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Breakdowns: Portrait of the Artist as a Young %@&*!

by Art Spiegelman

ESSAY BY JOSH LAMBERT

Publishing a literary masterpiece can be a little like creating a golem, it seems: first you're just proud you were able to create it, then you're astonished to see how powerful it becomes, and then, suddenly, you're scared you can't control it. That's been Art Spiegelman's experience, at least, with *Maus*, one of the finest comic books ever printed and among the great literary achievements of the past quarter century. One panel of *Portrait of the Artist as a Young %@&*!* – a recent series of Spiegelman's brief autobiographical comics – makes this clear: "It's no use...", Spiegelman's avatar says, glancing back at a monolithic mousy representation of his father: "No matter how much I run I can't seem to get out of that mouse's shadow."

Breakdowns – an important new book that includes the *Portrait* series and a complete reprint of Spiegelman's first collection of comics from the '70s, which was also called *Breakdowns* – should help alert fans to Spiegelman's broader oeuvre. And not a minute too soon. In fact, a few years ago, Spiegelman was one of fifteen comics creators featured in a museum show, "Masters of American Comics," and when the show moved from its first locations, in L.A., to two museums in the New York area, Spiegelman requested that his work be removed. In an open letter to the curators, he explained that he didn't want *Maus* in New York's Jewish Museum, where his half of the show would be housed, because *Maus* might overshadow the other artists, confuse the audience, and misrepresent the history of comics that he has worked so hard to honor. As he explained, the show didn't make sense at the Jewish Museum, as "only four of the seven artists in the Jewish Museum's portion of the show are card-carrying Jews." And, more important, he wrote,

Maus looms so large in the public's perception of the comic book's recent apotheosis [that] the subject of the Holocaust can trump considerations of form in this museum's context. The statement intended by the *Masters* show, an exhibit formed to postulate that comics can actually be some sort of... Art, would be undermined by presenting the medium as some sort of "ethnic" phenomenon.

He was right, unfortunately. When I toured "Masters" at the Jewish Museum in the fall of 2006, I overheard a boy ask his mother whether Robert Crumb, one of the seven artists featured in the exhibit, is Jewish. "Of course he is," she replied, "They all are." I winced: Crumb isn't Jewish (though his wife is), nor are Gary Panter or Chris Ware, two of the other artists featured there. The confusion Spiegelman feared occurred before my eyes.

Spiegelman's primary concern, though, was not to dispel the growing, ridiculous consensus that comics are inherently or essentially Jewish. (For the record: they're not; many of the finest comics artists, from Winsor McKay to Chris Ware, have been non-Jews.) More important, Spiegelman didn't want the subject of *Maus* – the Holocaust and its aftermath – to overshadow the aesthetic interventions of his work, or his crucial stylistic debts to both classic and avant garde American comics.

Fittingly, the re-publication of *Breakdowns* places the focus squarely on Spiegelman's contributions as a formal innovator. Of course, lots of readers will pick up this book because of the insights it offers into *Maus*: in the *Portrait* section, Spiegelman recounts the inspiration for his masterpiece in a film professor's analysis of old Walt Disney cartoons ("this jazz-age Mickey Mouse is just Al Jolson," in blackface, "with big ears"). And the first three-page "Maus" strip, published in an underground comic in 1972 called *Funny Aimals*, is reprinted, too. Less refined than the masterpiece we know as *Maus*, this three-pager comes across as a more raw, more intense version of the conceit of rendering Jews as mice and Germans as cats. Here, a survivor recalls working at a "kitty litter factory," while the drawings stylize the animals less than in the later version, emphasizing their whiskers and huge Mickey Mouse ears. Spiegelman even gives the survivor's son the name Mickey, rather than acknowledging him as a self-portrait.

Along with a full-size reprint of "Prisoner on the Hell Planet" (an autobiographical strip about Spiegelman's mother's suicide, already familiar to readers of *Maus*), that's about all a seeker of Mausiana will find here. The real value of this volume inheres in its presentation of groundbreaking work Spiegelman produced before dedicating himself to *Maus*. In many underground comix, and then in *Arcade* – the comics magazine he

co-edited with Bill Griffiths in the mid-'70s – Spiegelman produced formally inventive strips that eschew or distort narrative so as to extend the boundaries of the art form.

