

## The CHICAGO ATTITUDE

**The Windy City's distinctive stance is exemplified by the subversive corporeal explorations of its Imagist legacy**  
**By James Yood**

I'm convinced—Chicago is the best-kept secret in modern and contemporary art. Not the city, mind you: that's eked out its place as one of America's great population centers, our nation's third largest city and the capital of the Midwest, the inland megalopolis that even the POTUS is pleased to call home. In the history of art, Chicago is a well-respected place to be born or educated, and the list of major American artists who have done so is pretty distinguished, including Thomas Hart Benton, John Chamberlain, Judy Chicago, Walt Disney, Richard Estes, Tom Friedman, Leon Golub, Arturo Herrera, Joan Mitchell, Elizabeth Murray, Georgia O'Keeffe, Claes Oldenburg, Nancy Spero, Rirkrit Tiravanija, and Grant Wood. There are those who chose to stay and work in Chicago for much—if not all—of their entire ca-

reers, including Ivan Albright, Roger Brown, Richard Hunt, Ed Paschke, Martin Puryear, Hollis Sigler, and HC Westermann, while living and working in Chicago right now are artists such as Dawoud Bey, Nick Cave, Theaster Gates, Gaylen Gerber, Vera Klement, Riva Lehrer, Robert Lostutter, Jim Lutes, Iñigo Manglano-Ovalle, Kerry James Marshall, Gladys Nilsson, Jim Nutt, Kay Rosen, Jason Salavon, Jessica Stockholder, Tony Tasset, Karl Wirsum, Mary Lou Zelazny and many many more. (Let's leave architecture out of this discussion for now, though if we included it, that would add even more luminaries.)

**"SPLIT PERSONALITY," 1954, Gertrude Abercrombie**

OIL ON PRESSED BOARD, 8" × 10"

PHOTO: COURTESY DEPAUL ART MUSEUM, CHICAGO



All right, all right, enough name-dropping—everybody has to be born and educated and live somewhere or other, and Chicago is a big place with a lot of art schools and a pretty active art center. The problem with such lists is that they can sometimes cloud the larger, thornier issues that are at stake whenever one examines the art of a particular place. Is examining place just a kind of local chauvinism, an exercise in place-patriotism? Or should that place be assessed on the basis of how significant a part it plays in the larger art conversation going on nationally and globally? Or, on the other hand, is what makes a place—in this case, Chicago—interesting is how distinct its voice is within those conversations, how independent and perhaps separate it can be, how some traditions and attitudes can be pursued there that make that place unique? Whichever way you look at it, it seems Chicago is of great significance, and the history of modern and contemporary art and culture is pretty much unthinkable without the names listed above. But still, as I travel and talk about Chicago, it's always surprising to me how few people around the country know the Chicago art scene, and how far a distance it is in terms of critical attention, between being America's third city than being its first or second. One might say, in terms of the realpolitik of American arts culture, Chicago has come in third in a contest in which there is only first and second place. So let's take a closer look at that last option, and consider Chicago as an independent art center that has carved out a special and distinct, though too often overlooked or misperceived, chapter in the history of modern and contemporary American art.

It does seem odd how many people resist the term "regionalism." To those who don't care for the word, it functions more or less as a synonym for provincialism, with a region somehow sounding less significant than a capital, implying a kind of a secondary status. But if one considers *all* art communities more or less as regional, including, say, Paris or New York, then regionalism is just a way of assessing the particular histories of particular places. Some regions are huge and magnets for artistic creativity and can be understood as historically dominant—again, Paris, New York, etc.—while others are mid-sized, some rooted in a city, or a larger geographic area. And sometimes—actually, pretty often—in these places, over a period of time, certain common attitudes and procedures can be discerned in ongoing generations of artists who mine somewhat similar visual terrain. It is then that you have the makings of a regional style, or at the very least of a regional attitude.

