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IN THE FACE OF THE MODERNIST POWER RED GROOMS
HAS DEVISED A REALM IN WHICH HIS SENSIBILITY AS
AN ARTIST IS SOVEREIGN

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I N T R O D U C T I O N

Red Grooms has been described as a sculptural comedian playing to an audience eager to respond to fun, humour and self recognition.

This is one way of regarding his work but certainly not the only one. Grooms operates as a matter of course on the boundary between art and life and in doing so he tests traditional definitions of art.

These definitions find their roots at the centre of an art world where any image tainted with frivolity is met with stern solemnity. (1) This comes in the form of harsh criticism which presumes that laughter or the art which provokes it must justify itself by turning into satirical comment.

Grooms lives first and then makes art. He doesn't live through his art. His work is a product of his search for reality born of his own way of seeing the world. He is naturally good humoured and this manifests itself very much in his work. He is able to recall everything he has ever seen or imagined;- firemen, fat-feet, shoppers, big dogs, Paris in the Spring etc. and that is his reality.

The result of his treatment of the various realities is a comical or a frighteningly absurd illusion. He excludes nothing and therefore we are faced with a profusion of imagery which bombards us all at once with tragedy and comedy. That is Grooms' style. He deals with everything in his work because everything affects him and therefore he sees no need for the isolation of issues.

"The unusual ability of this Nashville student is like a fountain, bubbling up from some inner resource of imagination and impressionability. He moves with amazing rapidity from one subject to another with no surcease of idea or inspiration. He draws sensitively and then applies watercolour with the boldness of the fauves and employs black line with the ruthlessness of Rouault" (2)

This quote originates from an article written by Louise Le Quire for the Nashville banner in 1955. When she wrote that Grooms moved with amazing rapidity from the subject to another with "no surcease of idea or inspiration , she may have presumed that he was testing his ground at that young and naive stage and that maturity would bring a more focused and defined development in his work.

It has certainly developed from a personal cry into a public spectacle but it still carries the same images that Grooms used in his early years.

"I want to have some of the dusty danger of a big travelling show, and the chicken coop creakiness of a backyard extravaganza and the mysteries of the operations behind the proscenium. (3)

Grooms transforms what he interprets as reality into extravaganza, longer than life spectacles and New York city especially with it's rampant energy served as the perfect catalyst for Grooms.

The city also provided Grooms with his most important subject - people. He has always been attuned to the dress and behaviour of real people but it is with the use of gross exaggeration, not realism that he chooses to portray an accurate account of what his perceptions of them are.

It is because of Grooms affectionate treatment of his subjects which makes his work widely accessible, especially to those not involved in the art field.

The irony in this is that Art World people are very precious about art and have a prevailing attitude that implies that work which is directed to a wide audience is presumed to have diluted content or lack of depth. Grooms believes that the ordinary un art conscious person has the right to an individual response to a piece of art. That does not mean that it is his sole purpose to bring art to the masses. The masses provide inspiration for his work and appear as subjects within it and therefore a common denominator exists when relating to the work.

"I try to create a proletarian style. I think in a way you try to create a style or an image that is supposed to work with what you're interested in" (4)

In adhering adamantly to what he believes in and what interests Grooms most he leaves himself totally vulnerable to adverse criticism but I propose to examine how he has managed to etch out a niche for himself where he has secured a well earned respect within the art field while creating and sustaining wide and favourable public interest.

Chapter 1

GROOMS BACKGROUND IN NASHVILLE

EARLY INFLUENCES

ART EDUCATION

INTRODUCTION TO PROVINCETOWN

AND OTHER ARTISTS

To understand or appreciate the work of Red Grooms it is essential to go back in time and study the details of his early years.

He was born in Nashville Tennessee in 1937 as Charles Grooms- the oldest of three sons of Gerald and Wilhelmina Grooms. He lived in the suburbs and as he records himself, one of the biggest influences in his life was the trips he made the few miles from home into Nashville Town when he was very young. From these trips was born a love for City-life, bright lights, hustle-bustle and people en mass. Also what formed the excitement was the detachment of being away from the security and warmth of home whilst having the freedom of being alone in a neutral sort of territory.

During his childhood in Nashville, Grooms unconsciously built up a reservoir of imagery and iconography which he is still using today in his works and he has always maintained that experiences during his childhood have always been the most potent.

One memory in particular was a trip to a bridge manufacturing company in Nashville where his father worked during the war years.

He remembers being fascinated by the construction and welding of hugh metal shapes and the phenonena of fabricating on a large scale. (5)

After the war his father was made redundant for the duration of a year and having a family to support, he quickly set up a makeshift manufacturing plant, making ashtrays of copper sheeting in their home basement. It was during this time that his parents got involved with a few Antique dealers in their area and it was these antique dealers who expressed interest when Red was selling some of his work while still at highschool.

Red recalls his family being very supportive to him in his chosen career as an artist. His mother was always smypathetic to the arts and later encouraged him to attend the Art Institute of Chicago.

After Red's father spent a year out of work he was hired as an equipment engineer with the Tennessee Highway Department. His job required him to travel all over Tennessee keeping stocks at appropriate levels and ordering new machinery, a part of the job which Red was willing to participated in.

"Sometimes we'd just go out by the side of the Road and start counting aluminium guard rails or stacks of lumber" (6)

This period could well be responsible for unveiling to Grooms the phenomenon of the all American Collossolism The Americal Syndrom. "Not only will we do it well, well do it big" Most evidence of this influence is found in the work he did later in New York like his "Ruckus Manhattan" 1975

While still a kid in school at the age of thirteen Grooms did a drawing 'Brawl at the State Fair' in which he's witnessing a fight at the annual state fair. Even at this early age Grooms attention to detail was remarkable. He has managed to capture the frenzy and energy of the fight, the anxious looks of some onlookers and the indifferent mothers scurrying past, trailing their kids behind them and others laden down with teddybears and other prizes just barely won - the reality of an actual incident recorded with an almost dreamlike quality with his use of bright garish colours.illus | Grooms ability to turn any ordinary situation into a spectacle is evident here and this eviednce continues to his present day work.

