





Insights on Thomas Woodruff's "Freak Parade"

Greg Escalante digs deep into the beautifully twisted psyche of Thomas Woodruff.

So Thomas, what was it that brought you to the conclusion that you should pursue one line of thinking as a body of work for five solid years?

Well, completing the full body of work for "Freak Parade" in five years wasn't an up-front

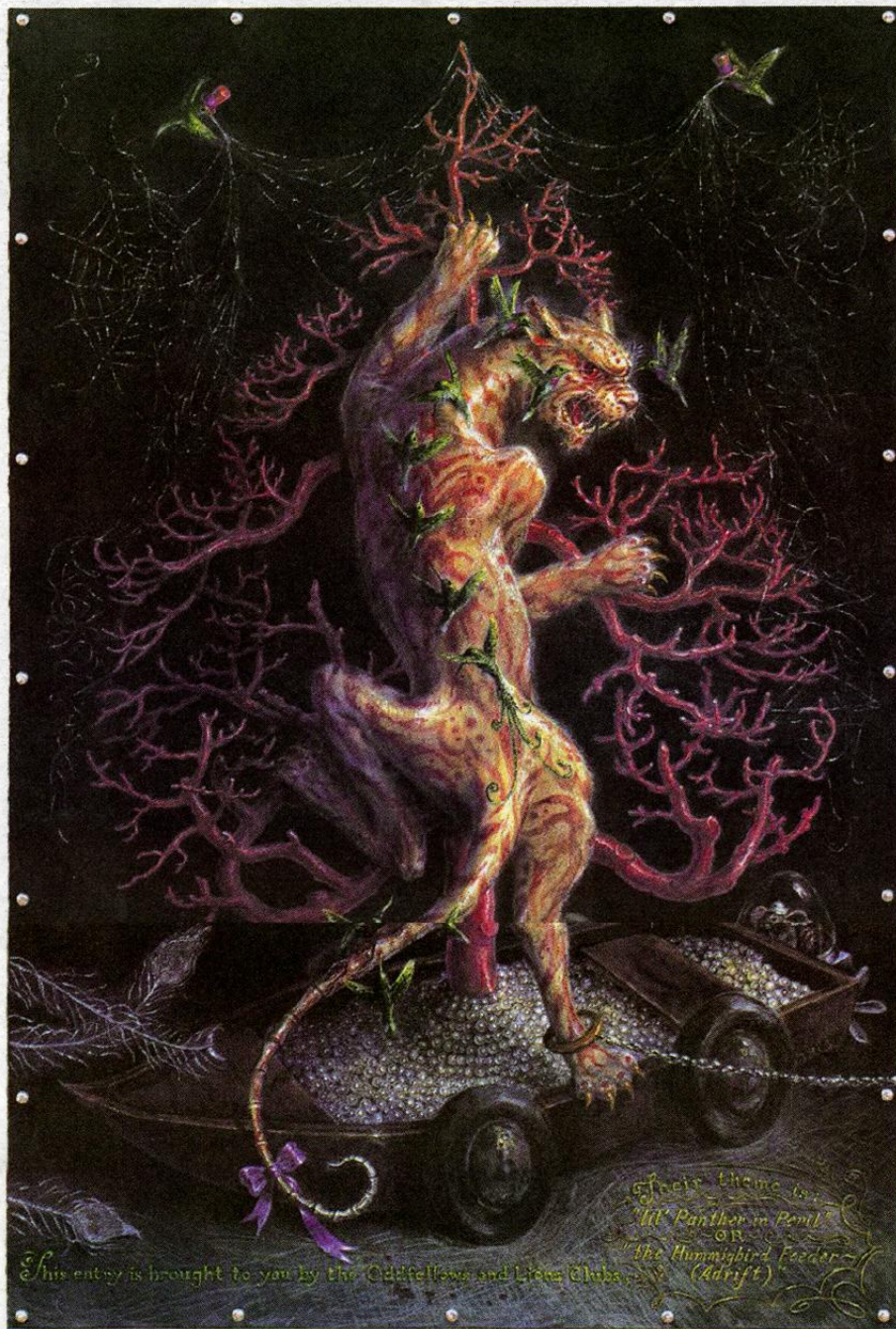
commitment. I mean, one doesn't just wake up and decide, "Today I'm going to begin an Odyssey of visual momentum that will span the next five years of my life..." No, I made the "Anatomy Boy" painting and thought that he needed a friend, a pet. So I put a leash in his hand and made the "Siamese Wolves in Sheep's Clothing" image, and I was well on my way to creating something of a series. After that I felt I really had something, and then "Root-

