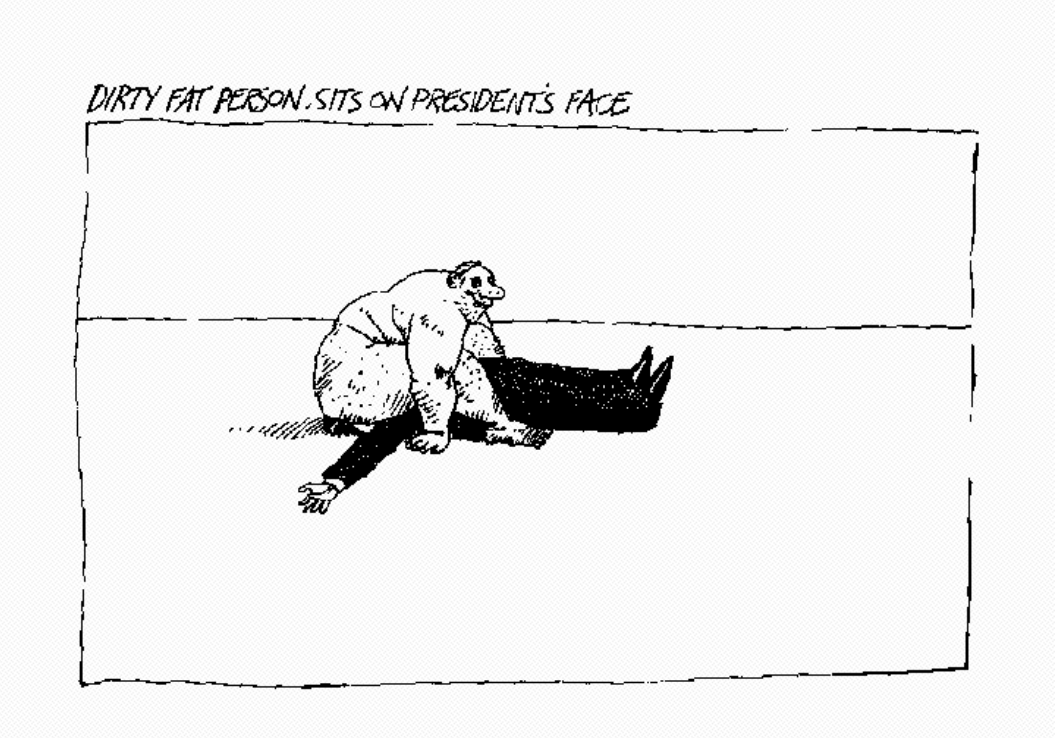

Deeper Meanings

Another Look at B. Kliban

When Bernard Kliban died twelve years ago, the first lines of all his obituaries mentioned his cat cartoons, as inevitably as Frank Zappa's mentioned "Valley Girl" and Peter Sellars's mentioned the Pink Panther and Bill Clinton's--even if he goes on to win the Nobel Peace Prize or marry Britney Spears or walk on Mars--will all mention Monica Lewinsky. One article credited Kliban with the now-common convention of using descriptive titles, rather than quotes, as captions. Writers were more tentative about his lasting influence, saying that it was difficult to gauge. Today he is still best remembered for his 1976 best-seller *Cat* and all its spin-off merchandise. In 1999 a coffee-table book of his previously unpublished, full-color cat paintings

was released. There was a Cat Calendar in 2000. A website for Kliban fans is dominated by collectors clamoring to buy or auction off cat T-shirts, mugs, calendars, stuffed toys, sheets, dishtowels, ties, throw pillows, cookie jars, golf tees, etc. Once in a while, some hopeful leaves a message saying that he's excited to find other Kliban fans, but personally he's always liked his non-cat stuff better.

It's true that *Cat* was a marketing phenomenon, preparing the way for cartoon cat behemoth Garfield in sort of the same way that Nietzsche inadvertently laid the ideological ground for Hitler. And Kliban did define that peculiar understated, deadpan tone and arch diction that's since been adopted by a generation of cartoonists ("Due to the convergence of forces beyond his comprehension, Salvatore Quanucci was squirted out of the universe like a watermelon seed, and never heard from again"). Today his influence is less difficult to gauge than it was when he died in 1990; Gary Larson's *The Far Side,* John Callahan's work, *The Neighborhood, The Quigmans, Bizarro,* and *Non Sequitur,* to name just a few, are all, to varying degrees, derivative of his work. You can look in any gag greeting card shop to see dozens of seventh- and eighth-rate imitation Klibans. He still remains better known among colleagues than fans, as Barry Hannah is among writers or Captain Beefheart among musicians--a cartoonist's cartoonist. But he's also one of the very few cartoonists whose work has insinuated itself into the broader underground culture. His drawings appeared before commercial breaks on *Fridays,* a short-lived imitation of *Saturday Night Live*. Rock bands like The Meat Puppets and Porn Flakes took their names from Kliban cartoons. He was known to a general readership with a taste for the offbeat and bizarre years before "underground" comics became as hip a commodity as "alternative" music or "indie" films.

