

Cultural Daily

Independent Voices, New Perspectives

Are Comics the Art Form of This Century?

Allen Rubinstein · Wednesday, November 6th, 2013

How often do you discover an artistic golden age only after it's long over? Right now, a creative renaissance is occurring in a medium that had been mired in triviality for the better part of a century. Among the majority of adults, those who are steeped in the arts and *even among those who simply know that this medium exists*, it comes as a surprise to learn that graphic novels – i.e. comics – are the up and coming art form of the twenty-first century.

Graphic Novels were defined by Art Spiegelman as, “Comics that need a bookmark,” and with that format as a venue, the comics medium has come into its own as a mature art form, building in both quantity and quality during the 1990s and exploding exponentially throughout the oughts and teens. The astonishing ascent shows no signs of slowing anytime soon. Available online, in bookstores and in only a relative handful of specialty comic shops, they remain a niche item for a growing, but teeny-tiny audience, while the range of genre and subject matter has flourished. Even those who may be familiar with the small handful of best-sellers (*Persepolis*, *Daytripper* and *Building Stories* among others) are unaware of the full spectrum of artistically and narratively groundbreaking work flooding the marketplace.

The most common response one hears whenever graphic novels enter the conversation is, “What are graphic novels?” (consider the corollary – “What is a novel?” “What is a movie?” “What is television?” Never heard of ‘em.) Some think the term describes children’s picture books (especially if their kids read comics); many people assume it’s a euphemism for porn. In what other medium would it be necessary for someone to create this two-page tutorial as drawn by graphic novelist Jessica Abel (*La Perdida*, *Life Sucks*)?



What is a Graphic Novel by Jessica Abel, page 1



What is a Graphic Novel by Jessica Abel, page 2

Twenty-five years ago, the geekier of us teens and pre-teens grew up reading comics of the more colorful variety – 22-page installments of muscular men and women in skin-tight outfits beating each other up. The generally held, quite arbitrary assumption that comics could only be disposable juvenilia had tied an entire arts industry to its adolescence, and the self-limiting nature of the industry seemed permanent. Some intrepid souls persevered at the fringes with more personal, less fantastical stories, but still the number of American comics published with a square spine (excluding newspaper strip collections) could fit in a file box.

The mid-eighties kicked off the graphic novel movement with two books you’ve probably heard of

by now, if not personally read – *Watchmen* and *Maus* (referred to in comics circles as “Watchmaus”). “Comics aren’t just for kids anymore”, the magazines reported with just a faint air of condescension. Now, a quarter century later, those two are still the graphic novels most read and recognized by the general public no matter how voluminous the pile of alternatives.

Fast forward one Internet later. New books appear weekly, some as thick as five- and six-hundred pages (Jeff Smith’s sublime, all-ages epic, *Bone*, tops out north of 1,200). A mid-size library could fill its shelves with new work before they touched any character that wears spandex and shoots laser beams from his elbows. Graphic novels report on wars, teach particle physics, deconstruct political theory and detail the history of Cleveland. Biographers draw the lives of Che Guevara, J. Edgar Hoover, the Dalai Lama, Jimi Hendrix and Justin Bieber. Fiction writers spin stories of coming out, coming of age, coming to America or just coming. A sitting Congressman has just released volume one of his memoirs as a graphic novel.

The artistic value of graphic novels in reflecting and commenting on our modern lives already holds its own, or surpasses, our more established media. Where movies are about grandeur and movement (and Coca Cola and four wheel drive) and prose novels explore language and the broad sweep of humanity, comics are about connection. They create meaning by sewing together fragments of data in fragmented times when data is everywhere. They build a vision directly from the artist’s imagination, each constructing their distinct, deeply personal visual language through page composition, parallel construction, iconic representation, and unique world and character design.

What’s more, the labor-intensive years of work required to create graphic novels – in both in learning how to draw and in loving a story enough to draw or paint the same set of characters literally hundreds of times – practically ensure there will be more books of higher quality and deeper vision. Graphic novels are reading for people who are too busy to read. They’re movies without CGI or product placement. They’re an art gallery sprung to life for people who can’t afford gallery art. Just to dig for comparison into my concurrent obsession, any person who is a fan of the likes of Quentin Tarantino, the Coen brothers or Stanley Kubrick is either reading graphic novels or missing out.

The emergence of any new medium for expressing ideas and stories about the human condition follows the same pattern – there’s the work and then there’s the public’s acceptance of and interest in the work. We are currently moving between those two poles. Sales of comics in every category shot up twelve percent in the last year. The very concept of an adult audience reading comics for its own merits, free from the specter of Spiderman and [Comi-Con](#), is slowly filtrating into the public consciousness. The day is approaching when sites such as this (and the editor on the masthead here counts himself a big fan, thanks) will list comics on the menu with film, art and video without anyone raising an eyebrow.

I grew up with comics, and comics grew up with me. The day when the medium has artistically matured is upon us. The rest of us are divided into those who know and those who will find out soon enough. If you’re the type of person who likes to jump aboard early, now’s the time.

Top image from [The Hive](#) by Charles Burns.

This entry was posted on Wednesday, November 6th, 2013 at 4:51 pm and is filed under [Fiction](#), [Visual Art](#)

You can follow any responses to this entry through the [Comments \(RSS\)](#) feed. You can leave a response, or [trackback](#) from your own site.

