

Arts & Entertainment

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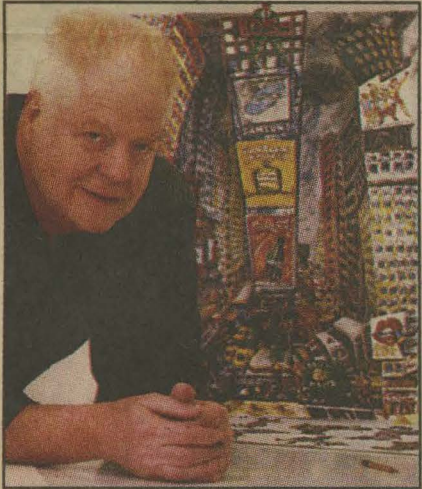


Photo by CHRISSY PASQUAL

RED'S colorful world

Grooms paints playful picture of artists and their work

■ Red Grooms, above, is known for his lively urban scenes. His works focusing on his fellow artists will be exhibited in "Red Grooms: A Personal Art History," presented by the Cape Museum of Fine Arts.



■ At right, Red Grooms's pop-up lithograph "DeKooning Breaks Through" shows Willem de Kooning on a bike with a figure from his "Woman" series on the handlebars.

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 By DEBBIE FORMAN
 FEATURES EDITOR

RED GROOMS'S artworks are raucous, rowdy, robust, effervescing with life. Once you're drawn into his densely packed pictures, assemblages or walk-through environments — sculpto-pictoramas, he calls them — you may never want to leave. It's simply so much fun, a kind of great escape into a rollicking world.

Grooms is best known for his views of Manhattan, mixed-media assemblages that celebrate the saucy style and urban energy of this city. Although the exhibit at the Cape Museum of Fine Arts, "Red Grooms: A Personal Art History," takes a break from his adopted city, his bold and comic style is still loud and clear as he takes aim at some of the great artists of the 20th century. But all in good fun.

Good fun is what Grooms seems to be having all the time with his art. "I wanted to be a comedian," he says during a telephone interview from his New York studio. "But I can't tell a set joke." He thinks a moment and then adds, "Very few artists wanted to go in that direction." And it is this humor that sometimes turns off the art establishment, he says.

An Artforum magazine review of an exhibit at Marlborough Gallery last year called Grooms "an entertainer, a venerable court jester." Referring to his "art-as-mass-entertainment," the reviewer wrote: "Mining the territory between art and entertainment, as Grooms is said to do, requires a much sharper critical edge. Such an edge is ultimately missing in Grooms's work. ..."

Need to fight

At 60, Grooms can look back at a long career that has had its ups and downs. "It's a competitive business," he says. "If you don't fight every minute, people will just as soon see you go out to pasture."

So he's never felt so comfortable with his position in the art world that he could rest on one of those skyscrapers that often dominate his cityscapes. But he is philosophical. "I'm still excited about my work, still working to improve." He gives an example: "One charge was that my art was too busy — particularly in the minimalist period. And sometimes I'd have to agree with them. I'd still like to work toward (simplifying). As you get older, you want to find a kind of synthesis."

Simple is certainly one word you wouldn't apply to Grooms's art. Take those Manhattan images. They're complex, rich and crowded with activity. Although he has lived in that city for 40 years, he still presents a kind of tourist's view. It's like he's still fresh from the Nashville, Tenn., suburbs where he was born and grew up, and can't get enough of this topsy-turvy world of New York.

"The reason I like cities is because I don't like suburbs, where I grew up," Grooms says. "Too much space. I like to be hemmed in." And, he adds, "You could disappear here. It's got great cover." But nothing disappears in Grooms's art. It's all loud and clear. He loves the vitality of the city.

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Exhibit features views of modern legends



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■ Red Grooms's "Jackson Pollock" shows the artist with one of his drip paintings.

Red Grooms takes a playful poke at fellow artists in the exhibit at the Cape Museum of Fine Arts. Twenty works show the range of the artist's mediums and his witty view of life and art. Adopting the style of the artist, and playing on aspects of his life and art, Grooms, as usual, seems to be having a grand old time. Here are my favorites. Comments by Grooms are from the exhibition catalog.

"DeKooning Breaks Through," a pop-up lithograph, shows the Abstract Expressionist artist on a bike with a figure from his "Woman" series on the han-

dlebars ripping through one of his canvases. Of course, Grooms has used both the image and words as a symbol for DeKooning's breakthrough in contemporary art. "I've always been mad about DeKooning," Grooms says. "I met him a few times. He was glamorous. ... I visited his studio in the early '80s. He was doing some great paintings. ..."