Hare Float" (the bunnies with swan necks) and "Ice Ghost" appeared. At five pieces I realized that I had a parade!

Your current "Parade" includes 32 striking paintings. Were there any ideas that you didn't use?

Oh definitely. I had a lot of ideas, like the hand float. It was composed of people in finger suits. Like if you had one person wearing a different suit for a

corresponding finger in a glove, the ring finger was a bride, etc. But that didn't work. There have been others not so clever to need mentioning. But the thing that did strike me as I thought through the beginning stages of this was that this was an amazing homage to all things in celebration - parades, fashion shows, and weddings. There always has to be big balloons, flowers, feathers and ribbons, and there's even a reference to the Mummer's



parade, complete with a triad of white peacocks with top hats.

And how did you see this even coming to a conclusion?

Oh, as they all do, with a sweeper, like the end of Jay Ward's *Fractured Fairy Tales*. But in my parade, the sweeper is the Grim Reaper... sweeper, so to speak.

Did this all debut at once, or has it been shown in pieces outside the greater context?

It debuted as a whole. Barry Blenderman ran a gallery in New York City that showed Martin Wong

and Mark Kostabi and Ellen Berkenblit. But he left NY and ran the University Galleries at Normal, Illinois. So I thought, "Wouldn't it be great if this series of freaks could be seen first in its entirety in a place called "Normal"?"

So how normal is Normal?

It's not normal at all! When we did the opening, the local tattoo shop came to pay their respects. It was a 10-station tattoo shop, so they probably had 20 tattoo artists come in all at once. Seriously, that's no small order of business for a town that size to have such a

demand for tattoos. Their shop even had a hoist in the backspace where they would do suspensions. The owner had the rings set into the back of his hands and all. I was surprised to learn that there was a very serious underground modification world going on there. I was impressed since there's no public suspension space in New York! There's some very severe stuff there in Normal, IL.