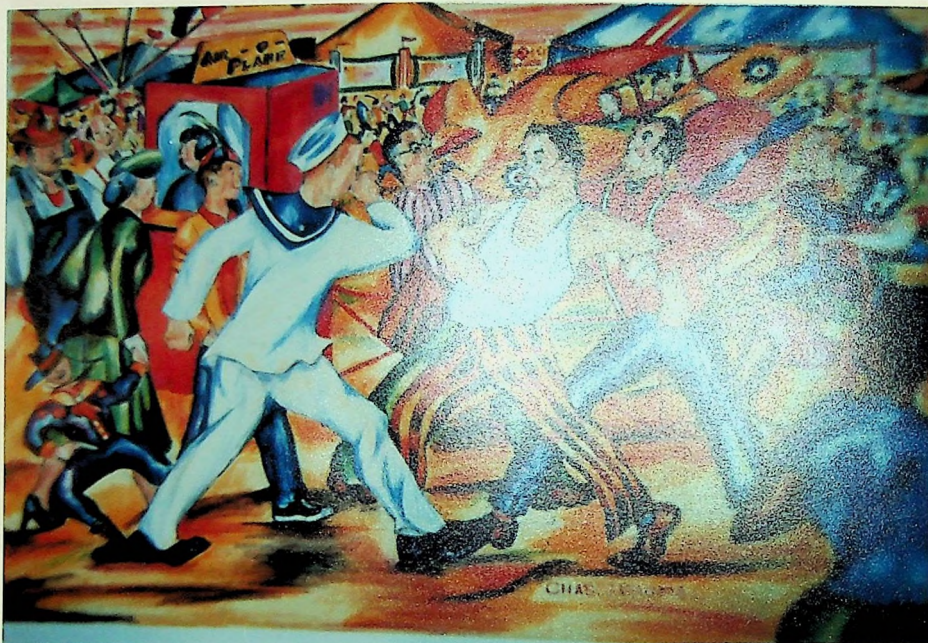


ILLUSTRATION- Brawl at the State Fair 1950
(1) Coloured Pencil on Paper
18 x 24"
Collection of the Artist



ILLUSTRATION - Tennessee State Fair 1952
(2) Casein on Paper
22 x 30"
Collection of Grooms Parents.

Another painting Tennessee State Fair 1952 depicts the inside of a circus marquee where he has managed to recreate the hidden intimacy between the circus characters. I could imagine Grooms peeping through a hole in the canvas to discover the scene. Since he came from a good secure, no -nonsense middle class environment, this kind of lifestyle must have seemed so exotic and exciting. His imagination certainly knew no boundaries when he rendered the scene as we again see the same vibrant use of colour and larger than life caricatures of the circus personalities. **illus' 2**

Red at an early age was encouraged to express himself artistically, and both he and his father studied art with Juanita Green Williams who took them on Weekend drawing trips to the Cumberland River banks. He studied with her privately for two years and it was Williams who instilled in the young Gooms the need for professionalism and seriousness in art. Her studio was based in a attic of an old dilapidated building in Nashville town called Watkins Institute.

Later Red took Saturday classes with another Nashville Artist, Joseph Van Sickle who's main works were cubist based.

The most influential elements from his childhood were vivid memories from Hollywood films, the Ringling Brothers, and Barnum and Bailey Circuses, and the Tennessee state fair's maze of amusements.(7) His one big ambition as a boy was to create rides or acts for the carnival. The theatrical side of the circus greatly appealed to him and he actually created his own acts and would perform them in his backyard.

When he was in eight grade, he made his own miniature carnival and entered it for a competition at the annual fair for which he won first prize. At high school, he, with a number of his classmates, would put on a collection of skits from time to time and subsequently Red was voted the wittest fellow in his class at Hillsboro High at the time of his graduation.

'Smokey Stover' was a newspaper funny character who was a favourite with Grooms. This comic strip was based on the activities and adventures of a dopey looking fireman. This is an important part to remember as Grooms in his later work has made numerous reference to fire. (3) This obsession with fire can also be traced back to the first time he witnessed a big proscenium in the Nashville Rieman Auditorium and he was consumed by the threat of fire burning down the completely wooden structure.

ILLUSTRATION (3)



Fire Man 1959
Mixed Media on Canvas
71 $\frac{3}{4}$ x 30 $\frac{1}{4}$ "
Chrysler Museum, Norfolk
Virginia.

One of his major happenings in the late 50's was called 'The Burning Building' the plot of which was modelled around firemen characters.

It was during his senior years in Highschool that he started to work for a Nashville frame shop called Lyzon Art Gallery. Myron King, the owner of the shop made a deal with Red that he would give him a weekly salary if he would produce x number of works. Myron would then sell his work in the shop which was a good start for Grooms to ascertain how his work would be received by the public. After two summers working in the shop Myron offered Red and his highschool friend Walter Knestrick, a two-man exhibition in which they had thirty five paintings. The gallery also exhibited other reputable artists, one of them being Chaim Gross who ironically had a daughter Mimi whom Grooms was later to marry.

When Red was eighteen years old he declared to his friend Walter that he was going to become a painter. This came in the form of a sudden outburst in the local doughnut shop and was induced by Red having seen a recent show of Jackson Pollocks work in a travelling show and this served to intensify his desire to make significant art.

His art teacher in school Helen Carroll was the one who really instilled a genuine interest in art History in Red. She taught him about all the old masters and a great respect for Picasso's work was born and has failed to wain.

Nashvilles parthenon also brought the Museum of Modern Art travelling show which also helped to broaden and embellish Red's knowledge of art. Some of the works in this show which impressed him the most as being vital and energizing were by George Grosz, Ben Shahn and Joseph Stella.

