

Cartoon Art By Paleontologist Richard Kissel

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With the bodies of brutes, and the brains of carrots,

dinosaurs dominated the planet for 150 million years.

These days, not so much.

- Dr. Richard Kissel

The Museum of the Earth is one of those casually miraculous treasures of the little town of Ithaca. I've wanted to visit it for the longest time...and I finally did for the occasion was the October 18, 2012 artist celebration of the exhibition "T. Rex Go Boom: The Prehistoric Cartoonery of Dr. Richard Kissel."

I talked editor Bill Chaisson into driving us there with the promise of free wine, beer, and snacks. Bill hates events like this. I had a wonderful time.

Richard Kissel, Ph.D. is the director of teacher programs at the Paleontological Research Institution (affiliated with Cornell University) at the Museum of the Earth. He is also a marvelous *cartoonist*. (He also

does proper, formal, scientifically correct, paleontological illustrations of dinosaur fossils, which is where, I assume, he developed his art chops.)

His cartoon art, of dinosaurs, Ice Age mammals, (and cute, furry, little present-day critters) is charming and sweet and most appealing. One of my favorites is a series of cartoon dinosaurs that resemble animation art by the Max Fleischer Studio of the 1930s and '40s. (Max & Dave Fleischer's studio was the main rival of the Walt Disney Studios. They did shorts like *Popeye* and *Betty Boop* and *Koko the Clown*, and features like *Hoppity Goes to Town*. Their cartoons were largely black-and-white and featured an early pre-Disney animation style called "Rubber Hose," so-called because the characters arms and legs flopped like rubber hose (and, charmingly, their characters always seemed to be bopping in time to the cartoon's musical score).

Dr. Kissel gives away the game, not only because these are Rubber Hose Dinosaurs, and are rendered in black-and-white-and-gray tones like the pre-color animated cartoons of the 1930s, but because Dr. K. gives them names like Leon and Friz and Van Beuren, names of famous animation producers and directors of the era.

Leon Schlesinger was the lisping producer of the early *Loony Tunes*. (Ever notice how many Warner Bros. cartoon characters like Daffy Duck and Sylvester the Cat seem to be lisping?) Friz Freleng was one the great Bugs Bunny directors. (I knew Friz, and worked at his post-Warners studio, DePatie-Freleng, in the late 70s. Friz was a legendary bastard, a short, irascible, hot-tempered guy, and probably the model for Yosemite Sam. He was actually *struck by lightning* in his youth and *survived*.) And the Van Beuren studio was an early 20th century American animation studio. (I know this arcane animation history because I worked as a screen cartoonist for three decades in the animation industry.)

Another series of Kissel drawings I liked is called "Dinky Dinosaurs: The Meat Eaters & The Beet Eaters."

The Beet Eaters are adorably cute herbivorous dinosaurs with Gary Larson ping-pong ball eyes and a computer-generated wallpaper background with a repeating leaf pattern, giving them a sort of Andy Warhol silkscreen look.

The Meat Eaters, the carnivorous dinosaurs, have a stylized cartoon-bone pattern wallpaper background. And they have a more extreme, post-modern cartooning style, like, say, that of Matt Groening in his *Life in Hell* strip ... a New Wave, neo-punk look. And they are very *funny* looking ... like, say, the work of Scott Adams, the creator of *Dilbert*.

My favorite work of Kissel's is a series of pencil drawings of a little girl and her companion animal, a *T. rex*.

One reason I like them so much is that they are drawn in pencil. I think pencil is the subtlest medium. Even more so than, say, oil paints (which I think of as *symphonic* in possibility). If you want to know if someone can really draw, look at their pencil drawings.

Another reason I like them so much is that they are just so freaking *charming*.

The drawings of the little girl holding the *T. rex*'s claw, or the *T. rex* licking her face like a giant cat, are irresistible.

My editor, Bill, likened them to the work of the children's book illustrator Edward Gorey.

For my part, I thought they were somewhat like the modernist cartooning style called "Retro" (based on the work of the 1950s animation studio UPA, who were, in turn, influenced by Picasso). And an interesting

touch is that, in contrast to the somewhat stylized little girl, the *T. rex* is drawn in an intentionally more naturalistic, neo-Disney style.

The exhibit at the Museum of the Earth is definitely worth your time to drop by and peruse, Perspicacious Reader, and while you are there, there are all kinds of *other* wonderful stuff to see.

Or, if you are in a more modern cyber-couch-potato mode, and interface with the world via your computer, you can view Dr. Kissel's art at the website he and his wife, Kelly, have created: oursecrettreehouse.com.

The website includes treasures like a series of zombie dinosaurs (*cute* zombie dinosaurs, for God's sake) by Kissel. (I don't know what it *is* with zombies. They have become a whole sub-genre of the comic book industry, as well as television & film. I can't *imagine* what this says about our culture.)

And you can click on a section called "Critters" with Dr. K's adorable cartoon drawings of present day 21st century animals like bunny rabbits and beavers and squirrels and the like. For these the Doc employs a very nice, stripped-down, hyper-simple design style that is cuter-than-pie appealing.

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In mid-November, I visited the Museum of the Earth to chat with Dr. Kissel. The Museum of the Earth is a fabulous modernist building (designed by Tony Egner), a couple of dueling giant glass triangles angled into the hills overlooking the west side of Cayuga Lake (and attached to a beautiful old 19th century neo-Swiss villa-cum-castle that used to be an Odd Fellows orphanage).