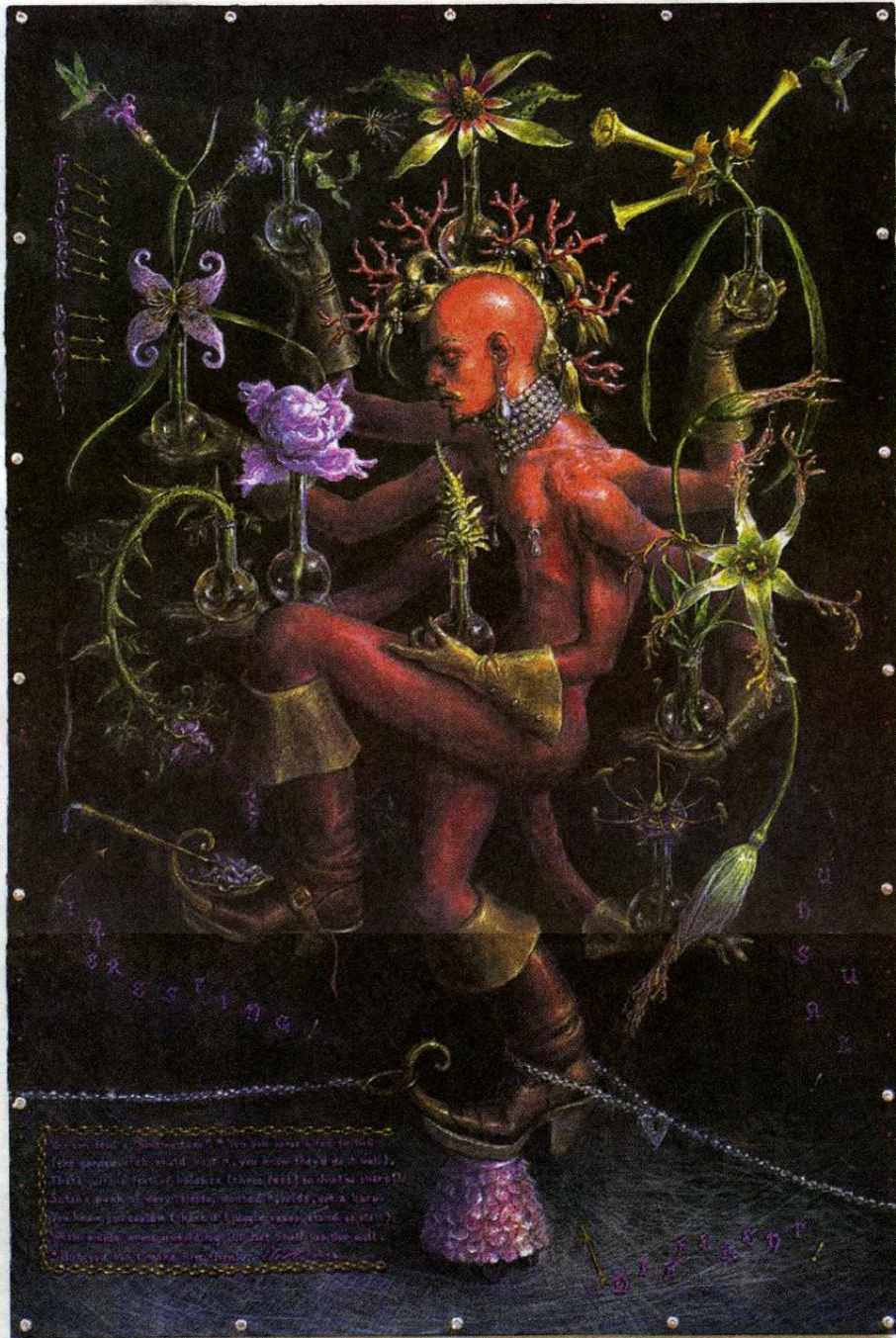
So what was the rest of the crowd like at the opening?

It was the most heavily attended show they'd had at that venue.

Kids came out in force. And even the people that didn't even like art were ready to enjoy the work. It just goes to show - everybody loves a parade! It was interesting to see it all up at once for a full viewing. The spectacle of the event became that while viewing the parade the people themselves became an incredible and beautiful living parade.

Where else has the parade traveled?

The Freak Parade had a lovely reception at the Cal State Long Beach Gallery last fall, and will



soon be going to the museum at the Herron School of Art and Design (Perdue) in Indianapolis, Indiana from August 8th through October 4th 2008. Other venues are in the works for the next few years.

So at what point did you know that you were an artist?

I always drew better than the other kids in school, so I had a clue early on. I grew up in an Irish-American Roman Catholic family of six. We all had our share of bad art instructions, Saturday programs. We each took a

different avenue; my brothers took guitar, dance, piano, etc. The others' lessons didn't stick but I really took to mine. Plus, in New Rochelle there was a lot of theatre. And all the kids that grew up there, 30 minutes from Manhattan, were easily interested in the arts. I did sets for school plays and the theatre group as a teen. That continued to art school to work on backdrops for sets, as the main focus in academics was abstract and I was working figuratively. I hooked up with the avant-garde theatre in New York in the 70's and started working

for Robert Wilson. So I can honestly say that there's always been a strong sense of the theatre in my work.

You worked with Robert Wilson?

Indeed. He was the experimental director who did "Einstein on the Beach". Philip Glass did the music for his operas, as he's a huge superstar in Europe. He primarily directs extended works that are beautifully designed and exquisitely lit theatre spectacles. But they are slow moving... he did an epic one in Iran that lasted for

24 hours.

