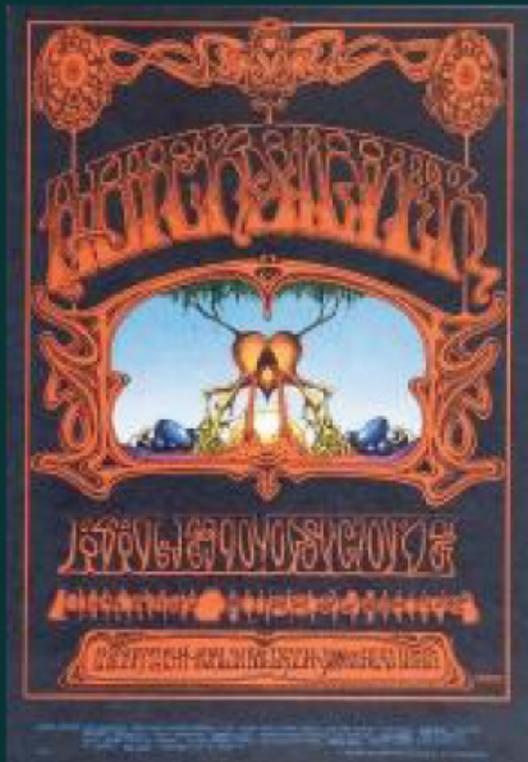


Rick Griffen's Super Graphics



by Walter Medeiros

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INTRODUCTION

This is not intended to be a finely produced book, but rather a readable document for those who are interested in in this series on concert poster artists and graphic design. Some of these articles still need work.

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RICK GRIFFIN'S SUPER GRAPHICS:

The Archive of Counterculture Art

by Walter Medeiros

Since Rick Griffin's death I've felt compelled to write something about him, to express my feelings, and my appreciation for the instruction and delight his art has provided me during the last twenty years. But where to begin? There is much to tell; I've been making notes about his art since 1971.

One day, while on the phone, I noticed I was busy with a favorite doodle. It begins with a circle. Then, with seven or eight parallel lines hatched along an edge, it pops into a sphere. Add a small circle near the opposite edge, and its becoming an eyeball. Often these multiply, forming a linear frieze, or a bubble-like cluster, as the charm of each transformation engages that idle part of the brain. This little homage to Rick's distinctive style involves the basics of a graphic technique that became a hallmark of Rick's art. To me, it also signifies Rick's transformation from a first-rate illustrator and poster designer to a bold, imaginative, innovative graphic artist.

In Rick's early posters forms are shaded with fine hatching lines, often cross-hatching, the traditional method of pen and ink illustration. These drawings are very competent. Forms are sufficiently three-dimensional, technique is in service to realism, and emphasis is entirely on the subject matter. Commendable work yet they remain illustrations, pictures of things, comparable to a photograph.

IMAGE

In the July, '67 "Independence" poster Rick's drawing took on a new crispness and solidity, like a metal plaque, and there is some simplification and unification of the hatching, especially in the frame (FD-69). This graphic development is carried further

in the "Good at Heart" drawing (FD-79, D1). A simplified parallel hatching is used for shading, primarily in the rounded forms. It effectively provides depth to the ornate frame, and to the spheres that lurk behind the large upper lettering. (There seems to be an emerging attraction to convex forms). With the "Sunday Comics" poster (FD-89) Rick made a transition into cartooning and symbolic imagery, and these motifs are prominent in the subsequent Jim Kveskin pair (FD-95 & D-14). Here the new shading technique lightly puffs out the cloud-lettering. Below, it is combined with color and form to create an incredible illusion of heavy liquid splashed into space. It makes me want to reach in and catch some of the drops.

IMAGES

In the January, 1968 "Quicksilver" poster the shading is more conventional, except for the sinuous decorative elements (FD-101). The light-hearted cartoon posters he did for Pinnacle in May use the parallel hatching with a darker, scribbled edge to pop out the work balloons, eggs, and other convex forms (Rick Griffin, Perigee Books, p. 36). In the black and white poster especially, its apparent how this stylized shading simplifies the forms, and also invites the eye to enjoy the patterns. The necessary shading is no longer "invisible", it has become a more significant part of each form, and of the whole drawing.

IMAGES

By August, in the precise "Bloom" drawing Rick had developed spherical shading into its final form (BG-133). At the sides, the skulls are hatched with long, parallel strokes. Defining the bright fore-surface is a wide black crescent with very short radical lines projecting into the bright area. Examined closely, this dark shadow is placed quiet forward, permitting the long hatching to have effect. This skull form is actually drawn like a pill or lozenge, with flat sided and rounded edges. Casually viewed, however, this delicate distortion creates the illusion of a

spherical form projected into exceptionally high relief, and it became a standard technique.

This is what Rick was obviously striving for: a fuller three-dimensionality, a heightened "presence" of the object and the image. And this was superbly achieved in the "Heart and Torch" poster, arguably one of the most solid, projective, sculptural forms ever rendered in pen and ink (BG -36). Color is artfully exploited in all these posters, of course. But the drawing provides the main punch, as can be seen in the original artwork (2.58, Art of Rock). With this technique similar concreteness could be cast into more complex forms, such as the beetle in BG-140, compared to its companion image in BF-141, his drawing technique launched Rick into full maturity as a graphic artist, as his subsequent posters, ZAP Comix drawings, etc., clearly indicate.

Considering the source, the motivation for this graphic breakthrough, I believe it generated from Rick's heightened, intensified vision, and perhaps from a heightened sense of "reality" as well. The Haight-Ashbury was a very stimulation, liberation environment, of course. And the artistic freedom and relatively gentle competitive spirit of the poster scene provided exceptional opportunity for creative development. But even more directly, there was the visual impact of hallucinogenics, and those deliciously glossy, globular forms of the liquid light shows- often all at once. Rick was a passionate soul, and intensely involved in the scene. With such inspiration he was bound to "kick out the jams, as he had already done, by early '68, with his imagery. Through his remarkable diligence and imagination, he found a way to transcend illustration and infuse his art with a unique, sometimes "super real" graphic power. And that was just the beginning.

We have lost an extraordinary artist. One who, through his art, engaged our affection. Requiescat In Pace.

[Note: This article originally appeared in Wes Wilson's publication "Off The Wall," and is used with permission of Wilson and the author. Copyright © Wes Wilson and Walter Medeiros]