

Big medium in a small box

Contributed by Kris Vagner

Comic-book artist/MacArthur Fellow Ben Katchor is finally going to do Las Vegas—as part of the Vegas Valley Book Festival

By Kris Vagner, 11/2/04

The settings in Ben Katchor's comics are unspectacular: late-night diners, dreary bachelor pads overlooking a gray city. The worn, middle-aged characters don't fly around in capes fighting for justice; they putter through alleys, drowsily fending off existential despair. A plot line could be as faint as checking an empty mailbox or momentarily relishing the sound of an imagined lunch bell.

But Katchor's worm's eye view of the most mundane corners of the world—of New York, in particular—is polished to such a sharp point it won the graphic novelist a MacArthur grant in 2002. His weekly strips circulate in newspapers, and he's published several books featuring the non-adventures of anti-hero Julius Knipl, some of which have been translated into French.

Katchor lives in New York, where he with teaches painting and writing at the School of Visual Arts. Nevada Today caught up with him by phone to talk about how he gravitated toward the medium that combines those two disciplines.

"I grew up in Brooklyn in the 50s," Katchor says slowly in a voice that gives away both of those facts. "My introduction to figurative art or Western art was through comic books. Before I could read, I remember looking at them. Around junior high school, I drew comics."

In college, he studied art and literature. "I didn't like to make paintings that hinted at fully formed narratives," he says. "I had this childhood experience of comics, so I had this ready-made solution. They could be as fully formed from a literary point of view as I could make them."

Keeping words and images in separate academic corners seemed unnecessary. To Katchor, pictures and text are just

different parts of the same spectrum. "Art teachers didn't want to talk about the story. Painters are not expected to use words," he says. "[They use] symbolic images and icons that sort of creep toward words. Image comes to be filled with inflections of life and little concrete details that make the difference between the word 'telephone' and a drawing of a specific telephone in the world."

While it might look like modern multimedia to deliver package subjects that we're more used to hearing about from Sartre or Beckett than in a comic strip, Katchor says it's not so new. (The tradition even predates Pulitzer-prize winning Holocaust comic, *Maus*, by a long shot.) Katchor explains, "There's a whole history of proto-comic strips going back in time. In the later academic history, these things were separated out, I guess in the name of artistic purity, but that's a strange, false type of dichotomy."

Talking about how writing comics fits into art-school curricula, he says, "It's not clear to me where I belong, where this kind of picture story writing belongs. There shouldn't be two departments."

Fortunately for readers, the Internet doesn't draw such solid distinctions. Catch Katchor's weekly strips on his Web site, katchor.com.

And catch Katchor in person Saturday (Nov. 4) at noon at the Contemporary Arts Collective (231 W. Charleston), where he'll give an illustrated reading. His appearance is part of the Vegas Valley Book Festival, which runs Friday and Saturday. Keynote speaker Chuck Paliahniuk will talk and sign books at UNLV's Student Union Saturday night at 7 p.m. For more information, visit the Vegas Valley Book Festival's Web site.

It's-A-Real-Small-Town Alert: Kris Vagner is a contributing writer for the Online Nevada Encyclopedia, a project of Nevada Humanities, the sponsoring organization of the Vegas Valley Book Festival.