

Underground Comix Come of Age: An Interview with Kim Deitch

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Miraculously, most of the great underground comix artists of the late '60s are still alive and kicking. Compared to the burnt-out, drug-slain rock stars of the same era, their unscathed record is rather amazing. Now in their late 50s and early 60s, many are also doing their best work. Along with R. Crumb, Art Spiegelman and Bill Griffith, Kim Deitch is one such exemplar of the art of underground "funnies," an author and illustrator who transcended his beginnings in the age of sex, drugs and rock 'n' roll to become a mature comics storyteller. Currently, his collection *Shadowland* (Fantagraphics) (<http://www.fantagraphics.com/artist/deitch/deitch.html>) is earning critical acclaim, and anticipation is high for *Alias the Cat* (Pantheon Books) (<http://www.fantagraphics.com/artist/deitch/deitch.html>), due out in April. We caught up with Deitch to discuss the longevity of comics, the dubious term "graphic novel" and his constant growth as an artist.

Heller: I remember savoring your strips in the *East Village Other* and *Gothic Blimp Works* back in the late-'60s—I even have one of your *EVO* covers in my slideshow on "avant-garde magazines," a fairly political one with a huge rocket. When you were in the thick of that innovative period of comics—when taboos were busted and conventions attacked and all that other radical stuff—could you have imagined that underground comix would evolve into graphic novels, which are among the hottest cultural movements happening today?

Deitch: No, I never specifically imagined that things would play out the way they have. For one thing, I never imagined *I* would last this long—not in the sense of longevity, but in terms of keeping a constructive, ongoing, creative thing going and managing to steadily build on it. On the other hand, it's true that back then I had a very strong and distinct feeling that I was in on something very special—that I had really stumbled onto the potential makings of a great art scene, if only I was up to it—that last part being the big question in my mind. But somehow I managed to grow and evolve over time even as the scene did.

Heller: Your work had a decidedly primitive charm back in the '60s, but that's anything but the case in your life. You and your brother and writer Simon were veterans even when young. And your dad, Gene, was a leading animator of his day. So what about your work has changed over time? What have the years done to the impulses that drove you back then?

Deitch: Well, that's where the growing and evolving part comes in. When I started out I did have the big desire and, as you say, a certain primitive charm—just about enough to get to first base on, or heading for it. But I also had a lot of bad personal habits, such as incipient alcoholism for one, poor self-discipline, poor focus and not much of a clue about developing good work habits or otherwise building on my vague, half-baked talents.

The big miracle in my life is that I managed to turn all that around. I believe that the essence of what I have going for me isn't that I'm some kind of a genius. Believe me, I've been around that and I know it when I see it. When I do see it, I study it and try to learn something. Over time I have managed to learn enough to purge bad habits and develop better ones... I think I am actually living closer to my actual potential than a lot of people do.

Heller: Your latest book is *Shadowland*. First of all, why is it titled that?

Deitch: The title comes from an airy phrase that was sometimes used to describe the movies back in the teens and 1920s. In particular I got it from an old 78-r.p.m. record I found called "In Shadowland," a musical salute [to early cinema]. I liked the way the word sounded and the sense of romance it seemed to evoke, which is why I used it for a title without feeling any pressing need to explain it.

Heller: In your introduction to the book you recall a three-year period when you worked at the Elm Bank homestead in Virginia. You illustrate that experience with a lightning bolt piercing your angst-filled head. What was so incendiary about that time in your life, and why did your comics from that period have such a maniacal aura?

Deitch: That's a fair question. At the time I was at Elm Bank in Virginia, I had recently undergone a breakup with a girl I had been living with for 11 years. It hit me really hard. It was years, really, before I even had sex again. I was miserable, in an unending state of melancholia, but it did wonders for my artwork in terms of increased productivity and also in the amount of self-searching that I relentlessly put myself through. It has nearly everything to do with the particularly maniacal quality of the work in *Shadowland*. It was also hard medicine that made me face up to many of my personal shortcomings. Weirdly, it was really kind of the making of "me." It made me finally grow up and become more of an adult than I probably, otherwise, ever would have been.

Heller: In the intro you also recall the mass murderer John Wayne Gacy, who was sentenced to death for killing 33 boys and young men. You note that he was also a painter, and you entered into a brief correspondence with him over his art. How did this play into your artistic aspirations?

Deitch: Well, I didn't enter into a correspondence with Gacy so much as goof on [my collaborator] Erwin Bergdoll's correspondence with him. It did, however, play into my artistic aspirations in an interesting way over and above the inspiration it contributed, at least cosmetically, to the character Al Ledicker in *Shadowland*.

