



Isn't It Rich?

BY MATTHEW PORTER

AT MIDLIFE, MARTHA RICH IS AT THE DAWN OF A CAREER IN ILLUSTRATION AND PAINTING. SHE WORKS OUT OF A SMALL, BRIGHTLY-LIT COTTAGE IN PASADENA, CALIF. SHE HAS NO PETS, NOT EVEN A GOLDFISH. "JUST ME AND MY TV," SHE SAYS.

After only two years on the scene, Rich's work is capturing the attention of national design journals and the admiration of her peers. But before she became a professional illustrator she was, among other things, an order taker in a check dress for Roy Rogers and a repo woman for Ford Motor Credit Company "wearing pantyhose and working in a cube." If anyone out there has a resumé to match this one, I want to see it. Rich is on a roll.

Rich's father was a minister, and one of his first assignments was a church on Madison Avenue in New York City. Within a short time, though, the family moved to Devon, Pa., a veritable nursery of Americana. She relates, "My parents were loving pseudo-hippies. They made glassware from beer bottles. My mom could do anything: batik, macramé, stained glass, sewing, all kinds of things. She encouraged me to paint and draw. My dad left the ministry in New York and became an administrator with the United Ministries for Higher Education—he had a big, giving heart and a big, unruly beard to go with it.

"Instead of couches, we had pillows on the floor made by mom. The walls were painted silver. The dining room table was a cable spool. We used raw wood for wall coverings and installed 4-inch yellow shag. I grew up both adoring and being appalled by my life. When I became a teenager, I knew all I wanted was to have a 'normal' life, with colonial furniture, a carport, and a ceramic American Bald Eagle hanging over it."

So after graduating from high school Rich pursued her idea of a "normal" life.

ARTIST MARTHA RICH DID THIS PAINTING/COLLAGES FOR A GROUP SHOW AT LA LUZ DE JESUS GALLERY IN HOLLYWOOD, CALIF., IN MARCH 2002.



"I AM PART OF A COLLECTIVE OF ARTISTS AND WRITERS WHO PRODUCE OUR OWN SHOWS AND PUBLISH ART BOOKS (HTTP://BROKENWRISTPROJECT.COM)," RICH EXPLAINS. "THIS PIECE WAS DONE FOR OUR FIRST BOOK LAUNCH PARTY/GALLERY EVENT. IT IS PART OF A SERIES OF PIECES I DID BASED ON AN ELK'S CLUB PARTY." EACH PIECE SHOWS A DIFFERENT SET OF PEOPLE ATTENDING THE PARTY AND WAS INSPIRED BY A SCRAPBOOK SHE PURCHASED AT AN ESTATE SALE. THE TITLE OF THIS PIECE IS "MAXINE AND BIG JOHNSON."



RICH'S 2001 HOLIDAY PROMO CARD ALSO FEATURED CHARACTERS FROM HER ELK'S CLUB PARTY SERIES, DERIVED FROM A SCRAPBOOK SHE FOUND AT AN ESTATE SALE. SHE SAYS, "THIS WAS AN EXCEPTIONALLY GOOD SCRAPBOOK, AND I FEEL LIKE I KNOW THE PEOPLE IN IT."

1
ROY ROGERS & THE SHERATON JUNGLE ROOM
 She began being normal in earnest, taking a job working at the local Roy Rogers Family Restaurant. A fan of horses and, as she puts it, the "horsey crowd," Rich got a kick out of working for a chain named after Trigger's campfire companion. It was a first step toward the normal she craved—and the uniform was fabulous. "They put me in a red cowgirl hat, a bandanna, and a red checked skirt. I felt like Loretta Lynn serving burgers and fries," she says. Sometimes, you have to explore many directions to find yourself. Rich's journey had just begun.

After graduating from high school, Rich set off for college with no idea of what she wanted to study or become. She says most of the college years spent at Dennison University in Ohio were a blur—her mother was fighting cancer the entire time. She died a few months after graduation, and Rich was devastated. "She was my cool mom," she recalls, "the one who could do it all. And she encouraged me. She knew I was going to turn out fine—I was the one who had doubts."

To be closer to her father, Rich returned home. She decided that her love of people could be exercised as a front desk clerk at the Sheraton Valley Forge. From behind a laminated fortress, Rich watched ashen businessmen come and go all week.

