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exhibition review



Mungo Thomson, page 24 from *Einstein #1*, 48-page color comic book (10 x 6 1/2 in. each page), 2008

MUNGO THOMSON AT MARGO LEAVIN GALLERY, LOS ANGELES

by Sharon Mizota

In his 2002 video *The American Desert (For Chuck Jones)*, Mungo Thomson erased the characters from classic Road Runner cartoons, leaving only their barren landscapes. Without protagonists, the camera's movements underscored the cartoon's fabrication of a mythic American West. In his latest exhibition, Thomson applies this strategy to another repository of popular imagination: the comic book.

The show's centerpiece is *Einstein #1* (2008), a full-color comic accompanied by framed black-and-white drawings of each page. The forty-four-page volume is formatted like a typical comic book, and gallery visitors are greeted by a commercial display rack full of identical copies. The drawings, framed on the walls of the main gallery, are done in black ink and nonphoto blue pencil on bristol board: a "making of" story behind the finished product.

Like *The American Desert*, *Einstein #1* is composed of background imagery, without characters or speech bubbles. Thomson has culled his images from a variety of comic books, faithfully reproducing their diverse illustration styles. Still, despite the range of sources and the lack of protagonists, *Einstein #1* is a surprisingly cohesive story.

The work's narrative continuity is due in part to Thomson's deft splicing, but it also relies on our familiarity with comic-book archetypes. Beginning in outer space, the viewer enters a dilapidated space station and proceeds through a disheveled command center into a dark room crammed with broken electronics, dossiers, and papers. From there, one exits into a ruined city. A flash of lightning beams down from the sky, catapulting the viewer back into outer space, past exploding satellites and asteroids, and down to the molecular level, which—surprisingly—is populated by flying horses and lumpy squidlike creatures. From there it's more asteroids, explosions, and a door into a different space station, suggesting the beginning of a new adventure.

By removing the characters and narration, the work calls attention to the way in which sequential imagery relies on the reader to fill in the blanks between frames. But the work also suggests the power of certain tropes to drive a narrative. Because space stations, destroyed cities, and subatomic explosions are classic comic-book subjects, they don't require the contextual details of faces and words to tell a story. In fact, Thomson's work turns the viewer into a comic-book character, short-circuiting the process of identification that usually happens anyway.

Although the book stands on its own, the inclusion of Thomson's drawings introduces another dimension: the divide between process and product, high and popular art. Some of the drawings are done entirely in nonphoto blue pencil, a medium that while visible to the eye does not show up in traditional photographic reproduction. (Accordingly, these drawings do not appear in the finished comic book, either.) With this gesture, Thomson highlights the distinction between the singular art object and the mass-produced one, even as he suggests that the heightened self-consciousness of art viewership and the immersive fantasy of comic books derive from the same impulse to insert oneself into the story.

This continual process of invention and dissection is embodied in an audio piece on view in an adjacent gallery, *"Bloody Hell: An Oral History of the Making of Blade Runner,"* by Dave Gardetta, *Los Angeles Magazine*, February 2007, Read by a Cast of *Computer Voices* (2007). It's an uncanny combination: simulated, robotic utterances revealing the fabrication of a vision of the future in which robots pretend to be people. Pop, in the hands of Mungo Thomson, will deconstruct itself.