

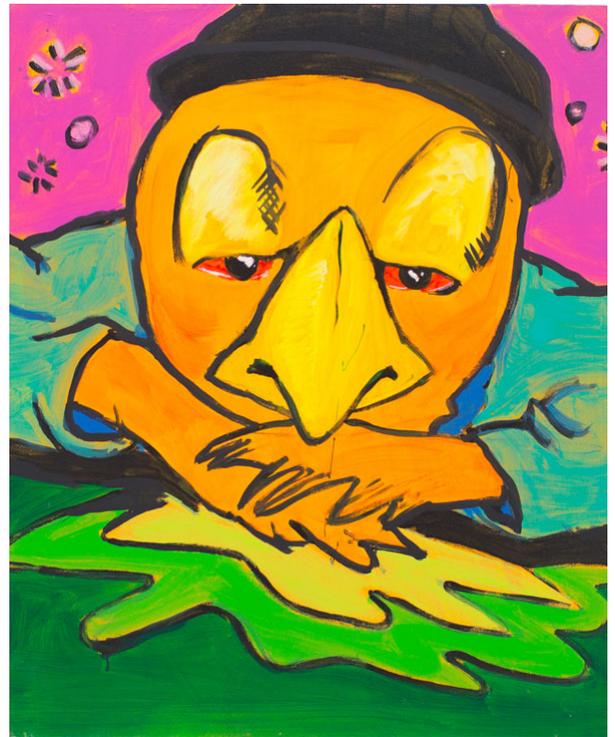


Archie Rand: *Misfits*

by Ann McCoy

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Archie Rand glides onto the scene, part mystical rebbe, part Diogenes, carrying a lamp, by day, which he shines in our faces, in his search for an honest man. He is looking among us for the 36 righteous “Lamed Vavniks,” who the Talmud says will save us from destruction in this dark and apocalyptic time. Like Diogenes of Sinope (c. 404 – 323 BCE), the Greek Cynic philosopher, Rand has positioned himself outcast and naked beyond the city walls, believing that virtue is better revealed in action than in theory. In an art world where, beginning with Greenberg, secular atheism has been the rule and has metastasized through successive movements into the critical theory now dominating art departments, the Shekhinah, ethereal spirit beings, and angels have been banished. We don’t hear much about Robert Smithson’s religious paintings, let alone Jung—there can be no place for the intangible, the ineffable, or spiritual mysteries of the imaginal psyche. The Academy is all about position, annihilation, and control, and few care to acknowledge its power shadow. What reigns there is a flat-earth positivism, advocacy of art as a form of political journalism, and tired notions of abstraction severed from its archetypal roots. The Frankfurters and their zealots have beaten out of art what it once could be about. Archie Rand’s work consciously challenges their exclusion of belief-based narratives. For Rand, the imagination is a form of prayer. His exhibition *Misfits*, at David Totah Gallery, has the feel of a door that has finally been dynamited open after years of neglect.