Weekends, however, were fun: chain-smoking, lecherous Hairy Backs accompanied by dyed, ginned, and grinning girls checked into the hotel's fantasy suites, which included the Caveman Room, Spaceship Room, and Jungle Room. While big whumpa-whumpa rattled the rafters, busloads of elderly arrived in the lobby to mix Mateus Rosé with Rogers & Hart tunes inside the hotel's Lilly Langtree Dinner Theatre.

"The whole experience was so Pocono-y; one fat brick of Velveeta," Rich remembers. "And it smelled like cigarettes, White Shoulders, baked chicken, and booze. I kind of liked it—for awhile."

Amid the pall of Pall Malls, glare of gold chains, and vapid nostalgia of *Show Boat*, Rich experienced an epiphany: maybe she didn't like people that much after all. The Sheraton Valley Forge was not where she needed to be. What she needed was a real nine to five job, five days a week, Big Gulp at her side. A passing businessman, sensing smarts, wit, or sheer potential offered her such an opportunity. Rich grabbed it and soon went far, far away.

2

SKIP TRACING, HIGH-FIVES & HUMIDITY

Rich found herself in a cubicle in the Atlanta suburbs. She lost the Sheraton-wear and doffed a headset, a skirt, and pantyhose (her detail, not mine) and began a successful career repossessing cars for the Ford Motor Credit Company. “Normalcy” was not pretty.

“This was not the kind of job you’d want if you had a drinking problem,” she says. “It was like Auschwitz in a cubicle. Most people smoked and drank a lot. You stared all day at a computer, pushed a call button, and said to the respondent, ‘Where’s your money?’ If you couldn’t find the debtor, you’d do ‘skip tracing,’ which is essentially calling their neighbors to see if their car was in the driveway. If it was, you called the repo-man man to go get it. Whenever we’d find a car, we’d slap high-fives in the corridors. It was sick.”

But she was good at it, and, to her horror, she kept getting promoted. One day, she had enough. Looking for more freedom and a job in a more creative place, she pestered *Atlanta Magazine* until they gave her a job. Taking a 50 percent pay cut, she began as an assistant to the business manager. She worked hard, earned respect, and got promoted.

Says her best friend from those days, Cathy Brim, a colleague on the business side of the magazine, “Martha was one of those people who crossed all boundaries. She brought together divergent people, assembling crowds no one expected to see together. It helped that she was hilarious.”

By the time she left in 1995, she had become the magazine’s promotion manager, throwing parties and getting well connected inside Atlanta. She had fallen in love and married an academic, blue-eyed man whose principle ambition was earning a doctorate in German philosophy. When accepted in the Ph.D. program at UCLA, the newlyweds headed west.

3

FINDING HER TIMING AGAIN

Kafka und Kierkegard in shallow and cheery L.A.? It was like drinking bock beer with a fruit salad: nein, danke. The marriage ended in a year. Now divorced, free, and living life in Los Angeles, Rich decided, at last, to explore her creative potential.

She began by taking a few extension classes at UCLA in graphic design. Soon after, she signed up for night classes in illustration at Art Center College of Design in Pasadena. One class, in particular, taught by illustrators Rob and Christian Clayton, set her off. “I could not wait to get off work and get to that class,” she recalls. “When not in that class, I spent all my time preparing for it. The Claytons were changing my life.”

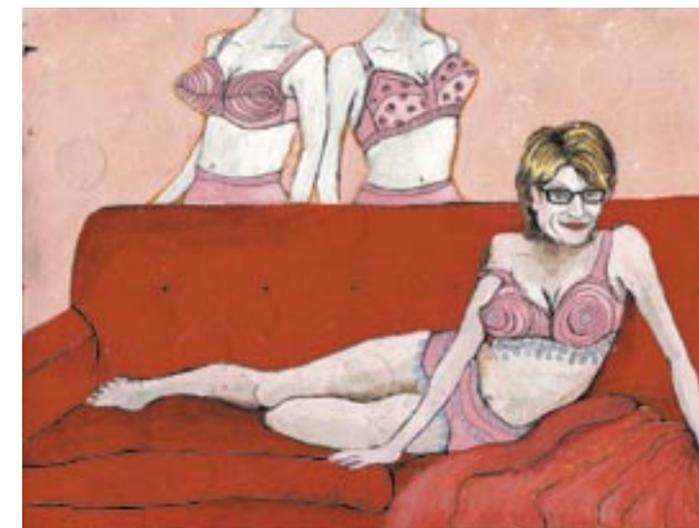
Eventually, the Claytons convinced Rich to quit her job (in human resources at Universal Studios theme park in Hollywood) to be a full-time student at Art Center College. In January 1998, she did, becoming in her words, “the oldest person in the class, surrounded by 22-year-old boys.”

