

“LIFE WITHOUT ‘THE BRAIN THAT THINKS HOLES THROUGH BOILERPLATE’”

Written by Gary Cifra Date: August 11, 2012



PAINTING TITLE: “THE BRAIN THAT THINKS HOLES THROUGH BOILERPLATE”

ARTIST: ROBERT WILLIAMS

I first fell in love with the paintings of Robert Williams when I saw ZAP Comix Issue Number 5 with its' wonderful cover – inside was an incredible story called “Masterpiece On the Shithouse Wall”. The cover itself looked like nothing I'd ever seen before but appeared to be completely familiar. I used to read that story once or twice a year. I used to have an underground comics source everywhere I lived. In 1981 or so, I went to a comic book shop I frequented regularly and the guy there said, "Did you hear about the Robert Williams show?".

I went to the show – it was in downtown L.A., maybe Boyle Heights if I recollect correctly, and there I saw 10 or 15 “Zombie Mystery Paintings”. They were about the size of a poster in landscape format, \$1000 each, and they were all sold. There were a dozen postcard size two-tone paintings for \$50, and I really wanted one. However, I just started a new job and it was way out of my price range. Anyway I loved the show. I met the artist and his wife Suzanne and bought a copy of his first book, and got the first of many signed Robert Willams books in my life that night. On the way home I told my gorgeous, charming, and adventurous French wife Stephanie that I wished we had stayed for the after-party we were invited to. Of course, she took the next off-ramp and drove us back to the party. We hung out with Robert and his wife Suzanne, and Rick

Griffin, and a writer of one of the Twilight Zone episodes.

In 1997, Mr. Williams invited me over to his house in North Hollywood. We talked for an hour or so. I may have sat in his wonderful antique barber's chair. He was very gracious and welcoming. A conversation with Mr. Williams is filled with all kinds of original observations. For example, I learned that Giuseppe Verdi is Italian for Joe Green. I got to look through some of the new paintings he was working on and wonderful do-dads and weird momentos he had, like the jar with a guy's piece of skin in it with a tattoo of Mr. Williams' artwork, and his formidable collection of antique German military helmets.

After those experiences, I always excitedly looked forward to the new Zap comics when they came out, and Mr. Williams became my favorite artist of this marvelous cadre, that also included Robert Crumb.

In 1987 I heard about a Robert Williams show on Melrose Avenue, a hip Los Angeles street that I occasionally visited. I was blown away by the show and was making a little more money at the time. I was hanging out with an old high school friend who would soon reach millionaire status named Ken. I brought Ken to the show and he had the same reaction I did. I talked him into going in with me on a painting. A year or two later we bought the painting. The title of this piece was "Little Lambie Pie".

I started making more money and ended up buying two more Robert Williams paintings. In 1990, I finally acquired a full-size painting entitled "Impervious To Chaos" for \$6,000. Several years later I got a smaller size painting for \$12,000 called "Symbol Silly". His paintings began fetching higher prices. By then I'd become friends with Robert and had earned a credit in three of his books for proofreading his lengthy painting titles. Some titles could be over 50 words or longer! I even had the honor of being allowed to contribute an occasional word or phrase to his titles.

Beginning in the 1990's I had always had at least two Robert Williams paintings in my house. I got used to living with them. In 1998 my high school friend Ken committed a cowardly and selfish act. He jumped off the Golden Gate Bridge and I inherited four Robert Williams paintings because we had a notarized agreement that I was part-owner of them.

The 1990's was a very busy decade for me. I was on a first name basis with all the attractive female curators in every happening gallery in the Los Angeles area. If they got something new in the gallery, they would call me. Since I'd gotten a credit card, I could just give a nod and it was mine. I produced three benefit art auctions and had an article about me in Juxtapose Art Magazine.

I started answering ads from credit card companies that offered zero interest for six months and started shuffling them around to finance my gallery purchases. In January

of 2000 I purchased a home in the San Fernando Valley. The paintings looked great there. Robert and sometimes his wife Suzanne used to come to my annual vegetarian Thanksgiving party (which they kidded me about, as they were not vegetarians). I went to their house in North Hollywood several times and even got to ride in one of his 1932 Ford Hot Rods. He even came to my house once to do a restoration treatment on one of my paintings after it had been hanging for five years. They also came to my third wedding and 60th birthday party.

I got confused keeping track of so many credit cards. Though today I have good credit, back then, several of my cards had late fees. I would call them and they'd waive the fee- hey, no problem! Well I guess wasn't that good with money because I didn't notice that they'd raise the interest rate on my cards to astronomical levels. Then, my 80-year-old plumbing started to collapse. Next thing you know, I was in debt. I needed \$30,000 to pay for the plumbing and pay off my credit cards. Over the years I sold a few paintings. In 2004, I sold "The Brain". By 2006, the best of my collection was gone, and my house felt naked for the first time in 20 years.

It felt so horrible to be in debt. That's why I decided to let my last painting go, to get clear. Even though I retired from my job in 2004, I would think, "well, maybe the next Williams show to come, I'll get one". I still think that to this day, though his paintings are well beyond my retirement budget.

Now I can't imagine how I let the loss of my favorite paintings in my art collection happen, and I deeply regret it! I still have plenty of other art around, but it's just not the same. For 20 years I was a co-conspirator in "fouling the Art World's Nest" (a saying on Mr. Williams' business card). I guess I'm in a different phase of my life now.

I've recently decided to buy two Robert Williams posters – "Nostradamus and the Astrological Planet Skinner" and "Flying Saucer Attack on a Pirate Galleon". I'm having them expertly framed by Mr. Williams' actual framer, to make them look as authentic as possible. There's a place for them above my mid-century sofa. It seems like a reasonable plan, a way to remember the good old days...

This year, I've gone from being legally blind, to being legally blind with jiggling eyeballs (due to Multiple Sclerosis, I have optic neuritis). Thanks for the memories, Robert Williams, Robert Crumb, Harvey Kurtzman, Bill Gaines, Merry Karnowsky, Alix Sloan and many, many more.