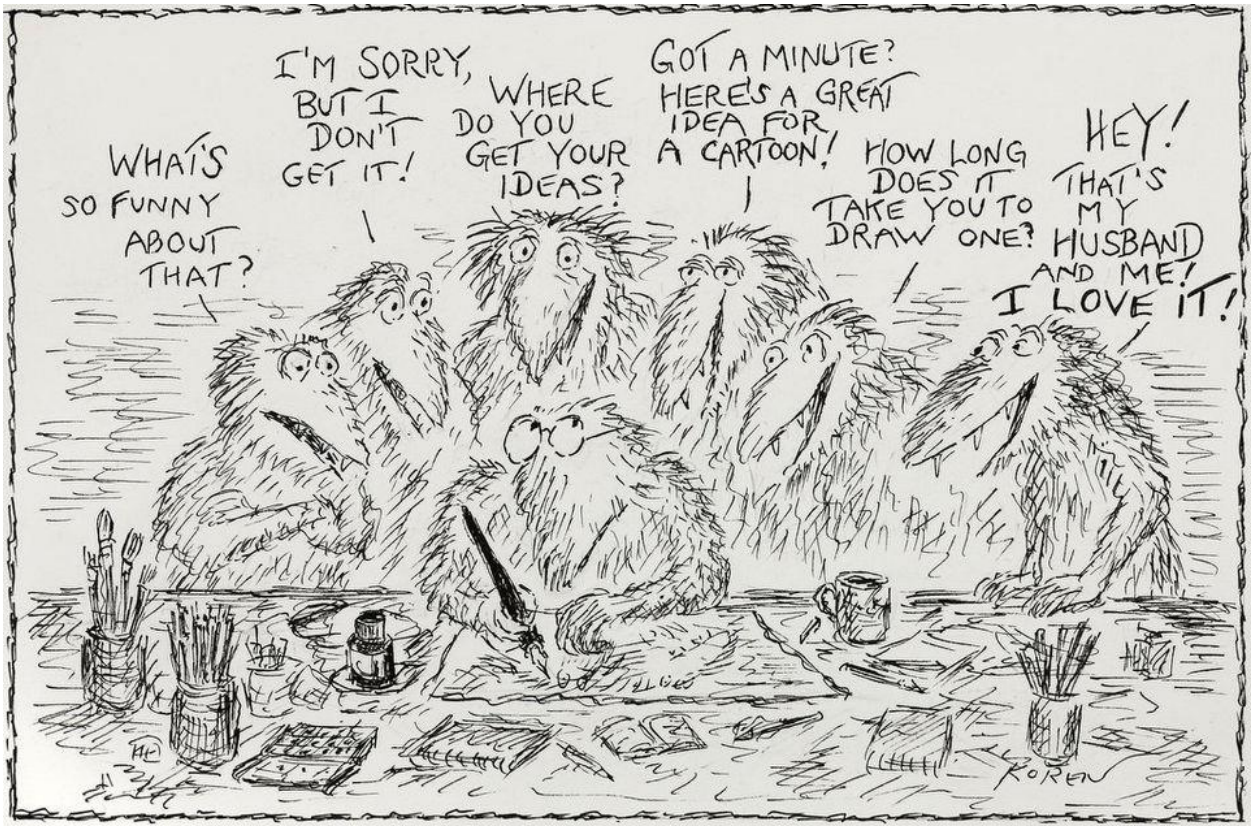
New Yorker cartoonist Edward Koren shows social satire at Saginaw Art Museum



Edward Koren, Self-Portrait, 1991. Pen and ink on BFK Rives paper. Photo courtesy of the artist. Edward Koren, the New Yorker cartoonist is currently on exhibit at the Saginaw Art Museum, through June 27, 2015.

SAGINAW, MI – Edward Koren started to answer the question, paused, and then tried again.

"It's an interesting question," said the cartoonist best known for his work in The New Yorker when asked what the 50-year retrospective of his work, "Edward Koren: The

Capricious Line," says about him. It's on display through Saturday, June 27, at the Saginaw Art Museum, 1126 N. Michigan in Saginaw.

"It's daunting, to see the volume," he said of the exhibit curated by Diane Fane and David Rosand.

IF YOU GO

What: "Edward Koren: The Capricious Line"exhibit

Where: The Saginaw Art Museum, 1126 N. Michigan in Saginaw

When: Through June 27. Hours are from 10 a.m. to 5 p.m. Tuesday through Saturday.

Cost: $5 for adults, $3 for students and 65 and older, free for 15 and younger.

Details: 989-752-2861

"When I sorted it out a little bit, what I had created through the years, I saw that it was not necessarily consistent with what I'm doing now. It's more like looking back in time at a child, noticing what's happened as time elapsed and remembering what interested me back then."

And, as you'll notice in Saginaw, the furry little creatures that one critic said resembled clippings left on a barber's floor take the viewer back to another time with words as powerful as the illustrations. It also provides the chance to see them as he draws them, big enough to show the details sometimes lost in publication.

"They're not necessarily still relevant," Koren said of his societal jabs. "But some of the themes have a strong afterlife; like perennials in the garden, they keep popping up."

Would they have succeeded as well, these drawings of, say, two creatures looking as skeletal remains in the desert and saying "Hydrate! Hydrate! Hydrate!" if they were human?

"I don't think so," Koren said. "It wouldn't have the same effect if normalcy wasn't turned into fantasy. It does make things very strange," he admitted, but it also allows the thought to work through the viewers' filters.

"Charles Schulz (who drew 'Peanuts') had a way of generalizing a philosophical approach so that the viewer could take it personally. He noticed all those things; you have to be keen on noticing everything, and that's true for artists in general. It's key."

That's why it amuses him when people ask where he gets his ideas, something he can't imagine asking a poet, for example. Of course, Koren's particular style, first appearing in The New Yorker in 1962, is a puzzle of word and image, the two naturally coming together in his freelance studio in Vermont.

"The heartbreak of a cartoonist is the number of ideas in relation to the ones published that are rejected," he said. "It's huge; it's part of the economics of the business."

There was a time, a couple of decades ago, when his work appeared in many more publications, including illustrations in The New York Times. As in the beginning, The New Yorker is still his prime outlet.

He's also taught his trade at various universities and collaborated with authors such as the late George Plimpton on books.

"George was a very generous man, giving in a personal way," Koren said of Plimpton. "He was a celebrity, but he was honestly interested in everyone. And he threw great parties!"

Koren has no intention of retiring — the word is not part of his vocabulary, he said, describing himself as dangerously well — and as long as there's a market, we'll still see his furry little perspective on the world at large. It's a self-deprecating art as well with some of the most amusing on display at the Saginaw Art Museum, the exhibit's first stop, aimed at writers who have grand illusions of their own worth.

"My happiest times are in my studio," he said. "I travel for a few days, working for a group in London or visiting a show in New York, but it's good to come home and put my thoughts on paper."

When it comes to explaining it to others, "my work speaks for itself," he said. And it embodies satire as explained by Jonathan Swift, a sort of glass where we see everyone's face but our own.