Before this time Red had played around with the idea of becoming a commercial artist, having been impressed by the liveliness of illustration in the 'American Artist' Magazine and enrolled in the Famous artist school for a course in commercial art but as his knowledge of art history increaed the desire to create commercial art dwindled. He says that while it did'nt work out the way he envisaged he learnt the invaluable techniques of observation and the ability of memorizing minute details.

Leaving Nashville behind him at the age of nineteen, Red entered a new phase in his life. In the autumn of 1955, he enrolled in the school of the Art Institute of Chicago. The realisation of the limits of an institutionalised art education left Red feeling totally disillusioned. He felt that having to take still life and figure drawing classes a very dry approach, and spent most of his time in the college library discovering artists like Jean Dubuffet and Francis Bacon who soon became favourites. While the new experience of big city life held him fascinated it wasn't enough to override his sense of claustrophobia in college and one day he just decided to get up and go home. Leaving everything behind in his college locker, he waved goodbye to Chicago.

The bad experience was not enough to deter Grooms, and in January 1956, he became a pupil at the New School on 12th Street in Manhattan, where he was taught by Gregorio Prestopino one day a week. Red describes this period as one when he experienced acute isolation. He was stuck living in the McBurney Y.M.C.A. on 23rd St. and was never really in the position to meet other artists.

He spent most of his spare time visting art galleries and managed to view new shows of work by William de Kooning, Philip Guston and Franz Kline which was the only thrilling factor about New York during this time. After returning to Nashville in Summer '56, he decided to stay and take up teacher training at the George Peabody College for teachers. He spent a year doing this but admits that he did it only to satisfy his parents as they were genuinly worried about him not having practical career skills behind him. It was another way of escaping being enrolled in the army which would never have appealed to him. Another reason for this teacher training course was to ensure a way of making a living. Commercial art he had given up on, so teaching seemed the most logical alternative.

It may have been an alternative, but it certainly was'nt the solution as Red began to realise the consequences of spending the rest of his life in a classroom. His one and only conclusion was that he wanted to persist with a career as an artist and it was by pure chance that his mother, while leafing through "Time" magazine read an article about Hans Hoffman's school in Provincetown.

So off Red went again to find some sort of satisfaction under the well respected tutelage of Hans Hoffman.

Grooms was chosen as class monitor because the rest of his fellow students were female and Hoffman wanted a man to sweep up. Grooms was delighted as he felt he had a title even if it only gave him the authority to clean out the classroom. At least he was 'somebody'

But yet again, he was to be dissillusioned with the whole attitude to art and especially the regard with which Hoffman was held by the entire community of Provincetown. Hoffmanism was taking over and the conflict which Grooms had was in the area of figurative imagery. He had already established his own aesthetic preferences by the age of eighteen and they did'nt leave room to entertain Hoffmans acedemic teaching. He opted out of the course half way through it's 5 week duration. He had lost complete interest.

Figurative elements were never really scoffed by Hoffman, but all figurative references had disappeared from his work during the 1940's and this is how he once referred to them.

"The Pictorial life as a Pictorial Reality results from the aggregate of two and three dimensional tensions"

(8)

Grooms reckoned that to come out with such an abstract pronouncement meant that Hoffman believed that to produce serious art, was to produce works of abstraction. For Grooms this was so radical that one either went along with this idea or resisted it totally.

It was the latter choice which Red favoured and he wasn't alone either as he was soon to find out. While supporting himself as a dishwasher at the Moors Restaurant, Red became friends with his fellow worker Dominic 'Val' Falcone.

Val Falcone happened to be the co-proprietor of a small gallery in Provincetown called the Sun Gallery with his wife painter Yvonne Anderson. It was in the establishing of a friendship with these two people when Red started to find his feet and a direction he felt comfortable with. It was also Val Falcone who knicknamed Grooms 'Red' because Charles didn't match this young kid's exciting personality and decided that the colour of his hair suited him better. The name stuck ever since.

The Sun Gallery, being more than just a business enterprise was set up with the view that it could be an outlet for young alternative and innovative artists working on the east coast. Red witnessed many solo and group shows here including works by Jan Miller, Lester Johnson and Yvonne Anderson and Allan Kaprew all during that summer when he met them first. Red was absolutely delighted with his new friends and by the end of his first summer in Provincetown, he was collaborating with Anderson on some projects. (Illus. 4) One example of this was an experimental piece called 'Friends The object of this was to emphasize the private act of painting and so both of them were required to place paperbags over their heads, with holes in them for eyes and mouth. (Illus. 5) They had to work on a canvas simultaneously every night at midnight for a week. They were not allowed to speak during this operation just paint away on the canvas on the gallery wall. Val Falcone was their audience and he recorded the performance for them

Their reason for doing this was based on the notion of the action painters that the canvas is the visual record of the artists private performance. Grooms, Anderson and Val Falcone were challenging the idea and the performance was devised to quash the notion.



ILLUSTRATION (4)
Red Grooms and
Dominic Val Falcone
outside the sun
Gallery in
Summer 1958



ILLUSTRATION (5)
Red Grooms (on left)
and Yvonne Andersen
preparing to paint
Friends 1958
Photo by Falcone

The two artists started painting without saying a word, the atmosphere taking on that of a ritual. The two of them painted human heads, a thoroughly figurative representational piece. This served to ridicule the ego of the abstract expressionists which had become so fashionably macho. Red and Yvonne were challenging the idea that there was indeed something almost sacred in the realms of the artist and his material. Their little performance was absolute mockery.

It was in the following Spring that Allan Kaprow organised the picnic for members of the Hansa Gallery at George Segals New Jersey farm. One of the activities which Kaprow initiated was the collective painting of a picture by everyone present. This shows parallels in his thinking and that of Yvonne's and Grooms back in the Sun Gallery. Grooms admits that the events which occurred at Kaprows picnic performing acts "opened things up" for him with reference to his happenings a few years later. (9)

Provincetown provided the perfect foundation for Grooms. He met people who were thinking on the same wavelength as himself, who like his style and liked his personality enough to become close friends. With the confidence he gained in these associations and in his art, he was just about ready to tackle New York again.