But to acknowledge Kliban's merchandising success, note his technical innovations, or trace his influence is to list points of trivia--like crediting Frank Zappa with writing a few novelty hits, pioneering the use of the xylophone in rock, or influencing songwriters like Warren Zevon rather than with orchestrating the talents of virtuoso musicians and combining classical avant-garde and popular musical traditions to create some of the most distinctive and brilliant music of his century. In other words, *forget about the freaking cats already*. B. Kliban was one of the funniest, most erudite and artful cartoonists of our time--far better than most of his more celebrated contemporaries--and one of the few Americans to use illustration as an instrument of psychological vivisection and a weapon of social protest in the manner of the European artists Roland Topor, Ronald Searle, and Ralph Steadman.

The reasons for Kliban's relative obscurity are unclear. There may exist a certain prejudice against single-panel cartoons among artists and critics in the field (evident in the dismissive label "gag" cartoons), not unlike like the mainstream perception of comics as less legitimate, less "serious," than fine art. Maybe it's just for the same reason that unpopular kids in high school, like the Dungeons & Dragons and Chess Club geeks, have to ostracize the *really* unpopular kids, the ones with speech impediments or parents in jail or scabies. It's true that the one-panel cartoon is a less innovative artistic form than the hybrid medium "sequential art," but it is also a purer one, less awkward in its conventions, descended directly from the visual traditions of pre-modern Western painting; it is a single, unified image in which meaning is conveyed not through a sequence of events but through a tableau in which every detail is essential and a whole situation is implicit, eliminating what Francis Bacon called "the boredom of narrative." It is capable of far

greater economy and immediacy of impact than the panel strip, comic book, or graphic novel--the equivalent of the aphorism as opposed to the essay, or the shot rather than the pitcher.

Some of Kliban's drawings hover on the border between cartoon and portrait, as pitiless and sad as Diane Arbus photos: look at "Malcolm's Interview," (an earnest applicant with a lumpy, misshapen head and heartbreaking flowered tie struggling through a doomed interview with a bland-faced personnel manager), "Another Boy for Jesus" (a withered old evangelist with a bolo tie and a sequined cross on each lapel, his arm outstretched in a gesture of misplaced confidence around the shoulders of a sullen, pimply recidivist wearing a T-shirt stenciled with the message "JESUS IS THE ANSWER"), or "The Victim's Family" (a darkly cross-hatched rendering of a baleful, deprived-looking group who seem, somehow, hilariously *deserving* of whatever unspeakable tragedy has befallen them). They're so painfully real they're almost not funny--but not quite. Often the real punchlines in his cartoons are in the "incidental" details, like the boy mechanically whapping a dead donkey with a stick in the background of "Espanish por Turistas," the two sneering girls with beehive hairdos and feline tails walking by in "God Made Monroe Simmons Wear a Lime Popsicle Around his Neck for Most of His Adult Life," or the inexplicable duck flippers on the bureaucrat in "Your Government in Action."

Kliban may have gone unacknowledged as a social critic for so long because his cartoons are seldom pedantic or obvious in their statements--they are never, for example, just illustrated rants, confessions, or autobiographical anecdotes in the manner of R. Crumb and his imitators. (Kliban's drawing "Autobiographical Material" is a parody of confessional comics, including memories like "Not born in the Balkans" and "President Roosevelt died because I got a haircut.") Of course Crumb's opinions are usually so outrageous, and his confessions so uncensored, that

they're well worth reading, but his technique is still, compared to Kliban's, heavy-handed and crude--he's just standing there in self-portrait or by proxy, telling you what he thinks. Kliban's cartoons are far more allusive and insidious, fraught with implication, assuming certain exformation in their audience and demanding some interpretive effort--they are, in other words, more *artful*. And, for that reason, they're funnier.

"Explain strange humor, please."

-Japanese journalist to Kliban,
quoted in *Advanced Cartooning*

Like the comedy of, say, Monty Python, Dick Shawn, or Andy Kaufman, Kliban's cartoons create their own idiosyncratic genre of humor, and it is an acquired taste. Many of them aren't exactly "funny" in the sense that Americans have come to expect--humor as a kind of gratification, punchlines that keep coming like potato chips. ("Americans demand an explanation with their humor," Kliban griped.[1]) You may "get" them--that is, they provoke an associative epiphany--but the effect is not always amusement but often deepened confusion or disquiet--the sort of effect we've come to associate with contemporary high art rather than with comics. *The Far Side*, by contrast, *is* consistently funny, with an average laugh-out-loud rate right around an impressive 25-30%, but Larson's gags are usually just that--disposable gags to laugh at, peel off your 365-day calendar, and toss out. A vampire in baggage claim dismayed to see his coffin

carelessly bashed full of holes, is, admittedly, hilarious, but in the end it's just a cartoon about vampires. For Kliban, a vampire is never *just* a vampire. His cartoon of a vampire rising from his coffin at dusk yawning, "Another day, another suck," has something sinister and subversive to say about our own routine motivation for getting up and going to work every day.

When I first read Kliban's books, in early adolescence, I didn't "get" a lot of his cartoons; they depended too much on common assumptions and a background of experience that I didn't yet have. To quote Kliban: "Cartoons are distilled products; you take a whole set of factors and squeeze one drop of essence out of it."[2] Over the years I got more and more of them as I grew up and learned some things about the world--some of them just cultural trivia, like who Noel Coward was, some of them profounder, like the insights that almost everyone is an idiot and that life is short. No doubt there are some I have yet to get.

