

Arts and Leisure: At the 'heart' of the revolution

by Robert L. Pincus

LAGUNA BEACH, Calif. - Since the Summer of Love is having its 40th anniversary, the phrase itself is back in circulation. But the revolution in graphic design that came along with that summer, actually began in late 1966 and was in full swing by the spring of 1967.

MEMORIES OF THE SUMMER OF LOVE - Rick Griffin designed this poster, featuring both his iconic eyeball and skull, in 1968. CNS Photo courtesy of Robert Greenwald. TRANSCENDENCE - Rick Griffin was a comic book innovator, as he shows us with his covers for 'Zap Comix No. 3' (1969) and 'Tales From the Tube' (1974). CNS Photo courtesy of Laguna Art Museum. The brilliance of the work from that time is richly evident in "Heart and Torch: Rick Griffin's Transcendence," the first full-scale museum exhibition for the late artist, whose career ended abruptly at age 47 in 1991 after a motorcycle accident. He was a genuine original. His posters, like those of a few famed contemporaries, altered graphic design. So, too, did the look of his comics. More than the rest of the Big Five of psychedelic design - Stanley Mouse, Alton Kelly, Wes Wilson and Victor Moscoso are the others - Griffin relied on hand-drawn imagery and his elaborate talent for lettering.

Griffin's talents came together, as they never did before or after, in his work of 1967 through 1969, which is abundant in this show guest-curated by Greg Escalante and Doug Harvey for the Laguna Art Museum.

He had found himself as an artist by the time he designed a poster for shows by Jimi Hendrix, John Mayall and Albert King. Dated Feb. 1-4, 1968, it is a tour de force, with its winged eyeball (a Griffin icon adapted from car customizer and artist Von Dutch) in a circular window. The edges of the circle are defined by flames, and the eyeball has an arm supporting a second Griffin icon: a skull in sunglasses that became linked to the Grateful Dead.

All of this imagery had mystical implications, some of it rooted in ancient symbolism. Then, there's the ornate lettering. In their designs, Griffin thumbed his nose at modernist simplicity but didn't mimic old styles, either.

For Griffin, as for the others who invented psychedelic graphics, being outsiders in the design as well as the

art world turned out to be a great virtue. They didn't worry about historical precedents, which in lesser hands could have been fatal. They made history instead.

In his posters, Griffin peaked in 1969, with his famed "Aoxomoxoa" image for a Grateful Dead concert in January - an image that doubled as an album cover - and its sequel for a Hawaiian show in July. And like so many of Griffin's posters, these displayed his love of lush, saturated color, which drew upon his considerable knowledge of color separations.

Inspiration spilled over to comics, beginning with "The Family Dog or Sunday Funnies" poster for an Avalon show in October 1967 featuring Quicksilver Messenger Service, Sons of Champlin and Taj Mahal & the Blueflames. The design mimicked a comic strip.

Griffin saw the potential in a new style of comics, as did R. Crumb. According to the curators, Crumb took inspiration from this poster as he was formulating Zap Comix. In turn, he asked Griffin to contribute to Zap, which he did beginning in Issue No. 2 with a semi-abstract strip, "Hike"; a seemingly apocalyptic one, "Bombs Away"; and a comical cover in a mystical mode.

The exhibition doesn't focus only on this period of genius. The years that led up to it trace Griffin's roots in surf culture, beginning in about 1962, when he was an able caricaturist under the influence of Mad magazine artists like Don Martin. Then, there are the years that followed his time in San Francisco.

He and his family left in 1969 and returned to Southern California, where he had grown up and first worked as a commercial artist. This happened sometime in 1970, as did his conversion to Christianity.

Even when he used the Bible as inspiration, Griffin occasionally came up with an original image. But he focused far more on painting, and much of his work on canvas, while technically proficient, is unimaginative. These are a hodgepodge of historical scenes reminiscent of bombastic 19th-century history painting, with added flourishes in the manner of Rockwell Kent and Maxfield Parrish.

The exhibition itself adds to the Laguna Art Museum's impressive record for presenting homegrown California popular art. In 1993, there was the landmark show, "Kustom Kulture: Von Dutch, Ed 'Big Daddy' Roth, Robert Williams and Others"; in 2002, "Surf Culture: The Art History of Surfing." Like these projects, "Torch and Flame" is accompanied by a richly illustrated and highly readable exhibition catalog that evokes the texture of the times and lives it recounts.

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