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ART

Errò: secret agent
of the art world

by Georgina Oliver

Errò? South American, I had always fancied. Because of the name. Because of the cataclysmic avalanche of strident pop-political, Errò-ticoviolent images cascading down his deliberately overcrowded compositions, or copiously welling up from behind the canvas' lowest, obscurest corner like a cloud of carbon-monoxide fumes of Hiroshima proportions.

But nordic Errò is no rescued guerilla hero. Born 1932 in Olafsvik, Iceland. Tall. Fair. Strong. Genial. The pseudonym is as fabricated and fanciful as the collection of picture clippings, cartoon fragments, and cropped advertisements — graphic remnants recuperated, processed, driven like a car or herd of animals into his highly concentrated representations of the world now, of the universe tomorrow, as told by the media.

Errò's paintings are bumper-car rides with all the media and nothing but the media. Forcing not one doctrine or hard-sell, but everyman's propaganda into head-on collisions. His current preoccupation («nobody — well almost — has seen these yet»): Soviet anti-this-and-that propaganda. Anti-Jewish. Anti-French. Anti-British. Anti-museums. You name it. Errò's formula: intensity of image(s) presented equals density of documentation available. «I'm going to need a huge canvas for the anti-U.S. picture!»

His work is far more complex than that of Warhol, Lichtenstein, or Rosenquist, but he is just as anxious to avoid heavy-handed moralization; «interpretation is up to the spectator», he says. Errò is conscious of the competition — pop made in U.S.A. It has been suggested that the fundamental difference between European and American pop is that Euro-pop accuses society, while the U.S. version only reflects it. Errò comments:

«I am for a return to narrative painting. (That is not popular at the moment.) But that doesn't mean I want to make didactic pictures.

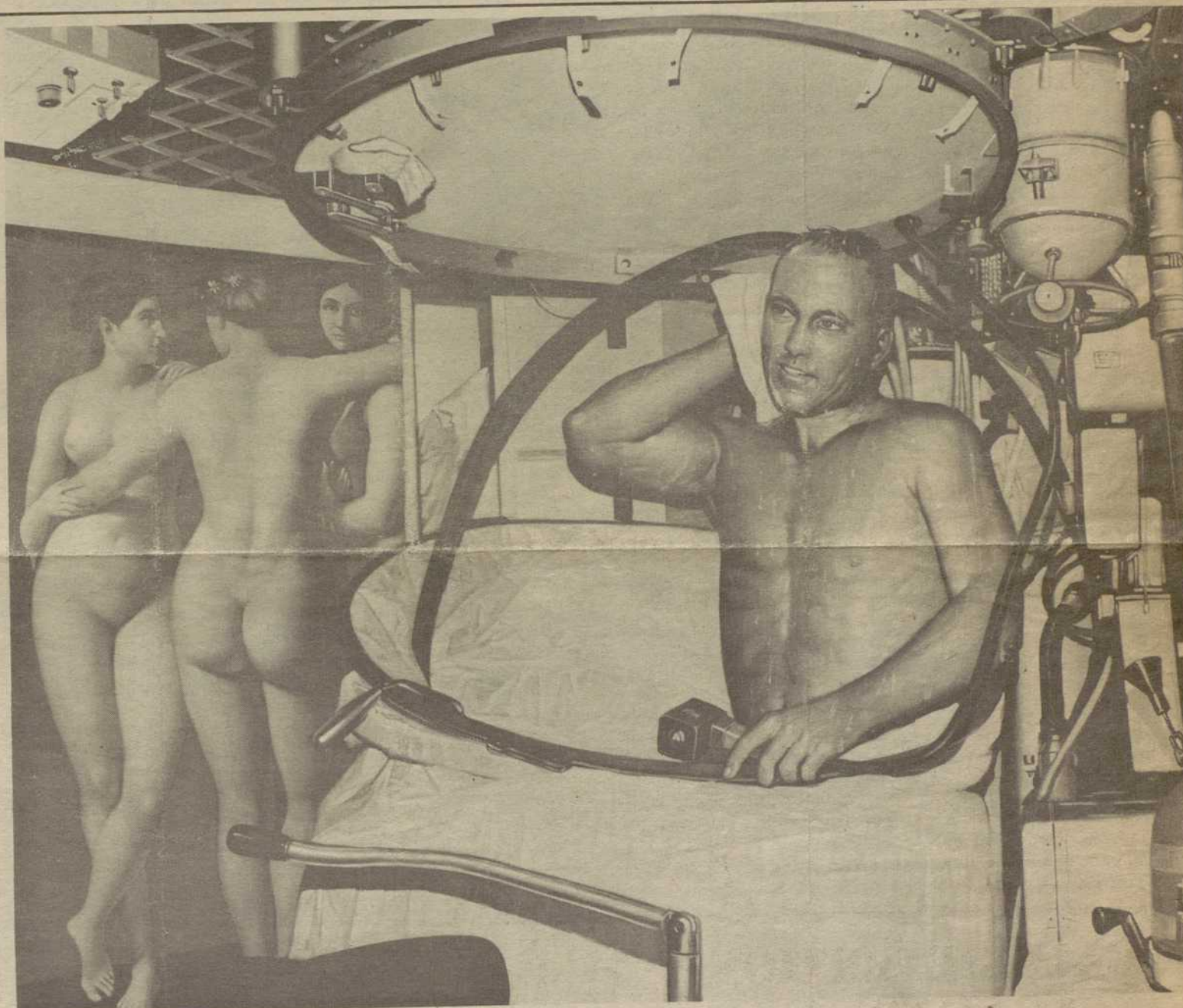
«American pop does not even reflect society. It tends to be simplistic. Like just a detail, which does not mean much.»