"What can you say to explain a cartoon of a man sitting in a jail cell with the sun shining through the bars, staring at the shadow on the wall, but the shadow has no bars? Or what about a waiter approaching a customer in a restaurant and saying 'Eggplant Parmesan? I thought you wanted some Toyota headlights,'--except that it's funny?" Thus Don Novello (whose known aliases include Father Guido Sarducci of *Saturday Night Live* and Lazlo Toth, patriot), in his introduction to *Advanced Cartooning*, shrugs off Kliban's humor as so much surreal non-sequitur, impervious to interpretive scrutiny. Father Guido is, of course, right in suggesting that Kliban's humor doesn't work rationally--but it does work, and it works *because* it is not rational.

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[1] Ibid.

[2] Ibid.

Kliban's cartoons have often been called "surreal"--and he liked to think of himself as a surrealist who happened to draw cartoons--but too often people use this word to refer to anything weird that they don't quite get. Surrealism is not random strangeness for its own sake; at its most effective, it makes explicit images that have lain unexamined in the unconscious, exposing an underlying logic that belies the false logics of daylight, the official truths of the superego, press secretaries, and TV. "I've done stuff I thought was ridiculous and other people thought was ridiculous but if I really reflect on it, then it relates somehow to a real situation," Kliban said. "I think it's transformed by the same thing that changes dreams: a censor, a filter, or a scrambler."[3] Kliban's cartoons are visual literalizations of metaphors. The two cartoons Don Novello cites as examples of analysis-defying humor *do* mean something--and they're not just about stir-crazy jailbirds or snooty French waiters who bring you the wrong order. These gags are synechdocic of larger issues--of what Kliban called, with a mock-solemn wink, "Deeper Meanings." They tell us that our perceived imprisonment is in our own heads, and that someone is trying to foist something off on us that no one in their right minds would swallow, while insisting that it's just what we asked for.

Drawings like these show us what would only sound obvious, trite, pretentious, or naïve if put into words--the sorts of protests that are excluded from "responsible" debate--in images so plain and ruthless that they're irrefutable. "I'd like to discuss slavery with you," says a cowboy, holding a gun to the head of a black man who's carrying him piggyback, "but it's a complex issue." Words are meaningless, things used by politicians, lawyers, and preachers to obfuscate the truth and justify their crimes; the image cuts through the "complex" bullshit, and shows the simple

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truth. (There was, let's not forget, a "responsible debate" over the issue of slavery among respectable people in this country for hundreds of years. How many contemporary issues are considered “too complex” for ordinary citizens, non-experts, to understand?)

This idea connects to a group of Kliban's cartoons that are all about exposing the cruelty behind the corporate-flak hypocrisy of our culture. There's one of a condemned man kneeling with his head on the chopping block, grinning broadly at the viewer. The crowd below is also grinning, as is the executioner standing at the ready holding his axe--its blade in the shape of a grin. (Another variation on this same theme shows a woman about to be burned at the stake; she, her executioner, the officiating bishop, and the crowd are all grinning out at us with the bright identical expressions of models in commercials. It's only when we read the caption--"Lights Every Time!"--that we notice the hooded executioner displaying a trusty, unflickering lighter. It's the execution as ad, decades before Benneton started using the faces of condemned men to sell brand-name clothes to teenagers.) The grin also has a deadly edge in the drawing of a man slumped dead at his desk, stabbed in the small of the back with a smile. Another shows a torturer wielding a cat-o'-nine-tails and his victim chained to a wall, both of them wearing round 'Seventies smiley-face masks. (Compare this to the cartoon of a sour-faced old man on an assembly line, rubber-stamping smiley faces on bombs--American foreign policy in a nutshell.) These drawings are all about the lying smile society wears to hide its true face**:** the fixed, unfailing rictus of propaganda, spin, P.R., and what David Foster Wallace calls the “professional smile" of service personnel. They also--with a humor so black as to be almost invisible--give lie to the hope that humor can be any kind of real escape from, or defense against, the daily atrocities inflicted on us.

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[3] Jacobs, 54.

Once they're understood as more than just absurdities, these cartoons can be seen clearly as the work of an angry man. That Kliban's work does not at first strike us as angry, just as funny, is a tribute to his skill and restraint--again, to his artfulness. The sublimation of rage into laughter is one of the rarest and most precious miracles comedic art can perform. Of course, angry isn't the same as mean; Kliban is described by those who knew him as gruff but kind, helpful to beginning cartoonists, sending drawings to children who'd written him fan mail. And there is, after all, much in this world for a decent man to be angry about. "Look around, read the newspapers," as Kliban said. "You don't have to stretch out too much to see a little darkness out there."[4] The objects of Kliban's scorn and loathing were wide-ranging, including politics, militarism, capitalism, the work ethic, consumerism, TV, ignorance, intellectual pretension, the pomposity and mercenary nature of art, and, finally, even humor itself.

