

TopSpin
Artists of Western New York and Beyond

Multiple Spirit: Work by Jonathan Rogers

June 14 – August 10, 2003

Opening reception with artist's talk: Saturday, June 14, 7:00-9:00 p.m.



jonathan**rogers**

Jonathan Rogers: Multiple Sources/Multiple Spirit

The human eye devours, seeking satisfaction for a hungry sensibility. We relish color, texture, contrasts, and illusions – the very stuff of animation, as I so well know. And the human spirit relishes nothing so much as the human experience dished up in provocative form. Michelangelo's Sistine Chapel; Chuck Jones' Coyote and Roadrunner. It's a picture show. It's what I do.

In this statement, Jonathan Rogers invokes the fertile dichotomies that characterize his paintings. Comic and grotesque, benevolent and sinister, his childlike figures enact a mysterious drama – one that owes as much to medieval morality plays such as *Everyman* as it does to the classic cartoon shorts of Warner Brothers. Indeed, Rogers' cartoonish imagery in the service of the spiritual reminds us of the lurid, didactic imagery of many a medieval illumination or cathedral portal. Yet, these disparate referents are not so much overt elements in Rogers' work as they are background – antecedents in the compelling slippage of a multi-faceted imagination.

By his own observation, the formative pathways in Rogers' personal philosophy – and, by extension, his artwork – are daunting to map-out. His biography includes an upbringing of "mystic religiosity" and ritualistic abuse, Kerouac-esque world travels, and prominent, innovative

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work in television and film animation. The barometer of his career has fluctuated wildly, from Hollywood player to homelessness on the streets of Los Angeles. The rewards and traumas of this amazing biog-

raphical journey have been many and great, but they refuse to form any logical, linear iconography for Rogers' artwork. But to the extent that he may be seen as a twenty-first century *Everyman*, Rogers – like his medieval counterpart – has felt the *frisson* of being pulled between heaven and hell. He has found himself in a position of contemplating pure potential – for good or ill – and been challenged to translate such potential into visual form.

Little Dancer

Most of my serious painting is to a degree allegorical – there is an implied past and future, especially to these current depictions, typical of all animation.

Rogers' canvas *Little Dancer* serves as a striking and enigmatic introduction to his allegorical visions. The scene is apparently set in a church home or orphanage, with various waif-like figures assembled in a living room. Most of these figures are grouped on and around a large, floral couch, like a gallery of Dr. Seuss extras. But one figure stands alone; the "Little Dancer" capers on the red expanse of carpet in an impromptu performance for his fellows. Looking

beyond this central act, we begin to notice details that belie assumptions of communal harmony or happiness. The *Little Dancer* figure – dressed in a sort of hospital gown – is painfully thin, with a crazed expression that is poised between elation and terror. Toward the right edge of the composition, one of the "audience" members, gray and emaciated, stares dejectedly at the floor, resigned to some unknown fate. Closer observation yields an ominous, red-clad figure descending the staircase beyond the room, and a red-draped table (an altar?) that beckons – but to



Jonathan Rogers, *Group Self Portrait*, detail 2000
oil on canvas, 48"x60"



Jonathan Rogers, *Little Dancer*, 1999, oil on canvas, 48"x 60"
Collection of the artist.

whom? For what purpose?

Such details fail to fully encompass the impact of this image. The scene is charged with a strange, complex emotion, heightened by the delightful dread of stumbling upon this situation *in medias res*. One can hardly help contemplating the previous or subsequent “frames” of this dramatic storyboard. The protagonist of *Little Dancer* is captured – to the amazement of his comrades – at a boundary, a precarious moment of potential. What remains ambiguous is the allegorical significance of this transgression; an enigmatic sense of dread lingers as we ponder the consequences.

Group Self Portrait

Whereas *Little Dancer* suggests an autobiographical scene for Rogers – perhaps an episode from his shadowy childhood – *Group Self Portrait* is a personal manifesto. The title is a provocative contradiction, as our expectations for the genre of self-portraiture predict a single figure. The most obvious reconciliation of this contradiction is that the children and child-like humanoids in the image are projections of the multiplicity of Rogers’ being. This is a self-portrait that

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employs the artist’s complex arsenal of expressive devices to go well beyond surface appearances into the depths of the psychological. In *Group Self Portrait*, Rogers’ affinity for animation comes to the fore in two major respects. First, the “synthesized human expression” employed in the multiple doppelgangers here is conveyed both through their distorted expressions, and through a distinct “color coding” of the figures (e.g. green for decay, purple for consuming evil). Abundant antecedents again come to mind, including Kabuki theater characters, the grotesque satires of Daumier and Goya, and the crudely emotive

figures of German Expressionism, but the synthetic expressiveness of animation remains constant.

Second, the allegorical reading of the scene is heightened through manipulation of perspective and the “gravitational ground base” – the visual sense of “right side up.” Gravity is selectively applied in this space, with some of the figures standing on distinct planes, and other floating around or above them. The black and white tiled “stage,” in particular, gives the scene an air of Alice-in-Wonderland surrealism. Perhaps the only note of stability is provided by the bucolic vignette in the background. It is as if the black backdrop of this theater has been breached, revealing a sunlit meadow beyond. Rogers has noted that this vignette represents a comforting memory from his childhood – when he was allowed to explore the countryside, free, for a time, from the ominous control of the adults in his life. This is the antithesis of the fractured psyche characterized in the main tableau.