Some consist of purely formal exercises, devoid of narrative: “Zip-a-Tunes and Moiré Melodies,” for example, plays around with the effects produced by the Zipatone sheets that were necessary, in the pre-digital years, to produce gray tones and colored covers for comics. “Don’t Get Around Much Anymore” represents the artist’s “wrestling match with Cubism,” while “The Malpractice Suite,” constructed from collages of Rex Morgan comics, dizzyingly deconstructs a standard newspaper strip. Spiegelman explains in his introduction to *Breakdowns* that “most definitions of STORY leave me cold”; these formalist strips illustrate that he prefers to focus instead on technique.

Even when Spiegelman tells a story, as he does in a one-pager about his move to New York, and one classic called “Ace Hole: Midget Detective,” he devotes more energy to confounding readers’ expectations than to developing plot or character. In the former, cockroaches overtake the page to the point that they obscure Spiegelman’s diary-like text; in the latter, the title character encounters a femme fatale rendered in the style of Picasso’s women, changing drastically each time she’s drawn. Including pastiches of “Little Nemo” and Guernica, and a complete set of exploded film noir clichés, “Ace Hole” reveals the artist’s commitment to tearing down the wall between comics and art.

Concentrated as they are on self-conscious formalism, Spiegelman’s most generically inventive strips don’t usually touch on questions of Jewish experience or identity. A few of the reprinted strips do concern themselves with dreams and humor, though, and in so doing they reflect Spiegelman’s sense of his Jewishness. In “Cracking Jokes,” a comics-style essay on humor from the first issue of *Arcade*, the artist exhibits his reading (or skimming) of Freud’s *Jokes and their Relation to the Unconscious*; and in his “Real Dream” series of surreal one-pagers, he reveals how completely his Jewishness suffuses his own unconscious. In one of them, his fingers transform into little people, one of which shouts “Jew” in a “rough Afro-American neighborhood.” In another, “Doctor Shpiegelmann” interprets a dream about a corpulent hostess, a sausage, and a lost mustache as a Holocaust parable in which the fat woman represents Odilo Globocnik, “head of the Polish S.S.,” and her vomit “the tragic uprising of the Jews of the Warsaw Ghetto.” The interpretation makes as little sense as the dream, except that it indicates how deeply the Holocaust resides and resonates in Spiegelman’s brain.

Many of the reproduced strips, including “Little Signs of Passion” and the “Soap Opera Strip,” would be impossible to summarize because of the density of visual and textual information in every panel. In fact, one *Portrait* strip explains that the “best advice” Spiegelman ever received as a cartoonist came from his father: “It’s important to know to pack,” he said. “Many times I had to run with only what I can carry!...You have to use what little space you have to pack inside everything what you can!” Regularly switching his drawing style from one panel to the next so as to echo a period of art or graphic design, and often alluding to classic comics and visual art and mass culture of all kinds, Spiegelman raises packing to the level of an art.

While the *Portrait* strips function as an introduction, Spiegelman’s prose essay, “An Afterword,” explains where, when, and sometimes why he created the *Breakdowns* comics, and offers a few valuable reprints of work he has deemed unworthy of full-size reproduction. (Sadly, though, Spiegelman provides no reprints of his less artsy, but no less entertaining early work, such as the gleefully pornographic “Jolly Jack Jack-Off” of the late ‘60s, or the Garbage Pail Kids he produced while working for Topps.)

What this collection reveals, most of all, perhaps, is the Herculean effort required for Spiegelman to produce his greatest work, *Maus*. As he notes in his “Afterword,” “it was the resounding lack of response to *Breakdowns* that led directly to the 300-page *Maus*... “I thought that if I kept following the trajectory I was on I’d again be reduced to passing out leaflets on street corners.” He’s probably right: brilliantly executed as the comics collected in *Breakdowns* may be, they seem like sketches next to his chef-d’oeuvre. Like Gertrude Stein in *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas* (1933), when in *Maus* he reined in his self-conscious style and concentrated on telling a story, the result was not only the technical genius of his early work, but accessible, celebrated, and canonical genius.

QUESTIONS

1. How do Spiegelman’s comics relate to the comic strips and comic books you’ve seen before? In what ways are they similar, and how are they different?
2. Some of Spiegelman’s strips tell stories, while others experiment with the form of comics. Which do you prefer? Why?

3. Can Spiegelman's comics be considered "art"?
4. Does Spiegelman have a unique style? If so, how could you characterize it?
5. Would you read *Maus* differently after reading *Breakdowns*?
6. In *Portraits*, Spiegelman quotes Victor Shlovsky, an important Russian literary theorist, who wrote, "The technique of art is to make objects 'unfamiliar,' to make forms difficult..." Do you agree with this vision of art and how it works?
7. *Breakdowns* has the words "Adults Only!" on its cover; *Maus* does not. How do you feel about this distinction, and why do you think the publishers made it?

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