His overtly political cartoons never caricature specific political figures (with the exception of "The Nixon Monument," an apparently bottomless hole in the ground) or illustrate positions on current affairs; to single out individuals or issues would cheapen his anger and dilute his blanket contempt for the entire institution. In "Name Your Poison," the reader may insert any one of the figures bearing Tab "A"-- a general, an African prime minister, an Ayatollah, a western president, a military dictator, each of them saluting, sieg-heiling, or giving the double V for

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[4] MacDonald, Heidi. Interview with B. Kliban. *Splat!* #3, August 1987.
Both the Jacobs book and this magazine, by the way, were made available to me by Sam ("*The Magic Whistle*") Henderson, whose archive of comic books, graphic novels, cartoon collections, anthologies, books on comics, mini-comics, and 'zines is an invaluable resource, the Vatican Library of the comics world. You name it--a collection of Kliban's *Playboy* cartoons, Jack Kirby's insane short-lived series based on *2001: A Space Odyssey,* Frederic Wertham's *Seduction of the Innocent*--Sam not only owns it but has it mentally filed and catalogued and can locate it among his piles of boxes of stuff inside of twenty seconds.

victory--into slot "B," cut into the back of a prone and naked civilian's corpse. The uniforms and salutes are incidental differences; the leaders are interchangable, and the foundation their power stands on is always the same. Another take on militarism reads like a Zen parable: a preposterous mustachioed fighting man in a fez and jodhpurs, brandishing a pistol and scimitar, charges furiously out of the trenches at a mirror, like a pigeon attacking its reflection. This is essentially the same cartoon as the one that shows two identical squads of soldiers lined up a few paces apart aiming their rifles at each other--mirror images of each other--waiting for the order to fire from a single commanding officer. "War is Hell," whispers one of them to his neighbor. "Pass it on." Again, the target (both in and of the cartoon) is neither Us nor Them; there *is* no Us or Them here. They're all victims under the same insane command. And, again, the token resistance ("Pass it on,") is pretty obviously futile; at the next moment the sword will drop.

Some of his jibes at politics are obvious and silly, like the poem: "The vegetable in general/ Does little to admire./ It often enters politics,/ But seldom rises higher." But some show us that *politics* is obvious and silly; has there really been any more lucid summation of the precarious mechanism of political power (or as sly a nudge toward revolt) than, "I'm the king and you have to do what I say or else I can't be king anymore"? Both "Your Government in Action," and "One Theory of Government" show the government's only function as taking food away from hapless characters--one a sullen, swarthy, oppressed-looking type with a pie, the other a cat with a sandwich. And, finally, I would submit that there has been no more richly satisfying image in all of cartoon history, nor any purer distillation of comedy, than "Dirty Fat Person Sits on President's Face."

Kliban also gives businessmen the cartoon ass-in-the-face--literally, in "Business on Parade," in which men in suits and hats crawl along on all fours, each with his face buried in the rump of the one before him--a daisy chain of brown-nosers, dominance and submission in an endless line. This cartoon, "The Birth of Advertising," and "What's Good for Business is Good for America" are all Groszian caricatures of businessmen as inhuman, either bestial or mechanical, emerging from horse's asses, spewing pollution. But none of them is as elegantly damning as the drawing simply titled "Industrialist," showing us a bald old man, eyeless behind glinting spectacles, holding up with his gnarled, feeble, liver-spotted claws a fresh, healthy, disembodied human hand, and gnawing greedily on it. Before him is a whole plate piled with them.

But the men at the top of the economic food chain aren't Kliban's only targets. Another recurring figure in Kliban's cartoons is someone with a preposterous and obviously useless menial job: "It's a deal then. You'll make three dollars every time you think of a chicken, and a dollar extra if it's a brown one!" A woman vacuums an apartment infested with owls that seem to be emerging through the walls and floor from another dimension. "It was a good job except for the owls," says the caption. "Ramona never liked the owls." Another man works on an assembly line as a "cracker salter." Or consider this anecdote from "A Little Family History": "When my grandmother came to this country, the only job she could get was strapping toothbrushes on fish. She often wondered what she was doing, but never dared to ask, as jobs were hard to come by." It's not obvious that being an "executive assistant," "marketing manager," or "content strategist" is really any more useful than thinking of chickens, vacuuming owls, or strapping toothbrushes to fish, but, as Kliban's grandmother knew, it pays the rent, and better not to ask too many questions. (Remember that "prisoner" looking up at the shadow on the wall? How often do

people complain about "being stuck" in a stupid job? The bars, Kliban suggests, are only in our minds.)

The whole notion of "useful" work is ridiculed in one of his most concise and eloquent cartoons, "Wasted and Useful Lives." This is a split panel: on the left, a bearded guy dozes happily in the sun on a desert island, a bottle at his side; on the right, a man in a suit at his desk scowls over paperwork, his pencil poised to make a correction, underneath a wall clock. The reaction this one provokes is not just laughter but something more like applause. In Puritan-ethic, eighty-hour work-week America, "Wasted and Useful Lives" is still a subversive statement, perhaps the closest thing we have to a heresy anymore. Kliban himself, a self-described "beatnik" who managed to succeed way beyond any realistic expectations in a capitalist economy just by doing "humorous drawings," epitomized the dubious achievement of triumphing within the system by dropping out and making fun of it. He even ended up in Hawaii, an island paradise. Kliban revisited that cartoon beach in a later drawing, except now the guy seems to have attained some "success" himself; he's got a bare-breasted island maiden on his arm and a receptionist at a desk who answers a call, "I'm sorry, he's wasting his life right now, and can't come to the phone."