Dr. K's office (in the 19th century building) is like a magical paleontological workshop full of fossils and dinosaur artwork and his cartoons. (My favorite was a fossilized Dr. Seuss fish that was "approved by the Seuss people" where he "reverse-engineered a Seuss character to make its skeleton".)

Ithaca Times: We were talking on the phone, and I asked you how you first discovered dinosaurs, and you told me you grew up in Pennsylvania, and your dad was a coal miner, and you said he brought home a fossilized fern ...?

Richard Kissel: Yeah, he brought home number of specimens of fern ... actually that piece of tree trunk up behind you there [*indicates a big hunk of fossilized tree trunk on a shelf*] he found in the mine. That was just part of it. He said it went on for about 20 feet ... but that was the biggest piece they could get out. That's a 300 million-year-old tree trunk, there ...

And in addition to that big piece, my brother and I had a metal coffee can of fossils he brought home. I still have 'em. That was no doubt the initial seed of my being fascinated by things that use to be alive but aren't any more.

IT: That's *sooo* fascinating. And then you told me your dad took you to a museum in Pittsburgh ... the Carnegie Museum.

Kissel: Yup. The Carnegie Museum in Pittsburgh. Once or twice a year we'd trek down there. And this was before the idea of *reproduced* skeletons ... *cast* skeletons. So museums only displayed dinosaur bones if they had *actual* dinosaur bones. Pittsburgh was one of two places in the world to see a *Tyrannosaurus rex*. Pittsburgh and New York City.

It doesn't exist anymore because they renovated it. It was this wonderfully atmospheric *dark, dank, dinosaur hall* – it had the perfect elements of *fear* and *wonder*. And, unfortunately, I think they've lost that a little bit with this new hall.

Turning that corner as a little kid ... being a *little afraid to walk in* ... but being *fascinated* ... being *pulled in*, too ... was a big part of it.

That poster on the wall there [*indicates a marvelously atmospheric and mysterious painting of a T. rex*] ... they had a life size mural of a *T. rex* and that was it. It was actually *painted on the wall*. And, unfortunately, they knocked the wall down, so it doesn't exist any more. But that was a 40-foot tall mural.

IT: Geez-Louise.

Kissel: That was the original poster I had on my wall as a kid ...

IT: The mural must have been pretty staggering, because, as a kid, you're physically smaller.

Kissel: Right.

IT: To have a *T. rex* mural that's larger than you ... I can see the sort of mystery and wonder of the museum for a kid.

Kissel: And they had a balcony around the perimeter of the dinosaur hall, and you had to go up on the second floor to actually get next to the head.

IT: *Very cool*. You grew up to be a paleontologist. Do you do digs and stuff?

Kissel: Yup. I've done digs in Big Bend National Park in Texas. We were looking at some Cretaceous fossils there ... dinosaurs ... but even more interesting, a fairly complete skeleton of a crocodilian ... basically a crocodile whose skull was five to six feet long...

IT: Good *God*... [laughs]

Kissel: So the entire thing ... we're looking at a 40-foot long crocodile.

That was a great experience. I did a number of digs there ... some work in Oklahoma ... and then a few summers in Germany to dig up some fossil reptiles and amphibians there.

IT: I'm envious.

Kissel: [laughs] It's not *all* romantic. Southwest Texas was what you wanted ... you're sitting at a campsite ... you're watching the sunset ...

IT: I've camped in the area ...

Kissel: It's beautiful ... but the work in Germany was 20 feet below the surface in a quarry with a hammer and chisel in the rain ... hacking through sandstone.

IT: [laughs]

Kissel: There was *nothing* romantic about that.

IT: When did you *decide* you wanted to be a paleontologist? Was that a childhood decision? An adult decision?

Kissel: It was a lingering childhood interest. When it came time to go to college, I was considering either an art path or paleontology/science ... and the ultimate decision was ... well, fossils have been a part of my life forever – so I was going to try to pursue that – but knowing that science and art are intimately connected ...

And that made the decision easier. It wouldn't be as prominent, but I wouldn't lose the art in my life if I pursued paleontology.

IT: What do you do here as director of teacher programs?

Kissel: My main project is a National Science Foundation grant. It's working with teachers, and we're writing guides to the geology of the country [where the teacher live].

And then a second part of that is we take teachers out into the *field* ... science teachers ... many of whom haven't done true fieldwork. So getting them out into the field helps them see what they teach in a different light. And then we help them document that ... to create what we call a virtual field experience ... that they can then share with their students.

We did a workshop near Albuquerque this summer ... and then we did one up in the Rocky Mountains Region ... and the Craters of the Moon in Idaho ... working with teachers in the various areas.

And so that's my main duty, here ... but I have experience with exhibits, and so I work with exhibits and I work with public programming.

IT: Are the teachers you work with college or high school teachers?

Kissel: Most are middle school ... but we've worked with kindergarten through college ... *and* educators from other museums ...

IT: I mentioned earlier the possibility of you doing a book of the *T. rex* and the little girl. Are you thinking about maybe doing some kind of narrative work?

Kissel: *I am*. Although, I'm currently wearing the exhibitor/researcher hat ... A co-author and I are doing a book on creating science-based exhibits. But that draft is due December first, and once that is off the desk I'm hoping in 2013 to take some of these narratives that are bouncing around in my brain and putting them on paper.