

Picco's art is based on juxtaposing harmonious and discordant images and elements — often delineated in a cartoon-like style — with seemingly no steadfast "rules" aside from those regarding composition and technique. Within the riddle of his work he nonetheless reveals himself as a mischievous jokemeister and consummate craftsman.

Perhaps Freud was right. Those who indulge in the practice and appreciation of comic nonsense invoke a virtual reality that harkens the carefree, halcyon days of childhood wherein one was permitted to think the unthinkable thoughts without the compulsion to be logical. And what about the preposterous notion of wedding humour and fine art? Humorologist Donald Kuspit (Sight Out of Mind) offers this poignant comment:

[Humorous] art today exists to preserve the possibility of "another" interpretation of life — the possibility of a continuing view from the margin, as if not the correct one, then the correcting one, reminding us that that the totality of the truth about life, and art itself, is hardly in the possession of any supposed mainstream.

Nick Roukes
February, 2000

Biographies

Jim Picco was born in Calgary, Alberta in 1954 and in 1972 attended the University of Calgary Fine Arts program on an Imperial Oil Achievement Scholarship. In the summer of 1975, while on a Fine Arts Department travel grant to England, France and Spain, he confronted the modern masters first hand. After graduating in 1976, he returned to western Europe for a year of private study and work. Picco set up a studio in Toronto in 1978 and made regular trips to New York. He returned to Calgary in 1988 to continue his studio practice. In 1993, he spent six months in Barcelona and Madrid painting. Curiosity and family history led him to travel to Panni, Foggia Italy in 1994, where the texture, light and colour had a profound effect on his approach to painting — his surface becoming thicker and more tactile, and his colour more vibrant. In the summer of 1999, Picco returned to Panni, Italy to set up a studio and in January of 2000, he had his Italian

public debut with a solo show at the Palazetto Dell'Arte in Foggia.

Nicholas Roukes is Professor Emeritus of Art, University of Calgary, and author of *Humor in Art* (Davis Publications, 1998).

cover image: Jim Picco, *Two Star General on Orange and Purple Background*, oil on canvas, 152 x 114 cm, 1997

This is a Stride Gallery brochure written by Nicholas Roukes who has been chosen by the artist because of his particular interest in the project. These publications provide regular opportunities for diverse writers to publish work that furthers critical discourse about contemporary art.

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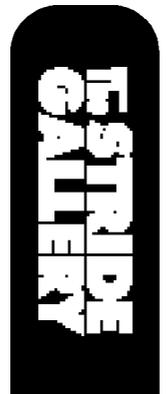
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Jim Picco

Pezzo Grosso

Our comic sense — like our linguistic capability, our habits of reflection, our emotionally complicated love life, and our preparation of food — seem to be one of those elementary characteristics of our species that define us as human.

— Robert M. Polhemus

Jim Picco Off the Easel and Over the Edge

About six months ago I remember saying to **Jim Picco**, "Jim, I'd be delighted to write a few words on the occasion of your exhibition at the **Stride Gallery**. But first, lets get together over coffee so I can here more about your work ethos."

"Good idea," says Jim, "But there's no time. I'm leaving for Italy next week."

"Okay, then let's go with plan B," I reply. "After you're comfortably situated in your new found village, take yourself to a nice coffee house, order a couple of double espressos, get a quiet table to sit and ruminate, then have an interview with yourself. Send me the notes."

Jim agrees, and almost six months later, true to his word, he sends me a memorandum — a dialog between Artist Picco and Critic Picco.

Excerpts: Jim Picco — A Short Interview With Myself Over Espresso: 11:34 AM, December 9, 1999, Panni, Italy

J: Jim, does the content of your work evolve subconsciously?

J: Yes, Jim, it definitely starts out that way. The act of moving ink and crayons and oil paint on paper and canvas, and the serendipitous little "accidents" and surprises that occur is my prime motivation. Along the way, many of the things I love or despise end up on the surface. I may then enhance a specific element or theme and stop when it feels right. In the end it's always about the drawing or painting as object.

