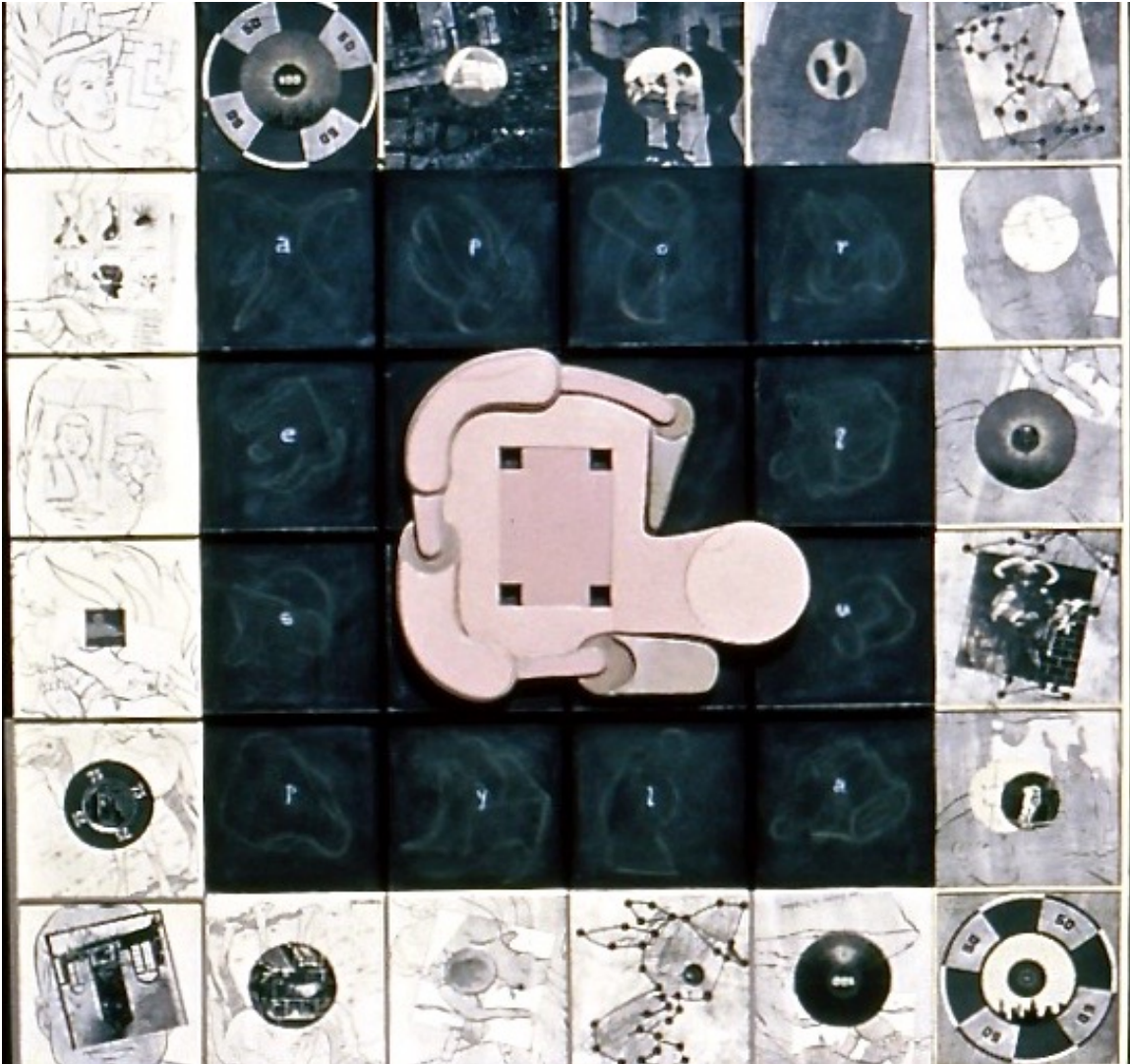


## REVIEWS

### MYSTERY GAMES Dave Richards: New Work



Imagine the perplexity you would feel if you found yourself in a room filled with unfamiliar, elaborately designed game boards. Without movable tokens or instructions on the rules of play, the games would seem mysterious, symbolic puzzles in which shapes and colors have a hidden meaning. The mixed-media wall pieces of Chicago artist Dave Richards present just such visually complex riddles –

they're alternately fascinating, frustrating, and finally cosmic in their portrayal of life's ineffability.

The eight works in this small, gray-walled gallery are all constructed in the same basic fashion: various shapes and thicknesses of foam board are cut and then glued onto a large rectangular piece of plywood. These forms and exposed areas of wood are painted with acrylics or covered with photos and illustrations from magazines, newspapers and children's coloring books. Because each composition combines biomorphic and geometric forms with off-key, muted colors, the impact is compelling yet disturbing, on both physical and psychological levels.

