

## Chicago

### The Look

April Kingsley

We all know what Chicago School or Chicago Style art looks like—comic-strip expressionism sprinkled with art brut, Pop, de Chirico, Magritte, and naive painting. Some critics account for its hard-edged hermeticism and zany inventiveness, geo-psychologically maintaining that it results from the psychic pressures of life on the edge of a landlocked waterbody in a city that is either too hot or too cold, and always too windy, but neither as culturally rich and intense as New York, nor as individualized and laid-back as L.A. But the artists who make “Chicago Style” art, and the dealers who promote it, think the School of the Art Institute of Chicago has been the more important factor, at least since the 1960’s.



April Kingsley, free-lance curator and widely published critic, lives and teaches in New York City.

Phyllis Kind and Alan Frumkin, who have long been the leading dealers of this art, maintain galleries in both Chicago and New York. Kind says that:

*Certain influences were more important for my ‘Ten Imagists’ (Roger Brown, Art Green, Philip Hanson, Gladys Nilsson, Jim Nutt, Ed Paschke, Christina Ramberg, Barbara Rossi, Karl Wirsum and Ray Yoshida) than any others, and those influences stemmed mainly from Whitney Halstead at the School of the Art Institute. He was an art historian who crossed chronological and stylistic lines in his courses, making his students think non-progressively. He would make them study work at the Field Museum, look at Medieval art, naive artists, and Japanese prints. He encouraged them to think visually. Turned on to Joseph Yoakum’s art by some of his students, he encouraged others to visit the studio of this eccentric and marvelous old painter. Whitney treated a naive artist’s naturally flat space with the same respect as Renaissance perspective.*

Kind also pointed out that Halstead showed his students Sepik River carvings, African sculpture and Australian aboriginal bark paintings. Even though his own collage work was done in a very soft, abstract style, he responded to some of the most raucous and discordant paintings by Karl Wirsum and Jim Nutt in the mid-’60s, and added them to his collection.

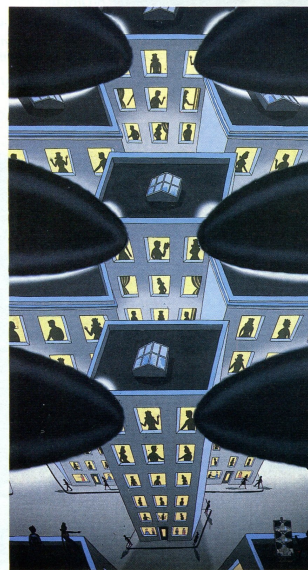
Ray Yoshida, who still teaches painting at the School, reinforced Halstead’s teaching “attitudinally.” Kind says, “He encouraged them to forget some of the things they’d already learned in art school and to think for themselves.” Yoshida coined the term “trash treasures” for the Deco pottery, old “art” photographs, standard home-decorating gimcracks, and other Maxwell Street flea-market “finds,” which most of these artists still collect. Kind, now in her seventh New York season, says her taste “crystallized” in Chicago during the late 1960s. When she started her gallery, she was looking for “something brand new, something that no one in the world had ever seen before,” and she found it in the work of the artists who were then coming out of the School of the Art Institute. Now many of those artists teach there and are among her “spies” on the lookout for new exceptional artists.



Left: Joseph Yoakum: Giant Rock in Angles Landing, c.1965, pencil, 12 by 18 inches. Collection Chris Ramberg and Phil Hanson. Joseph Yoakum, who died in 1976 at the age of 90, was a self-taught visionary artist who began drawing in 1962 because God directed him to do so in a dream. A black man, born on a Navajo reservation, he left home at the age of 15 to join the circus. Later, Yoakum went around the world as a stowaway hobo and seems never to have forgotten what some of the most exotic landscapes in China, South America, or the Near East felt like to walk upon. The land seems alive in his drawings; the rocks shiver, the waters pulsate, and the earth seems to throb. Linear patterns that look like formal transcriptions of the cellular structures of things are organized across the picture’s surface with the naive artist’s innate understanding of flatness, but somehow turn out to look like the finest and most sophisticated Chinese landscape paintings.

Below: Roger Brown: Painter of the Bird’s Eye View, 1980, oil on canvas, 72 by 40 inches. Courtesy Phyllis Kind Gallery.

Opposite page: Art Green: Black Ice, 1979, oil and mixed media on canvas, 93 by 44 1/2 inches. Courtesy Phyllis Kind Gallery.



The other major Chicago dealers also mine the same school although few concentrate on Chicago area artists, tending instead to lace them between imports from either coast. Nancy Lurie says that, “A lot of the artists I show went to the School of the Art Institute. They always produce intriguing artists, probably because they always demand that the individual finds himself. They don’t think of it as a school, though; they’ll just point to a particular professor who’s been important to them.” Lurie says that there is a considerable difference between the school and the artists it produces now and the way things were in the ‘60s: “There is a strong spirit of independence; the new artists don’t need reinforcement from each other.” Of course, that always happens with second generations; they move from the protection of wagon trains to the individual homestead.

Lurie doesn’t feel that the School’s new exhibition and studio facilities are as good as they had been, however: “It used to be so exciting to go over there and see the new talents emerge.” Despite the present viewing difficulties, she’s just as excited by the new artists she’s finding there—like Joel Hilton and Roxy Tramoto—as Phyllis Kind probably was in 1969. The work may seem very different, but they probably “owe some degree of the intensity of their feelings to the artist-teachers at the School of the Art Institute”<sup>1</sup> the way the first generation Chicago Imagists did—and do—according to Roger Brown.

<sup>1</sup> Roger Brown, “Rantings and Recollections,” in *Who Chicago?*, Sunderland Arts Centre, Ltd., 1980, p. 29.