"Jackson Pollock," a colored pencil on paper, shows the artist — with his arms folded, a cigarette dangling from his lips and a challenging expression on his face — with one of his drip paintings. "The little joke is that

it's all colored pencil, such an opposite technique from all that thrown paint," Grooms says.

"Hans Hofmann in Provincetown" is a sculpto-pictorama of the artist with blocks of color embedded in his face. "The portrait is about two memories of Hofmann — one as a teacher, the other as a painter," Grooms says. "When Hofmann would crit his students, he would take colored pieces of paper and stick them on their canvases to show them the different color possibilities; when he

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GROOMS

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"the concentration of life, the street life."

Many of his large pieces are like stage sets, for which he even supplies the actors. They have a theatrical quality, and, like the theater, Grooms's large pieces are a collaborative effort, worked on with a team of assistants. He creates endless scenarios. "Lots and lots of stories," he says. But they aren't written down or planned. They're spontaneous and grow as the work does.

Grooms builds his sculpto-pictoramas with a variety of materials: wood — plywood, 2-by-4s, pine planks; fabric; Fiberglas; resins; Styrofoam; insulation foam. "Any kind of material I can get my hands on," he says. He frequents hardware stores and lumber yards, rather than art-supply shops.

Summers in Provincetown

Although Grooms hasn't been to the Cape in 15 years, he has fond memories of his summers in Provincetown, which he considers a pivotal period in his life. It was 1957 and he was 20 when he arrived to study with Hans Hofmann. The late '50s were heady years in Provincetown, when its position as an artist colony was at its zenith. Provincetown "was a staging area for the art of the time," Grooms says. Abstract

WORKS

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was in his 80s, he would do very smushy backgrounds with solid blocks of color."

With "**Mondrian**," a painted bronze, Grooms gives a third dimension to the master's grid, and then locks him inside. It's as if Grooms felt Mondrian had painted himself into a corner with his rigid arrangement of horizontals and verticals. "This is one of my better ideas, I think," Grooms says. "Somehow it seemed logical to put him together with his design for living."

"**Portrait of Francis Bacon**" another sculpto-pictorama, is grand in scale, a circle almost 7 feet around. Real brushes and paint tubes are incorporated into the work, which

even includes the kitchen sink. "Bacon's studio was just like that — a pile of paint tubes on his floor, just totally crazy, a chaotic thing," Grooms says. "It made me believe in his work, actually, because his work is sort of controlled looking, and yet it came out of chaos."

"**Matisse In Nice**," a color lithograph, is one of the smaller works in the show, but it is no less sumptuous. Picking up on Matisse's brilliant sense of color and his rich patterns, Grooms pictures Matisse painting a model, and offers his own miniature rendition of two well-known Matisse paintings.

Grooms's first pop-up lithograph, done in 1975, "**Gertrude Stein**," captures the essence of the American writer, whose salon for the artists and writers of her time is legendary.

— DEBBIE FORMAN

Expressionism was reigning, and many of those artists — Robert Motherwell, Mark Rothko, Adolph Gottlieb, Franz Kline — summered there.

Hofmann's classes, which attracted hundreds of artists, were not for Grooms, however. "I like very much the wildness, the sensuality, the explosion of paint of Ab-

stract Expressionism — the slap and dash — but I wanted to harness it to real life," he says.

Grooms was washing dishes at the Moors restaurant in Provincetown when he met Dominick Falcone, who, along with his wife, Yvonne Anderson, ran the Sun Gal-

lery, which developed a legendary reputation for promoting a more accessible art than the cerebral Abstract Expressionism. Grooms speaks affectionately about Anderson and Falcone, who, he says, were significant influences on him.

The group of artists who showed at the Sun Gallery advanced a new figurative form. The gallery was also known for its "happenings," which Alan Kaprow inaugurated and Grooms jumped into with gusto. Falcone gave Charles Rogers Grooms the nickname "Red," and it was at this point that he began signing his work this way.

Grooms, along with others who would soon be the major movers and shakers of Pop art, began to challenge the intellectual style of the Abstract Expressionists with a bold figurative work, which in the '60s grabbed the reins from the ruling abstractionists and galloped off to a love affair with the American public.

"We were upstarts," Grooms says. "Abstract Expressionism didn't have much of a social agenda, and Dominick was very interested in a social agenda."

Pop 'too modern'

Grooms had studied with social realist Gregorio Prestopino at the New School when he first came to New York in 1956, and he "was

deeply dedicated to the figure."

Although he is often grouped with Pop artists, Grooms found their approach a bit too cool for his tastes. "It's too modern for me," he says. Too sleek.