So it has been in Chicago. From the days of Ivan Albright (1897-1983), through the Monster Roster of the 1950s, into the great age of Chicago Imagism beginning with the Hairy Who exhibitions in 1966, and to the work of younger artists as well, there are a group of core considerations that one could accrete into a sense of a Chicago attitude or style in the visual arts. Here's my mega-list: an overwhelming commitment to the human figure, often presented singly, as the central vehicle of artistic expression; predilection for small-scale work scrupulously and fastidiously crafted toward a kind of finish fetish with evidence of the process of making suppressed; tendency toward a surrealistic view of the figure, sometimes abject, sometimes comic; a nurturing of obsessive and idiosyncratic vision and an attendant deep interest in self-taught and non-academic artists; a preference for high-keyed color and dense and often symmetrical compositions; a kind of blue-collar take on mass culture, a witty and often tongue-in-cheek embrace of the lowbrow; a pursuit for source material in vernacular rather than elite culture; and a tendency within individual careers to a kind of tunnel vision



TOP RIGHT:  
"SELF-PORTRAIT," 1935

**Ivan Albright**

OIL ON CANVAS

30" x 19"

MARY AND EARLE LUDGIN COLLECTION

PHOTO: COURTESY © THE ART INSTITUTE OF CHICAGO

"I CAN'T," 1975

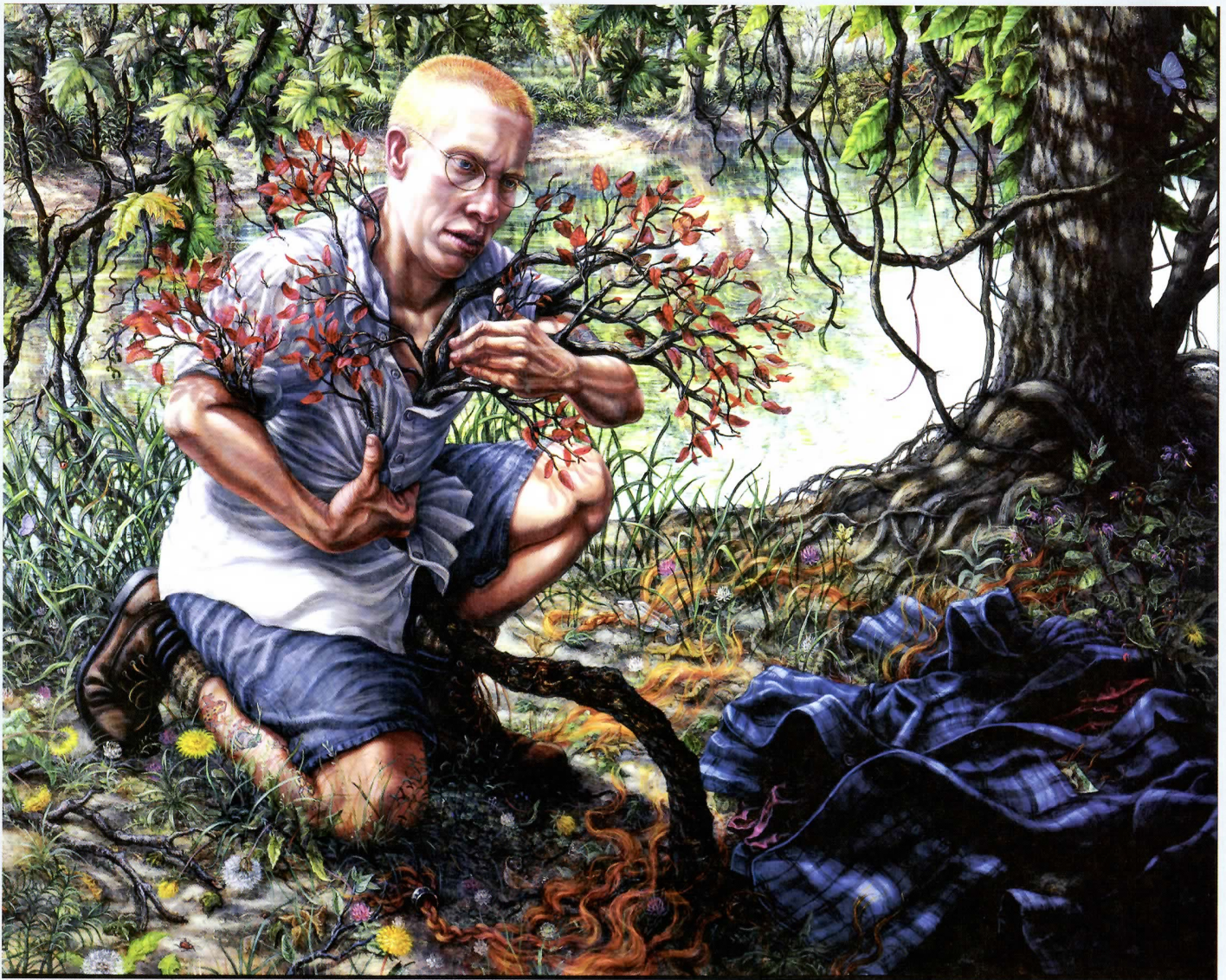
**Jim Nutt**

ACRYLIC ON WATERCOLOR PAPER

22¼" x 19½"

PHOTO: COURTESY RUSSELL BOWMAN FINE ART





"CIRCLE STORY #10: ELI CLARE," 2003

Riva Lehrer

ACRYLIC ON PANEL, 29" X 37"

PHOTO: CHRIS CASSIDY

or pictorial stasis with a long retention of a signature style. All these things—and they could be spun out further—describe something different than the art produced contemporaneously in New York or Los Angeles or elsewhere, and with endless permutations can be seen to form the bedrock of the Chicago attitude.

A quick disclaimer: there's no such thing as a "Chicago artist," there are just the men and women who live and make art here. There's no lockstep unanimity of attitude or focus, and there are fine local exceptions to much of what is described above. But there has been a certain trajectory of artistic emphasis in Chicago for an extended period of time, much of it centered on a determined representation of the human figure as under some kind of stress, psychological or physical, and almost never presented as an ideal form but as some