Footnotes (Introduction & Chapter 1)

1. Paul Richards, AN APPRECIATION P.P. 9-15
2. Louise Le Quire RETROSPECTIVE OF RED GROOMS
P.6
3. Michael Kirby HAPPENINGS P.63
4. Carter Ratcliff RED GROOMS P.30
5. Carter Ratcliff RED GROOMS P.30
6. Judith E. Stein RED GROOMS A RETROSPECTIVE
P.30
7. Carter Ratcliff RED GROOMS P.30
8. Judith E. Stein RED GROOMS A RETROSPECTIVE
p.32
9. Judith E. Stein RED GROOMS A RETROSPECTIVE
p.50

Chapter 2

WHAT GROOMS IS CONCERNED WITH IN HIS WORK
AND THE MEDIA HE USES (THE CONSTANT
PRESENCE OF THEATRE AND SPECTACLE THROUGHOUT
HIS WORK)

+ HIS CONCERN FOR AUDIENCE PARTICIPATION

+ HIS TECHNIQUES

Grooms attitude to theatre coincided with that which he had for art in general - these were quite simple requirements. Like Artaud Grooms felt that theatre should be accessible to everyone. He wanted to retreat from the idea of theatre being a vehicle to express the literary word. He did'nt want to abolish speech but use it as subordinate to the overall production.

Formally, theatre was something that was principally accessible to those who were receptive to the literary form of representation. The level of importance put on the spoken word in theatre seemed to dictate to all the other elements, including the visual and physicality of the stage itself.

He felt that every spectacle should contain a physical and objective element which could be appreciated by everyone.

Grooms used these ideas when he set out to produce his happenings in the late fifties. The inistence that a work of art was not necessarily to be grasped or held but that all of the senses of the spectators should be engaged was of utmost importance. The work was supposed to be a mechanism for producing a particular sensation or series of sensations.

The spectator of a happening no longer asked 'what is it' but 'how am I to react to it'? Happenings were compelling 'art' to take on a more personal subjective role.

The existence of 'environments' provided a perfect performing ground for happening artists. Where they were the manipulations of space and designed to provoke audience response within the given space performance provided within that space was a natural progression.

'Happenings' or otherwise the amalgamation of art and theatre was not entirely a novel movement as its roots were in the past. The dadaists like the Russian and Italian futurists, who immediately proceeded then, had already channelled a lot of their energy into theatrical presentations. (2) Happenings did not evolve from the idea that art should be presented in the theatrical form, but because it entailed the use of performance it was labelled as another form of theatre.

It's roots remained in the artists studio, not in theatre and it was really the extension of an 'art sensitively' into a situation which called on such elements as sound , time durations, gestures, sensations touch and smell. (3)

The spectator at a happening was not supplied with characters and plot as in normal theatre, but was bombarded with sensations which he was responsible to sort out himself.

Grooms happenings 'the burning building' 1959 and the 'Magic Train Ride' 1960 were part of a natural progression for him. Even when happenings began to lose their novelty within the art scene, he continued to work with performance. His concern for audience participation with his work highlights his early relationship with state fairs, carnivals, circuses etc., and happenings formed the foundations of how he was going to present his work as and from that time.

After his trip to Europe with Mimi Gross and her friend Katherine Keane, Grooms made a film called 'Shoot The Moon' with the help of Rudy Burkhardt, Mimi and others in 1962.

This was his first step back into the New York artworld and proved that he was'nt going to forfeit his use of performance in his artpieces. His association with theatre and film continued - he built sets for 'Guinevere' a play by Kenneth Kock, and he acted in Burkhardt's film 'Lurk' in 1964



ILLUSTRATION (6) Premier of the film 'Shoot the Moon' at St. Marks Place 1963
L-R Mimi Gross, Red Grooms Yvonne Jacquette and Edwin Denby.
Photo by Rudy Burkhardt.

In 1966 he made his second film 'Fat Feet' in collaboration with Falcone and Yvonne Anderson (Former proprietors of the sun gallery in Provincetown) and Mimi Gross.

The object of the film was to record how performers could handle walking around with fat feet. It was a joke where ordinary flat feet were transformed into huge extensions which Grooms made out of cardboard etc.

The characters seemed to be wearing gigantic cardboard shoes ranging in size from suit-cases to baby carriages. The films questioned the difficulties which these hindrances put on the characters and was a way of recording how they tackled the problem of stomping or shuffling from one end of the set to the other.

The set was a city scape with backdrops of streets, buildings and dubious looking characters. Illus 7/8

In 1967 Grooms started to construct the City of Chicago which was his firstsculpto-pictorama piece, the dimensions of which were 500 sq. ft. x 11 ft. This was how Grooms depicted Chicago City, in a set like tableau piece made up of important elements like the historical Arch of Chicago, the Railway lines, and trains and buildings etc. He used this for the set of his film Tappy Toes in 1968 Illus. 9/10



ILLUSTRATION (7)
Bertie Hartman
as Nurse in
Fat Feet and
Jean Falcone as Baby



ILLUSTRATION (8)
Dominic Falcone in
Fat Feet



ILLUSTRATION (9)
City of Chicago

The Art Institute Lions
1967
Collaboration of Mimi
Gross and Red Grooms
Mixed Media and
Mechanical Parts
12 x 25 x 25'



ILLUSTRATION (10)
City of Chicago

Other works using performance and film include Hippodrome Hardware which was presented in New York for three weekends in May 1972 as part of a collection of performances by New York artists entitled the big six units show. He used collage for film, action painting and brightly painted environments and the cast included Mimi, Red and other friends.