Grooms's work is certainly not sleek. There's too much energy and heat, too much power and passion. The polished soup cans of Andy Warhol, the neat targets and flags of Jasper Johns and the manufactured look of Claes Oldenburg's soft-sculpture pies and hamburgers look staid and static in comparison.

After his first summer in Provincetown, Grooms went back to New York and lived in a loft with Anderson and Falcone. Back in Provincetown the following summer, he

again worked as a dishwasher and had his first solo exhibition at the Sun Gallery. At the end of that summer, he returned to New York and set up a gallery space — City Gallery, he called it — in part of the 24th Street loft where he lived. Works by Jim Dine, Alex Katz, Oldenburg, Jay Milder, Bob Thompson and Lester Johnson were shown there.

Again in Provincetown during the summer of '59, Grooms was already moving into collage and sculptural pieces. A 1960 show of his works at the Reuben Gallery in New York received favorable reviews. In 1961, he made his first

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EVENTS RELATED TO GROOMS SHOW

The following events are related to the exhibition "Red Grooms: A Personal Art History," which was organized by the New Britain Museum of American Art in Connecticut. The exhibit at the Cape Museum of Fine Arts, Route 6A, Dennis, which runs through Sept. 7, opens tomorrow from 1 to 5 p.m. Hours are 10 a.m. to 5 p.m. Tuesdays, Wednesdays, Fridays and Saturdays, and 10 a.m. to 7:30 p.m. Thursdays. Admission is \$3; free from 3 to 7:30 p.m. Thursdays.

All of the programs are held at the museum. More information may be obtained by calling 385-4477. Events include:

- **"Red Hot Night on Cape Cod,"** a celebration of the opening of the exhibition, featuring a Southern barbecue, bluegrass music, dancing and other amusements, at 6:30 tonight. Tickets are \$35. Reservations: 385-4477.
- **"Red Grooms: A Not-So-Prim Primer,"** a lecture by Gregory F. Harper, Cape Museum of Fine Arts director, at 7:30 p.m. Thursday. \$8 for members, \$10 for non-members.
- **"Fat Feet and Fire – It's a Happenin',"** a lecture by Yvonne Anderson and Dominick Falcone, with films, at 7:30 p.m. July 24. \$8 for members, \$10 for nonmembers.
- **Films by Red Grooms:** "Shoot the Moon" and "Ruckus Shorts" ("Washington's Wigwamed," "Before and After the Big Sneeze" and "Spaghetti Trouble") 7:30 p.m. next Saturday and 2 p.m. July 13. "Ruckus Manhattan" and "Ruckus Shorts" 7:30 p.m. Aug. 16 and 2 p.m. Aug. 17. \$4 for members, \$5 for non-members.

A \$25 combination ticket allows admission to all lectures and films.

GROOMS

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film, "The Unwelcome Guest." In 1963, he had his first uptown exhibition in New York at Tibor de Nagy Gallery. In the mid-'60s, his art was included in group shows at the Art Institute of Chicago and the Guggenheim Museum.

Grooms was on his way.

'City of Chicago'

In 1967 with his then wife, Mimi Gross (they have since divorced), daughter of the well-known sculptor Chaim Gross, Grooms created the first of his sculpto-pictoramas, "City of Chicago." He began his most famous example of this innovative approach, "Ruckus Manhattan," in 1975, for the lobby of a Wall Street area office building. Sections of the work include "World Trade Center," "Woolworth Building," "Wall Street," "Subway" "Tourists," "Brooklyn Bridge" and "Forty-second Street." These are splendid examples of his inimitable funky, cartoony approach to the architectural wonders of the modern city.

The red-headed youth from Nashville, who got his start while washing dishes in Provincetown, has become a major American artist, translating the irrepressible spirit of urban energy into a populist style, expressed with extravagant humor, a wild sense of space, a great appetite for details and a boundless love of life.

In 1985, a retrospective of his work opened at the Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts. It traveled to museums in Denver, Los Angeles and Nashville. The Whitney Museum in New York did its own version of the retrospective.

Grooms has since had shows at Harvard University, the Brooklyn Museum and at the Nagoya City Art Museum in Japan. His work is in the collections of major museums, including the Metropolitan Museum of Art, the Museum of Modern Art and the Guggenheim Museum in New York City; the Philadelphia Museum of Art; and the Hirshhorn Museum in Washington, D.C.

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You will see some of this in the works at the Cape museum. His artist subjects are treated with a clever twist of wit, a buoyant bounce and an affectionate little tweak of the nose.

So is this artist as funny and gregarious as his work might lead you to think? "If only it was true," he says.