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compendium of mania, strange and changeling. From Albright's stunning immersions into flesh as decay, as existence always on some headlong lurch toward death and decomposition, to Nutt's lifelong figural obsession, from his early scatological and sexual fixations to his

later, hyper-refined and excruciatingly delicate studies in personality and physiognomy; from Paschke's electric-zip head-hunting to Nilsson's teeming and gentle proliferative universe, it's like the boxing trainer's cry, "the body, the body, the body, the body." (It's almost no surprise that the canvas Paschke was working on the day he died in 2004 was a painting of a boxer. It's on YouTube.)

Paschke, Wirsum, and Nilsson, and others previously mentioned here such as Brown, Lostutter, Nutt, and Sigler, are all variously described as part of the Chicago Imagist movement. While terrific artists such as Albright, Gertrude Abercrombie, Seymour Rosofsky, and others worked pretty much singly in Chicago, though sometimes in loose affiliations, the first time things coalesced into what could be termed a true art movement began in 1966, with a series of group exhibitions held at the Hyde Park Art Center that would come to define Chicago Imagism. Along with Art Green, Phil Hanson, Christina Ramberg, Suellen Rocca, and Barbara Rossi and some important affiliated figures such as Don Baum, Phyllis Bramson, and Ray Yoshida, Imagism

expressed the exuberance and irreverence of youth culture of the time, as a seeming endless chain of young artists, almost all trained at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago, exploded on the scene.

"DAVID'S NOSE," c. 1960'S  
**Don Baum**  
MIXED MEDIA SCULPTURE  
PHOTO: COURTESY  
CARL HAMMER GALLERY, CHICAGO

"PORTRAIT (VAN DYCK)," 2010  
**Jason Salavon**  
DIGITAL C-PRINT  
38½" x 31"  
EDITION OF 7  
PHOTO: COURTESY  
TONY WIGHT GALLERY, CHICAGO

BELOW:  
"TOURIST TRAP," 1974  
**Roger Brown**  
OIL ON CANVAS  
48" x 59½"  
PHOTO: COURTESY RUSSELL BOWMAN  
ART ADVISORY, CHICAGO

