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An Eye for The Ladies

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Robert Crumb, the visionary behind underground commix, is a reluctant hero of his generation. He has been lauded as a draftsman on a par with Bruegel, with a twisted, if not downright perverted (though always sincere) view of women. Following the filming of the 1994 critically acclaimed documentary "Crumb," by his friend Terry Zwigoff, Crumb and his wife, Aline, fled the States to live in a medieval hippie village in France. Just before the publication of his new book, "Gotta Have'em: Portraits of Women by R. Crumb," we caught up with him at home while Aline tried on clothes for her supermodel debut.

ROMÁN ALONSO: Robert, are you ready?

ROBERT CRUMB: It's been a bit hectic around here today. The clothes arrived from The New York Times, so Aline's been trying everything on. She met this one guy personally while in New York.

LISA EISNER: Narciso Rodriguez, right?

R.C.: She liked his stuff the best.

R.A.: So, Robert, we just want to have a little conversation with you to accompany the drawings you are doing for the magazine.

L.E.: We're going to pick your fashion mind.

R.C.: My rant on fashion? You know, I like big women with full figures. And the female figure as it appears in all the great works of art throughout history is not in the fashion world. All the magazines show those bony, anorexic women. They're bulimic. They vomit up their food. They all feel bad about their bodies.

L.E.: Well, a lot of designers feel their clothes look better on a thinner frame.

R.C.: They don't design clothes with that full-figured woman in mind. I like to draw women with clothes on. I'm not a big nude kind of fanatic. If I were a designer, I would design clothes that looked great on those curves, on those full, round shapes of the female figure. There's one short black dress that Aline likes, by some guys, Dolce & Gabbana. It looks good.

R.A.: Well, those guys are Italian and Narciso is Cuban. So I think they have a totally different appreciation for women and their bodies.

R.C.: That's right -- the Latins appreciate that more than us.

L.E.: I wonder when the idea of American beauty changed and women got skinny.

R.C.: Well, it's real clear in the 20's.

R.A.: Yeah, women would bind their chests.

R.C.: I don't appreciate that period at all. It's kind of an upper-class sign of affluence. You can never be too rich or too thin.

L.E.: Robert, what about fashion in your drawings? You are very specific with your shoes and socks. It's gotta be a boot, right? Or a Mary Jane.

R.C.: Well, there's a certain kind of classic shoe in old Sears catalogs from the 30's. There are pages and pages of shoes in there -- a graceful but classic shape. Once in a while they still put them out, but they don't bring out the classic looks because they want to keep women in a state of discontent -- constantly going out and buying more shoes and never being fully satisfied with the shoes they buy.

L.E.: And the socks! It's always gotta be a shoe and a sock.

R.C.: I don't know, socks are something from my adolescence. I don't like girls who dress in high heels, have peroxide-blond hair and heed all that sleazy stuff. It's not attractive. You know what the ultimately sexy thing is? A Catholic-schoolgirl outfit.

L.E.: Your new book, "Gotta Have'em," is much quieter and mellower than your other books. Are you feeling sentimental these days?

R.C.: No, it's just an aspect of my work. The comics are where all the crazy subconscious stuff comes out. The drawings in "Gotta Have'em" are either from life or from photographs. Every woman in there is a real person.

R.A.: Most of the drawings in it are of Aline. Is she your muse?

R.C.: Oh, you know. She's around a lot, and she always wanted me to draw her. Back in the 70's and 80's, she'd say: "I'll pose. I'll pose." After about half an hour, she'd say, "Can I go yet?"

L.E.: Do girls ever dress up like one of your fantasies to meet you?

R.C.: When Aline first met me, she used to dress up to suit my fancy. She kind of got tired of that. She used to put on white knee socks and these little schoolgirl outfits. She was a lot chubbier in the early days. Now she's gotten quite thin. It's a little disheartening to see her derrière go down. But she's happier being that way, so what the heck. But she's still quite muscular. She says her ideal body type now is Lance Armstrong's.

R.A.: You're basically a connoisseur of the female bottom, right?

R.C.: Yeah. Definitely.

L.E.: That's why you moved to France. It's more about derrière than poitrine there, right?

R.C.: France? French women have no hips, no derrière, nothing.

R.A.: So what are you doing there?

R.C.: Aline lured me over here to get me away from all the big-bottomed American women. That's where the biggest keisters in the world are—America.

L.E.: And guess what -- since you left, they're even bigger.

R.A.: Hey, you've never been to Cuba, have you? Some would argue the biggest keisters in the world are there.

L.E.: Or Disneyland.

R.C.: I've heard that about Cuba. I should go there actually.

L.E.: I read that Hugh Hefner tried to get you to work for Playboy.

