

## HOW I LEARNED TO STOP WORRYING

Paul Coleman

I first encountered Gravity's Rainbow at about the same time I began to paint, in mid-1977. At the time, I was just looking for any big book to help keep me awake at my job as a motel night clerk. At random, I selected GR from the local library and read it episodically, between the arrivals of the red-eyed tourists.

The words were fascinating. Pynchon seemed to know everything. No notion was too small for his attention, and no concept was too large to be encompassed by his vision. His use of myth and technology corresponded to my own interests; however, the depth of the sympathy, emotions, and memories he conveyed was new to me and provided solid lessons to a young art worker. What is stunning to me even now, after more than a decade of living with the book, is recognizing the staggering intensity of the effort that must have been required to corral all those facts and inventions into a coherent story line.

Having acquired this interest in GR, I naturally began to occasionally make paintings that comment on the book. One of the earliest of these is Return to the North Sea (1982). It shows poor, lost Bianca as if she had been returned to life. She is wearing a swimsuit and is diving head first into a featureless sea. Like Charles Dickens' Little Nell, she had to die; but if she had grown up innocently, she might have had the chance to dive trusting and eyes-closed into the North Sea, instead of being lost during the storm.

In Rocket Girl (1983), Katje Borgesius is shown superimposed on or perhaps embedded in an Atlas rocket test stand during a launch. To illustrate that she is fundamental to the effort, she is in the lowest part of the painting, the foundation of the stand. Since it is her role to act only as a catalyst, bringing men and money to the rocket, she remains unaware of the pyrotechnic fury depicted above her.

The Rocket paintings, dating from 1985-86, are a series of studies of the V-2. In order to further examine this central image of GR, it was necessary to produce a simple and mythic view of the rocket that would have the educational and meditative functions of a religious icon.

A narrative series of paintings begun in 1986 introduced a character named Atomic Bob. Atomic Bob began the series as a radio announcer who worked from a number of increasingly chaotic locations. He presented his broadcasts from his home, the road, the air, Hell, and the Void. Then, believing he had broadcast it all, he left the microphone to become a full-time seeker of

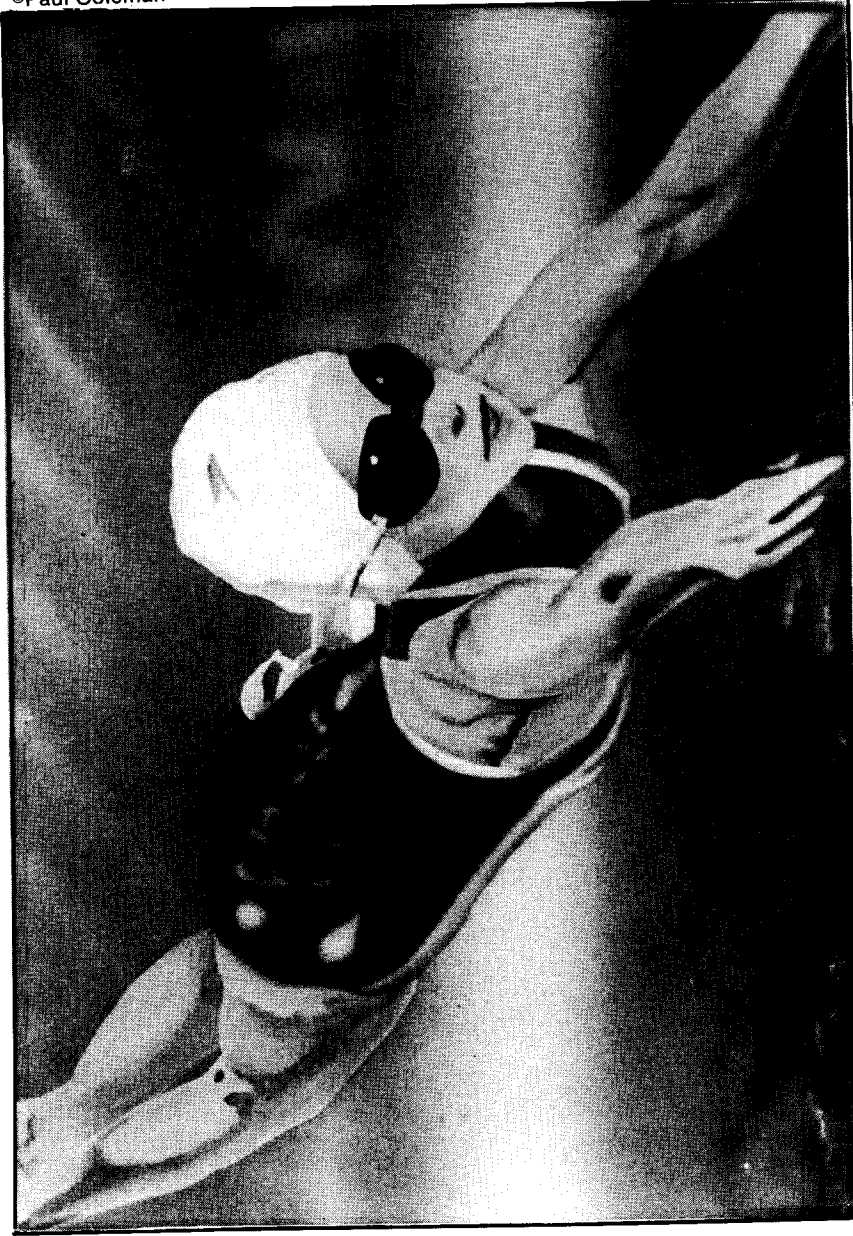
truth. Like Tyrone Slothrop, Atomic Bob notices patterns, projects dreams, and avoids near disasters. From his observations he draws far-reaching conclusions that are, as often as not, wrong. Like Rocketman, he has settled into a routine of fact-finding and omen-reading, but more like Benny Profane, he does not have the comfort of being on a proper quest, nor does he have the motivating terror of an unspeakable past.