Years later when Art Spiegelman was doling out jobs for a reality comics series that was running in *Details* magazine, he offered me the job of going to San Quentin to interview Charles Manson for one such reality comic story. Well, I have just about as much contempt for Manson as I did for Gacy, and told Art so, also adding that I considered it a somewhat hackneyed thing to do as Manson interviews have been done to death and just provide that jerk with an ongoing soapbox. But I still did have a lingering interest in death row left over from Erwin's correspondence with Gacy and, not wanting to lose the *Details* gig, made a spontaneous counterproposal that *Details* let me cover the execution of some more obscure, condemned criminal. Art and *Details* went for it, and it turned into one of the most interesting experiences I ever had doing comics, one that was a strong and interesting turning point.

I took to interviewing people like a duck takes to water—made me feel for a time like maybe I'd missed my true calling and should have been a reporter. More to the point, I think it brought somewhat more relevance to the stories I've done since then. Maybe that's putting too much of a pretentious spin on it, but it has definitely had an effect on the work that I have done since then.

Heller: Your story “The Mystic Shrine” takes place in a carnival. Carnivals and carnies are often the subjects of very eerie tales—from those about the Geeks [carnie characters who eat the heads off live chickens] to requisite freak shows. Why did you choose carnivals?

Deitch: The carnival theme in my comics evolved out of fine-art pieces I was doing for collectors like Glenn Bray and others in the '80s, some examples of which are in the back of *Shadowland*. Carnivals with all their color and tawdry folklore seemed like irresistible grist for the creative mill—especially since Glenn was showing me a lot of fascinating carnival memorabilia at the time. Before I even realized it I was making my living doing fine art. At a certain point I decided, “This is nuts. I should get back to comics and use the material where more people would be able to see it.”

Heller: As I was reading “Two Old Birds,” the story of aging actor Larry Farrel and his pet parrot, I thought, “So, this is what it’s going to be like to see your life slip by.” As Larry compares notes about his career with the bird you begin to feel how horrible it is to be past your prime. Were you trying to purge yourself of that thought?

Deitch: Not at all. I spent about two years living in Los Angeles in the '80s and was just totally thrilled to be living in the town where movies were really born. For all people say about LA's unhealthy smog, I was fascinated to observe that even at that late date there were still many human relics of the silent movie era—an era I love—still [living] there. I went out of my way to meet these people when I could and to study them. I guess you could say it was kind of the “shake the hand that shook the hand of Buffalo Bill” syndrome.

Heller: You have another book, *Alias the Cat*, coming out in April. It’s a complex tale—your wife, Pam, collects Halloween cats and in the story buys a mysterious cat costume, which triggers the plot—of obsession and fantasy. What prompted this crazy exploration? Was it the next stage of your fabled *Waldo the Cat*?

Deitch: I got a job doing a strip for *Time*, a New York City guide-book published by *Time Out* magazine. The theme I chose was a walking tour of the city's flea markets with my character Waldo as the guide. I had so much fun doing those three pages that I felt a real sense of loss when I was done. The first part of *Alias the Cat* reflects my desire to keep the theme going.

Also, the influence of the *Details* reality strips is still in play in that, even though I'm now back in the realm of fiction, I'm still interviewing people in my yarns—except that now I'm interviewing imaginary people. This is definitely the case in *Alias the Cat* as well as the work that I am now doing. I've got a lot more yet to say about Waldo. For instance, an essential part of Waldo's back story, which I touch on in my book *A Shroud for Waldo*, is that Waldo isn't really a cat at all but a demon from hell and more specifically the reincarnation of Judas Iscariot.

Heller: So, after all these years you're still at it. Is there anything you haven't done that you want to do?

Deitch: In *Alias the Cat* I have a 13-page passage where I experiment with using illustrated text as opposed to comics in order to get more introspectively into the head one of my characters. I think this initially came out of a response to the pretentious term now in use: graphic novel. It doesn't especially bother me that the term is over-the-top pretentious, but it did get me thinking about what a graphic novel actually is and what it could be.

The book I am now working on, *Deitch's Pictorama*, started out as a book of illustrated fiction as opposed to comics—and really it still is that, except more aspects of the comics idiom are beginning to creep in, such as the way I am using splash panels and in the limited use of word balloons. By doing this I am not looking to abandon comics so much as explore ways to make them a more effective medium. So I guess the short answer is that I aspire to do real novels with pictures that I can more effectively present more fully dimensional stories and characters.

About the Author. Steven Heller, co-chair of MFA Designer As Author at School of Visual Arts, is the author of *Merz to Emigre and Beyond: Avant Garde Magazine Design of the Twentieth Century* (Phaidon Press), *The Education of a Comics Artist* co-edited with Michael Dooley (Allworth Press), *The Education of a Graphic Designer*, Second Edition and *The Education of an Art Director* with Véronique Vienne (Allworth Press).
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