This performance was based around a clown-like character 'Ruckus' played by Grooms, (Illus. 11) who would act out different occupations from sculptor, hair stylist, portrait painter, to dancing instructor, all with the aid of volunteers whom he lured from the audience. Ruckus was joined on stage by four over-alled workmen who's main occupation during the performance was to construct a pre-fab house on stage. The performance was interrupted frequently by the occurrence of strange visual events which were designed to build up to a climax. Mr. Ruckus held up hand painted signs throughout the performance instructing the audience what occupation he was about to enact.

In 1975 Grooms embarked on a project which is probably his most known and highly acclaimed works to date.



ILLUSTRATION (11)

From HIPPODROME HARDWARE 1972
Grooms as 'Ruckus' holding up sign
live performance at Walker Street
Studio, New York

Grooms had just met a woman called Anita Contini, the director of a non-profit making organisation called Creative Time. Her organisation was in negotiations with commercial enterprizes in New York city to encourage the siting of artistic works within the commercial district.

Creative time arranged for Grooms and Gross to construct an environmental work in the lobby of 88 Pine Street, an office building in the Wall Street area.

So Grooms, Gross and thirty assistants who formed the Ruckus Construction Company, set out to recreate all of Manhattan in the form of a huge sprawling, elaborately, detailed environment called Ruckus Manhattan a sculptural Novel. Illus. 12/17

They spent many days drawing and photo-graphying local people and buildings and their eye for social and architectural detail is acute. They began with New York harbour, then streets and buildings of the financial district.

It was Grooms way of making New York into a larger than life fantasy world.



ILLUSTRATION (13)
Ruckus Manhattan
Detail of the Woolworth
Building sculpture
17 x 14 x 15'
Collection of
Marlborough Gallery
N.Y.C.

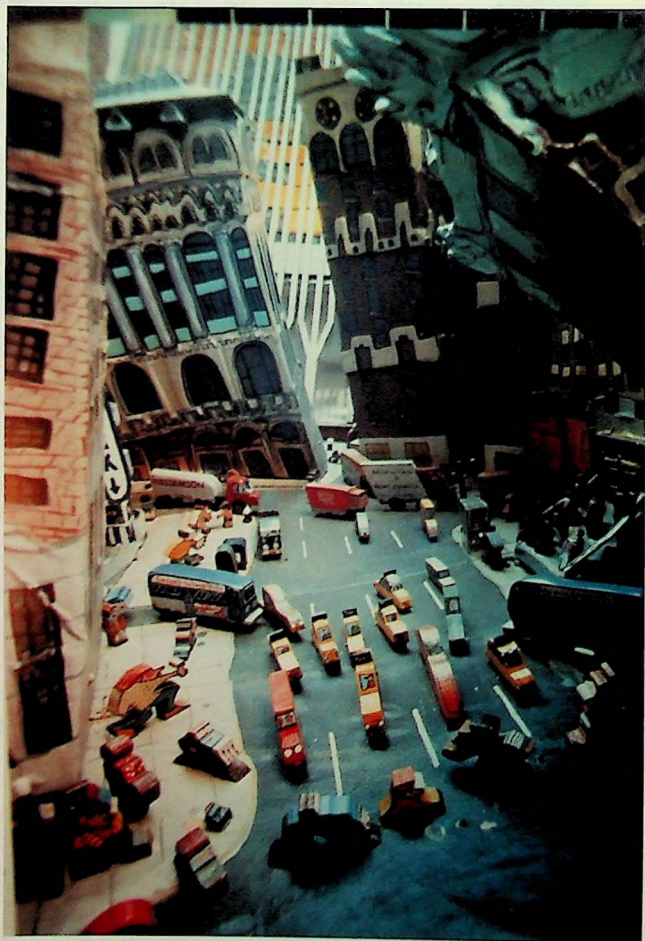


ILLUSTRATION (12)
Street Chaos



ILLUSTRATION (14)
Ruckus Manhattan
M/S Liberty 75-76
Mixed Media 15 x 10 x 10"
By Mimi Gross

ILLUSTRATION (15)
Chinese cooks from
Ruckus Manhattan.





ILLUSTRATION (17)
Subway Detail from
Ruckus Manhattan
9' x 18'7" x 37'2"

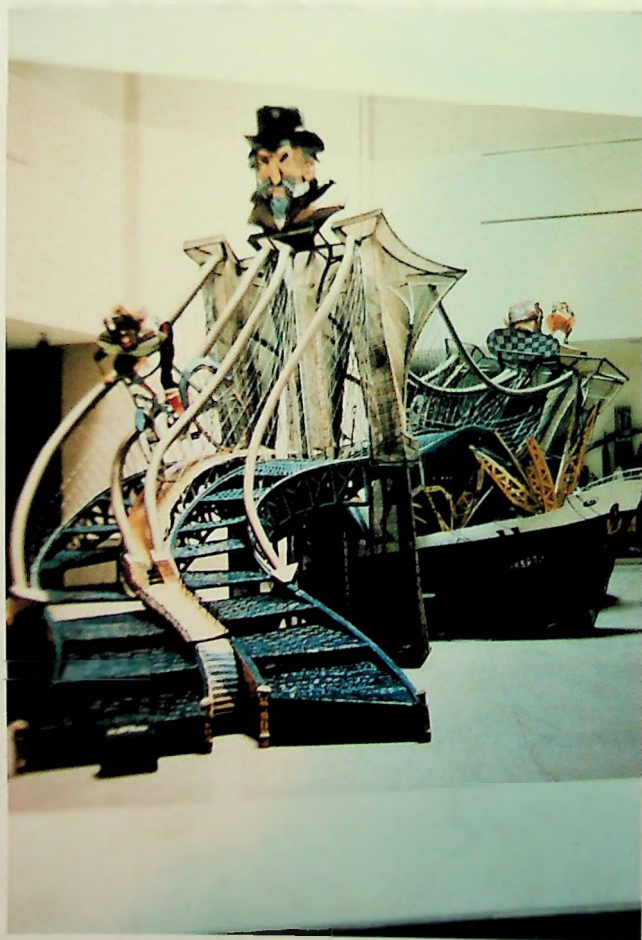


ILLUSTRATION (16)
Brooklyn Bridge '75
Enamel on Steel
30' x 14' x 17'

Choosing to symbolise rather than depict every detail he made Chinese Cooks stand for Chinatown, a porno shop for 42nd St. and Rockefeller Centre Skating Rink for Midtown. Illus 15

Once Ruckus Manhattan was completed, it was a huge hit and with the help of the national press, which granted it massive coverage, visitors which are estimated at over 50,000 clambered and roamed through it's plywood streets, rode the ferry and subway and climbed one of its 30ft. world trade centre-towers.