So how did you make headway in college as a figurative artist in an abstract environment?

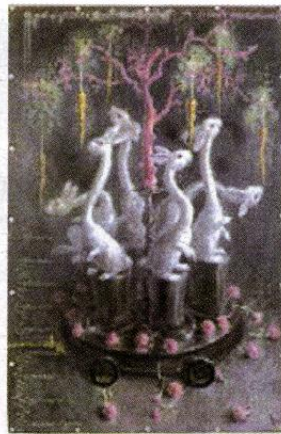
It was frustrating because my instructors at Cooper Union were either first or second-generation abstract expressionists, or dyed in the wool modernists, or dry conceptualists. I was working for Robert while still in college, and it was helpful to learn how artists actually "work". This was positive and negative, I probably learned more about the kind of artist I didn't want to be during this



1- ANATOMY BOY



2- SIAMESE WOLVES
IN SHEEP'S CLOTHING



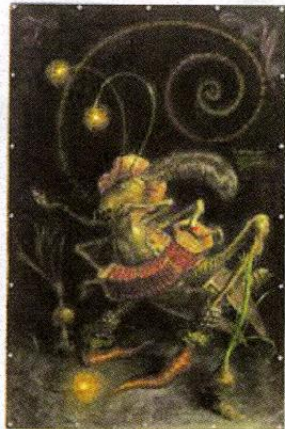
3- ROOT-HARE FLOAT



4- ICE GHOST



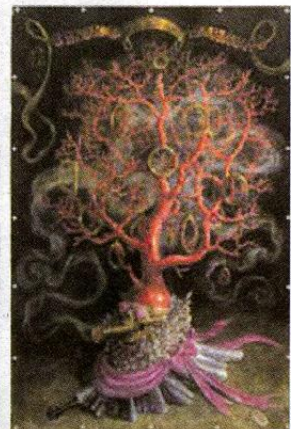
9- POOR MR. P.



