

Getting Conceptual: 50 Years of Allen Ruppersberg

Even for those who aren't familiar with conceptual art, the evolution of Ruppersberg's style, on display at the Walker, offers a narrative of its own

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THE SINGING POSTERS: ALLEN GINSBURG'S HOWL BY ALLEN RUPPERSBERG (PARTS I-III) AT THE WALKER ART CENTER

PHOTO BY KATIE BALLALATAK

Scattered among the 120-plus works of Allen Ruppersberg at the Walker Art Center are a handful of self portraits the artist rarely ever appears in. There is *Self-Portrait as Bugs Bunny*, where it is actually Bugs Bunny; *Self-Portrait Making a Face Like Barney Bear*, where the average viewer might argue it is not, as the title says, Ruppersberg “making a face like Barney Bear,” but a drawing of Barney Bear; and a third self-portrait, in the same row, where at least his silhouette appears among a colored bird collage. But the beauty of the Walker’s survey of Ruppersberg is that, through 50 years’ worth of art, we can piece together what he looks like not by seeing *him*, but by seeing how he views the world.

Allen Ruppertsberg: Intellectual Property 1968-2018 runs from March 17 through July 29 and shows a timeline of one of the first artists to prioritize concept and narrative above everything. Much like we can follow Pablo Picasso through his different stages of blue, rose, Cubism, Surrealism, and more, we can track Ruppertsberg's evolving interests—his examinations, his loves, his reflections on the horrors and staidness of life—through the sheer immensity of the Walker's exhibit and the clear precision of senior curator Siri Engberg's design. (Pictured below: Engberg, left, and Ruppertsberg, right.)



In *Seeing and Believing*, the most romantic and nostalgic piece of the exhibit, Ruppertsberg compares 1970s Polaroid photos of suburban houses to “seeing” while comparing the interiors of those houses, alive and warm with family, to “believing.” Ten years later, for 1982's *The Human Figure*, he silkscreen-prints an article, “Target of death plot now seeks a divorce,” and then “translates” what

this event tells him about human nature and depravity by writing in the large margins of the canvas.

Ruppertsberg loves playing with the overlap of story and art, and for a large majority of the five-section exhibit, this exploration takes the form of visuals juxtaposed with text. *The Singing Posters: Allen Ginsburg's Howl by Allen Ruppertsberg (Parts I-III)* writes out Ginsburg's poem phonetically, while pencil sketches of books from the 1970s and '80s ask whether they are simply spines and pages stitched together or something more. In his *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, a 20-canvas work where he hand-wrote the entirety of the novel with a marker (you can see little sections where he had to cross out mistakes), Ruppertsberg attempts to turn the book's consciousness into a visual work—or, in a more epithetic sense, he makes a “painting about a book about a painting.”

Some of these works haven't been seen in the U.S. for decades, and some are making their U.S. debut. Other staple pieces by Ruppertsberg were performance based, which left Engberg the task of recreating the sense of them. His first major experiential art was *AI's Cafe*, where, every Thursday evening for a few months in 1969, people would come in and order off a menu full of art. There were BLTs—“branches, leaves, and twigs on lacquered pine board”—and “deserts,” such as “cotton covered with star dust.” Walker visitors can see a mosaic of these meals all across one of the gallery walls along with some memorabilia such as the *AI's Cafe* shirt and order slips. Although Engberg puts out a symbolic table and chair, you really have to take the time to stop and let loose your imagination as you look at the pieces. Two years after the cafe, Ruppertsberg created another space for artists to gather called *AI's Grand Hotel*, complete with everything a hotel needs—a neon sign, matchbooks, stationery, maid service, and entertainment. While Walker visitors can't rent a room, Engberg has created a hotel room that, instead of a bed or a nightstand, has a hodge podge of film from the original hotel projected on the walls that helps give a sense of the space.

With *Intellectual Property* being such a large exhibit, it's not surprising that some of the work seems disparate from the other: Where one is minimalist, the other is saturated with pop culture clippings. Where one is about placemaking, the other is about paying tribute to the inspirational or the forgotten. At the beginning of the tour, Engberg even joked about how Ruppertsberg surprised himself with the variety when they were putting the exhibit together.

Still, the Walker's commission of Ruppertsberg, *The Shoes Are Centered on the Shelf*, manages to bring it all together as the perfect capstone of the exhibit. Over the three years he and Engberg worked on the exhibit and the two weeks it has taken the Walker to install everything, his visits to Minneapolis have included journeys into the depths of the Walker's archive. Old programs and newspaper articles, artwork, and more lay within folders and storage areas that Ruppertsberg individually dug through, and within the large upper gallery of the museum, he created a 1,200-color photo copy collage of the Walker Art Center's history. Its mass fills the white walls and creates a conceptual rendering of the archives room, and the minimalistic, brightly painted furniture set about the room brings it back to its original lounge purpose. It's a piece that seems to capture so many of the exhibit's themes and shows the genius juxtaposition of Ruppertsberg: That, while he has this untouchable way of looking at the world, at the same time, he merely creates something new out of found objects that, for whatever rhyme or reason, speak to him.