

eric firestone gallery

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First Look: Positively Marvillainous Summer Group Show at Eric Firestone Gallery, The Hamptons
by Jennifer Landes

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Long the summertime escape of well-heeled New Yorkers and a haven for artists including Jackson Pollock & Andy Warhol, The Hamptons has always been short on real art galleries until the pioneering Eric Firestone opened his namesake gallery with a roster of visionary artists and curatorial taste to match. His recent summer show, the suggestively titled Positively Marvillainous which opened over the July 4th weekend features an incredible lineup of like-minded artists including Kenny Scharf, Bäst, Ellen Berkenblit, Mike Bidlo, Rosson Crow, Chris Johanson, Ray Johnson, Sean Landers, Austin Lee, Dan McCarthy, Joyce Pensato, Dave Sayre, David Shrigley and Devin Troy Strother, all of whom share a predilection towards comic imagery coupled with a deviant vision.



Of course, all good theme shows are accompanied by a good manifesto and with a title like Positively Marvillainous, this exhibition is no exception:

“Expanding on tradition doesn’t necessarily demand the push towards perfection or a high polish. Rather, it can entail building on established conventions in a particular artist’s unique voice. Today, contemporary artists—knowingly or unknowingly—reference George Herriman’s historically overlooked, unpretentious and universally accessible fantasy, Krazy Kat a comic strip that ran in American newspapers from 1913 until 1944. The artists in Positively Marvillainous embrace tensions, arising from Herriman’s formal qualities in character portrayal, including those between line and shade, humor and drama, human and animal, collage and *décollage*, marvelous and villainous.

Since the cave paintings found in the Cave of El Castillo and Chauvet, the world’s two oldest cave art sites dating at least 40,800 and 30,000 years ago, the artist has relied on personified animals and hybrids to conceive the full range of human emotions. Frequent characters, such as the bull or dun horse, told stories to the audience better than spoken word. The universality of this imagery from these drawings attracted viewers for tens of thousands of years, never losing significance or translation.

Still, simple and sophisticated characters tell our stories better than a complicated plot. The epitome is the cartoon. Sprawling and suspended, flattened-pictorial space allows for collision of times, settings and character interactions, and nobody did it better than George Herriman who broke the strip with Krazy Kat. In an effortless depiction of the canonical love triangle, Herriman introduced us to Krazy Kat, a whimsical black cat, who is in love with Ignatz Mouse, who displays his rejection by throwing bricks at Krazy, and Offisa B. Pupp, the bulldog cop whose love of order is matched only by his love

for Krazy.

Just as Herriman's elementary nuances become identities, such as Pupp's empty star outline on his shirt collar that symbolizes his duty as a police officer, Herriman's language plays with stark opposites to mimic his generation's ethos. Herriman conflates "marvelous" and "villainous" and coins "Positivilly Marvillainous," which Krazy exclaims as he first uses electricity. With smart word play, Herriman alludes to the pervasive yin-yang dynamic of everything, transcending predictable funny papers.



Herriman's dichotomies affected countless modernists, such as: E.E. Cummings, who wrote the introduction to the very first collection of Krazy Kat strips; Willem de Kooning, who was a fan of Herriman's Southwest surreal landscapes; Walt Disney, who named Herriman as a pioneer of the cartoon business; H.L. Mencken; Gertrude Stein; T.S. Eliot; Jack Kerouac, who called Krazy Kat as the precursor of the Beat Generation, and; Woodrow Wilson. All publically acknowledged Herriman's influence in their own works and furthered the development of character aesthetics we see today.

Positivilly Marvillainous showcases artists who champion the character. Each artwork delineates the tradition of character development and demonstrates an acute understanding of human nuances and expressions. In turn, Positivilly Marvillainous delivers the next evolution of human iconography."