10- TROUBADOUR



11- BAMBI-LYNN



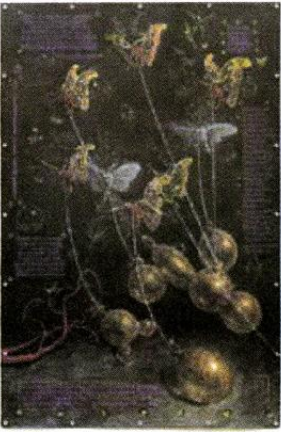
12- SMOKE AND MIRRORS



17- MONKEY SEES



18- MONKEY DOES



19- SIRS OF ATLAS



20- MOBILE MONUMENT



25- FLOWER GIRL 1



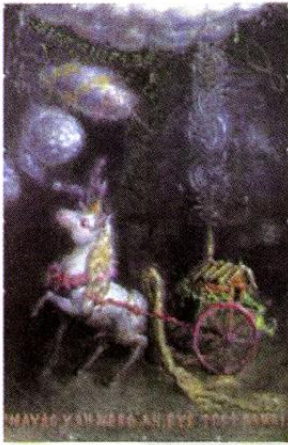
26- FLOWER GIRL 2



27- BURDENED BEASTS



28- AWARD WINNER



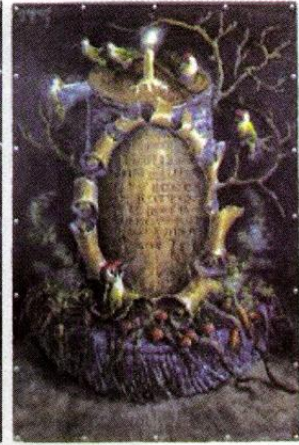
5- MISS GIGGLES



6- MAN OF LETTUCE



7- LEGENDARY BULB



8- WOODPECKER'S EPITAPH



13- DAIN LY DESIREE



14- FOWL IMPRESSIONS



15- JO-JO



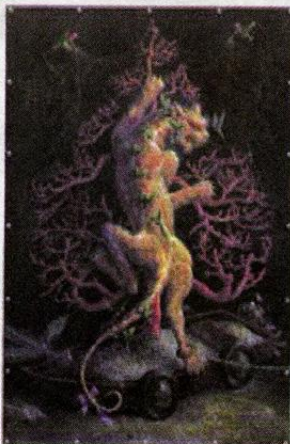
16- COBRA BALLOON



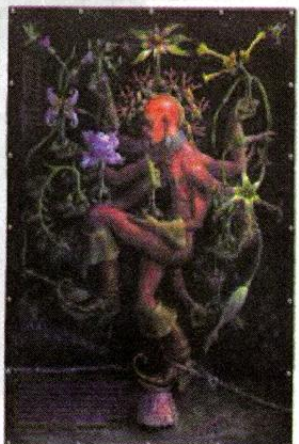
21- PANSY AND FAGGOT



22- PEACOCK BALANCE



23- BRUISED BEAST



24- FLOWER BOY



29- VULGAR DISPLAY



30- STINNING CONCLUSION



31- DRODGE



32- SWEENEY



period. I was seeing that now it was actually possible to be an artist and make a living. Then came magazine illustrations, and that seemed kind of pure. Like I said, I was one of the few artist serious about working in a figurative manner, and I was also good at reading things carefully and figuring out the symbolic image for a given text. I was reliable, fast, clever, and no trouble, so I was well suited for illustration.

It was great training; you sat down and make something. I

wasn't sitting around contemplating each stroke. It enabled me to take on more ambitious projects in my personal work. I'm very good with coming up with ideas, but sometimes shaky with the follow through, so with the more elaborate projects, I found that I could trick myself into finishing things by setting up rules to the opus. Ones you can't just stop halfway if you're bored, I'd have to finish everything. For example, I couldn't stop at 345 apple paintings, I had to complete all 365.

So did you see this parade piece as something more than just 32 paintings? Why 32?

The "Freak Parade" was something that I always saw as a book. So I set it up as sets of 8, and that's why there are 32 images. It's the format for publishing a book in signatures.

Don "Ed" Hardy published this book under his imprint Hardy Marks, correct?

That's correct. It was designed by Robin Read and won a prestigious design award from the AIGA. You can order it from the publisher

online at www.tattoocitysf.com, or through Last Gasp.

How did you and Hardy meet?

I started collecting tattoos over 25 years ago. At that point there weren't many tattoo artists, and it was really underground. My first piece was from an artist named Tux in Baltimore. I walked into the shop and thought the images were fascinating, beautiful and mysterious. I just picked an image from the wall, not even really expecting to get tattooed; I was 23 at the time. From that time on, I would get them when I



would go on trips. I heard about Hardy from Erno, a tattooer in San Francisco, from whom I had collected some work. He had an appointment that he wasn't going to be able to meet. And since you had to book Hardy months in advance, he offered me his appointment slot. At the time Ed was primarily doing the full body Japanese pieces. I had this American style wolf head on my arm and wanted the whole body wolf to wrap around the triceps. So Ed marked it out in ballpoint pen, and went from there. I was passionate about the vocabulary

of the classic Americana imagery, which he wasn't really into anymore. I think that through our friendship and the work he's inked on my arms, chest and back, I believe he reinvestigated his love for the classic designs.

I heard he wasn't doing tattooing anymore.

He's actually been so busy doing porcelain designs in Japan, new prints, and gallery shows. And with the opportunities to expand his vision through avenues made available through the fashion line, it's given him the freedom to

explore so many more exciting things. He's one of the most amazing artists that I know.