The strength of Rich’s visual language results in raw, edgy, and sometimes disturbing images. She communicates a heightened sense of irony, a byproduct of her amusement with life, for better or for worse. In short, Rich’s work is informed by her experiences, but unlike some, she never really imagined her story would inform any art, much less her own.

“When we first met Martha while teaching our night course at Art Center she stood out among her classmates for reasons other than age,” recalls Christian Clayton. “Usually the kind of people who take night classes are not the ones who will go on to become professional illustrators.”

Continues Rob Clayton, “We knew right away this woman had it, even though her early drawings were raw. We saw that she possessed a distinctive voice and an earned edge. Some say she was ‘influenced’ by us. On the contrary: We were attracted to the similarities in our work that we saw in hers.”

Rich finished the four-year program in less than three years, graduating with honors.



DONE FOR ALTERNATIVE PICK. “THIS IS BASED ON AN OLD PHOTO I FOUND AT AN ESTATE SALE. I LIKE THE WAY IT LOOKED,” SAYS RICH. “I ADDED A LOBSTER FOR NO REASON EXCEPT THAT I LOVE LOBSTERS. MAYBE THE STORY IS THAT IF YOU BRUSH YOUR TEETH WITH THE SUPER TOOTHPASTE YOU GET WHAT IS ON YOUR MIND.”

RICH COMPLETED THIS ILLUSTRATION FOR *READYMADE MAGAZINE* (AUGUST 2002) TO ACCOMPANY AN ARTICLE ON HOW TO START YOUR OWN HAREM.



"I DID THIS FOR MY AD IN *ALTERNATIVE PICK*. I LOVE USING OLD PHOTOS FROM THE 1950S, '60S, AND '70S AS A STARTING POINT FOR MY ILLUSTRATIONS. THIS DEVELOPED INTO A STORY ABOUT A SINGLE MOTHER AND HER FAMILY PRAYING FOR A MAN TO COME AND HELP HER PROVIDE FOR HER FAMILY," RICH EXPLAINS.

4

MAKING AN ENTRANCE AGAIN

In 2000, Martha Rich—former burger flipper, desk clerk, repo woman, promo manager, existentialist divorcee, and HR gal—officially became pantyhose-free. She was a full-time artist, professional illustrator.

From her years in the South, she became a fan of the late celebrated folk artist, the Reverend Howard Finster (the Clayton's are also heavily influenced by him). Finster's work, now in collections across the United States, is the willful assemblage of found objects. Throughout his life, he was driven by the Divine to express himself through collage, painting, sculpture, and architecture.

The incorporation of found objects is as visible in Rich's work as it is Finster's. She combs flea markets and estate sales for personal objects, scrapbooks, and the discarded intimacies of long-dead people. From these widowed and orphaned fragments, she gains inspiration, incorporating these personal yet foreign fragments into her own work. She might be exercising some sort of psychological compensation, but she does not say. What else is an artist but the sum of her memories? Why not invite the memories of others inside your work, the care-

fully crafted autobiographies that have been abandoned to junk shops and flea markets?

Everyone needs a second chance, a new opportunity, another life. In this respect, Rich's work provides a measure of social immortality to herself and her anonymous contributors. Perhaps that's why many are responding to her work.

When the personal becomes universal, when the intimate becomes public, when the voyeur becomes participant, you have discovered art and an artist that matter very much. After years of searching for something to do, Rich has found something to give: herself.

Says Brim, the friend from her days at *Atlanta Magazine*, "I had never seen her work before. I didn't know she could do this type of thing. She only doodled on birthday cards when we were together. When she finally showed me a small selection of illustrations she had made at Art Center College, I said, 'This is what you should be doing, Martha. This!'"

Now, isn't that rich? **S**

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