



Reprinted from exhibition catalog, Tom Everhart: Under the Influence (2003), with permission of the Charles M. Schulz Museum and Research Center, Santa Rosa, California.

## INTRODUCTION

by Jean Schulz  
Santa Rosa, California  
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It is fitting that the first non-cartoon exhibition the Schulz Museum mounts is this collection of paintings by artist and good friend, Tom Everhart. Many people have seen his paintings in other museums and galleries, but it is unique to see them in conjunction with the art that inspired them.

The friendship between Sparky and Tom Everhart grew out of their mutual admiration. They first met while Tom was working for the Becker Group, a company licensed to use the **Peanuts** characters; Tom sculpted figures for their holiday shopping mall displays.

Turning cartoon drawings into 3-dimensional figures is a difficult task, but Tom caught Sparky's attention with his ability to translate the **Peanuts** Gang into 3-D. When Tom began painting his huge canvases showing exaggerated poses or elements of Snoopy, Woodstock, or one of the other **Peanuts** characters, Sparky was charmed by them. Sparky often stated that each art form has its own freedoms and limitations; Tom is able to play with the characters in a way that is impossible within the confines of a comic strip. When you see his paintings and read their whimsical titles, it is as though Tom is letting you in on a very personal joke.

Tom is always experimenting with new patterns, colors, and applications, which keep his work fresh—but always it is grounded on his understanding and love for the characters and for Sparky.

There are hundreds of wonderful paintings you won't see in this exhibit due to limited space and the artist's desire to be *au courant*. It is our loss not to show them all.

I wish you could see (and perhaps you have) Woodstock in *Dancing Down Fifth Avenue* (1999), and Lucy in what looks like a dunce cap, but is actually her "coiffureprotector" (*Prevents Hair Messing While Milady Sleeps*, 1998). They all make you look and laugh and look and laugh again.

We are happy to bring Tom's work to Santa Rosa in this historic exhibit, so **Peanuts** fans can see each canvas and its unique personality. Walking through the exhibit you will feel enveloped in color, life, and good humor.

## ECHOES OF INFLUENCE

*by Tom Everhart  
Venice, California  
August 2003*

Why is it that we are only aware of a profound influence through its retrospection, or, at best, during its evolution? In other words, it seems to be only with time, looking back, that one can clearly see what has taken place and what effect it has had. Just imagine how helpful it would be if, along the motorways of one's consciousness, there were signs that read, "Slow—Immense Influence Ahead" or "Yield to Oncoming Influence." I do realize that influence will not knock upon the door to give notice of its arrival, but a doorbell would be nice—maybe chimes. Is part of its charm derived from unexpectedness? How do we explain to others that it will require all of their intuitive abilities to recognize it? If not it may go undiscovered and undeveloped. Maybe influence is so difficult to see because its vitality has swept us along with irresistible momentum. Without a doubt, this is a very special time, and in its current is an inspirational wave that carries one period to an end as another period magically begins.

So, how does it happen?

Of course, it was a dark and stormy night (what else would one expect?) with all of the usual suspects participating in an unsavory East Coast winter. The rusted buckets activated a strong rhythm swallowing intermittent raindrops as they fell from the ceiling, pretending to be waterfalls. Not to be outdone, the hot water pipes, running horizontally underneath the nineteenth-century floor, were steaming away as if to be the mist rising from the waterfall. All of this was perfectly complemented by rattling shocked and determined windows moving to the beat of the argument between the freezing cold external air and the defending, hot internal air.

It was about 25 years ago, and I was standing barefoot in my New York studio. Facing me was a large 20 x 25-foot white wall, with splattered evidence of past works-in-progress. I was preparing to use an opaque projector to enlarge some of Charles M. Schulz's drawings on this wall. I wanted to make them the familiar scale of my recent 20-foot skeleton paintings for deeper investigation. All this was in preparation for some drawing involving **Peanuts** for a design company's presentation at Schulz's studio.

Unfortunately, I was now brought face to face with what was the real burden—my frustrations with this unfamiliarity. My background—that is, my formal art education— had never included training in cartooning. Instead of viewing this as a negative, however, I have found that frustrations, especially concerning the unfamiliar, can sometimes create the most surprisingly resourceful means for one's work. Since I was Malready familiar with a few of the **Peanuts** animated television specials, I think what I expected to see once I turned on the projector was an oversized vision of black-and-white suspended

animation. Thus, the studio lights were turned off and the projector was turned on.

Astonishing! *Animated suspension* is what pulsed across my wall. These extraordinary, elegant black lines presided over my dark studio like suspension cables stretching across a bridge that gracefully wiggled from tower to tower. I had actually blown up his strip much too large for the wall and cropped off the text balloon and the comic strip's borders, leaving only these large than life, beautiful lines. They had motion like an echo in a canyon, but at the same time these lines revealed a confidence that understood how to hit it and quit it. I felt excited by it.