Grooms is delighted if his work is responded to as if it were some sort of carnvial funhouse, for he is not so concerned that his work be considered as 'art; whether it be high, low, popular or folk. The important aspect of his work is that he has reached his non-art world audience and they love it. He has used the ordinary man in the street for subject matter. For instance, his statue of liberty is a secretary wearing red platform heels (Illus 14) and he has incorporated two life-size caricatures of Real-Life characters (Paul Bernstein and Jack Schnair) standing at their Newstand on Wall Street.

Grooms although providing such a delightful piece of work in such an entertaining way, is not turning a blind eye to the real New York.

He's not that naive, in fact the methods he has employed to depict New York's bustling Manhattan serve to intensity the absurdity of the goings on. So much happens so fast in such a small space with so many people that everyone ceases to notice the suicide, the bank explosion or the office clerk in the Woolworth building who disappears in the grip of two mysterious hands. Illus 13.

The carnival element conjures up the idea that just as there are scary roller-coasters, which we ride for the thrill of being frightened, Manhattan must also be ridden for the thrill of the pollution, rubbish, violence, towering monstrosities, and crazy nasty people who inhabit it. Most of all, the over-riding idea behind this piece of work is to show and manifest the consuming power of capitalism for it is the pressures of capitalism which makes Manhattan the landmark which it is.

Brooke Alexander, the New York critic for the 'Art International' Magazine, describes (in May 1975 issue) Grooms beautifully whacky sense of humour and appears to be delighted with Grooms hommages to the modernist heroes. (4)

"Grooms talent lies in making art out of a look of innocense, and what makes his work bearable is the way he exaggerates and pinpoints the absurdities of city Denizin's styles with complete accuracy and yet never viciously, the truer he is to the spirit behind apperances, the more affectionate he gets"

Grooms use of sculpto-pictoramas like Ruckus Manhattan, Discount Store (Illus 18) and City of Chicago, could be viewed as his way of putting something over on the gullible. His works are funny, light-hearted and in a way inviting. They don't intimidate.

Like a spider weaves a web for his victims, so Grooms provides his own web in the shape of carnival-like sets which are not that much fun when a closer look is taken. His works have the look of innocense but in a way this leaves him more room for satire within them.

ILLUSTRATION (18) 'The Discount Store'
Sculpto Pictorama Acrylic on
Wood & Mixed Media.



If the satirical content in his work is picked up then obviously relating to Grooms work is not always a pleasant experience.

He provides the background for the plot but once his viewer steps inside he is responsible for his own performance. The larger than life quality which runs through the work has an almost nightmarish effect because while his subjects are drawn from real life, his treatment of them is sometimes very scary.

What is very characteristic of Grooms is that his cut-outs of people and objects or his sculptured caricatures of people often appear to have the same quality as their immediate environment. Another obvious aspect of this style is the juxta-positing of elements of differing scales.

This can have quite disorienting affects on the viewer while his usual detailed activity within his visual field also can be intimidating. The reason for this, is that there is a lack of strong selective focus which sometimes an audience needs. This detailed treatment of all his subjects does not leave scope for focusing in on singular areas.

By selecting a particular image and making it significant in a piece of work is cheating the viewer out of making his own mind up as to what elements are most important to him. At the same time, one could say that it is obviously the commitment of providing specific imagery.

A strong example of this treatment can be seen in The Maine Room (Illus 19) where Grooms is depicting a scene full of his friends and the treatment of the people does not differ from the background.



ILLUSTRATION (19) Maine Room 1965
Casein on Wood Paper and
Cardboard in Plexiglass box
12 x 23 x 23"

Footnotes for chapter 2.

Chapter on Theatre.

1. Michael Kirby HAPPENINGS P147

2. Laurence Alloway TOPICS IN AMERICAN ART SINCE
1945 P195

3. Judith E. Stein RED GROOMS A RETROSPECTIVE
P.21

4. Brooke Alexander ART INTERNATIONAL MAY 15.
75 ISSUE

Chapter 3

GROOMS CRITICAL RECEPTION

RELATIONSHIP OF ARTIST AND AUDIENCE.

The art of Red Grooms has never been overwhelmingly accepted by the serious collectors or prominent critics of the avantgarde. This is a complex issue and stems from the fact that in general one avoids an investment or commitment to an art which is just intened to be funny. Although this work raises an immediate reation of laughter, the humour often requires a double take.

Unfortunatley the double take isn't always grasped and because critics get suspicious when they sense that they are just being entertained Grooms is not always accommodated within their systems.

It is interesting on the other hand that Claes Oldenburg's large sculptures Gigantic Hamburger and Deflated Fans, his Toilet Float on the Thames or Monumental Lipstick mounted to the body of a tank have been readily accepted by the critics. Although these are equally as humorous as Grooms, they are highly regarded by the critical scholars, collectors and general public. (1)

The difference is that Oldenburg is overtly commenting on issues which can be applied on a more universal level in this case political or sexual.

Some would say that the entertaining quality in Grooms works overpowers whatever satirical comment he might have had in mind but that does'nt seem to bother him in the slightest. Grooms works with a freedom responsible neither to the world nor to the modernist ideology in which art criticism is swamped.

The irony attached to this is that the average gallery-goer does not cast an individual vote to assure an artist success. In the eyes of the artworld this privilage belongs to the critic.

