

GARY PANTER
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Texas-born illustrator, painter, designer and part-time musician, Gary Panter is a child of the '50s who blossomed in the full glare of the psychedelic '60s and, after surviving underground during the '70s, finally made his mark in the '80s as head set designer for the successful kid/adult TV show *Pee Wee's Playhouse*, a job which brought his jagged art and surreal cartoon ideas into the homes of America and bagged him two Emmy Awards. With *Pee Wee*, Panter created another world, a fantasy extension of his natural studio habitat which was constructed out of a collection of garbage and buried treasure. In the same way that Francis Bacon surrounded himself with images that inspired him to carve out his grotesques in oil paint, so Panter gathered around himself the rubble of his childhood to create *Pee Wee* and the host of lovable (yet strange) characters which inhabit his *Playhouse*.

Possibly the most influential graphic artist of his generation, a fact acknowledged by the Chrysler Design award he received in 2000, Gary Panter has been everything from an underground cartoonist to an interior designer (for a crèche inside the Philippe Starck-designed Paramount Hotel in New York) to an internet animator (his *Pink Donkey* and the *Fly* series can be seen online at Cartoon Network's web site). He is also the creator of *Jimbo*, a post-nuclear punk-rock cartoon character whose adventures were first chronicled as a comic strip in the '70s LA hardcore-punk paper *Slash* and later in *RAW* magazine. Although the inspiration for *Jimbo* was partly rooted in the '60s underground comix movement, other influences such as Japanese monster movies, cheap commercial packaging, the work of Marvel comics artist Jack Kirby, Mothers Of Invention house artist Cal Schenkel, and the writing of cult science fiction author Philip K. Dick leaked into the project. All of which gave *Jimbo* a startlingly fresh look that was subliminally familiar yet defiantly oddball.

Drawn with pen and black ink in his now familiar "ratty line" style, Panter's work (like Andy Warhol's before him) successfully broke down the barrier that separates "trash" from "art" and transformed underground comix into a viable art form. Equally ground-breaking were his extended comic novels *Dal Tokyo* and *Cola Madnes* (which has recently been published by Funny Garbage Press). *Cola Madnes* was created by Panter primarily for his Japanese audience (who named a cafe in Nagoya 'Gary Panter Squar' in his honor) using a manga-style two-panel-per-page layout that paid silent and respectful homage to the work of Toho Studios (creator of *Godzilla*) and comic book legend Jack "King" Kirby. *Cola Madnes* was Gary Panter's artistic "holy mission" way back in 1983. A project that was spawned from sketch-book jottings to rise up phoenix-like 18 years later as a smouldering piece of graphic and literary art that deserves to be stacked alongside J.G. Ballard's *Crash* and William S. Burroughs' *Naked Lunch*.

As an illustrator, Panter was one of the first to stop worrying about graphic perfection, preferring instead to push the underground punk attitude he had nurtured since the '70s into his commercial art for established magazines such as *Time*, *Rolling Stone*, *Entertainment Weekly* and *The New Yorker*. By deliberately presenting his work with serrated edges instead of clean lines, Panter's style came as a breath of fresh air to both publishers and audience alike. His fame as an illustrator grew when he was commissioned by Warner Brothers to produce a set of album sleeves for Frank Zappa. The resulting covers for *Studio Tan*, *Sleep Dirt* and *Orchestral Favorites* were universally admired (albeit initially not by Zappa himself), as was his cover illustration for the debut album by the Red Hot Chilli Peppers.

This enormous body of work has earned Panter the moniker of "King Of Punk Art" and roused fellow painter Robert Williams to dub him the "King Of The Preposterous". To anybody unfamiliar with the world of Gary Panter, stepping into his ramshackle Brooklyn-based studio is akin to being injected directly into the artist's brain, Fantastic Voyage-style, through the tip of a giant syringe. Once inside, the visitor is faced with a sprawling mass of artifacts from Panter's past, present and future. An hallucinogenic stew of hippie posters, Rat Fink model kits, Japanese monster movies, punk rock artifacts and underground comix, all of which mirrors the passion, madness, psychedelic perversity and creativity which he pushes into the work that is hanging half-finished on the rust streaked walls. A series of acrylic paintings in progress, each sending juddering pools of acid colour dancing across the grime and paint-smear floor whenever the sun manages to beam a shaft of white light through the ugly cataract windows that are the bleary eyes of his studio. Happy-faced Martin Sharp magic daisy mutations unfold poisonous triffid petals, while a doe-eyed Walter Keane teen plucks at a lime green electric guitar, illuminated by a squiggling lava lamp that has come straight out of *Pee Wee's Playhouse*. In another corner of the studio bake the spiked, severed heads of several Amazon natives, victims of a tribe of headhunters who have been wrenched from the pulped guts of some *Men's True Adventures* magazine and sprayed on canvas where they now silently scream. Welcome to Planet Panter.