There too, once I had realized it, I began to find visual traces back to Chinese ink painting and, moreover, to the black and white paintings created by Abstract Expressionists Franz Kline, Willem De Kooning, Robert Motherwell, and others in the 1940s and '50s. As you can imagine, since they were all very important early influences on my own work, my acquaintance with the inherent physical characteristics of his line was now instantaneous. This was solid ground again and I was thrilled.

I never made it past that first blown-up drawing of his strip. I sat in front of it for hours. I don't even remember leaving it.

A few months later, after the design meeting at his office, Charles Schulz and I were off to his drawing studio with the presentation drawings. He told me he could always recognize copies of his work, and he never really liked them. It was at this point that I was aware that he knew I had redrawn his artwork for the presentation. I briefly explained to him my background, and thus the necessity to redraw in order to capture the feeling of his originals. Certainly, he was then aware that the popularity of his characters was not my focus, but that my fascination lay with the brilliant architecture of his black ink line. I do feel, looking back, that this was something new to him, and I believe this to be the moment that inspired our friendship.

Critique turned to play as he broke out his ink and pen nibs. For a long time we drew nothing but lines—just lines! But, and most importantly they were not abstract marks; he was actually, with each stroke, showing me his own unique language.

Shortly thereafter he started showing me the images of his vision and style; the flattening of the perspective of the doghouse, the calligraphic slashing of Woodstock's nest, Schroeder's toy piano, the black pulsation within Lucy's hairdo, and his confident and heroic rain lines. By the end of our day, in his kindness, he gave me a substantial quantity of his special ink pen nibs. That afternoon was to be the template for the rest of our relationship—from that day forward, his name was Sparky.

The gift of the pen nibs was not the only thing he shared with me. Sparky had been deeply concerned with a sensitive notion that the art world did not recognize his art as Art, and this truly bothered him. With his massive output of brilliant work, one would know it was absurd—too absurd—because it would have meant that the Art world had missed that he had developed a new way of seeing. Had the Art world lost its Art manners? I was taken aback by this at first,

but I had no idea that his insecurity would eventually become one of the central matters of my own art, or that it would continue to seriously fuel my work to this very day.

I must take this chance, while I have it, to persuade you to take a moment and look very closely at Sparky's art, in particular the structure of his ink line. It is too often referred to, as Sparky himself did, as just "a wiggly line." During the many incredible opportunities I had to see the creation of this line, I can promise you that it is much more.

Sparky made most of his lines with ink and a two-pronged split sharp-ended quill pen that was both flexible and malleable. He determined the thickness and thinness of each line by the pulsating pressure of his hand onto the pen, thus manipulating the prongs open and shut to release and stop the flow of ink. So actually, these strong confident "wobble lines" were likely a reflection of his energy, and more importantly, an autobiographical mark of the moment.

After a few years of our unique relationship I was producing supplemental drawings for magazine covers and interiors as well as doing special projects, imitating the "Schulz-like" style in the manner that he taught me. He trusted me to do it and I did it; I didn't let him down. I continued to create these drawings, on and off, for about the next 17 years.

At the same time, in my studio I began to replace my previous skeleton-based paintings with a new body of landscape paintings. This work attempted to reconstruct and bend the reality of actual landscapes into a new way of seeing them—as artificial puns of the same landscapes. Although I worked full-time on these paintings for several years, it was obvious to me that I was becoming increasingly motivated by my supplemental drawings for Sparky.

By the latter part of the 1980s I was convinced that his influence on my act of painting was inevitable. Even the backgrounds and colors in some of my "Schulz-like" drawings became a little painterly, especially relative to the conventions of cartooning. Neither of us could envision what it meant or how it would ever work in balance. I was really confused and stuck.

Then, in the summer of 1998, the brakes jammed and came to a screeching halt. I was diagnosed with the very late stages (probably too late according to the hospital's consensus) of colon and liver cancer. Due to its late discovery, it had already spread to many areas in my body. All this as friend, Jean-Michel Basquiat, devoted artist to the cartoon as an artistic painting language, was being buried in Brooklyn.

What I should like to convey about extreme cancer is short—everything stops. But, much like when one period ends as another begins, one's internal reality is rethought as things start to relate and cross-relate into a new reality. As I unexpectedly made it through two 10-hour surgeries, Sparky's images and influences, which had long before been made my second nature, blended together with my demands of painting into a new way of seeing. My future Schulz-inspired paintings began to develop themselves, one after another. I immediately shared my revelations with him, and he couldn't wait to see the first piece.

I spent the next year in radical chemotherapy at the Johns Hopkins Hospital in Baltimore. During this period, I was heavily involved with preparing drawings and concepts for my new paintings, and I filled a thick sketchbook with crayon color field ideas. Above all, my most important consideration in creating and thinking about this work was Sparky's expectations and approval.