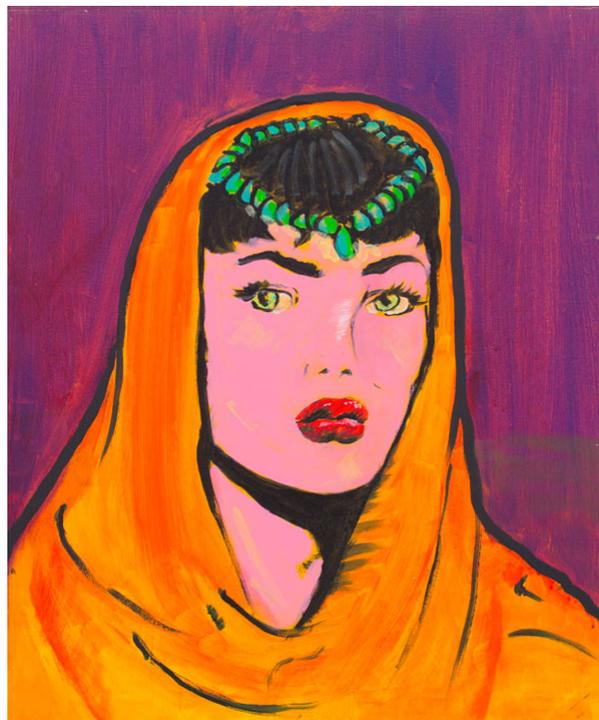


Archie Rand, *1A*, 2005. Acrylic on canvas, 24 × 20 inches. Courtesy TOTAH.

This critic first encountered the Lamed Vavniks in the 2001 film *Invincible*, by Werner Herzog, a fictionalized account of the life of Jewish strongman Zishe Breitbart. The unassuming Polish blacksmith’s son had been brought to Berlin to perform Herculean feats before audiences of Brownshirts. A Berliner Rabbi told Zishe that he may be one of the 36 men who feel the suffering of the world. Zishe threw off his Aryan Wagnerian disguise and escaped, with a young boy, into a mythological landscape. The Hebrew

letters denoting 36 are the *lamed* (which is 30) and the *vav* (which is 6); hence these 36 people are referred to as the *Lamed-Vav Tzadikim*. Gershom Scholem, a Jewish historian steeped in messianic tradition, described them as “concealed,” “hidden,” or “secret,”—they may not know themselves who they are. Walter Benjamin, influenced by Scholem, described in his 1940 essay “Theses on the Philosophy of History,” the “angel of history,” who is blown backward into the future by the storm of progress. This messianic move toward mystical hope was more than Adorno could abide—angels could have no place in his world.

In his exhibition, Archie Rand has painted 36 portraits of wild and crazy “Vavniks.” The “Lamed Vavniks” are also called “The Nistarim,” which means “the Concealed Ones,” because no one knows who they are and no one recognizes them—luckily for us, Rand does. His work has an unjaded innocence, and is full of heart. We find these bulbous-nosed, bird-beaked, and edgy characters wonderfully sympathetic. Rand’s painting style feels effortless, sincere, and lively, and is as unpretentious as his subjects. The portraits are numbered, one through thirty-six, and are not named. They are a congregation, a quorum, we would be lucky to join. Being there among them, this critic felt the art world might yet be saved. In our age of toxic narcissism and puffed-up philanthropy, it is refreshing that the “Vavniks” are not allowed to make a display of their good works. They perform anonymous acts of love, kindness, and charity, often on a small familial level, such as helping an old lady across the street. Grand gestures are not their style. Their acts may be humble, odd, awkward, or embarrassing. Love is their guiding force. When was the last time we heard about the importance of love in the art world?



Archie Rand, *14A*, 2005. Acrylic on canvas, 24 × 20 inches. Courtesy TOTAH.

Unlike saints depicted in icons, the “Vavniks” may be obnoxious or ineffectual weirdos. Here we see them warts and all, every oddity and imperfection magnified. As Jung would say, they eat their shadows. They are of both sexes, not necessarily Jewish, and could be described as the “righteous among the unlikely.” If only the Vavniks could be found in art schools, where a reading of the Kabbalah or Zohar would be a welcome addition to a master’s curriculum. Rand’s “misfits” embody the mysteriously divine, socially uplifting deeds that may save us from a cultural collapse. This is the reverse of Warhol’s artist as celebrity, Koons’s blatant narcissism, and Marina Abramovic’s slick styling. These “Vavniks” may be odd ducks, tricksters, Dumpling, or even dancehall girls, yet they have something to offer us on a soul level. This Catholic critic developed an affection for every one of them, and would be more than happy to include them in her hagiography. While Hilma af Klint dialogued with angelic “higher masters,” Rand, with his down-and-dirty *Misfits*, brings his agents of salvation into our daily lives and an art world that could use their help.

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