

**University Galleries of Illinois State University (Normal, IL)**

*Wolf's Clothing: Imagism from the Collection*

1/7/2023-4/2/2023

**Introduction**

The few decades following the Second World War saw a flowering of the visual arts — particularly drawing and painting — in and around Chicago. In the 1950s, a group of artists known as the Monster Roster made freaky, psychological pictures inspired by their experiences in the war and the paintings of Jean Dubuffet. The following decade, several artists associated with the School of the Art Institute of Chicago exhibited together under the group name the Hairy Who. When they disbanded, their loud graphic style influenced a more diffuse set of artists who came to be known as the Chicago Imagists. Frequently, artists associated with all three of these movements are lumped together under the banner of the latter. “Imagism” has become a label of convenience for anything made in Chicago around 1970 that displays an interest in stylized organic forms, cultural reference, and playful, often perverted content.

The works in this gallery demonstrate the large range of techniques and approaches used by midcentury Chicagoans. Between Miyoko Ito’s lithe, muted compositions and Ed Paschke’s portraits, for instance, there seems to be little common ground. What connects their work, as well as that of all the artists in this exhibition, is a coy approach to the relationship between abstraction and representation. Just as much as there are landscapes latent in Ito’s designs, Paschke’s figures emerge from skeins of indulgent patterning.

The critic Roberta Smith once called Paschke “a formalist in wolf’s clothing”: the photographic precision of his representations belies the delight they take in tricks of ornamentation, framing, and perspective. Likewise, the works in *Wolf’s Clothing* demonstrate how, circa 1970, Chicago artists thematized the tension between *what* and *how* an image shows.

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**Peter Bodnar** (b. 1928, Czechoslovakia)

*Untitled*, 1975

Oil on canvas

While teaching art for more than three decades at the University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign, Bodnar developed a unique visual lexicon made up of shapely cloud-forms, circular ornaments, and phalluses. Bodnar was friends with several notable Imagists but lived in Central Illinois for the movement’s entire heyday. This painting demonstrates the reach of Imagist preoccupations outside of Chicago. The curvaceous central figure exists in the same valley between corpulence and decoration as many of Barbara Rossi’s blobs. The inclusion of a painted frame within the picture’s real boundaries is similar to techniques used in this show’s works by Nilsson, Hendren, Mahmoud, and Otton.

**Robert Donley** (b. 1934, Cleveland, Ohio)

*Tower of Babel*, 1974

Oil on Canvas

Its bright colors and hyperactive design make *Tower of Babel* seem initially playful. Upon closer inspection, a horrible scene reveals itself. Donley's art frequently commented on social issues. This painting, undertaken during the last months of the Vietnam War, is no exception. In the Bible, Babel is a dual metaphor for the hubris and the potential of humankind: when a unified human race attempted to build a tower to heaven, a nervous God fractured their society because "nothing will be impossible for [them] as one people speaking the same language." This painting's grisly scene connects the biblical tragedy to contemporary events; its general prettiness, however, provides a note of hope. (Leah Brecheisen, student gallery assistant, contributed to researching and writing this label.)

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**Krys Hendren** (b. 1945, Chicago, Illinois)

*Untitled*, 1972

Watercolor and ink on paper

Though she showed with them in several important exhibitions in the early 1970s, Hendren is not among the best-remembered Imagists today. Still, her style is exemplary. In this untitled drawing, many of the concerns prevalent among Chicago artists of the period are on display. The intestinal suggestions of the tubes that tangle in the picture's bottom half and interrupt its upper are characteristic of the Imagist wont to permute biology into abstraction. The playful overlapping of multiple drawn borders within the literal border of the sheet of paper is connected to ideas about the limitations of a picture's frame.

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**Miyoko Ito** (b. 1918, Berkeley, California; d. 1983, Chicago, Illinois)

*Tabi Sox or foot fetish*, circa 1974

Oil on canvas

"Tabi" are split-toed, typically white socks with a centuries-long history in Japanese culture. The title of this painting, then, is perhaps a punny blend of Ito's heritage and her home team: Japanese and the White Sox, respectively. Little in the piece, however, bears this out visually. Instead, it is full of floating architectonic shapes with cilia-like wisps emerging from them at random. This mixture of hard-edged abstract forms and vaguely organic softer ones was typical of Ito's style. Certainly, *Tabi Sox* is one of the most enigmatic paintings ever made about baseball.

