

ARTFORUM

Charley Harper

Country Club

By Catherine Taft
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Charley Harper,
Owl and Mouse,
ca. 1978, gouche on
paper, 10 ½ x 10 ½"

As a kind of midcentury anti-Audubon, artist Charley Harper imaginatively sought to represent the natural world through its most basic shapes, colors, and patterns: that is, through a style the artist called “minimal realism.” The term, though, is a bit of a misnomer. While Harper’s illustrations and paintings from the 1940s to the end of his life in 2007 are undeniably modern designs, they lack both the exaggerated objectivity of realism and the cold authority of Minimalism. Rather, his delightfully idiosyncratic renderings faithfully represent organic processes, but hint at the fluid personalities of animals. His flat, condensed images make economical use of negative space and line to cleverly present zoological traits: the horns of an arctic musk ox herd are formed by a series of brown arches adjacent to icy white squares and triangles; the eyes and claws of an owl descending on a teardrop-shaped field mouse emerge as Xs and Os from a midnight-black ground; a manatee is composed from two gray circles and two finlike triangles. Despite taking such liberties with natural forms, Harper’s paintings were nonetheless used to illustrate two classic educational books for children, *The Giant Golden Book of Biology* (1961) and *The Animal Kingdom* (1968). Twenty-five original illustrations from these books—in addition to another twelve paintings and five vintage serigraphs—were the highlight of Country Club’s recent exhibition, which appealed to both high-design sensibility and humbler tastes.

In September, Country Club began operating from R. M. Schindler's 1934 Buck House, a small International Style landmark in Los Angeles's Miracle Mile district, and the contrast between the building's controlled floor plan and Harper's filtered forms drew attention to distinctive geometries well worth considering more often. The domestic setting distanced Harper's output from its commercial history, reclaiming each piece's potential as an autonomous (or simply decorative) artwork. While Harper did conceive of many works as "fine" art—such as *Hawk Aloft*, circa 1985, a painting of a silhouetted hawk soaring among falling leaves (similar to one of his images that later became a best-selling mail-order print)—several drawings and paintings in this show retain the evidence of their commercial life as photo-ready illustrations with visible tape marks, cropping and printing notations, and page numbers scrawled in margins surrounding the image. *Structure of the DNA Molecule* (p.63), 1961, for example, includes the notes "make line drawing 50 percent black and reduce 3 to 2," while the illustration-board support to the small gouache *Cricket* (p.48), 1961, has been visibly hand-cut to remove ground unnecessary to the composition. Annotating the process these illustrations would undergo, such details twist each piece into a kind of artifact that locates value in the original versus the utility of facsimile.

That Harper's drawings and paintings also appeared in a variety of popular media—Betty Crocker's 1958 *Dinner for Two*, the magazines *Ford Times* and *The Sohoian*, ads for Morton Salt and Procter & Gamble, and in US National Park Service campaigns—is among the reasons the work seems so familiar (perhaps more so to Midwesterners, as Harper found a grassroots following in his home region), but the particular nostalgia that surrounds Harper's work should not undercut the Country Club show. In an opening season with far too many "safe" contemporary exhibitions, I was all the more receptive to the simple pleasures of line and color, an artist in awe of the animal world and its awkwardness, the controlled touch of hand-worked illustrations, and the look of predigital graphic design. And with the popularity of exhibitions like the Museum of Contemporary Art Tokyo's recent survey of Mary Blair (known for her '50s Disney concept art) and the Orange County Museum of Art's "Birth of the Cool: California Art, Design, and Culture at Midcentury" (not to mention *Mad Men*, where Harper's Morton Salt ad is visible on the walls of Sterling Cooper), perhaps the time is right for further reassessment of popular midcentury American design.