G.O.: In the current Paris Biennale catalogue, Michael Compton points out that the Pop period came about at a time when advertisers and certain writers identified characters in terms of the products they consumed.

Errò: «Yes, it's just a detail. People the world over save soup cans because they like the look of them. To keep pencils in, in New York. To keep kitchen utensils in, in Saudi Arabia. Or the other way 'round. They don't take the label off. They leave them as they were when they bought them. But that does not say much about either of those people. There has to be more to it than that.»

Errò is well qualified to mix-and-match references to the world's media. He is a roving artist, like they don't make enough of these days, like not enough of them can afford to be. If he were an international spy, he could not be more thorough — gleaning pamphlets, comic strips, packages, and local-style illustrations wherever he happens to be, with the eagerness of a young reporter. All filed when he gets back to base in Paris, for use in three or four years' time perhaps. When he least expects it. «It's all there waiting», he says pointing to a drawer with a cute puppy stencil stuck on it, «that's the dog file, with heads in one drawer and legs in another.»

Errò the person is like Errò's painting: you never know whether he is joking or not. «I was studying at art school to become an important professor and serious abstract artist,



«Skylab shower», 1976.

in the clique, out there», he says in an appropriately pompous tone. «I won a lottery ticket prize of about 3000 dollars; an aunt had bought it for me. That enabled me to get out of Iceland. I earned extra money as a carpenter when I came back home and I was free because I had lots of money from the carpentry and lottery put together. I would go away for frequent brief spells. I went to Italy. To Ravenna. I'm trained to make mosaics, you know. I have a diploma and did a great deal of restoration in Ravenna.»

Errò's material is rarely secondhand, though he does ask friends to look for particular themes which he is researching for a «scape.» (Fishscape, 1974, 200 x 300 cm. Foodscape, 1965, 200 x 300 cm. Lovescape, 1973, 200 x 300 cm. Plainscape, 1970, 200 x 300 cm, for example.) They send him exotic food labels or postcards like the one of former British Premiers Heath, Thorpe, and Wilson grimly carrying red wreathes on Remembrance Day pinned up in the kitchen of his small, not-done-up atelier on rue de Buci. «I have this and a small apartment nearby as pied-à-terres in Paris, but otherwise I live like — I can't tell you — six months of the year in Thailand (his wife's homeland), winters in Spain at Formentera . . . I used to be in New York during the winter. Now it seems I'm never in one place.»

He cuts up Soviet satire magazine *Krokodile* as it comes in and returns from Moscow or New York with heaps of goodies in his suitcases, full of childlike excitement at the thought of getting back to work in his mince-meat-factory studio. For the «Space Program» series to be seen until October 29 at the Beaubourg 1 Gallery (23 rue du Renard, Paris 4e, tel: 887.62.63), he gathered his documentary data on-the-spot in Houston, Texas.

G.O.: How did they feel about your work at Houston? Weren't they afraid of you? I mean

surely they're very security conscious!

Errò: «No, they're all young and smiling, mainly under 30. Involved in this huge thing called space. It's very special. In fact they were wonderful. Most of all they did not want astronauts' features to be distorted if they appeared in my pictures.»

For an artist whose work has an uneasily ambiguous, subversive feel to it, Errò seems to have quite an easy *entente* with officials, whatever their provenance. When he showed his Mao-meets-the-Western-world paintings, the Chinese Embassy asked for details and sent someone along to see the exhibit.

Errò takes us for a ride, from East to West and back again. One series showing Indo-chinese guerillas incongruously plotting in all-American spic and span interiors (1968), and other similarly amusing scenes, could be taken to mean anything from «don't forget your comrades struggling where the action is!» to «watch out for the reds under your beds!» depending on who you are. As Michael Compton has put it discussing an analogous point in the Paris Biennale catalogue, in such cases it seems «that the artist is so confident that any right-minded person holds the same attitude to the figures or items he has collected that he does not need to say anything.» Personally, in such situations, I feel left out.

Looking at Errò's imagery — so full of impact that the effect is sometimes as brain-numbing as real-life media — applied to Allende, Che, and My-Lai, his story-line seems clear but with the Soviet anti-propaganda theme, or when stereotypes from Maoist ideology are introduced the intention is less clear. Errò is playing with fire. Fortunately for him, he is only a painter and will not get physically burned. We are only in an artistic comic-scape. We are not real victims as we are in true-life, getting cancer from consuming seductive

special offers, getting maimed for causes, dying because of another.

Maybe that is part of Errò's point. Yet, what price the point? Basically his powers are not greater than ours; no amount of traveling, of picture-hoarding, of collecting will give him power over those images and what they can say to whom.

A more domestic artist, David Hockney, once said to me modestly «I'm just a little painter, you know.» So is Errò. In spite of the smoke screen of media-manufactured images he has created, his main pleasure remains the actual act of painting: «What is my part in the painting? The composition. The documentation, perhaps. People can look briefly if they like and pick the image up where they left off later on, or not where they left off, or not at all. It's like listening to the radio. You can change the station. Adjust the volume (a metaphor used by 80 percent of the artists I meet). Those who really want to can ask themselves endless questions about each image's origin and references.

«For me. It's a painting. It can be read like an abstract painting. Once you have seen one, you've seen them all. To me, each painting is a landscape in which things happen.»

He enjoyed the change-over to the calmer, more neo-classical mood of the «Space Program» series in which astronauts and repossessed Ingres nudes rub shoulders because it meant he could paint with oils again. As with the Mao goes West pictures, here a strange fusion/friction phenomenon occurs. Two unreal images repel each other like magnetic poles that just won't meet. Strangely, mysteriously the effect is real.

The political ambiguities may make the works more sellable; but I personally would rather Errò used his considerable talents to stick his neck out on clear statements more often.