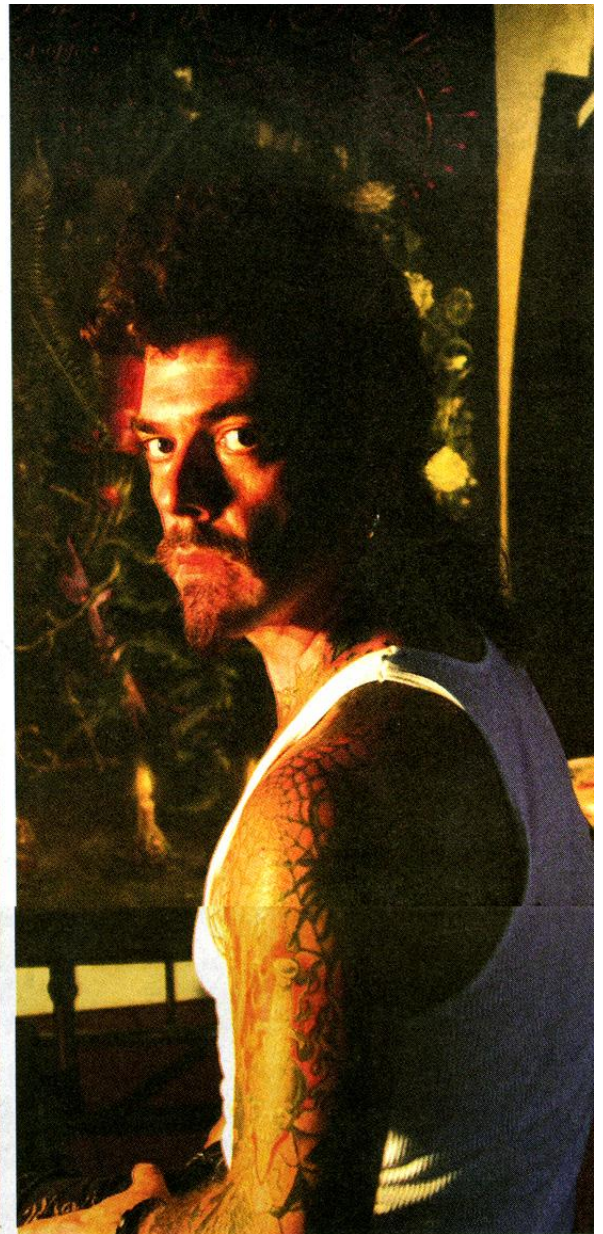
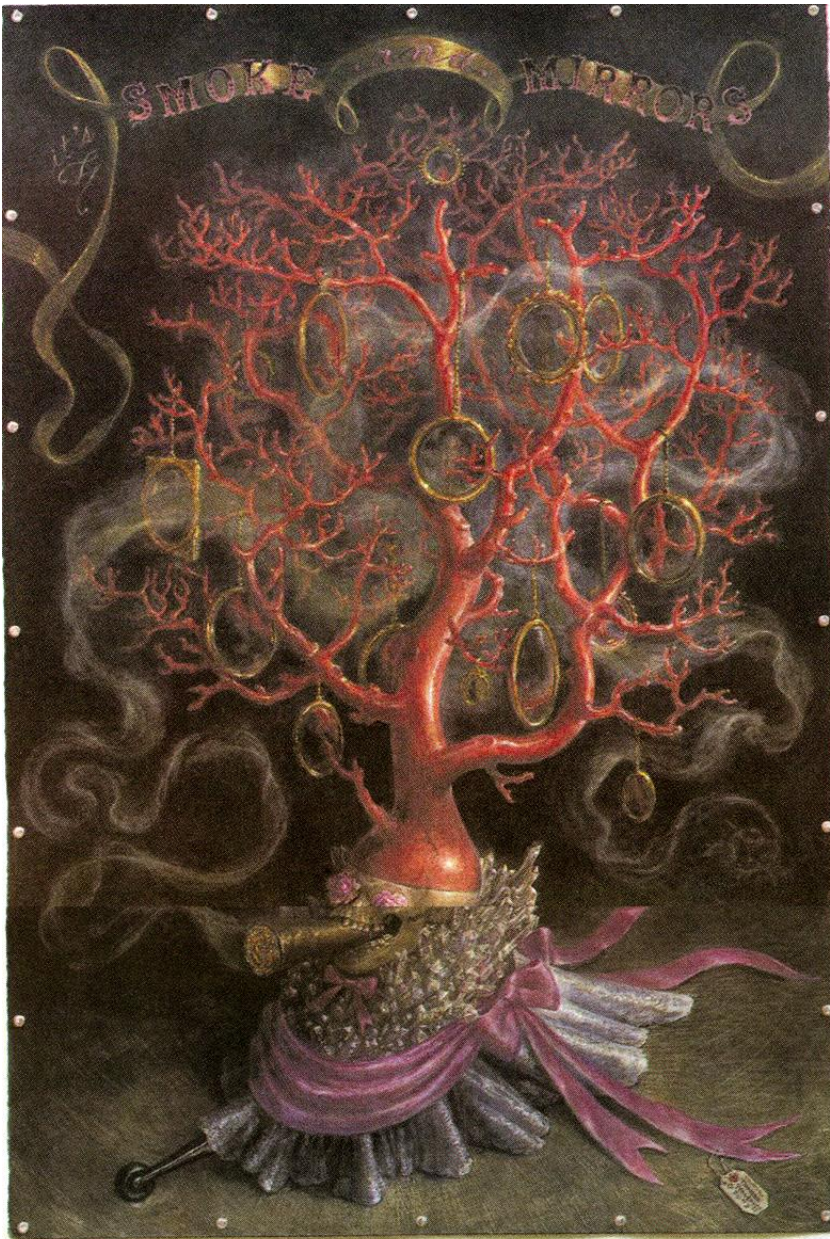
So did you learn to tattoo from Ed?