R.C.: Yeah, in the late 60's Playboy courted me. I had gone there with my sketchbook in the early 60's looking for work, but they weren't interested. After I got to be well known, I found that I could do exactly what I wanted and have it published. So, why do I need restrictions and directions from Hugh Hefner?

L.E.: Did you ever go to the Playboy Mansion?

R.C.: Yeah. I found it rather alienating and dull. I was in my 20's, and all these guys in their 40's were dazzled by the scene. I thought it was corny.

And the girls seemed barely human to me. I couldn't talk to them.

R.A.: Did you ever draw anything from photographs in Playboy?

R.C.: No. Those girls don't interest me at all.

R.A.: You describe an innocent Catholic girl as your ideal.

R.C.: Not innocent but wholesome. The average, regular, wholesome, kind of unstudied, artless sort of regular girl that you find in America.

R.A.: But you draw them larger than life -- Amazonian. How come?

R.C.: I don't know. Maybe I need 15 years on the couch and some Freudian psychoanalyst to figure it out.

R.A.: How do you feel about all the interest in your work from the art world?

R.C.: It's been very interesting and surprising. I mean, you get the impression that there's some kind of desolate, intellectual process going on in the art world. Look at magazines like Artforum -- you ever try reading that stuff? They have their own language -- Artspeak. When you get inside that world and start talking to the people who actually operate in it, it's not that smart, really. It's not as smart as it seems from the outside.

L.E.: It's really different from the cartoon world.

R.C.: A totally different world. The fine-art world knows very little about the cartoon world. Even my pal Paul Morris, God love him, he knows nothing about the cartoon world. He's very knowledgeable about fine art but has no idea who Krazy Kat is, and he's like the Leonardo da Vinci of the cartoon world.

R.A.: Well, you're probably the only one that's made that crossover.

R.C.: One of the few. You know, it's funny the way things are now. It's all mixed together. I mean Matthew Barney, what is he? He's a show-biz guy mixing it all together. Or Art Spiegelman. He's got a Pulitzer Prize. So, comics spill into the art world, and it spills into the literary world. I even spill over into porno.

L.E.: There's a whole new generation that's actually growing up with cartoons as art. It's not like us growing up going to museums. It's about graffiti and cartoons. All these kids want to be animators now.

R.C.: Yeah, that whole graffiti thing and hip-hop world, that's a big influence. It doesn't interest me at all. I don't like any of it.

R.A.: So are there any artists that really turn you on?

R.C.: Oh, yeah, absolutely. Bruegel, my main man. Most of the stuff that interests me is from old masters, but not that schmaltzy, puffy mythology or whatever; that doesn't interest me. But when I was at the National Gallery in London, we walked into this room with these Hans Holbeins staring at me, and I got sucked in time. I was suddenly in the room with him while he was painting.

R.A.: And those are your kind of women.

R.C.: Actually, when it comes down to it, there are not a whole lot of artists in history that knew how to draw a pleasing-looking woman. I think most of them were interested in men. You know, Michelangelo and all that, they loved to draw beautiful men. The heroic male is much more important than the female.

R.A.: It's funny, because most people call you a misogynist. But in fact it's obvious you love women.

R.C.: It's a strong love-hate thing with women. Very complicated. I can really make a case against women. A lot of my comics continually plug hideously hostile stuff toward women. When I was young, I just had a lot of anger I had to get out. I don't have an urge to draw that kind of stuff anymore.

L.E.: You created Fritz the Cat, Keep On Truckin', Mister Natural—everybody thinks that you are rolling in dough.

R.C.: I oughta be rich. But, you know, if you don't spend all your time looking after money, somebody else will. The guys who look after money, they're the ones who get the money.

R.A.: I read that you turned down \$100,000 to do a car ad.

R.C.: When it comes down to it, those people will want this done and that changed, and before you know it you've lost all your dignity and integrity and you're just groveling before these people to get their money. Plus I just know that once you sell out, you kind of lose your -- it's hard to explain.

L.E.: Well, it seems as if you just never want to lose your freedom.

R.C.: Well, yeah, and I got spoiled in underground comics, where I could draw my craziest sex fantasies and get them published instead of flushing them down the toilet, that was incredible to me.

R.A.: Robert, you're obviously not into the celebrity thing and you're not into the art thing and you don't really care about money, so what motivates you?

R.C.: The work itself is what motivates me. I like my own stuff, you know? I like the way it looks. I do it to please myself first.

Editors' Note: April 3, 2003, Thursday The Style pages of The Times Magazine on Sunday featured an interview with the artist R. Crumb by Lisa Eisner and Román Alonso. It referred to Mr. Crumb's new book, "Gotta Have'em: Portraits of Women by R. Crumb," which is being published by Greybull Press.