

HOLDING OUT FOR A SUPERHERO: THE GAY EROTIC ART OF J.C. ETHEREDGE

BY ALAN BENNETT ILAGAN

With his racy depictions of gay superheroes and all the muscles and bulges that go with them, J.C. Etheredge proves that some cartoons and comics are not just for kids.

When I was a little boy, I had a minor obsession with superheroes. I wanted Superman and his bulge to rescue me, I wanted Batman to make me his Boy Wonder, and I wanted Wonder Woman... well, I wanted to **be** Wonder Woman. Cartoon superheroes have always been rendered as vaguely (and sometimes explicitly) homoerotic. Look at those hard-bodied physiques, the rippling muscles beneath skin-tight costumes, and the identity-defying masks that lend a bit of S&M mystique to all of the proceedings.

For an exploring gay boy, it was the closest thing to porn (check out He-Man and his bikini-clad brawn if you don't believe it). Besides the eye-candy, however, these superheroes offered something far more powerful – a sense of escape and an affinity with those who are different from everyone else. Digging deeper, it's easy to find that the duality and double-life that most superheroes live out is exactly what many gay men and women have gone through. Gay artist J.C. Etheredge found his escape from a closeted teenage existence in the larger-than-life characters of the comics, and it's led him to create his own series centered on a group of gay superheroes.

"The first erotic thing I ever drew was a naked Disney prince," Etheredge states, giving a whole new meaning to a whole new world. Prior to that, however, his beginnings were slightly more innocent. "Before I ever drew anything naughty I practiced by copying the comic strips in the Sunday newspaper. My favorite was 'Peanuts'. I loved the simple but distinct character design. I think much of my art style to this day derives itself from that strip."

Charlie Brown as a sex symbol? Perhaps not, but many a gay man has been drawn to the chiseled Disney princes and the perfectly-pumped bodies of various X-men. Such an influence can be seen in the gay appeal of grown-up, live-versions of superheroes (Christian Bale's brooding smolder as Batman, Brandon Routh's much-hyped bulge as Superman, and Hugh Jackman's fittingly-hairy chest as Wolverine). These have brought an adult edge to what was primarily the domain of kids, and Etheredge pushes this edge ever outward with his own art.

His work is a deliciously racy and raunchy hybrid of Tom of Finland, Falcon Studios, and Saturday morning cartoons, filled with colorful homoerotic images, over-the-top characters, and thrilling renderings of phallic phenomena. One look at the work on his website (www.anti-heroes.net – Warning: NSFW) and it's clear that this is for grown-ups, with compelling and explicit cartoon images not quite fit for childhood consumption. It's not the stuff of your Sunday funnies, and Etheredge challenges the limits of erotic art in gloriously graphic detail.

There is a rich history of such art, and a growing appreciation and acknowledgement of this work as a legitimate art form. (Witness the hefty price-tags some Disney cartoon cells command.) With the current popularity of manga (the Japanese word for comics), there is a new recognition of cartoons and comics as commercially-viable art. It's a tradition that harkens to the sexually-charged material of the wood-block etchings of Japan (ukiyo-e). The means and methods of creation may have changed (wood and chisels being supplanted by computer graphics), but the message and emotional resonance remains just as potent.

The rage for Japanese animation has been a blessing for Etheredge, who views the interest in it as a boon to his own business, as well as an affirmation on his outlook. As Etheredge puts it, "I like the way their culture views the art form. First off, they don't have the same Puritan hang-ups about content that Americans have. Secondly, the industry is just as valid and lucrative for the adult market as it is for kids... The Japanese really do respect the art form and the industry way more than we do in the West."

That strict Western philosophy on sex has been an obstacle for many an artist dealing with erotica. Throw in an unabashedly queer slant to the shenanigans, and you've got the possibility of commercially-disastrous controversy. Etheredge has seen his share of roadblocks.

"I do feel as though there is indeed a growing understanding of the type of work I do but acceptance of it is still a long way off. Most people dig what I'm doing and recognize it as a valid art form, but people in the mainstream commercial art world steer clear."

Given his unfailing artistic integrity, Etheredge admits it has not always been easy, but would not have it any other way. "I've lost out on a number of different mainstream jobs because of the existence of my erotic work," he explains. "But it's not something I let bother me. It's more-so solidified my resolve to continue to pursue what I'm strong at and what my fans like me for. It's the fans and people who enjoy gay erotic art that really keep me in the game."

To that end, the opinions and requests of his followers are vitally important to Etheredge. "Even though much of what I do is self-motivated and based on my own ideas, as

someone who was trained in commercial art, I take the fan-base's opinion very seriously. I cater to what they want."

It's a refreshingly honest take, and an authentic admission that most artists deeply care about the reception their work receives. There is a symbiotic relationship that artists and their readers/viewers have, and it has particular relevance when the art form is an ongoing comic series, where characters and storylines can run for years, becoming part of fans' lives. Etheredge also has a personal investment in portraying gay superheroes.

"As a person who looked to comics as a sense of escape from the dreadful realities of being a closeted gay teen, a gay superhero or two would have really empowered me. Recently, the mainstream comics have introduced a few here and there, but they are not treated with the same importance as the other characters," he laments. "For that reason, a side of me wants to create and produce a character and series based around gay characters that I could sell to an all-ages market. But then, the other side of me likes drawing porn too much to give it up."

Blatant porn notwithstanding, there have been homoerotic hints in cartoons and comic books since Superman took his first flight. "Comic superheroes are such an erotic genre of characters to begin with, it's a wonder some people don't see it," Etheredge states. "The instant I began drawing superheros as an adolescent, I hyper-sexualized them. My girls always had enormous boobs with erect nipples and my guys always had massive baskets. Even before I decided I wanted to draw erotic superhero comics, people noticed the provocativeness of my characters. It was something that was almost unconscious on my part. I felt, hell, these people are wearing spandex.... You'd definitely see something."

Despite his overt depictions of sexuality, this is one artist who does not necessarily bring his own particular preferences to his work. Unlike Tom of Finland (who was once rumored to have claimed that a work was only done when it gave him an erection), Etheredge does not judge the success of his art solely on the effect it has on his nether-regions.

"Contrary to what many people assume about guys who draw erotic stuff, I don't necessarily draw what gets me off. Rather, I draw what people request, and what they say gets them off. This is a weird fetish of mine, but I find the fact that other people get off to my work extremely hot! Call it a voyeuristic type of thing, I don't know. But yeah, the ultimate compliment is when someone tells me something I've done turns them on."

Aside from the occasional personality quirk or passing physical trait, Etheredge keeps his personal life out of his work – a departure from the traditional notion of artists working out their own issues through their art.

“For the most part, I’ve used my artwork as an escape from my personal life as far as I can remember. In general, I think comics have become way too rooted in reality. I think part of it is due to the influence of Hollywood adaptations of comic books... I agree that there is definitely a place for realistic comics, but I don’t think they should diminish the significance of fantasy-based comics. As a kid, the comics and cartoons that captured my imagination were the ones that felt totally unrealistic. I guess that aspect of escapism one feels when one dives into a comic book is something I value highly.”

That escape is something Etheredge offers for everyone who views his work – a colorful world where good triumphs over evil, where the bodies are tight and the baskets are big, and everyone looks hot in their own way. It’s a world where gay doesn’t mean different, and the only things that separate people are their own unique talents and morals - a super-reality we should all admire, even if it comes as a cartoon.