J: Then the layering of images and notations isn't creating a specific narrative?

J: In the sense of telling one story — no. That's left open for interpretation because all those pictorial bits can be combined and read in so many different ways. Where the narrative gets specific is in my desire to pay homage to the kind of painting that grew out of the modernist movement, i.e., how painting, surface treatment, gesture and composition have evolved since C zanne.

J: How, for example, do the Two Star General paintings fit this ideal?

J: I've always had a great respect for the figurative tradition and for modernist painters like Dix, Bacon, Picasso, the German Expressionists, Giacometti and Kokoschka, and how their unique vision brought a freshness to that tradition. My love of swirling oil paint on surfaces, and the fact that it's greasy, fatty stuff, naturally suggest the figure be big and fat and fleshy. Why these figures? Perhaps it's because military generals recollect fond boyhood memories of playing "combat". I could have just as easily painted cowboys or hockey players. Anyway, it's about fantasy and role playing and that's something we all have the desire to do.

J: There's a humorous bent to a lot of your work, right?

J: Yes, and at times I inject the comic flip or flair into the work after it has had a chance to "cool off". But most of the time funny stuff just happens...people tell me I'm a funny guy.

Okay, Jim. Thanks for shedding some light on your modus operandi. By the way, what else was in the espressos?!!

JIM PICCO'S MODUS OPERANDI — i.e., his method of creating art by free association — is not unlike that of many subjectively-driven artists — with the exception that his creativity is also fuelled by a wacky sense of humour. The author, Henry Miller, wrote:

I obey only my own instincts and intuition. I know nothing in advance. Often I put down things which I do not understand myself, secure in the knowledge that later they will become clear and meaningful to me.

The artist, William Wiley, stated:

People always ask me what something means, but I don't really know what it means, and that's why it's interesting to me. It's a multitude of things; it's there as some sort of mysterious concept and that's one of its main functions — to remain undefined.

The unconscious mind, according to Freud, is a rolling sea of buried memories, primordial drives and unthinkable desires. When it surges over into the conscious mind the vivid images it produces can easily surpass the substance of everyday reality.

Visual humour — brought forth by subjective fantasy and conscious mind work — is a universe of many satellites. It embraces the arbiters of whimsy, wit, parody, satire and nonsense and reveals itself in many guises and forms, i.e., as a visual joke or pun, benign parody or lampoon; mild, dark or subversive satire, or off-the-wall nonsense and comic absurdity.

Jim Picco's comically surreal doodles are products of his subconscious thought that issues from beneath lavishly painted surfaces and skillfully crafted compositions. Seemingly bewitched by the spirit of comic free-association, he allows his capricious instincts to follow their own unpredictable pathways.

However, as Jim is quick to point out — aside from the zany images forthcoming from his imagination, which are often as surprising to him as to his viewers, and whatever meaning their incongruity might suggest — there is also the issue of the painting itself.

Indeed. As the eminent psychologist Silvano Arieti astutely points out in his book *Creativity — The Magic Synthesis*, art cannot be exclusively symbolic, i.e., it cannot stand for something totally not present. The work of art itself is present; it stands for itself as artistic reality. Its potential is also its power to elicit in us an aesthetic pleasure.

So, how can one begin to appreciate visual complexity and contradiction such as that found in Picco's creations? On the simplest level of non-sequiturs verbal (and visual) nonsense possesses an air of mystery and unexplored metaphoric potentiality, observes humorologist Maurice Charney. Why? Because the displaced logic teases the imagination to complete propositions that cannot logically be completed.

Absurdity in art is not absurdity, but an enrichment of reality, noted surrealist Andr Breton. The most beautiful experience we can have is the mysterious. It is a fundamental emotion that stands at the cradle of true art and science, observed Albert Einstein.