*Pocket Pool* is perhaps the most eloquent of these visual enigmas. This three-foot-by-five-foot piece features a stubby cross shape on the right side that looks like a human organ and is painted the color of dried blood. On the left side is a large black-and-white photographic cutout of a headless, armless nude standing with its back to us. The space separating it from the organ is painted the same deep red as the organ. Long thin strips of white foam board rising one or two inches above the plywood base shoot out of the organ at various angles and traverse the flat red area, hitting the nude at several points along its right side. Marking out a ricochet pattern, these low-relief lines also divide the red area into closed geometric shapes or "pockets." The surface above, below, and to the right of the organ is painted in sections of off green, pink, and yellow.

Several tiny photo fragments have been cut into circles and arranged around the organ on a thin, curving black line, they look like balls or coins about to embark on a journey whose destination – via the red pockets – may be the nude poised on the other side. Because we don't know how the organ and the photo balls relate to the nude, we can't guess how to score, much less win, in *Pocket Pool*. All of the elements in this stylized game seem significant yet random.

Richards may use anatomical-looking forms throughout the show because our bodily experience is so fundamental. Sometimes he represents known organs like the heart or kidneys, but often these elements have obscure shapes and functions. This is the case with *Kneeling at Buffalo Bill's Grave*, a three-foot square grid composed of 36 segments – 6 rows of 6. At the center of the grid is a fleshy pink

mass with a phallic-looking prong protruding from its lower right side. Within this form is an empty rectangular shape that seems to mark the place for a missing pile of game cards.

The pink mass rests within several rows of grid segments coated with a chalkboard emulsion; together they form a black square. This square is framed by black-and-white grid segments, which enclose it on all four sides and mark the perimeter of the whole composition. The segments of the inner, black square contain unidentifiable images drawn on in chalk and lightly erased. They look like the dreamy tracings of shapes one might find in a child's storybook. Along the outer border, the segments are composed of recurring photos and children's illustrations. These include a camel, a cowboy, a connect-the-dots rabbit, and a bull's-eye displaying the number 50.

Its plethora of images is initially confusing, but *Buffalo Bill* can perhaps be understood in terms of Surrealist art. Andre Breton, the Parisian poet who played a key role in setting forth Surrealist philosophy during the 1930s, emphasized that childhood experience, games of chance, dreams, and the human sexual drive were crucial to creativity and transcendence. With its Monopoly-board layout and randomly juxtaposed children's pictures, *Buffalo Bill* seems to manifest the Surrealist spirit perfectly. Even the title seems arbitrarily chosen. And if the pictures composing the outer border can be said to represent the edge of conscious memory, then the faint blackboard images of the inner square must symbolize the subconscious. The pink phallic shape commanding the center can then be interpreted as a symbol for the sexual drive both Freud and the Surrealists felt was our prime motivator.

Armed with this psychic map, we may feel prepared to play the show's remaining games with some degree of luck. But the almost total abstraction of *Double Kilroy or Two of Ducks* reminds us we are still lost at sea. Set on a square plywood base, the main shape in this composition is a pink circle with two prongs extending out of it, one at the top and one at the bottom. It looks simultaneously like a propeller, a steering wheel, and a double phallus. The number two appears in green on both prongs. This biomorphic shape rests in a teal blue square whose sides

have been partially carved away to reveal some of the chalkboard surface of the square beneath it. The phrases “Double Kilroy,” “two of ducks,” and “double Melvin” have been written in chalk on the exposed blackboard areas and smudged over. Except for a pink triangle in the upper left corner and a pink circle cut into the lower left, the rest of the surface is painted brown. Small peg holes are scattered about, and thin strips of painted foam board connect with each other will-nilly. Three old-looking cartoon fragments shaped like tiny paper fans are tucked quietly into three of the composition’s four corners.

Beyond the possibility that it refers to some imaginary card game, the meaning of *Double Kilroy or Two of Ducks* remains a mystery. However, there is something extremely familiar about it formally. The playful unpredictability of the foam-board lines recalls the lyrical, often childlike compositions of the Swiss painter Paul Klee. But though Klee often used a similar muted palette, Richards’ color sensibility probably comes from a source closer to home. His strange, off-color pinks, browns, yellows and greens also appear in many of Ray Yoshida’s paintings. It comes as no surprise that Richards once studied under this well-known Imagist at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago.

Richards’ combination of form and color is the disturbing aspect of his work. The cross shape in *Pocket Pool* looks like an organ, but is it a liver, a kidney, or something he invented? And since it is the color of dried rather than fresh blood, does it signify death? We are fascinated by that which we vaguely recognize but don’t really know. Though the pink phallic mass in *Kneeling at Buffalo Bill’s Grave* is hauntingly familiar, it won’t be found, I think, in any medical books. Its pale pink and soft, fleshy look suggest an archetype of the human body – so the sharp lines of the empty rectangle in its center feel unnatural and intrusive. In fact, the very precision of the geometric elements in each of Richards’ pieces works against the curvilinear organic shapes, creating a sense of alienation or even imprisonment. The mystery games begin to feel like fun-house dreams or cosmic traps.

