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The Face on the Canvas and Other Mysteries

By Ted Loos

ONE would think that the artist Jim Nutt would have a lot to say about the subject he's been painting over and over, day after day, for the last 25 years: the off-kilter face of an imaginary woman with an impossibly monumental nose, an image that is apparently never too far from his mind.

One would be wrong.

Seated in his studio on a snow-covered street in this town just north of Chicago, Mr. Nutt, 72, laughed nervously in response to nearly every inquiry about the project that has consumed him for decades. "I don't know," he said, repeatedly and reflexively.

"It seemed like a good idea at the time," Mr. Nutt allowed when asked how the series got started and what it meant back then. More uncomfortable chuckling.

Stroking the bushy mustache he has worn since his early fame as a member of the 1960s Chicago artist groups the Hairy Who and the Chicago Imagists, Mr. Nutt was always unfailingly polite and friendly, even as he evaded questions. But in an age when artists are trained to explain the point of their work succinctly — the better to market it to collectors, curators and dealers —

there seemed to be something either willful or strangely innocent in Mr. Nutt's responses. Or possibly both.

Nearby, in the latest iteration of his long-running series, a small in-progress canvas showed a stylized woman's face and upper torso, with signature nose and 1940s chignon hairdo, in a palette of blues, greens and purples — except for the coral-colored lips. The relatively flat handling of paint with significant areas of pure color was typical of recent treatments of the woman.

"It's an irritating period," Mr. Nutt said of this extended phase. "I wish the paintings went faster. I probably do about one a year. If they went faster, I probably would have moved on somewhere else."

But what Mr. Nutt does produce, and what he has created over a nearly 50-year career, is anything but irritating to the art world and a handful of devoted collectors. Many of his most important works are now on view at the Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago, in the large exhibition "Jim Nutt: Coming Into Character" (through May 29). Though not a full retrospective, the 73-work show includes some of Mr. Nutt's more ribald early pieces, which were clearly influenced by cartoons and comic books, as well as the work it mainly focuses on, from the mid-1980s forward — the period of the mystery woman.

"The recent paintings are just beautifully done, and so fascinating in the way they quote the history of the medium," said Carter Foster, a curator at the Whitney Museum of American Art. "They make me think of Northern Renaissance portraits."

Roberta Smith, a critic for The New York Times, recently described Mr. Nutt's "cubist cuties" as examples of "fiercely loony American figure painting," a tradition that she said included Willem de Kooning and Philip Guston. And Lynne Warren, the Chicago curator who organized the current show and called Mr. Nutt "an artist's artist," reeled off a surprisingly diverse list of artists who have cited Mr. Nutt's influence: Jeff Koons, Mike Kelley, Amy Sillman and Chris Ware, among others. Mr. Nutt's decades-long focus on one subject is unusual, but he is not art history's only repeater. The Italian painter Giorgio Morandi went back time and again to the same bottles and vases for his still lifes, and the abstractionist Richard Diebenkorn painted the view from his Santa Monica, Calif., window for 25 years and called it the "Ocean Park" series.

As with those artists, Ms. Warren argues, it's a mistake to see repetition as a problem. "He has a singular vision, but it's not the same painting," she said.

The painter Carroll Dunham, an acquaintance and admirer of Mr. Nutt, agreed. "I don't see them as symptoms of blockage," he said of the works. "They look dense and complex and beautiful. That kind of focus is the opposite of limiting."

For his part Mr. Nutt may be chagrined at his pace of production, but it hasn't prompted him to change his habits. He puts in roughly six hours a day in the studio, and over the year or so it takes to create a painting he does some drawings of the image along the way.

"I start with one thing and then try to put something else with it, meaning a nose with an eye," he said. "Then I add to that combination or change one of those two because they're not quite right. It's a constant process of adding and subtracting."

Fundamentally Mr. Nutt has always been a devoted portraitist. Even in the late 1960s, when his work was decidedly more grotesque, many of his paintings were of people. The museum's

exhibition features several examples, including the scabrous “Miss T. Garmint (she pants a lot)” (1967), the blob-headed subject of which is holding cigars in each of her three hands.

“I’ve never really been able to understand why anybody paints a still life, even though I enjoy looking at them,” Mr. Nutt said. And when it comes to people, he added, “I would much rather look at a female face and lavish attention on it than a male face. I think that’s part of the reason it’s ended up being a singular thing.”

Mr. Nutt was born in Pittsfield, Mass., and his family moved often while he was growing up. He said that his interest in the human face dates back to the influence of a single work — a Hans Holbein the Younger portrait of a woman at the Saint Louis Art Museum, “Mary, Lady Guildford” (1527), which Mr. Nutt saw while he was a student at Washington University in the late 1950s. He was taken by the emphatic rendering of the sitter, he said. “She is a formidable woman — more like a fortress than anything else.”

Mr. Nutt attended the Art Institute of Chicago in the early 1960s, where he met the woman who became his wife, the artist Gladys Nilsson; the two live in Wilmette, next door to Evanston.

The emergence of Pop Art developments made a strong impression on Mr. Nutt, who particularly recalls the work of Claes Oldenburg and Andy Warhol from that time. “It freed us up to look for other sources,” he said. “You suddenly realized that comics are acceptable.” (Still, he added, “Push comes to shove, I was more interested in Miró than comics.”)

Mr. Foster of the Whitney said that Mr. Nutt took the influence of comics in a very different direction. “The Pop artists in New York were ironic about it,” Mr. Foster said. “The Chicago artists really embraced the medium, and Jim had his own slightly more sinister and humorous take on it.”

Mr. Nutt has been the subject of major solo exhibitions — notably one in 1974 that traveled to the Whitney and another in 1994 that made it to the National Gallery of Art — and he has gallery representation in New York and Chicago. But much of his fame came early, and the current exhibition is not traveling. “It’s been a huge disappointment for Jim and me,” Ms. Warren said. “And we tried every museum.”

His diehard fans still feel that Mr. Nutt’s biggest recognition may be yet to come, in part because of the recent resurgence in comics and graphic art generally. “Pictures have evolved in Jim’s direction,” Mr. Dunham said. “Cartoons have been collapsed into painting.”

In the meantime Mr. Nutt, who professes little interest in art-world trends, chips away at his portraits. Several people have suggested that his constant subject bears a resemblance to his mother — something in the nose and hair. A picture of them together from the 1940s, when Mr. Nutt was a child, has appeared in some exhibition catalogs of his work.

Over lunch with Mr. Nutt at their favorite Italian restaurant in Wilmette, Ms. Nilsson tried to address the mommy-likeness issue. “Well, Jim hasn’t really disputed that,” she said, glancing at her husband.

Mr. Nutt just looked down at his salad and laughed. — *Ted Loos*