing, Michigan, the Figge Museum in Davenport, Iowa, the Akron Art Museum in Ohio, and the Krannert in downstate Illinois.¹⁷ Museums outside the Midwest with important collections include the Smithsonian Museum of American Art, Washington, D.C., which sprang from their showing the Hairy Who early on as well as a generous gift by Chicago collectors Sam and Blanche Koffler, and the Pennsylvania Academy in Philadelphia. As public collections expand and scholarship increases, the term Chicago Imagism builds more and more valuable currency.

As well, it is important to note that none of the surviving Imagists who have continued working and showing have radically changed their styles, which allows the term to continue to fit them, so to speak. There have been evolutions, but not radical change to, say, an abstract style or a medium never before used, such as photography or video. Yet, despite being constantly lumped together, innumerable exhibitions, and art historical analyses, Roger Brown's works are unmistakable, as are Ed Paschke's,

as are Jim Nutt's, as are Gladys Nilsson's. Subject matter, color, graphic style, painterly qualities, and so on are distinctive in each, as is apparent in the present exhibition that consists of early and later examples, often in some depth, of the key figures in Imagism.

Brown is unmistakable for his uncompromising political voice, which emerged with force in the 1980s. He frequently lampooned art world figures and tendencies, and did paintings of President John F. Kennedy's assassination as well as that of Italian prime minister Aldo Moro; none of the other Imagists came close to dealing with such subject matter. His use of the silhouetted form, both human and natural, makes his work distinctive within the grouping of Chicago Imagism. The dazzling seven-color woodcut *Family Tree Mourning Print* of 1983 [p.94] demonstrates both his brilliant use of the silhouette and his skill as a printmaker.¹⁸ Approximately ten years out from his debut in the HPAC's *False Image* exhibition of 1968, *Skyscraper with Pyramid* of 1977 [p.80] represents another Imagist tendency at which Brown particularly excelled, that of the painted object. Here, Brown's furtive figures populate the glowing yellow windows of a boxy skyscraper.

Gladys Nilsson, one of the original Hairy Who, demonstrates the maturation of her loopy watercolor technique in works such as *Beautify* (1994) and *Ern* (1999). Yet it is also interesting to view her 2001 work *Some Other Tree* alongside Brown's *Family Tree Mourning Print* and note their several formal similarities. The use of hierarchically scaled figures is one shared visual trope, though Nilsson's mastery of this compositional device is unrivaled among the Imagists. In his early career, Jim Nutt also frequently depicted a mixture of large- and small-scale figures within the same picture plane; Madison's collection is rich in these earlier works, including *Zzzit* (1970) [p.66], a masterpiece of revolting imagery intriguingly presented. In the 1980s, Nutt evolved into a format he continues today, that of imaginary women in a traditional portrait pose, such as the luminous and contemplative *Cheek* (1990–91).

Ed Paschke, as different as his painting style and the scale of his works are from Nutt's, also focused on heads, many being actual, if unattributed, portraits. Yet Paschke, unlike most of the Imagists, tended to rely on photographic sources, often projecting images onto his canvases and tracing them. It is Paschke, often cited as Chicago's best-known Imagist, around whom much confusion seems to reign. Many assume he was one of the Hairy Who artists, when in fact he was inspired by seeing the first *Hairy Who* exhibition to organize his own cleverly titled group, the *Nonplussed Some*.

Christina Ramberg likewise focuses on heads and fragmented bodies: The early lithograph *Head* (ca. 1969–70) [p.63] shows a luxuriant sweep of hair from the back, while other works including *Tight Hipped* (1974) [p.75] and *Vertical Amnesia* (1981) [p.84] show the artist's palette lightening and her imagery opening up while retaining her characteristic forms of abstracted clothing and bound bodies. Ramberg participated in the *False Image* exhibition in 1968, which notably included Roger Brown and Phil Hanson, yet, like most of her artistic colleagues, she never considered herself affiliated with any particular stylistic grouping.

Karl Wirsum, who like Ramberg shows a predilection for schematizing the

body—aggressively on display in the painting *Fire Lady or Monk's Keyboard* of 1969 [p.57]—also creates, like Roger Brown, engaging and often cleverly conceived objects. *Measle Mouse Quarantined from His Fans* (1980) [p.83] and *Brown Derby Bouncer* (1983) [p.158] are two examples from the McClain collection. And Wirsum's punning, alliterative titles demonstrate another tendency that spanned the group, especially in the early years: wordplay and fanciful or evocative titles.

In the final analysis, Chicago Imagism has proven to be a useful term, even if it was misconstrued by those subsequent to the term's originator. Individual artists so described inevitably chafe under its confines, wishing their achievements to be seen first and foremost on their own terms. This is natural and understandable. Yet as a way into the fascinating worlds of the individual artists, the effort it might take to understand the term Chicago Imagism can be quite valuable. The description of a 1987 exhibition, *Drawings of the Chicago Imagists*, mounted by the Renaissance Society at the University of Chicago says it well: "Imagism became known as 'The Chicago Style' and it was this group of artists that put Chicago on the map for national and international art audiences."⁹ And one final word: The Wikipedia entry on Chicago Imagism, though brief, is generally accurate.

