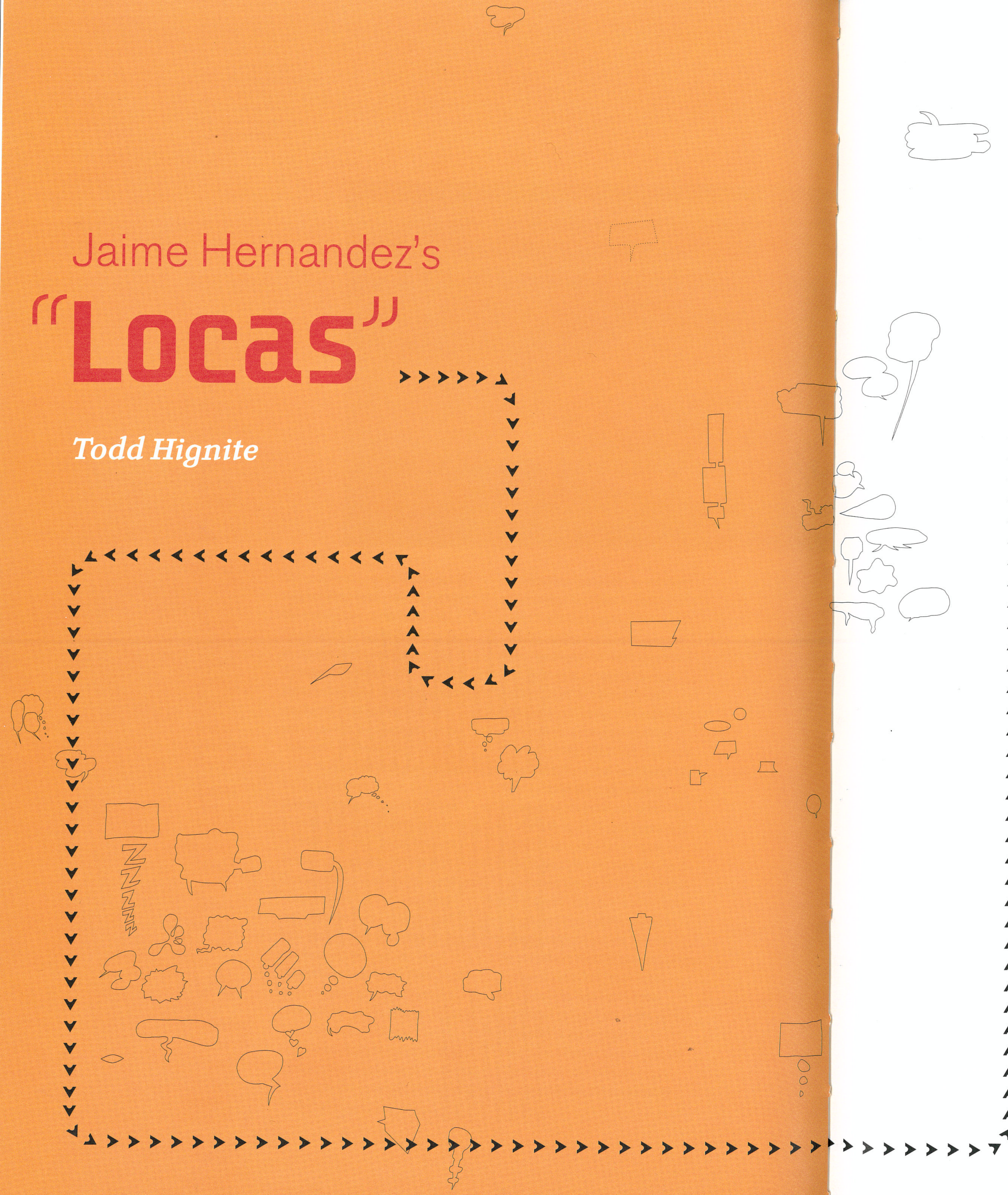
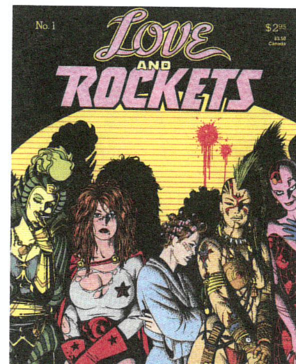


Jaime Hernandez's "Locas"

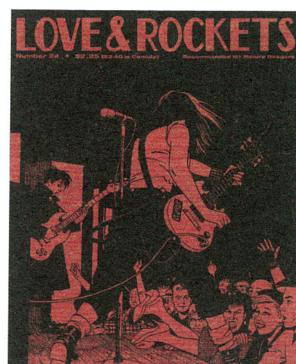
Todd Hignite

While the current flowering of North American art comics owes an undeniable debt to the pioneering and liberating work of the late-1960s underground comix movement, the specific sources of most of today's work began to take shape in the early- to mid-1980s "alternative" period. These predominantly black-and-white comics, published independently from the two major mainstream American companies, were distinctive in terms of subject matter, narrative strategies, and method of distribution, representing a middle ground between the heyday of the underground and the widespread critical and commercial attention paid to today's work, which has now been completely freed from any genre restrictions or commercially dictated editorial control and is marked by unrivalled formal invention and conceptual sophistication.

