



their work.

Similar to Crumb, Torok's comic strip drawings use autobiography and narrative to comment on a myriad of topics, such as politics, the life of an artist, everyday events and self doubt.

Two of his most candid drawings are *I Got Cancer of the Ball*, and *The Big "C"*, describing in detail Torok's bout with testicle cancer.

Unlike a lot of art that has text, Torok's work is actually enjoyable to read. You almost feel guilty laughing aloud at his drawings, thinking art should be more serious. In recent years, he has created large paintings on canvas in addition to his works on paper. Torok has also made a series of slapstick cartoons called *Lo Tech* animations, where he photographs drawings

portraits is a petite four by five inches, but he has made work even smaller. To achieve the desired luminosity, Torok uses the white of the panel or the gesso for his highlights, building up layers around them to model the figures. Painted in series of washes and glazes in a traditional manner, the paintings have an inner glow and an uncanny realism that is even more striking given the size of the works.

When Torok first came to New York he said portraiture was out of vogue, but he looked to artists such as Chuck Close for a commonality with his own work. German artist Thomas Ruff was also an influence, since he could relate to his photographs. Torok has often used himself in these portraits, carefully rendering a subject he knows better than anything else. Talking with him, it's clear that he is comfortable discussing his practice, which has taken him down two different, yet satisfying paths. While it's natural for artists to question themselves at times, you have to admire Torok for his honesty, sense of humor and yes, a bit of schizophrenia. ■

Located in the heart of Williamsburg, Brooklyn, artist

Jim Torok's studio is just a few doors down from Pierogi, the gallery that has represented him for the last several years and where he will have a solo exhibition this fall. In addition to Pierogi, Torok shows with Daniel Weinberg Gallery in Los Angeles and Lora Reynolds Gallery in Austin, Texas.

Torok is seemingly full of contradictions, painting small, photo-realistic portraits and another series of work in a narrative comic strip style, often featuring a bulbous-nosed everyman character, which is a thinly disguised self-portrait. He explains the fact that he works in two different styles as a form of schizophrenia, a trait many artists can relate to. Pierogi gallery had been showing Torok's cartoon style drawings in their famous flat files for years and included them in several group exhibitions before representing him officially. But what made Torok most comfortable about Pierogi is that Amrhein never questioned the work's validity. He didn't make a distinction between the two styles and never thought it wasn't art. While chatting over cookies and coffee we delved into the issue of comics versus art, portrait painting and Torok's arguable claim that he doesn't know what he is doing.

After cartoonist Chris Ware's work was featured in the Whitney Biennial in 2002, it seems that comics and art have forever been intertwined. Torok sees a distinction between someone making art strictly for a comic book and making art that resembles a comic style of drawing. He points out that the best format for comics is usually the comic book itself, not a gallery, while art that is shown in a gallery should be about the object. Torok admits that underground cartoonist Robert Crumb's work stood out more than anything else at the entire Armory Show art fair in New York this past February and appreciates his draftsmanship as well as the meaningful content behind the work. With the boundaries between different medias and methodologies becoming almost irrelevant in the art world and Crumb's work being highly valued by collectors, the debate remains open as to the intent of the artist and the best format for



Left: protected portraits; Below: Torok in studio with "other work"

and projects them in slide form. Many were first shown at Michael Ballou and David Wells' long running Slide and Film Club night at Four Walls gallery in Williamsburg. Torok's work has crossed-over into the commercial realm, with MTV commissioning him to make eighteen short videos during the 1990s and *Paper* magazine publishing one panel comics.

I got a glimpse of some of his newest subjects, including his wife, the artist Mary Carlson and artist Edward Ruscha. Torok usually paints friends or acquaintances, many of whom are artists. On a drawing table next to a wall of windows at his studio, these impeccably crafted portrait paintings are hidden inside inexpensive plastic boxes to protect them from dust while he is working on them. The standard size for Torok's