Sparky expressed, and very emphatically so, that the paintings should be something different from what he would do or think. If not, they would be nothing more than a facsimile of his work. He stressed that it had to spring from my own individual feelings and insight—inventing a new way of seeing the same.

Thus my goal in this new work was to strike an effective balance between altering the conventions of his comic strip without undermining its fundamental verity or my thinking about painting. If cartooning, in principle, is once removed from reality, then my paintings were to be once removed from cartooning.

Immediately following a year of chemotherapy in 1990, I finished my first concerted effort at producing this work; a 6 x 12-foot painting of the **Peanuts** toy piano on two canvas panels. In my opinion, the toy piano is Schulz's most elegantly drawn object. My practice of using panels, whenever possible, refers back to the panels of the comic strip without the obligations of the black outline borders. The explosion of scale was, and continues to be, very important in emphasizing the difference between the cartoon and the painting, as well as forcing a close-up view. Considering my recent year, this was a new way of perceiving, up close, the beauty of things in this world.

I thought it would be humorous to paint the toy piano in cadmium red because of a law being presented before Congress to ban cadmium in paints. When Sparky first viewed the painting he was joyfully impressed, but he became disappointed with the title *Schroeder's Toy Piano* (1990). He thought it sounded like something he titled himself and that it lacked my insight. Concerned about being safe, I overlooked our mutual understanding that these painting must be different when designing a title.

To make matters worse, I had already written this title onto the side and back of the canvas. Pulling from my insight I added, *Play on Cadmium Red!* Sparky was pleased. Since this interaction, all of my painting titles have reflected my own insight and feelings, usually in the form of verbal/visual puns.

Many of the strip's "found objects" that I have used as subjects for my works, like the toy piano, were inspired by the drawing in that first meeting with Sparky, 25 years ago. Several paintings would go on to mix them together, as did *Late Afternoon Doghouse Cathedral in Rain* (1993), where the work is predominantly about the rain lines with the doghouse in the background. The title is a humorous comparison of the doghouse to Monet's series of cathedrals in various outside conditions.

Still lifes, such as a flower vase tucked away in the strip's background, were some of my most playful "found objects." I pulled them into the conspicuous foreground and titled them with the date of the strip (for example, *Still Life from a 6-21-82 Cartoon Life*, 1997).

Soon after the first "found object" paintings, I began to experiment more with the strip's characters. For each particular painting, characters were chosen

not for who they were but rather for the expressive manner in which Sparky had drawn them. In other words, I selected one of his drawings based on a character's expression that most identified with what I was trying to say. It was as if the character could be a self-portrait of my astonishment. In a recent work entitled *Sophisticated Mama* (2002–03), the facial expression and overall attitude of Peppermint Patty perfectly presents my humor about the many unsophisticated sophisticates.

Even as my paintings were growing in number, only a few people had the opportunity to see them. Sparky, always the biggest and best promoter of the paintings, knew that I previously had made lithographs with my landscape-themed work, and thought that this art form would be a great way to present the body of my work to more people. The first lithograph was created in the early 1990s, and today, 65 lithographs later, my art is still “under the influence.”

In the fall of 1997, the second inspiration for the title of this exhibition, *Under the Influence*, developed when I moved from the East Coast to the West Coast. I created all of the work in this exhibit in my Venice studio where the movement of the Southern California light changed my structure of sight—thus another way of seeing.

Having to do the same thing every day, but differently, was probably the most prominent life lesson that I absorbed from my long relationship with the cartoonist, Sparky. “You’re really coming into your own,” was the biggest compliment he gave me. Thus, I never strive for consistency, but work to keep the paintings growing and changing to keep them alive and fresh, but with their original intentions.

The use of dots and circles has evolved while working in my Venice studio, both in quantity and in form. My early paintings included only a few floating circles, created as small dropped drips and poured dots onto a canvas laying flat on the floor. My more recent pieces consist almost entirely of dots and circles, which I have stamped and pressed onto an upright canvas, very similar to the process of lithography. With the mutual relationship of these dots rolling around, floating, and falling, I attempt to keep each work in a constant state of movement and growth, which makes it something alive.

Charles M. Schulz's death meant a great deal to me. I don't remember ever experiencing such sorrow and loss. And it wasn't “Good grief,” it was horrible grief. Thankfully, his family's continued friendship is one of the few things in life that has helped me to accept it. For that, I am greatly in their gratitude.

So, how does it happen? happen? happen?

I don't know. Maybe it's like an echo. Imagine that you're standing in the presence of something overwhelming, like the Grand Canyon. Inspired, you scream, which travels throughout and with the canyon, reverberating on and off its surfaces, like an opera from act to act. But if you listen very closely, that scream, as it travels, evolves into something new and different—a poetic whisper of the Grand Canyon that inspired it.