More than likely you will either delight in the endless flights of fancy Richards’ work allows, or flounder in frustration. Either way there may be something to learn. For if these works are looked at as metaphorical games of life,

the absence of any instructions, though initially mystifying, could symbolize the freedom we all have to make up our own rules, decide what it means to win the game. All we need is a little imagination and the energy to back it up.

Lynda Barckert

### Richards Links Imagism and Abstraction



Dave Richards' mixed-media constructions – at the Compassrose Gallery, 325 W. Huron St. – go a long way toward reconciling the traditional Chicago antipodes, Imagism and abstraction.

The primary components of his wall reliefs are all abstract, evoking by their form and color some of the European-influenced paintings produced in America in the 1930s and early 1940s.

The difference, however, is that Richards gives these interlocking shapes the appearance of well-used children's toys. Surfaces look faded and edges are scuffed,

as if from years of knocking about the nursery. They almost evoke a kind of nostalgia, for they seem to have had a past.

The subsidiary elements come from American pop culture and are more representational: magazine photographs, comic-book cartoons and so on. These are very much a part of the Imagist esthetic. They underline the oddly human feelings prompted by the toy-like abstractions.

The exhibition title is "Fun House," suggesting a place of merriment as well as horror. And this, the work supports by giving a light first impression that slowly deepens and darkens.

Several of the cartoons are anything but merry. The photographs frequently convey an edge of menace. Some of the writing is cranky, almost hostile.

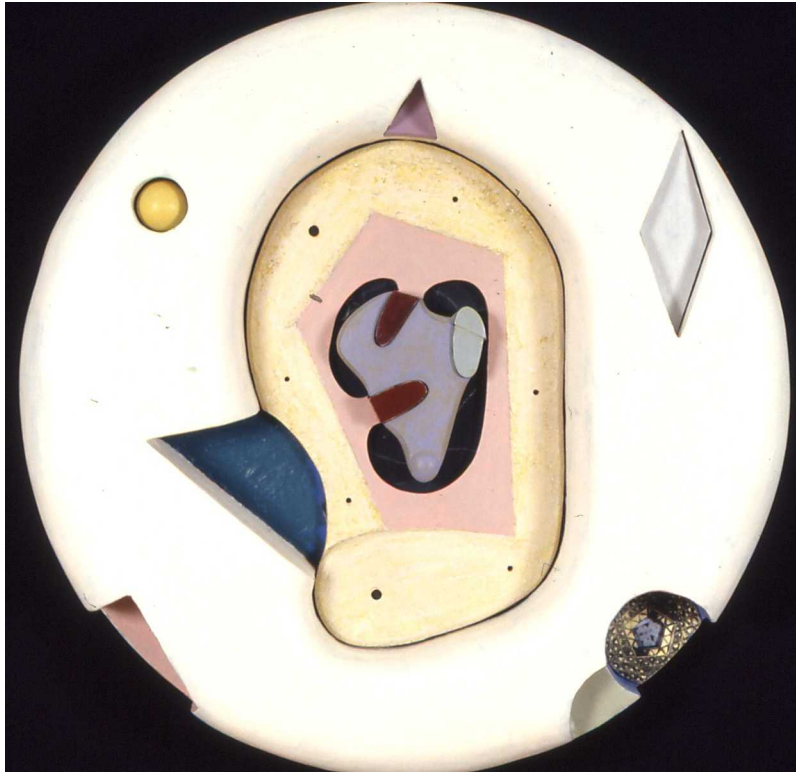
And so, the more one looks at the work, the more its cheeriness fades, taking on the character of something not without pathos. This art whispers rather than shouts, but still a feeling of sadness is emphatically present, at once unsettling and unresolved.

Some viewers may want to overlook it, and Richards provides so many deft spatial manipulations that anyone seeking diversion need not go far. Yet the strength of the work is in how its downbeat vision insinuates, pressing itself upon you with an inexorable cumulative force.

I cannot say how well the art will wear; I haven't seen enough. Yet the emotions that run beneath the surface of Richards' constructions are rich in expressive possibilities, and right now, at least, are conveyed remarkably well.

Alan Artner

**Dave Richards**  
**Blotted Escutcheons**



Dave Richards has made consistent work for twenty years, without becoming stale and repetitive. Maybe this is because, in spite of a teaching career, he seems to be able to live in a special world, immune from the influence of art fashion, where his vision can fester and flourish. There are obvious traces of eighties Pop appropriation, but even then, this was too warm and idiosyncratic to be stylish. Titles like *Drunken Elf* and *Happy Mutants* are clues to the playful way Richards juggles anonymous materials, formal relationships and links to esoteric knowledge. The large, roughly symmetrical, wall-mounted, lumpy, organic shapes, with inset bits of text, diagrams and palimpsest blackboards, suggest playing boards for some exotic, magical game – Jumanji or Myst or the Glass Bead Game; rounded edges and muted carnival colors are those of a mysterious, well-used and forgotten artifact. Despite this, Richards never tries to impose a literal reading or contrived strategy.

The real game is where it should be, in the viewer's head, with the playing pieces the memories and references the work stimulates, amid a visual game of shape and color and space.

Michael Bulka