The man who made his fortune with cat merchandise once drew a cartoon titled "Merchandising" that shows a rabbit producing pellets with "Raisins - 5 cents" written on its coat. Not much interpretive work for the critic to do here; it's the commodity as crap. The equation is made just as explicit in "Bear Shits Neckties!" It's a little (but not much) more oblique in "Eaters of Dung," which shows a family, naked and in primate postures, their knuckles dragging the ground, staring at the TV, with their possessions piled behind them--a few clothes

thrown over the rocks, a toaster lying on the ground.[5] This is not just some quaint cartoon people like Kliban's "Bean Tribe," "Tree Dwellers," or "Soap Suckers"--*we're* the Eaters of Dung. The same metaphor, mixing materialism and scatology, is reworked in the drawing of a man, naked except for shoes and argyle socks, lifting a leg to "mark" his pile of possessions.

Kliban is no less critical of the indiscriminate appetites of consumers than he is of the hateful old businessmen who feed on them. (After all, they couldn't charge a nickel for rabbit turds if someone weren't willing to pay it.) An emaciated couple on a couch contentedly watch an open refrigerator full of food as though it were a television set. (Why do *we* spend whole evenings watching that other appliance? What is it that we're starving for? And why are we wasting away while gazing at plenty?) Compare this to the drawing of a man without a mouth sitting down to "A nice dish of lips." In these cartoons the metaphor of "consumption" is made literal, exposing its essential hopelessness, the lie that it's ever going to gratify the cravings it exacerbates. Unless we keep this level of meaning in mind, the drawing of a man eating "Razor-Sharp Peach Slices" looks like no more than a funny (if excruciating) visual conceit--after all, who would ever buy something so clearly unfit for consumption? ("I thought you ordered the Toyota headlights.") Understood in this light, what is so horrifying about the drawing is not the glinting edge of the peaches, or even the blood streaming down the man's chin, but the blithe, affectless expression on his face. He doesn't even seem to feel what's killing him.

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[5] The innocuous and helpful toaster, by the way, is Kliban's visual shorthand for all the crap consumers feel they have to buy, and on which the eternally expanding American economy depends. In "The New World," Columbus plants his flag and smiles in satisfaction, surveying a beach littered with toasters. In "An American Tragedy," a man flops back dead in his chair at the breakfast table, with two pieces of toast, evidently ejected from a defective toaster at a velocity incompatible with consumer safety, embedded in his forehead--a man slain by his own shit.

Another drawing shows a guy sitting and eating his dinner and staring vaguely at his own home entertainment system--a human skull on a stick. (What--haven't you ever sat munching out and half-watching the spectacle of someone else's death?) A middle-aged man, with products like "Sloth," "Ennui," and an "Adult Don't-Do-It Kit," piled in his living room, slumps in his easy chair watching a box labeled "Tepid Boredom." This group of cartoons is brought to a grim close by two *mementi mori*, one in which that same middle-aged man, now comfortably accoutered with "E-Z Comfort," "Mild Lust," "Wow Laughs," "Moderate Wealth," and "Dilute Truth and Mixed Justice" answers his front door only to be handed a box marked "Old Age." The other shows a woman looking down at a corpse like a pile of rotten apples spilled into an armchair (the remote still loosely clutched in its hand), and explaining to her friend, "He was just watching television, and suddenly went all rotten." He's like the patient in Poe's "The Facts in the Case of M. Valdemar" who, on being awakened from the hypnotic trance that's kept him barely alive but comatose, instantaneously rots into "a nearly liquid mass of loathsome—of detestable putrescence."

It's this awareness of our mortality, I think, that makes Kliban so intolerant and scornful of the way we squander our precious hours and years working, buying crap, and watching TV--which are, maybe not coincidentally, the three main things American consumers are encouraged (or, increasingly, allowed) to do. He drew a series of wry reflections on the existential bummers of age, decay, and death. "No Loitering," shows an Ages-of-Man procession from infancy to decrepitude, from one dark doorway to another, marked ARRIVALS and DEPARTURES, respectively, through a huge bare room with the title sign posted on the wall. (It was reproduced in the *Comics Journal* with his obituary.) "Before" and "After" contrasts a plump clueless infant

with a hunched and shriveled old man; what unspeakable trauma has so cruelly transformed him is only implied in the space between panels. "That Old Devil, Time," is a huckster clown who coaxes beautiful young girls to leap through a hoop that turns them, to their dismay, into thick-trunked, wrinkled, sagging old women. "Howard and Sylvia were dealt with quickly and brutally by time" shows us a desiccated couple in Kmart liesure wear walking down a crud-littered sidewalk, as godawful an example of *Homo Americanus* as any of Duane Hanson's superrealistic sculptures. One drawing from his last, posthumously published book, *Advanced Cartooning*, looks suspiciously like a self-portrait. "They don't make mirrors like they used to," it says over a picture of a stubbly, sleepy-eyed guy staring dully into his medicine cabinet mirror, toothpaste curling limply out of the tube in his hand. The caption is finished underneath the drawing: "either." Clearly B. Kliban was a guy who spent a lot of time staring at that skull on a stick.