¹ Franz Schulze, *Fantastic Images* (Chicago: Follett Publishing Company, 1972), 9. It is also important to note that Imagism has long been in use as a literary term, referring to a style of poetry championed by Ezra Pound and others in London in the early years of the twentieth century. Imagist was described by Pound in his manifesto "A Retrospect" as the "direct treatment of the 'thing,' whether subjective or objective." Imagism also has been used as an art historical term, particularly by noted art historian H. H. Arnason in his catalogue essay accompanying his 1961 Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum exhibition entitled *American Abstract Expressionists and Imagists*. It is not entirely clear from Arnason's essay the distinctions between Abstract Expressionists and Imagists, but the net he cast in curating the show was wide and included figures now largely thought of as Color Field painters (Morris Louis, Kenneth Noland) as well as mavericks such as Alfred Jensen. Incidentally, this exhibition is now best known as being the backdrop against which the famous incident of Willem de Kooning punching Clement Greenberg at the Cedar Tavern transpired.

² Ibid., 12.

³ Although Schulze gives a nod to Chicago abstract artists of the generation in question, mentioning Roland Ginzel and Richard Hunt, and including the significant abstract painter Miyoko Ito, who attended SAIC during the war.

⁴ Schulze, *op cit.*, 9.

⁵ Ibid., 5.

⁶ One especially important teacher was Ray Yoshida, who although older than the artists dubbed Imagist, has come to be thought of as an integral member of the group. In fact, the press release for Yoshida's recent exhibition at SAIC's Sullivan gallery, cites a "pre-Imagist" period that dates from 1953, www.saic.edu/news/releases/index.html#current/SLC_31937.

⁷ Dennis Adrian, in an essay on Karl Wirsum, makes a cogent point that he "does not 'aestheticize' the images of popular culture or ironically present them out of their ordinary functional contexts as symbols of contemporary civilization" in the manner of the New York Pop artists. This certainly holds true for all the Chicago Imagists. *Karl Wirsum: A Retrospective Exhibition*, exh. cat. (Urbana, IL: Krannert Art Museum, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, 1991), 34.

⁸ Robert Storr, "Tropical Isles for a Cold Climate," in *Ed Flood: Constructions, Boxes & Works on Paper 1967–1973*, exh. cat. (Chicago: Corbett vs. Dempsey, 2010), 7.

⁹ See Lynne Warren, *Alternative Spaces: A History in Chicago*, exh. cat. (Chicago: Museum of Contemporary Art, 1984).

¹⁰ Richard Hull, "Art—Gladys Nilsson + Jim Nutt," *Bomb* 114 (Winter 2010): 57.

¹¹ Dan Nadel, "Hairy Who's History of the Hairy Who," *Ganzfeld* 3 (2003): 121–2. For another interview in which Nutt describes the origin of the group and term, see Phil Linhares, "Jim Nutt: A Conversation with Phil Linhares," *Currant* (April/May 1975): 23–27.

¹² Joan C. Siegfried, "Art from Comics," *The Spirit of the Comics*, exh. cat. (Philadelphia: Institute of Contemporary Art, University of Pennsylvania), unpag.

¹³ Nadel, "Hairy Who's History of the Hairy Who," 127.

¹⁴ It also must be noted that some have identified a second generation of Imagists, artists who came on the scene in the late 1970s or 1980s, including but not limited to, Phyllis Bramson, Richard Hull, David Russick, Hollis Sigler, and Mary Lou Zelazny.

¹⁵ Although nationally based figures often use the term very differently than those more familiar with Chicago. An example is Cynthia Roznoy writing in the catalogue essay for an exhibition in 2000: "Franz Schulze coined the term 'Imagism' to described this [postwar, internally focused] work, and it now has become a blanket label for figurative art produced in Chicago after 1945." Ivan Albright was included in this exhibition, the very artist Schulze used as an example of the type of art his generation vehemently rejected. *Cynthia Roznoy, Chicago Loop: Imagist Art 1949–1979*, exh. cat. (New York: Whitney Museum of American Art, 2000), unpag.

¹⁶ Unfortunately several of the most prominent of those who have become known as Imagists are deceased: Roger Brown (1941–1997); Ed Flood (1945–1985); Ed Paschke (1939–2004); and Christina Ramberg (1946–1995).

¹⁷ A recent traveling exhibition mounted by Krannert from their permanent collection, *Figures in Chicago Imagism*, sought to "broaden the scope of Chicago Imagism by including not only artists commonly exhibited as such, but also those who were influential in the creation of the school," www.kam.uiuuc.edu/pr/imagism/index.html.

¹⁸ Most of the Imagists are accomplished print-makers. See Dennis Adrian, *The Chicago Imagist Print* exh. cat., (Chicago: University of Chicago, David and Alfred Smart Museum, 1987).

¹⁹ This show included Roger Brown, Art Green, Philip Hanson, Gladys Nilsson, Jim Nutt, Ed Paschke, Christina Ramberg, Suellen Rocca, Barbara Rossi, and Karl Wirsum. www.renaissancesociety.org/site/Exhibitions/Intro.Drawings-of-the-Chicago-Imagists.106.html.