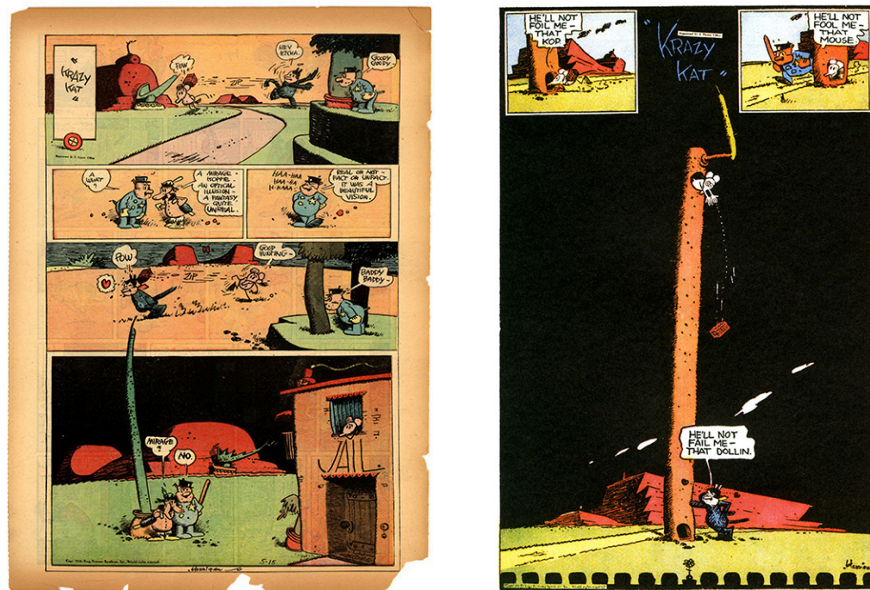


WAYNE THIEBAUD INFLUENCER A NEW GENERATION

Vonn Sumner Revives the Iconic Krazy Kat for the Pandemic Age

Dan Nadel, Curator At Large

Vonn Cummings Sumner vividly remembers first encountering George Herriman's comic strip masterpiece, "Krazy Kat," as a freshman in Wayne Thiebaud's Art 148 class. Mixed into a slideshow of art historical greats was a scratchy cat drawn as though made of yarn. "Krazy Kat," Thiebaud said, was not just a favorite of his, but of Willem de Kooning, Elmer Bischoff and Richard Diebenkorn. Picasso had been an avowed fan in the 1910s, trading drawings for a stacks of American comic strip sections; the Paris Surrealist group also avidly collected the cartoons in the 1920s.



Left: George Herriman. "Krazy Kat", May 15, 1938.
Right: George Herriman. "Krazy Kat", September 12, 1937.

Sumner, a comics fan since he was a kid, immediately went to the library and checked out what was then the only widely available anthology: the 1969 edition of George Herriman's Krazy Kat, with an introduction by poet e.e. cummings. There the young artist plunged into the same immersive verbal and visual world that his teacher loved. That world was created by George Herriman (1880-1944), New Orleans-born and Los Angeles-raised, and loath to reveal much about his identity, conspicuously keeping a hat on at all times to hide his "kinky" hair. It's now known that Herriman was Black but lived primarily as a white man. He began work as a newspaper cartoonist in 1901 and quickly found success with ongoing comic strips and sports cartoons.

The character Krazy Kat debuted in another comic strip in 1910 and graduated to its own in 1913. “Krazy Kat” then ran in newspapers across the country until Herriman’s 1944 death. The premise is simple: Krazy, a genderless Kat, is in love with Ignatz, a mischievous and foul-tempered mouse who returns the favor by hurling bricks at Krazy. Offissa Pup, meanwhile, is a deputized dog who also loves and seeks to protect Krazy, though the cat only has eyes for Ignatz. The dialogue is a mix of Herriman’s native Creole slang, French and the Yiddish he picked up from his pals, Spanish, and English. And the setting, which Herriman calls Coconino County (not to be confused with the actual place in Arizona) is primarily the glorious Navajo country in around Monument Valley, which straddles Arizona and Utah.

The landscape is evoked with Herriman’s unmistakable spindly, curious, assured lines. Unfussy, but surefooted as only a lifetime of daily, constant drawing can produce. His colors were based purely on the conceptual needs of the narrative — a sky might be white, orange, blue or red depending on the needs of the narrative. Herriman began visiting the area 1907, usually staying at the Kayenta Settlement, and working with the Navajo there. A sensitive, searching man, Herriman understood the precariousness of identity, culture and the land itself. All of this is present in the strip itself. The trio is constantly discussing some event, musing on the universe, or bound up in the whirling humor of romance. Here, for example, is Krazy speaking on waking from a slumber in a May 5, 1940 strip: “Comes the “Darn” – / an’ none around to claim the day / the stork of time has brung / – but me.” In the decades since its creator’s passing, Krazy Kat has only grown in stature. Most of the Sunday comic strips are now available in book collections, and it’s generally regarded as the most beautiful and important comic strip of the 20th century.

For young Wayne Thiebaud (b. 1920) growing up in Mesa, Arizona, the landscape of “Krazy Kat” was that of his youth. He loved the comic strip — his first career goal was to be a cartoonist — and his big skies, everlasting lands and individualized sense of color can be linked back to Herriman. Moreover, both artists drew for printing. Herriman’s finished work only existed as offset prints, and his sure, bold lines reflect the needs of the printing press. Thiebaud, a masterful printmaker, approaches the medium like a cartoonist might have — rooted in linear drawing as evoking and enclosing space. And so Thiebaud taught Herriman along with the latter’s art historical peers, as it should be. In 1990, Thiebaud even designed sets for a “Krazy Kat” ballet produced at the War Memorial Opera House in San Francisco.

And four years later, in 1994, Vonn Sumner encountered the Kat. It stuck with him. As artists Oyvind Fahlstrom and Jess had done before him, Sumner first tried Krazy in collages, and then some paintings, but he put the project aside and for the next two decades worked in a more traditional figurative mode. All the while, he and Thiebaud maintained a correspondence into which the elder artist would sometimes slip photocopies of “Krazy Kat” strips. In late 2019, as Sumner sought a way to paint his impressions of the difficulties engulfing America, he began depicting dumpster fires.



Left: Vonn Cummings Sumner, *Dumpster Fire II*, 2019. Oil on canvas, 18 x 14 inches. Courtesy of the artist. © Vonn Cummings Sumner.

Right: Vonn Cummings Sumner, *Dumpster Fire III*, 2019. Oil on panel, 16 x 16 inches. Courtesy of the artist. © Vonn Cummings Sumner.

A friend suggested adding a figure to allow viewers a way into the images. During the lockdown, Sumner flashed back to Krazy. His way into the image had been there from the start.

Suddenly Krazy Kat became Sumner's stand-in for all of us. Here is Krazy, as Krazy has always been confused, alarmed, bemused, bewildered by the state of the world. When Sumner recently showed these paintings to his old professor, Thiebaud offered the greatest, and most Herriman-like compliment possible: "You painting Krazy Kat makes my heart leap."



Left: Vonn Cummings Sumner, *Watching a Dumpster Fire*, 2020. Oil on canvas over panel, 14 3/4 x 16 x 1 in. (37.5 x 40.6 x 2.5 cm). Courtesy of the artist. © Vonn Cummings Sumner. Photo: Cleber Bonato.



Right: Vonn Cummings Sumner, *Just Walking*, 2020. Oil on canvas, 17 x 18 inches. Courtesy of the artist. © Vonn Cummings Sumner.