It was this urgency, too, rather than simple snobbery, that made him so impatient with the numb vulgarity with which so many of us sleepwalk through our time on this earth. This is nowhere more obvious than in "Ungainly Persons, Lumping Through Life," in which oblivious crowds shamble past a theater showing "REALITY." Other, similar scenes: a guy picking his nose staring at a massive steel fortress-like door whose sign reads "REALITY," a bunch of people loitering and looking lost outside the "ILLITERATES' ENTRANCE," a teen sticking his heavy-lidded, slack-jawed face through a door labeled "PERCEPTION." Or the man looking contentedly at a gift box containing "1 Mind" while his wife asks him impatiently, "Aren't you going to open it?" (An equally unsubtle variation: the guy saying "Hey! They're giving away free brains today," to his friend, who says, "Oh, yeah? Maybe I'll go over later." Yeah, maybe.) The drawing "Fool Traits" shows us examples of "Partial Awareness," "Ineptitude," "Flawed

Existence," "Lame Rationalization," and "Semi Consciousness." Again and again he tells us, *wake up, look around, see what's right in front of you.* (He's like the exasperated labcoated scientist with a stopwatch screaming, "Think, damn you, think!" at a monkey who looks ready to weep with frustration before a simple peg-and-hole puzzle.) The masterpiece of this thematic series, mocking both the dumb gullibility of crowds and the corporate contempt to which they eagerly line up to subject themselves, is "The Only Show in Town." This depicts a line stretching around the block for the feature, advertised in huge letters towering over the theater: "GO FUCK YOURSELF."

At this point the thoughtful reader may be wondering whether all this smug anti-consumerism doesn't seem a little elitist and hypocritical coming from the guy who single-handedly created the commercial frenzy for cat crap (and, indirectly and to his horror, the ensuing backlash frenzy for *anti*-cat crap--*101 Uses for a Dead Cat,* etc.) of the late Seventies and early Eighties, then cashed out, moved to Hawaii, and spent the rest of his days cranking out cat calendars and T-shirts. You could argue that Kliban, not unlike his "Industrialist," is biting the hand that feeds him. But these cartoons can be read as rueful confessions (or acts of atonement, like self-flagellation) as well as condemnations. Kliban was ambivalent about the fame his cat cartoons had brought him. "I'm doing the cat calendars strictly for the bucks," he confessed. "...but it's pretty agonizing."[6] He drew a group of bitter allegories about art's sordid liaisons with commerce. In "The Critic," a man with elbow patches and a pipe excitedly lowers his pants, his tiny erection at the ready, while an Olympian-sized old whore on all fours smokes a cigarette and tiredly offers up her gigantic rear, across which is stenciled the word ART. (It's hard to imagine,

if only for the obvious anatomical reasons, that she'll get as much out of it as he will.) Again and again in Kliban's work Art is represented by the figure of a prostitute: a bored model waits with her arm crossed, dressed only in stockings and high-heeled boots, while a Lautrecian artist holds up a thumb to gauge the proportions of her crotch; in "Art and Business," a pasty nebbish in a suit cannot believe his apparent good fortune as the classical-featured beauty standing before him, her eyes lowered and skirt pooled around her ankles, resignedly unhooks her brassiere. Kliban's relationship with his own muse seems to have been an uneasy one. He once depicted himself, in a drawing titled "B. Kliban," as a hairy buffalo glowering at a passing butterfly--a burly, unkempt thing suspicious and wary of beauty.

He was suspicious of the uses and value not only of art but of humor itself. In "Humor of the World," he included one of his own cartoon cats, holding a cartoon bomb, among all the broadest and crudest conventions of American comedy, along with a leering teenager in a "FUCK YOU" T-shirt heaving a gigantic pie at a cringing middle-aged straight man. His own work is not exempt from the whole commodity-as-shit equation; "Satire" shows a man gleefully standing with his pants dropped by a pile of excrement in the unkind likeness of a businessman, who looks on with a little teardrop in his eye. The cynical implication is not just that satire is a base and dirty business, but that the whole pretense of resistance through satire--the Romantic notion of art as "an instrument of psychological vivisection and a weapon of social protest" --is pompous and laughable. He's mocking the idea that the wealthy and powerful could shed a tear--could possibly give a shit--about what some cartoonist has to say about them.

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[6] Jacobs, 54-55.

His ambivalence about his career as a humorist is clearest in his caveman cartoons, which are always a convention for showing human beings at their most basic, without civilization's smiley-face mask. Two of these are specifically about caveman comedians. ("The caveman with the growl on his face, that's him," his friend Victor Moscoso said.[7]) In one of these, a Paleolithic stand-up pounds himself in the head with rocks to the appreciative laughter of his audience. Another (presumably later, post-lingual) comic wins over a crowd with this bit: "Ogg see Nur. Ogg hit Nur with rock. Nur fall down! Nur say why you hit me with rock? Ogg say why not? Hit Nur with rock again. Hit! Hit! Hit! Hit! Nur dead! Ha ha ha ha ha ha! Where you folks from?" That last clichéd bit of stage patter is the real punchline, suggesting that nothing else in the schtick has changed in the last three million years, either. All these are variations on a cynical theme: brutality as the most perennially popular form of comedy. ("Humor of the '80's" shows one country nuking another, saying, "Ha ha!" Just a higher-tech version of the rock-on-the-head gag.) The image on the back cover of his last published collection, *Advanced Cartooning*, is one of his funniest and most poignantly pessimistic. It's a "Two kinds of people in the world" tableau: one caveman sits on a rock at the beach, transfixed by the colors of the sunset, while behind him, another caveman raises a rock in both hands, poised to bash in his brains. "We're loony, we're a wacko species," Kliban once mused. "I don't know if we're going to survive, we're so goddamn crazy. We hate each other."[8]

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[7] "'Cat Cartoonist' B. Kliban Dies." *The Comics Journal*, #138, October 1990. p. 10.