The freedom with which Grooms works allows him to create work using every mode of artistic expression available including painting, drawing, printmaking, film-making, sculpture and theatre etc. This also gives rise to conflict because spreading oneself thick in a number of media is regarded as an unorthodox way of working. (2) It seems that in specialising in one medium of expression one is granted more respect as mixing media is generally perceived as adversarial not alternative.

So with Grooms's extensive use of different media, coupled with a sense of humour, he seems to be out to antagonize the whole realm of high art. In fact he admits to consciously working against the art world's orderly groupings.

"I've always felt that it is good to have the art context because it gives you something to go against"
(3)

He doesn't create work which will immediately justify itself in the hands of the art world by appealing to advanced aesthetics. This doesn't manifest a weakness in him or his work but rather proves his strength and commitment to himself first and foremost which I believe is paramount.

Proof of Grooms unwillingness to compromise shows in the fact that he has never been categorised with any group or any art movement since he decided to pursue his career in 1955

He has momentarily been classed as one of the happening artists, or as a pop artist during the time when such movements emerged, but he has never been involved with any movement long enough to be categorised within the boundaries which they inevitably establish.

Grooms deliberately shied away from groups because they immediately confine your behaviour. He wanted to develop his own work on his own terms.

In 1959 he produced "The Burning Building" (Illus 20) a controversial happening "at which were spotted such uptown critics as Dr. Mayer Schapiro, Robert Frank, Howard Hart, and Bernard Scott" (4) Media and audience interest in happenings were rapidly growing, and along with that, came Grooms first one-man show in January 1960 in the Reuben Gallery. The Gallery was set up by Anita Reuben as "an outpost for human image art in a sea of abstract expressionism" (5)

The Gallery had a short life only being open from October 1959 to April 1961 but it managed to show during this short time such up and coming artists as Jim Dine, George Brecht, Claes Oldenburg, Lester Johnson and George Segal among others.

The first six months of 1960 brought Red an expanded audience and news of his work began to grow beyond the avantgarde circles of lower Manhattan.

Fairfield Porter singled Grooms out of a February group show at the Reuben to praise his vitality in the publication "The Nation"



ILLUSTRATION (20)

The Burning Building
A performance at the Delancey St. Museum
1959 - The Happening for which Grooms
earned great acclaim.

Public attention to happenings was at its height during the 60/61 season at the Reuben but Red did not participate. Looking back in retrospect, he felt that he had lost the thread of what it was he was doing. He began to analyse too much, and in the process became too self-conscious

Later that year, in June, Red had a piece of Relief Sculpture "policewoman" 1959 shown at the Martha Jackson Gallery in an exhibition, New Media - New Forms
1

In reviewing the exhibition, Thomas B. Hess the New York critic had this to say in foretelling public acclaim for 'pop' and Grooms art.

"There is a kind of protest in many of these works but it is not against the values of middle class society as were the Dada manifestations rather, the new protest is in favour of society or for people in general and against the invisible crystal hard barriers that an art-on-canvas or sculptured sculpture place between the witness and the finished object. It is as if many of these artists were trying to reach out from their works to give the spectators hand a good shake or nudge in the ribs" (6)

Grooms was excited about the pop art movement and knew that he could stay in New York and be secured a place alongside Dine, Oldenburg, and Kaprow, etc. as pop had now formulated for itself a new critical category. It is true that he shared many of their concerns in his work as Laurence Alloway observed at the exhibitions and happenings at the Reuben in which all of these artists were involved.

"The city and it's inhabitants was not only the subject of much of this art, it was also literally the substance providing the texture and bulk of the material itself." (7)

The same month, June 1960, Grooms packed his bags and headed off for Europe, just as he was on the threshold of a new phase in his career. Having been given the stamp of approval by the New York critics, he decided to forfeit the benefits and seek new challenges.

He believed that artists who survive from any given period, are those who smash and combine existing norms instead of setting up headquarters in them.

He needed new challenges and in an attempt to learn more about the field he was in, he went straight to the land of the old masters, Leonardo, Michaelangelo, Giotto etc., and he joined forces with Mimi Gross and Katherine Keane who had a studio in Florance, Italy.

Painting from this time shows how he was strongly influenced by the high key colours, bold compositions and everyday, subjects of the Italian Macchialioli Group:" (7) Illus 21/24

When he arrived back in New York, he had a bigger and more daunting challenge ahead of him. He had to reintroduce himself to the art scene at a time when art chauvinism was at an all time high. Those artist friends he left behind were receiving continual favourable criticism and were reveling in the knowledge that they had contributed to the creation of pop revolution.

Grooms way of dealing with this, was not to redirect his work to fit in with what was going on. He could'nt. His work had taken a new perspective and so he immersed himself in a year long project creating his first feature film "Shoot-the-Moon"



ILLUSTRATION (21)

Two Italians 1981

Oil on canvas 19½ x 25½"



ILLUSTRATION (22)

Expatriate

Oil on canvas
27¼ x 19½"

Red Grooms was about to encounter problems. The sort of criticism which presided over art in the 1960's assumed that important art demanded self-important criticism, so art which invited a lighter touch could almost be dismissed out of hand.

"I like to make documentaries, something you can see as it happens, what people wear and do" (8)

Comments like this one from Grooms regarding his work only served to incite cynical responses because in the sort of documentation which Grooms created, he didn't question his imagery sufficiently. He chose to dwell on the amusing or humorous aspects of human nature in some of his work and because of the light hearted nature of his work, he was treated equally lighthearted by the hierarchy of the art system. Grooms annoyed the system by not openly questioning his subject matter. His work was in some ways a study of people and their environment but the art system would have been more satisfied if Grooms had said that he was questioning the environment and how people react within it. He wouldn't give them the benefit of conforming to this and continued to believe that to be taken seriously, one didn't have to dwell on or represent the sombre side of life.

