

(Biography continued, keep skipping)

toward a set of public services collected under the umbrella company Fantastic Industries.)

What Erdman's project has required, above all, is a finely tuned attentiveness to what his audience believes they want and an absolute willingness to work out these wants in material form no matter what (evidence: hundreds of panda paintings). Erdman's creative decisions are pushed along by his audience's desire to find what they already know, and he in turn pushes these desires slightly toward the unexpected (turning cute into creepy, sick into sentimental). Such is the recipe for actual entertainment. While wrestling with what the audience wants stays the secret of most Real Art, it becomes the explicit subject in Erdman's paintings, as well as in his pranks (on the promise and pitfalls of audience satisfaction see, for example, his early Diane Files or the notorious Kathy McGinty collaboration with Julia Rickert). Unlike his Pop predecessors, Erdman's paintings are not meditations on the shiny coldness of market interactions, nor are they clever declarations about the end of art. Instead, they are exercises in turning commercial surfaces back into a folk tradition, a truly popular lexicon, which we can playfully control. If his paintings are flat and bright—and they are incredibly, stubbornly so—it is because they are the coins in this constant exchange, the tokens of an unfolding common language of serious puns and half-jokes being shot back and forth between Erdman and his fans. The fan is the single constant, the only truly necessary piece in Erdman's game, and to play it, the artist himself becomes a super-fan of the constantly shifting popular landscape, faithfully reproducing how it delights and disgusts. What results is a collapsing of the personal and the public in Erdman's work, and in his life—a collapse that Erdman has embraced perhaps more than any other artist. Just as he re-frames the seemingly impersonal stuff of mass-publicity (celebrities, news events, commercials) as the shared familiars in our common biography, so too do the workings of Erdman's private life become his material for public entertainment. No detail, no matter how mundane or potentially damaging to himself or his audience, is spared from consideration (the examples are endless, but see for instance the fallout of his recent appearance at Pecha Kucha in Chicago). All this may seem quite megalomaniacal. It is. But in the end it is also the opposite. In a way Warhol would never have tolerated, Erdman perpetually offers his fans absolute artistic control of his fate (gleefully handing over his Myspace password, for instance, so that anybody might tinker with his brand). In doing so he illuminates his own celebrity, like all the others, as the people's creation.

--Hannah Woodroofe  
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