

His Shaggy World (and Welcome to It)

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As everybody knows, the Upper West Side of Manhattan is the home of overeducated, comfortable but not superrich liberals and the psychotherapists who treat their garden-variety neuroses. Edward Koren, whose whimsical cartoons of shaggy animals and hairy, bemused humans are a staple of [The New Yorker](#), is the neighborhood's poet laureate.



Edward Koren/Luise Ross Gallery

"Where did you put the rest of the moose?" is featured in "Edward Koren: Parallel Play, Drawings 1979-2010" at Luise Ross Gallery, one of two current shows dedicated to this cartoonist. The other is "Edward Koren: The Capricious Line" at the Wallach Art Gallery.



Edward Koren/Wallach Art Gallery

"We can't tell if it's a malfunction or a dysfunction" (1991).



Edward Koren/Wallach Art Gallery

"We deal with it by talking about it" (1975).

Mr. Koren's many fans should be delighted by "Edward Koren: The Capricious Line," a five-decade survey at the Wallach Art Gallery at [Columbia University](#), organized by the art historians David Rosand and Diana Fane.

Mr. Koren, who was born and raised in New York (Columbia, class of '57) and now lives in Vermont, is a nonconfrontationalist who has avoided many contentious issues of the last half century. Vietnam, Iraq, racial strife, the AIDS pandemic: these are not the sorts of concerns that worry his characters. Not explicitly, anyway. Considering the kinds of controversial subjects that comic artists like [R. Crumb](#), [Art Spiegelman](#), [Daniel Clowes](#) and others have addressed, Mr. Koren seems awfully timid. [Woody Allen's](#) world is Tolstoyan by comparison.

Within his comfort zone, though, Mr. Koren can be funny, psychologically acute and philosophically provocative. He has a pitch-perfect feel for gag lines, and with his scribbly draftsmanship has forged one of the most distinctive styles in cartooning. It is worth visiting this show just to see the full-scale ink drawings on fine, heavyweight paper that are reduced to gray, postcard-size images in *The New Yorker*, in which his work has appeared since 1962.

Mr. Koren is not completely oblivious to world affairs. The pressures of modernity may be muffled by his penchant for sly understatement, but are palpable in almost everything he draws. It is impossible not to think of the Gulf of Mexico oil disaster when looking at his drawing of a pair of plumbers working on a bewilderingly complicated system of basement pipes. “We can’t tell if it’s a malfunction or a dysfunction,” one of the workmen explains to the worried homeowner.

Among the numerous chuckle-out-loud works is a drawing of animals lining up to board Noah’s ark. They have to pass through a metal-detecting security gate, which is comical, but sad. Is this what it has come to? Must we be scanned and searched everywhere we go?

The dopey creatures of indeterminate species that Mr. Koren likes to sketch, some of which he has made into wooden cutout figures, seem untroubled enough. But more thoughtful consideration may find in them a yearning for innocence, for a peaceable kingdom in which all of us unruly animals can get along.

Mr. Koren draws explosive, vaguely humanoid figures by the dozens, like a musician practicing scales. As images of unbridled yet aimless expressivity, they embody a kind of psychic energy that most of us well-behaved citizens must keep in check. The many images of bicycle riders touring the countryside — Mr. Koren is an avid cyclist — speak of an urge for Thoreauvian escape from the madness and desperation of metropolitan life.

In one of Mr. Koren’s more overt references to popular culture, the leader of a rock band announces from onstage, “This song is dedicated to our parents, and is in the form of a plea for more adequate supervision.” Anxiety about loss of control pervades Mr. Koren’s work.

The trials of marriage and divorce are recurring topics. One of a pair of rats on the stage of a vast auditorium, whose seats are occupied by hundreds more rats, says, “Your father and I want to explain why we’ve decided to live apart.”

A hirsute beast the size of a small elephant lurks behind a smug human couple in their suavely appointed living room. The female half tells her alarmed guests, “We deal with it by talking about it.”

A topic that does not fully come to the surface is sex. Mr. Koren’s work is strictly PG, which is too bad. It would be interesting to see what his offbeat sensibility would make of the eternally troublesome sphere of intercourse. But he is not a big risk taker, and not one to stir up the censors.

As the cartoonist Saul Steinberg often did, Mr. Koren sometimes meditates on relations between art and reality. In “Landscape of Metaphors,” a grinning, professorial type — balding, bearded and bespectacled,

with a thick book under one arm — enjoys a pastoral scene studded with signs. One, attached to a tree, says, “Metaphor for growth and change.” Hanging from a branch under a ditzzy bird is another that says, “Metaphor for lyricism.” Next to the trail that leads to distant hills, a billboard blares, “Metaphor for aspiration.” As philosophers have been telling us for centuries, what we see is what we have words for.

For those who can't get enough of Mr. Koren, there is a fine selection of his drawings at Luise Ross Gallery in Chelsea. In a recent piece, two bears at the foot of a tree menace a pair of hikers who have sought safety among its branches. One of the unfortunates suggests, “Tell them how hard we worked to protect their habitat.”

“Edward Koren: The Capricious Line” continues through June 12 at the Wallach Art Gallery, Schermerhorn Hall, Columbia University, Morningside Heights; (212) 854-7288, columbia.edu/cu/wallach. “Edward Koren: Parallel Play, Drawings 1979-2010” is on view through June 2 at the Luise Ross Gallery, 511 West 25th Street, Chelsea; (212) 343-2161, luiserossgallery.com.