

Chris Ware on “Here”, the original 36-panel comic strip:

Richard McGuire and “Here”, a grateful appreciation.

Every once in a while an artist comes along who takes the accrued potential of his or her discipline and recasts it into a brand new way of seeing or feeling. Cezanne famously accomplished it with painting, Stravinsky did it with music, Joyce with writing — and Richard McGuire, I think, did it with comics. It may sound a bit hyperbolic, but I believe that with his deceptively modest strip “Here”, which first appeared in *RAW* magazine, volume 2, no. 1 in 1989, Richard McGuire revolutionized the narrative possibilities of comic strips.

Without digressing too much into description, the strip is a history of one corner of a room, spanning the years 500,957,406.073 B.C. and 2033 A.D., told in 6 pages of 6 panels each, totaling 36 reader-friendly panels. Or, more properly, 85 panels, because although the initial panels are clearly labeled “1957,” by the fifth panel “1957” is only a smaller part of the original image, having been reduced and reframed by a picture of the same room, but labeled, and clearly refurnished, as “1922.” This simple, maddeningly obvious and magically electrical metaphor for the very longing that is life passing into oblivion carries the strip forward through a parade of multi-generational oppositions that are at once trivial and poignant.

One of the more infrequently considered aspects of comic strip storytelling is the transparent present tense in which everything seems to happen; i.e., things literally seem to move before the reader’s eyes. Those cartoonists who desire a more literary seasoning to this effect may shake a little third person narration over choice panels, casting everything back into a simulation of past tense, or memory — but beyond these two choices, and before “Here”, there had been very little experimentation into the narrative tense of comics (which is, really, the concern for where exactly it is the reader’s consciousness “is” in a strip, if I can say this without sounding too erudite.) A fundamental technical oddity of comics is that “space” is sliced up into paper-thin views of experience, visually spread out in rows, tiers, or whatever compositional arrangement most clearly indicates linearity, and then life breathed back into it all by the peculiar (and rather complicated) act of reading. Such re-representation of time in comics is also traditionally arranged with an implicit direction of past to present which generally directly corresponds to the “direction” of reading in the cartoonist’s native culture; for we westerners, it’s from left to right. With “Here”, however, Richard takes space, slices it into pictures, and then shuffles it all up — past, present, and future hopelessly intermingled — taking time out of the page and placing it squarely back into the

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consciousness, and, more importantly, the control, of the reader. The uninitiated viewer doesn't realize this "trick" at first, but as soon as that fifth panel is reached, with the "1922" surrounding it, we have to look back, we reread — and before we know it we've gone back in time, both narratively, and of our own volition. By the second page, we will likely have already flipped back and forth a good number of times, recognizing certain characters suddenly aged, then youthful, then aged again, yet all held in frame by the simple idea that this is all happening (or has happened, or will happen) in one corner of the same space, or "here." People move around, give birth, laugh, spill water, and die — but the room stays the same. In "Here", space and time work in the mind of the reader in a way that's closer to real memory and experience than anything that had come before in comics. And, best of all, it's all done so wonderfully unpretentiously: through some odd combination of the appeal of dollhouses, photo albums, and the then-new computer-window metaphor of "selecting" a portion of an image, Richard takes the reader out of the strip to a vantage point where one may see all times and all places all at once, creating an experience that is, ultimately, transcendent.

There are some formal antecedents: Art Spiegelman's 1976 *Malpractice Suite* with its stylistically fractured and mindbendingly multilayered panels may have provided Richard some formal inkling of his structure, and while I'm not sure if he saw Dutch cartoonist Marc Smeets' odd, obscure comic strips where businessmen and scholars appear to be treading on an invisible sedimentary topsoil of modernity above medieval Flemish landscapes, there is a similarity of notion between the two artists' work, though the approaches are wholly different. Finally, Robert Crumb's 1979 *A Short History of America*, while easily one of the greatest comic strips ever drawn, and while it shares something similarly thematic with "Here", Crumb's strip is primarily sociological, and Richard's is metaphysical — with an eye, it seems, towards finding a sort of new poetry of the form itself.

Nabokov's *Pale Fire*, probably one of the more commonly mentioned books by young writers as a source of inspiration, tells its story partially in footnoted text, lifting the reader out of the experience of any directly-continuous narrative; "Here", similarly, is in a way "footnoted," but is a footnote unto itself, in which the narrative development is entirely the result of poetic and happenstance juxtapositions — not a linear reflection of the experience of time itself, but one of memory and/or ultimately of action "above" all human experience. This innovation also suggests a formal direction for young cartoonists seeking a fresh way of expressing the complexities of life in a woefully under-developed and commercially handicapped narrative form. I should know; I don't think there's another strip that's had a greater effect on me or my own comics than "Here", so much so that rereading it is actually a shameful and rather embarrassing experience. Having gotten to know Richard over the years, however, I've found him not only to be a generous friend but also an artist who's relentlessly and restlessly dissatisfied with anything

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that seems as if he might be repeating himself; he shifts between painting, sculpture, printmaking, film, installation, drawing, book design, illustration, sound, and music and does groundbreaking work in all of them. I just wish he could take some solace in his wildly insatiable curiosity, because he bemoans his work as having no continuity, or oeuvre, which is simply not true. Personally, I think he's a genius, transforming every medium he works within into his own, peculiar personal language, and what he gave every reader with "Here" was an individual and unique way of looking at life, and additionally (to this cartoonist, at least) it was life-changing.