Conclusion

Jonathan Rogers is an artist who, like many a conflicted cartoon character, seems to have an angel on one shoulder and a demon on the other. The existential conversation between the two rewards us with some truly disquieting, but stunning images. They suggest that the self is characterized by obverse states of potential. They also suggest the excruciating enlightenment of leaping into the void beyond reason, beyond rational creativity and...falling? Being uplifted? The potential for both is omnipresent in Rogers’ work. **CAM**

Eric Jackson-Forsberg,
Curator of Collections and Exhibitions

jonathanrogers



Born in 1937 in Toronto, Canada, Jonathan Rogers studied at the Ontario College of Art. From 1957 to 1964, he traveled across Canada and Europe, settling in England for a time to teach at the Devonshire College of Art and start a family. Returning to Canada in 1968, Rogers served as Drawing Master at the Sheridan School of Design, where he began to experiment in animation. *Evolu*, a short film produced during this period, won 11 awards in film festivals world wide.

In 1972, Rogers and his wife produced an animated Prime time TV special for the CBC, using the then undiscovered voices of Gilda Radner and Dan Ackroyd. This project evolved into an NBC Prime time special, *Witch’s Night Out*, featuring the voice of Radner, by then a household name through her work on *Saturday Night Live*.

By 1981, Rogers had made his way to Hollywood, where – among other eclectic ventures – he created *Atomic Dog* for George Clinton and the Funkadelics, a piece awarded Billboard’s “Best Animated Music Video of 1985.” Next, Rogers worked as Supervising Producer for Disney Studios Educational Division, then moved on to Marvel Productions for three years to produce *Casper*, *My Little Pony* and *G.I. Joe*.

Throughout each of these periods, Rogers continued to draw and paint, developing his “own work” independent of the various commercial ventures. In the late 90s he presented a stand-alone body of paintings for exhibition. Seven of these canvasses were shown in the *In Western New York 2002* exhibition at the Albright-Knox Art Gallery. *Multiple Spirit: Work by Jonathan Rogers* is his first solo exhibition. He now resides in Niagara Falls with his wife, Alexandra, where the couple manage a company, Art by Jonathan, to market Rogers’ prints and cards. **CAM**

Artist's Statement

I obtain visions from what I perceive as the Infinite Source of all existence and consciousness and I produce them as drawings and paintings. The countless stories and reports from viewers who have been profoundly affected by these works are validation of the power and authenticity of that source. It is commonly labeled God. I have long been disinclined to use the word because of its religious connotations, I find them so limiting; also, there is a certain grandiosity about making the God claim that I find repugnant, yet because of the profound nature of the reports I cannot deny what I have known in myself for a decade. I say that my work comes from God, and let people think what they may. The spiritual experience is not reasonable, it does not submit to words, but the visual image may elude the rational thought filter. Bam. The image penetrates, the viewer resonates.

Paintings in the Exhibition

All works are loaned from the collection of the artist, except where noted.

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| 1 <i>Group Self Portrait 1</i> , 2000
oil on canvas, 48" x 60" | 7 <i>Conflict</i> , 2002
oil on canvas, 48" x 60" | 12 <i>Pastoral Memory</i> , 2003
oil on canvas, 30" x 40" |
| 2 <i>Group Self Portrait 2</i> , 2003
oil on canvas, 48" x 60" | 8 <i>Happy For No Reason</i> , 2003
oil on canvas
48" x 60" | 13 <i>Imminent Disclosure</i> , 2002
oil on canvas, 30" x 40" |
| 3 <i>Little Dancer</i> , 1999
oil on canvas, 48" x 60" | 9 <i>Angry About Everything</i> ,
2003, oil on canvas
48" x 60" | 14 <i>In His Hands</i> , 2002
oil on panel, 24" x 30"
collection of Rev. & Mrs.
Paul Robinson. |
| 4 <i>Everybody Dance</i> , 2003
oil on canvas, 48" x 60" | 10 <i>Potential 1</i> , 2002
oil on canvas, 48" x 60" | 15 <i>Happy Kid #1, 2, 3, 4, 5,
6 & 7</i> , 2002, oil on panel,
8" x 10" |
| 5 <i>The Futility of Belief</i> , 2003
oil on canvas, 48" x 60" | 11 <i>Potential 2</i> , 2003
oil on canvas, 48" x 60" | |
| 6 <i>Free Flight</i> , 2002
oil on canvas, 48" x 60" | | |

TopSpin

Artists of Western New York and Beyond

The museum's Tops Gallery – long dedicated to the exhibition of work by local and regional artists – now presents the **TopSpin** series. This juried series of solo exhibitions draws from the richly diverse work of Western New York artists, as well as that of artists beyond the region. **TopSpin** will feature a broad range of visual expressions, varied in media as well as message.

TopSpin is made possible through the generous support of Tops Markets, LLC.

TOPS

Refuse, Reuse, Rework: Assemblages by Dianne Baker

August 23 – October 19, 2003

Opening reception with artist's talk: Saturday, August 23, 7:00-9:00 p.m.

African + Indian = American: Performance and Exhibition by James Montford

November 8, 2003 - January 3, 2004

Opening reception and performance: Saturday, November 8, 7:00-9:00 p.m.

TOPS



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