Hah, I did! He said it would take one week to learn to tattoo. So I took two weeks to go out and learn with him. He taught me how to make the needles and what equipment to buy. I did the first one on myself, as is the tradition. I was a tone and shade guy, not a line guy. But this helped my line I felt. It was illegal to tattoo in New York at the time. There were no

street shops, so I didn't do much tattooing at the time. Around that time I met Mike Malone (RIP) and he said I could work in his shop in Honolulu. So I went out to work for a time, at Sailor Jerry's old shop. It was terrifying and very exciting. I'm not a very good tattoo artist, and it's kind of gross to do on a daily basis.

Did you improve your line work?

Yeah, and I learned that if I ever need to escape from life I can set up shop near a military base and do pretty well! That's plan B, I



guess. (laughing)

So this Freak Parade, are they all sold or privately owned or for sale?

At this point the sales issue is not a big issue for me. I would like for them to be in one place, as one piece. Because I primarily paint in series, it saddens me to have the works dispersed all over the globe. There is one of my clown paintings from a series of nine that is in a museum collection in Australia that will be hard to borrow back, and I may never see again. But not with this series, the "Freak Parade" is still intact. I own them all and ideally I want them to tour and be seen by as

many people as possible. It's fun to look at them in person.

So you're the Chair of the Illustration department at the SVA in New York?

Chair of the Department of Illustration and Cartooning, yes. When I took this job I was a fine artist and illustrator with no cartooning experience. But I'm a fast learner, and know how to contact people WAY smarter than me! The school is now being hailed at the "Harvard of Cartooning" in the business, particularly for women in cartooning. It's manga that's really important now to so many. The Ameri-manga scene is

centered at SVA at the moment; the students are getting significant book projects immediately after graduation.

So what have you been working on since the Freak Parade has come to a conclusion (2000-2005)?

A new series based on the planets. They're nine upside down heads painted on black silk velvet. They each appear as one character, but become different personalities when flipped over. They're actually going to revolve, be motorized. It's difficult to paint on the velvet, you have to skim many thin layers of paint just the

right consistency to get the best effect, but when they're finished they are pretty dazzling! I'm working on the sun now, the biggest (obviously) and the most complex. They will be exhibited in New York at PPOW Gallery this fall from October 4th to November 9th. To see a preview you can visit their website www.ppowgallery.com.

Well, if the "Freak Parade" is any indication to the complexities of Woodruffworld, I'm certain this new group of planets will be over the top and out of this world!