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**Gladys Nilsson** (b. 1940, Chicago, Illinois)

*Terrible Twinery*, 1971

Watercolor on paper

Nilsson was among the six artists who banded together as the Hairy Who in 1966. By then, she was

on her way to developing two distinct but related pictorial styles, both of which are represented in this exhibition. In each case, Nilsson's art draws equally from the grotesqueries of political cartooning and the crowded picture-planes of Cubism. In her watercolors, of which *Terrible Twinery* is an excellent example, the softness of this medium contributes to a blurred busyness of the image. Shapes and colors oscillate between being representations of bodyparts and pure decoration.

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**Gladys Nilsson** (b. 1940, Chicago, Illinois)

*Wolf*, 1971

Oil on canvas

Nilsson is perhaps best known for her watercolors, but she was also a strong painter in acrylics, which lent her jam-packed compositions more solidity and strength. In *Wolf*, rock-solid squiggly lines hem in each figure tightly while flowing into and out of each other at seeming random. This near-paradox of composition gives the painting an uncanny puzzle-like quality: it appears to fit together just so. *Wolf's* painted wooden frame, too, recalls the playful approach to borders and boundaries present in this show's works by Hendren, Otton, Mahmoud, and Bodnar.

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**William Otton** (b. 1948, Paradise, California)

*Action Never Ceases in a Timeless Room*, 1973

Ink on paper

An Illinois native, Otton studied in the sixties in California under Hairy Who cofounder Jim Nutt. He returned to the midwest in 1970 to pursue his doctorate in the fine arts at ISU. Here, he was urged to move beyond his stiff realistic style by professors Harold Gregor and Ken Holder. They were well-pleased when Otton took his former teacher's Imagist cue, which Otton says allowed him to draw more directly from his unconscious. The drawings he made in this vein, such as *Action Never Ceases*, take delight in zany imagery, optical illusions, and the juxtaposition of rectilinear forms with crazily curving ones.

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**Ed Paschke** (b.1939, Chicago, Illinois; d. 2004, Chicago, Illinois)

*Klaus*, 1976

Lithograph

In looking at this lithograph, one could recall the patterns in many late-medieval Italian paintings which reciprocate between the figures' clothing and their gold-leaf backgrounds. Such elaborate systems of ornamentation — whether in Sienese illuminations or Imagist prints — serve to lock every area of a composition together into a tight field. In *Klaus*, the richness of these decorative elements is almost overwhelming: the subject's vest, lapels, undershirt, background, even his face are teeming with pattern.

**Seymour Rosofsky** (b. 1924, Chicago, Illinois; d. 1981, Chicago, Illinois)

*The Couple*, 1973

Lithograph

A generation older than most of the Imagists, Rosofsky first came to prominence as a member of the Monster Roster in the 1950s, though he made artwork continually till his death in 1981. In this lithograph from 1973, it is clear that the fuzzy harshness of his earlier “monstrous” style was grating against the flippant colors and hard lines of Imagism. The dreamlike imagery and domestic themes present in *The Couple* were common in Rosofsky’s art, especially in his late career.

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**Barbara Rossi** (b. 1940, Chicago, Illinois; d. 2023, Chicago, Illinois)

*Eye Deal*, 1973

Lithograph with Chine-Collé

This print’s compact arrangement of bulbous forms is typical of Rossi’s style. In fact, she reused the composition a year later for a painting on plexiglass. Though Rossi (who, after a short stint as a nun, graduated from the School of the Art Institute of Chicago in 1970) was among the more abstract Imagists, close observation of her pictures reveals that they are amalgamated from distorted organic shapes. In *Eye Deal*, fingers, toes, bellies, and butts unfurl out of the blob that hogs the entire page.

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**Joseph Yoakum** (b. 1891, Ash Grove, Missouri; d. 1972, Rock Island, Illinois)

*Mt. Humphrey’s Peak*, 1970

Colored pencil and ink on paper

Yoakum was untrained as an artist and only started making art at the age of 71, in the early 1960s. By the end of that decade, his fanciful landscape drawings — which he produced at a rate of around one per day — had made their way into the purview of the Imagists. These younger artists saw an affinity between their work and the zany colors, tight compositions, strong lines, and loose representationalism of Yoakum’s. Before his death in 1972, Yoakum was included in several exhibitions with his younger contemporaries. He had a spiritual impetus for artmaking, and claimed to have personally visited each of the hundreds of landscapes he drew.