

**Essay by Carol Jackson**

The storyboard paintings of Jim Torok are a comedy of manners performed within the absurdity of early 21st century America. We know this theatre by its stage props, the war on terror; the war in Iraq; the depiction of political power by the media; the impotence of the individual who once approximated an effective citizen within a faulty but functioning democracy.

Our historic moment requires an ongoing and simultaneous going and abnegation of the information we receive through mass media. Torok posits himself as the main character within a cartoon version of our social environment that generates fear, miscommunication, self-deception, unrewarded effort, competition, and focus-pocus politics. He does his best to muddle through the governing social and political standards familiar to but now heightened by the communal narrative of American culture.

The autobiographical representation of Torok, essentially an upright oval with enormous sausage-like schnozzle, serves as the anchor of our narcissism. We can climb aboard this epic hero's experience within this reductive but familiar world and empathize with his frustrations regarding the lack of rewards for good intentions. Our 'everyman' protagonist morphs from story to story, sometimes within a single piece, to exemplify a variety of stock characters: the fool, the omniscient fool, the clever observer, the paranoiac, a hypocrite, the bewildered participant, etc.

It isn't always a mere internal or surface transformation of character. He periodically explodes, complete with zigzag red yellow and orange detonations, severed limbs and X'd out eyes. Such depictions are a dead-on response to the absurdity of our time amidst the threat of tourism as we are encouraged to believe and behave as a normal consuming audience while we are told unwarranted and indeterminate violence looms. Although we might be aware that any pending immediate destruction or even alteration of life as we know it is a spun tale and that the comparative absence of explosive violence on our soil has initiated an irretrievable predicament of suicide on the installment plan rather than a cold war or big bad bearded ka-boom, the shame of simply being an American is enough to sustain the fear of retribution.

Lets All Just Keep Quiet-Violent images coupled with the monotone understatement of black comedy. Be grateful and repeat these jingoist mantras like a good member, lay down, shut-up and suck in your fears. Deterioration in quality of life you say? Pshaw. Impotent emoting of despair is funny. We've all been there. We're all here, inside a lovely rainbow wash to calm our nerves.

You Are Sleeping-the text is the Restoration, the comedy of manners. The explosion is our internalized theatre of the Absurd-that would be the media. Quiet and muted but always there. Angst of the Artist-Your petty aesthetic stances and stylings birthed by leisure in other peoples misery were despicable enough. And now in the presence of the twin towers' apparition you dare to continue your trifling. For SHAAAAAMME!

Torok sees himself as a reporter covering two stories: one is internal-that would be the cartoons; the other is external-wherein he does small extremely realistic portraits, of friends and many of himself. The cartoons are a relief from the portraits and vice-versa. It's hard to be serious all the time, seriously observant or seriously introspective. Going back and forth keeps both fresh

Without a mirror Jim Torok can never remember what he looks like, so he draws himself simply and ends up resembling Kilroy of "Kilroy was here" military graffiti (and a lot like Alice the Goon from Popeye). Kilroy was the graphic personification of the benevolent (to the US) omnipresence of America. To ensure this icon's dissemination throughout the allied world everyone had to know how to draw him to make his omnipresence felt, and for this his depiction had to be simple and economical. Torok draws himself this way because he's on the inside looking out. The only thing he can see on his face from that angle is probably, like most, his nose. So he draws his nose huge. His face is a constant, quickly and easily identifiable in all the works, occasional changes in mouth and eye shapes and sometimes the presence of teeth to show anger or excitement. The simplistic way Torok draws his face operates on Scott McCloud's idea that the fewer and less complicated the lines are when depicting a character the more people it can define, and the more people can identify themselves in the painting as Torok.

We are the reduced and simplified people within Torok's storyboards and paintings. The building is the Theater of the Absurd due to the necessary representation of absurdist situations, economy of information and economical use of lines, but the stage is populated by characters commonly found in a comedy of manners and its depiction of artificially induced behavior imposed by class status. There are shared qualities in terms of the protagonist's situation found especially in the absurdist writings of Ionesco and Kafka's K but the cartoon Torok always recovers from the blows of meaninglessness, impotence and misinformation to search for truth and purpose once again. The closest match would probably be Adamov's plays written at the height of the comedy of manners form where miscommunication coupled with an inexplorable swooning sense of guilt, portrays life as a series of fragmented narratives rife with ahistorical victimizations.

We are all simultaneously but independently interpreting the same point in history. We are encouraged to keep quiet and stay private about our anxiety caused by an absurd political backdrop. Torok's storyboards give us a Sisyphian hero who despite failure continues to make sense of nonsense and have hope instead of longing.