Not all critics and art journals were against Grooms ideals. In fact, in 1966, Artnews published a review of his work by the poet Ted Berrigan. It was entitled "Red Power" and in his treatment of Grooms, Berrigan showed him as an artist immunised against the ordinary sorts of critical discussions.

"The paintings seem to indicate that Red paints what he sees and feels" (9)

This comment from Berrigan suggests that Grooms used expressionistic traits in the execution of his work, but that was only one from a huge source of styles which Red derived influence from. Dadaism questioned the preciousness of the artworld and didn't hold any regard or respect for it and futurism made the mixing of media a valid way of resolving a piece of work. Berrigan did not go into the usual line of questioning regarding the form, source and place within the current structure of the art system. He knew that it couldn't be justified under the same criterion by which Red's contemporaries would be judged and decided to leave it out.

Red passionately believed that the individual imagination was sufficient enough to enhance an artist's sensibility whereas in the American Modernist 1960's that sensibility was considered to be a critical, not a creative faculty. This is where I find a conflict.

As an artist, you are told that 'you have to remain responsible to your audience' The audience seems to be broken down into two distinct groups, the art critics and the general public. The art critics of the art world devise the criterion by which an artist can create work. The general public, which proportionately makes up a much higher percentage is usually ignorant or indifferent to modernisms past or the criterion devised by art criticism. So in this light, it seems that by remaining responsible to your audience, you have to create work which will only be understood by art world people. I cannot help but be irritated by this absolute show of elitism and question it's validity. For a start, the critics will judge artwork on the basis of an education which the general public doesn't have, but does this mean that the ordinary unart conscious person doesn't have the right to his/her individual response to a piece of art?

Red Grooms certainly believed that they did, and it was the fact that he wanted to create art for as wide a spectrum of the community as possible, that he was also snubbed by the critics.

"I think that what makes me an impure artist or perhaps not an artist at all, is that I'm totally fascinated with people and I'm more into the personage than trying to make whatever it is " (10)

Remaining responsible to his audience was never really an issue with Grooms, as is confirmed in this statement. By using people as subjects for his work, it was an extension of what really interested him, and in doing just that he remained responsible to himself.

By creating any sort of art, and presenting it to an audience, an artist has to be aware of the questions which will follow but by spending too much time considering it's response would almost certainly stifle the creative process.

Questioning the end product before it is in existence would be hypothetical. However, it isn't wrong to question the work through each stage of the production because it is essential to know what elements work and what dont.

If an artist feels strongly enough about an idea or concept, then the work should flow as a natural response. The questioning which will inevitably be provoked should be easily answered with conviction because the artist has conceived and executed the idea without contrivations and in this case deserves justification.

FOOTNOTES FOR CHAPTER 3

1. "Ruckus World of Red Grooms" ARTFORUM p79
March '74
2. Review of Grooms Exhibiton ART INTERNATIONAL
P.84 MARCH 20TH '74
3. Judith E. Stein RED GROOMS
RETROSPECTIVE P.13
4. Judith E. Stein RED GROOMS
RETROSPECTIVE
5. Anita Reuben TOPICS IN AMERICAN
ART SINCE 1945 P152
6. Thomas B. Hess MIXED MEDIUMS FOR A
SOFT REVOLUTION
ART NEWS 59 SUMMER
1960 P.45
7. Judith E. Stein RETROSPECTIVE p36
8. Judith E. Stein RETROSPECTIVE P 45
9. Carter Ratcliff RED GROOMS
10. Judith E. Stein RETROSPECTIVE P46

C O N C L U S I O N

In December 1983, 'The Vasari Diary' in Art news reported a funny incident regarding one of Grooms pieces of work. It is a sculpture titled 'Shoot-out' and comes in the form of a 26 foot long wagon in which a Cowboy and Indian fight it out wild west style with bullets and arrows whizzing above their heads.

It seems that controversy surrounded 'Shoot-out' since it first appeared in the plaza of an office complex near the university of Colorado's downtown Denver complex.

Tenants did'nt object to the subject but rater the size of it. By arrangement with the university it was moved to a traffic island in another section of Denver. Seating areas were built and landscaping was in progress when controversy broke out again.

Native American Indians objected to Grooms interpretation of the old west, saying that it was still showing a demeaning idea of what the Indians were like and that it was the cavalry who committed the atrocities, not the natives. More complaints came from Feminists who claimed that the piece trivialised violence.

Students and faculty members claimed that it was ugly, and this reached the university board, which eventually ruled that Shoot-out by removed from university property. Despite all the contraversy Shoot-Out found a house in the Denver Art Museum.

The Curator, Dianne Vanderlip said,

"everybody is very happy that it found a home that is appropriate and where it is going to be safe and admired"

This is important in highlighting one simple fact:- You can't please everyone. You're bound to offend someone. In the case of Shoot-out, the general public which is normally the first to respond favourably to his work, is the very audience which Grooms has grievously irritated.

This incident is also important in highlighting the fact that once placed in a Gallery or museum, it functions as art, and within that context, the possibilities of interpretation and acceptance become much broader. It is indeed the art world's structure which in this case serves as Grooms point of origin, support and validator.

This is not a painful reminder of his dependance on the art world. This is a security which Grooms is worthy of. The strength of Grooms lies in his perseverance in doing what he believes in and it is therefore comforting to know that those in the hierarchy of Modern Art, even though they have been in contention with Grooms in the past, have grown to recognise that he speaks too loudly to be ignored.

The fact that he has featured the same images in his work throught out his career from 1955 to the present proves his enduring interests and he manages to do this with an acute awareness of his own which does not rely on simplistic formulas.

The humour for which he is renowned allows him to deal with issues concerning his contemporary world without the restrictions of political dogma which is utilised all too often to add substance to work.

Grooms has done as much as any artist of our age to crack the sour humour that rules the realm of art and for this reason, I admire and respect his determination.



ILLUSTRATION (25)

'Shoot-Out' 80-82

Cast and Fabricated Bronze
Denver Art Museum.

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