[8] MacDonald, 22.

"I know we're stupid, but is that any reason to give up on your novel?"

-One turkey to another

in *Advanced Cartooning*

The characterization of any of his drawings as "poignant" probably would have annoyed or embarrassed B. Kliban. ("A Poignant Device" shows a couple weeping at the sight of an absurd little assemblage of a propeller, a cut-out bird on a spring, and a jar of office supplies juxtaposed on a pedestal.) Explicating cartoons, “explain[ing] strange humor,” is exactly the sort of redundant academic exercise he mocked in "Proving the Existence of Fish.” "I'm a big devotee of the balloon theory of humor," he said, "which is that balloons are great but when you cut them open to see how they work, you haven't got much left." (See his cartoon "Inside the Modern Balloon" for further elaboration of this theory.) You can see in his cartoons the subtlety and wit of a keen intelligence, but he was no goddamn *intellectual* : his drawing "Intellectual," shows a goateed man on all fours, wearing a thinking cap plugged directly into his own anus. (On the bookshelf behind him we can read the titles:"Intellect & Mind," "Problems Intellectual," God & Intellect," "Intellectualisme," "Intellecto," and "Das Intellekt.") Whenever he drew anything that might be perceived as too overtly metaphorical, as Making a Statement--for example, a man sitting in meditation with the fiercely burning flame of his mind keeping a circle of wolves at bay in the surrounding darkness--he would give it the mock-pretentious title "Deeper Meanings," as a little preëmptive irony to show that he wasn't taking himself too seriously.

And, admittedly, some of Kliban's best cartoons are not as didactic as the ones I've discussed here. Some are deliberately inexplicable, almost automatic drawings, like "The Turk," a

series that Kliban describes as having "emerged of their own free will over a two week period, and then stopped, for some other reason." Some are surrealist visual transformations, like "Clouds Turning Into Iron and Falling on Everything" or "Genitals of the Universe." He had a sometimes regrettable fondness for puns, rhymes, and worplay, like "More Than Coincidence?: A Cumbersome Apparatus/ Some Cucumbers and Asparagus," "Wombat, Tomcat, Kumquat, Tophat, Porkbutt, Slipknot, Coldcut, Tidbit," or his lessons in "Inglese" ("fent/fence, carp/carpathian, rock/Rockette")--dadaist games that simultaneously mock and revel in the irrationality of language. ("I don't feel that words are our friends," he explained. "They mislead us a lot. So I like to torture them."[9]) And he understood that some things are inherently, inexhaustibly funny, and used them again and again: toasters, chickens, Eskimos, meat, the word "wiggly," pie, and the truncated storefront sign, "HARDW." Much as I endorse the political sentiment expressed in his drawing in *Advanced Cartooning* of the American flag with "ANYTHING FOR MONEY" and "THIS SPACE FOR RENT" emblazoned across its stripes, I have to admit it doesn't crack me up like the one on the facing page--"Evil Black Spaghetti."

But, for Kliban, that sort of pure silliness was subversive, too. It's not just the juxtaposition of the "Dirty Fat Man," the hideous embodiment of filth and anality, with the squeaky-clean, officially revered "President" that makes that cartoon so beautiful--it is, more precisely, the sheer obviousness and vulgarity of the juxtaposition; this is *the worst possible thing*. "Dirty Fat Man Sits on President's Face" is so cathartically funny *because* it is so dumb--so gross and infantile and so gorgeously *unfair*. Cartooning is childish and craven and unfair, like throwing dirt clods at cars and running away. This is what makes it so much fun. After all, to

play "fair" is to play the rigged game of "responsible debate," to walk into rhetorical traps and make inevitable concessions to the enemy. The cartoonist's guerrilla advantage is that he ignores the rules of engagement and hurls his bombs (or dung) from outside the bounds of acceptable discourse. When their most convincing arguments are ignored and their best efforts frustrated, some revolutionaries reach for their guns; Kliban picked up his pen. That big filthy ass planted squat in the face of politics and business, shit molded into satire--these are the weapons of Kliban's rebellion, his own cement pie. Kliban's cartoons are not reasoned arguments about campaign finance reform or the WTO or the exploitation of third-world workers or the alienation of labor, arguments that can always be refuted by slick rhetoricians-for-hire; they're saying things much less articulate and defensible, things that come from the gut rather than the brain--things like, "Politicians are murderers," "Business is inhuman," "Stop eating *shit*," and "You are wasting your life." Things that are true, true, true.