Gahlberg Gallery



Jim Torok

**Jim Torok: Things are Better**  
Oct. 13 to Nov. 12, 2005

The Gahlberg Gallery/McAninch Arts Center would like to thank the writer, Carol Jackson, the artist Jim Torok, and Pierogi, Brooklyn, NY for their generous contributions in making this publication and exhibition possible.

Barbara Wiesen,  
Director and Curator

**Artwork**  
*You Are Sleeping Soundly*, 2004, acrylic on panel, 61" x 46"  
*Twisted Man* acrylic, 2004, acrylic on panel, 46" x 61"  
*Lets All Just Keep Quiet*, 2004, ink on paper, 22.5" x 30.25"  
*Thanks Giving Day*, 2005 ink and watercolor on paper, 22.5" x 30.25"  
**Inside spread:** *Things Are Better*, 2004, acrylic on panel, 61" x 46"

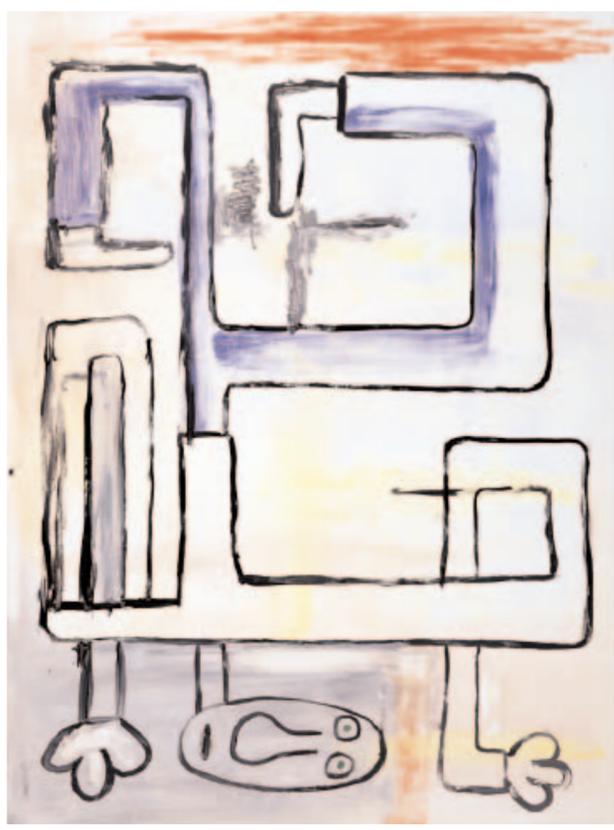
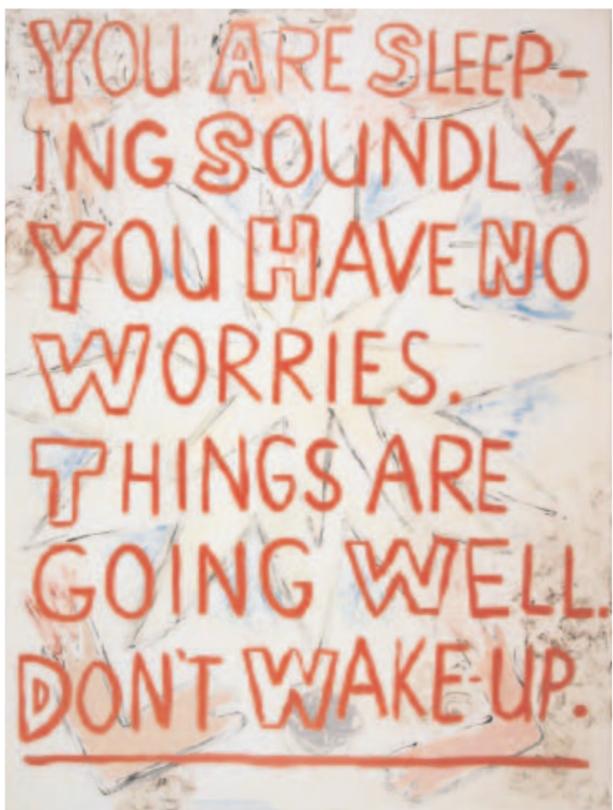


This program is partially supported by a grant from the Illinois Arts Council, a state agency, and by The National Endowment for the Arts.

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06-16710/051M



# THINGS ARE BETTER



THERE IS MORE FREEDOM.

MORE CABLE  
MORE 'NEWS'  
MORE 'INFO'  
MO



THERE IS MORE TV.



THERE IS MORE LOVE.



THERE IS LESS SICKNESS.