Recent paintings of Atomic Bob place him with figures that are meant to refer to the Floundering Four in the Raketen-Stadt sequence of GR. Atomic Bob himself takes the part of Slothrop. A guardian angel plays Myrtle Miraculous. The cartoon character Astroboy takes the part of Marcel. The part of Maximilian has yet to be cast. So far, the major achievement of the three seems to be the creation of a sense of uncertainty mixed with wonder.

These are some of the pictures I have painted while under the influence of Pynchon. I hope he does not mind too much if we comment on or build with his inexhaustible body of work. Those of us who were impressionable at the right moment really do not have much choice in the matter. Just the same, I am inclined to think that the people who have learned Pynchon's lessons the best will go on to make inexhaustible worlds of their own.

--Sandusky, Ohio

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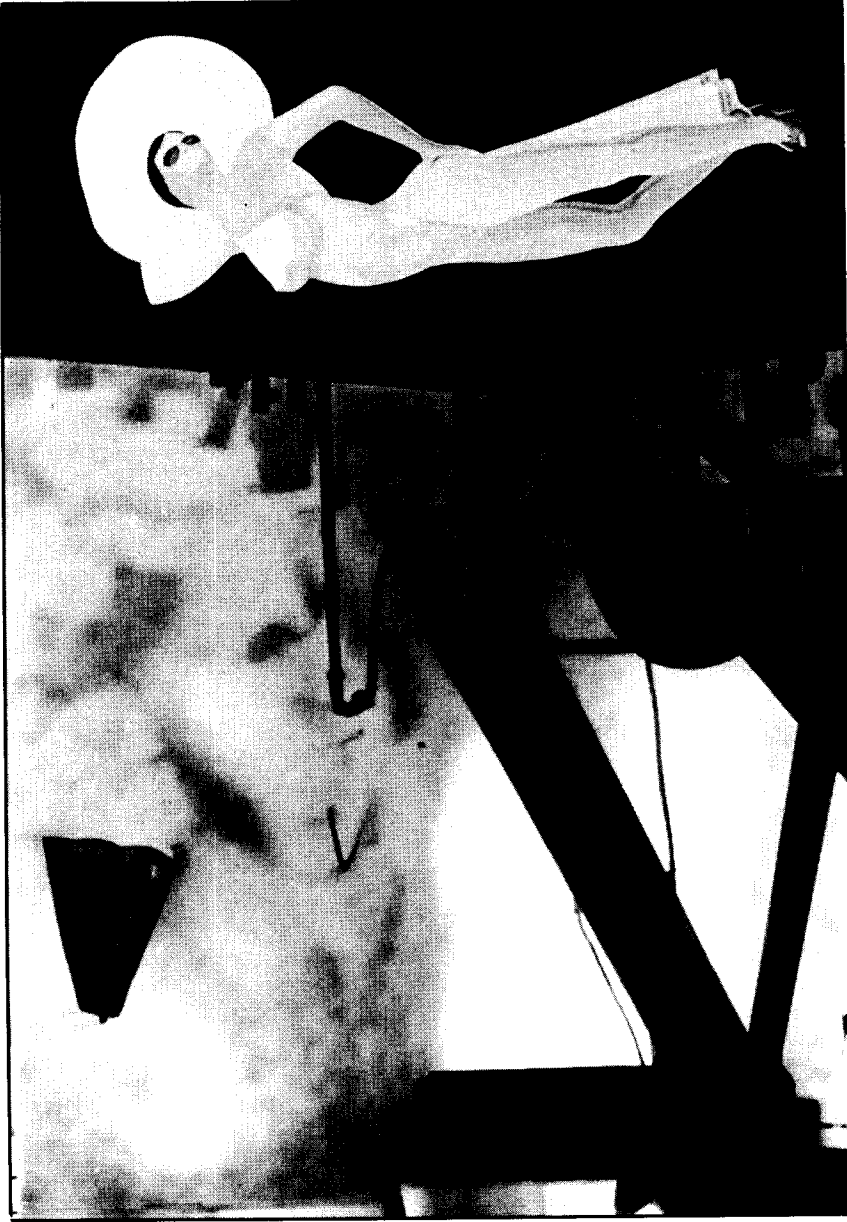


*Return to the North Sea*

48" x 60" Acrylic on Masonite

1982

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*Rocket Girl*  
48" x 72" Acrylic on Masonite

1983



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*Homage to Selfridge* (from the *Rocket Series*)  
24" x 36" Acrylic on Masonite 1986  
Selfridge was the first man to die in an airplane accident.



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*Atomic Bob and the Small Wind*

36" x 48" Acrylic on Masonite

1988

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*A Fork in Atomic Bob's Microwave*  
24" x 36" Acrylic on Masonite

1988

©Paul Coleman



*Atomic Bob and the Modern Mandala*

24" x 36" Acrylic on Masonite

1988





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*Atomic Bob at the Monorail*

36" x 48" Acrylic on canvas

1989



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*Waiting for the Monorail*

36" x 48" Acrylic on canvas

1989