And just look at the expression on the dirty fat man's face--it's one of vague, loutish pleasure. He's *smiling*--probably relishing the sensation of the President's face writhing in outrage and revulsion on his splayed, unwiped perineum! He's *enjoying* it! So is that irresponsible man "wasting" his life on that desert island. And so, I suspect, did B. Kliban. This is his alternative to the stifling, repressive seriousness that they try to tell us is the "real" world. His humor, from his most abstruse to his most unabashedly dumb, is his antidote to the bland, hateful authority and conformity it mocks, and the opposite of the cruel comedy that it exposes for what it is--sadism as stand-up, the smile as murder weapon. It's pure play, an unsullied joy.[10] It's angry, yes, but

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[9] Jacobs, 55.

the hostility is expressed as exuberant humor, the rage become laughter. Nonsense *is* his argument, a refutation of the kind of "sense" that tries to justify the world we live in. As the poem from *Whack Your Porcupine* goes: "Piggly/ Wiggly/ Birdbath/ Pie/ Cat hips/ Fish lips/ Poke you in the eye!"

This sort of defiant absurdity is very much in the tradition of Dada and Surrealism, which were conceived at a time when good old Reason seemed not to be working out so well. Now, almost a century later, when "subversive" irony has become an all-pervasive tic in our culture and everyone from John Waters to right-wing cultural critics (always the last to hear about anything) are heralding its "death," this old notion of humor as means of resistance may seem as quaint and utopian as the by now pretty discredited idea that music can change the world. Kliban saw that decades before most other humorists did, and he made bleak, self-deprecating fun of the impotence and triviality of his own art. His rueful estimation of his own vocations' importance to society is made clear in the last drawing in *Two Guys Fooling Around With the Moon*: a cool, effete artíste in dark glasses and an ascot strolls down the sidewalk with a gorgeous bimbo in lingerie on each arm, a smitten plain Jane looking longingly on in the background, her heart a-thump, and a couple of cartoon cats following behind him. In the foreground, a policeman kicks a

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[10] This, finally, may be where his beloved cats fit in. His cat cartoons are often very funny, but they're also unironically affectionate, works of obvious love. His teacher at Pratt, Richard Lindner, liked painting dogs because "dogs, like children, are the real grown-ups." Kliban also uses cat cartoons to caricature human behavior, but, in the end, his cats may have more in common with the animal subjects of another artist--Franz Marc. “Very early I found people to be ‘ugly’,” wrote Marc. “Animals seemed more beautiful, more pure." Kliban joins not only Marc but a number of gentle misanthropes, from Celine to William S. Burroughs to Stanley Kubrick, in an inordinate fondness for cats. One can imagine his mixed feelings on seeing them become merchandising icons.

blind beggar selling pencils from a can out into the street, growling, "Out of the way, you swine--a *cartoonist* is coming!"

But Kliban also knew, I think, that humor could be more than a distraction or escape from the serious business of life; it can be dangerous, a bad example, exposing things like "seriousness" as absurd and "business" as contemptible. (Contrast this to *Dilbert*, which infamously offers corporate drones an impotent expression of resistance as sort of a safety valve in the corporate machine, to release a little of their rancor, take a little more of their money, and keep them sullenly working another day. Like the good soldier says: "War is Hell. Pass it on.") An exasperated woman in one cartoon tells her giggling, rubbery husband, "I want you to stop this wiggly business--it's bad for the children!" She was right--it was. Some of the kids who liked *Cat* innocently bought *Never Eat Anything Bigger Than Your Head* or *Whack Your Porcupine,* and were exposed to a kind of humor that was much less cute and fuzzy. ("That's where my heart is," Kliban himself confessed. "The weird books."[11]) For all his drawings mocking ignorant people's fear and mistrust of books--"The book-burning festival was called off because nobody had any," the bomb squad, media, and crowd of horrified onlookers surrounding "The Pornographic Book," a wary caveman tentatively prodding a book with a long stick--Kliban must have hoped, must have believed, that books really *can* be dangerous. Even books of humorous drawings.

B. Kliban has been gone for more than ten years now, but the exuberance and absurdity of his cartoons still amazes. And his books still turn up in the humor sections of second-hand stores, wedged indiscriminately in among the *Garfield* and *Cathy* treasuries and anthologies of

Dave Barry and Erma Bombeck. ("Stick This in Your Humor Section," reads a note taped to an ominously shaped package left outside a bookseller's door in one cartoon.) Find them. Buy them. Show them to friends. Leave them lying out on the coffee table at parties. Give them to your impressionable nephews and nieces. In case you've forgotten, they are: *Cat, Whack Your Porcupine, Never Eat Anything Bigger Than Your Head, Tiny Footprints, Two Guys Fooling Around With the Moon, Luminous Animals, The Biggest Tongue in Tunisia,* and *Advanced Cartooning*. It's time we gave them another, closer look.

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[11] MacDonald, 22.

Cat. New York: Workman Publishing Company, Inc., 1976.

Never Eat Anything Bigger Than Your Head and Other Drawings. New York: Workman Publishing Company, 1976.

Whack Your Porcupine and Other Drawings. New York: Workman Publishing Company, Inc., 1977.

Tiny Footprints and Other Drawings. New York: Workman Publishing Company, 1978.

Two Guys Fooling Around With the Moon and Other Drawings. New York: Workman Publishing Company, 1982.

Luminous Animals and Other Drawings. New York: Penguin Books, 1983.

The Biggest Tongue in Tunisia and Other Drawings. New York: Viking Penguin Inc., 1986.

Advanced Cartooning and Other Drawings. New York: Andrews & McMeel , 1993.