One of the most important cartoonists to emerge from the alternative period is Jaime Hernandez, whose ongoing serialized "Locas" stories published in *Love and Rockets*, which he has continued to expand, deepen, and interweave, demonstrate unparalleled character development and highly nuanced emotional resonance in the medium.[1] Built as much on the classical mid-century American tradition of comic book cartooning as informed by the revolutionary taboo breaking of the '60s underground artists, Hernandez's work encompasses many of the formal and narrative concerns (self-reflexive examination of earlier modes of cartooning, and the depiction of marginalized subcultures—for Hernandez, the Mexican-American culture of Southern California and the early and gradually fading punk rock milieu) of the two generations. As such, while acting as a bridge between the underground and now, his ever-evolving tapestry, poignantly chronicling the human condition with unparalleled candor and affection (his true subject matter), has gone far in paving the way for myriad contemporary approaches to the art form.[2]



Jaime Hernandez,
Love and Rockets #1.
Comic book cover
(Fantagraphics Books)
1982



Jaime Hernandez,
Love and Rockets #24.
Comic book cover
(Fantagraphics Books)
1987

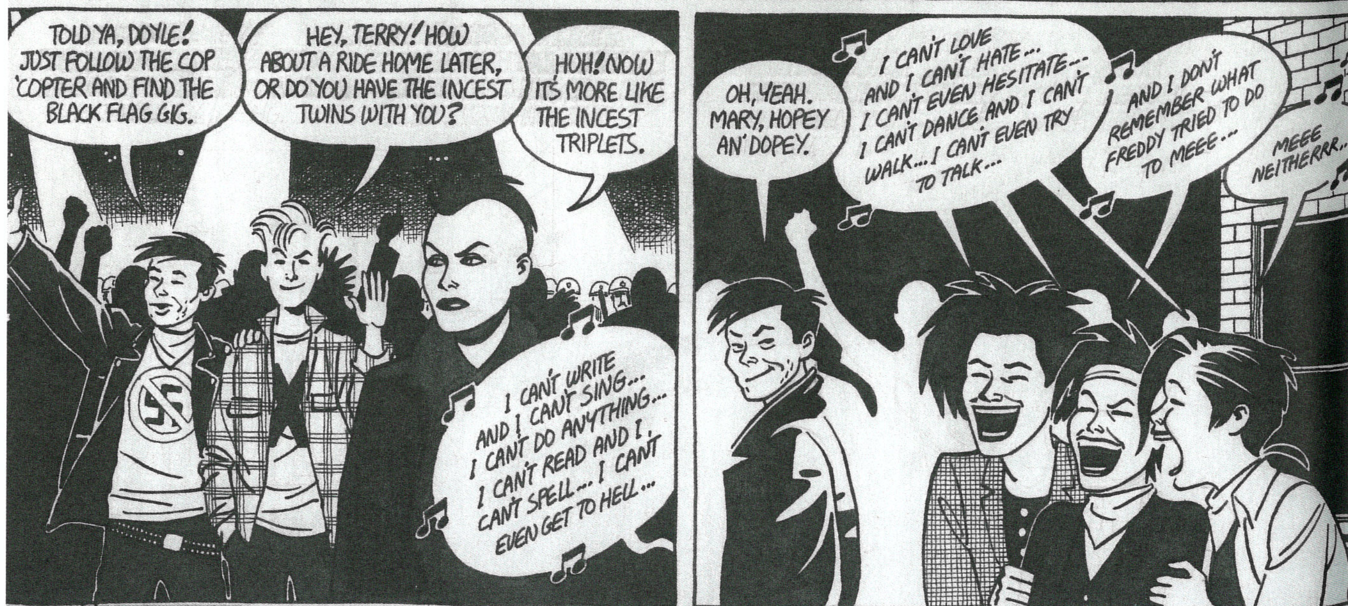
Jaime Hernandez,
"Mechanics: Part Two,"
Love and Rockets #7,
page 6.
Comic book panel
(Fantagraphics Books)
1984

love & rockets

Created along with his brothers Mario and Gilbert, ***Love and Rockets***, first self-published in 1981 with an expanded version released by Fantagraphics Books in 1982, marked a pivotal point in the burgeoning alternative movement. Young cartoonists working during this time were armed with an expansive history at their disposal, covering both commercial genre comic books of their youth and newly reprinted historical comic strips, as well as the mind-bending (and taboo-decimating) undergrounds. In fact, Hernandez's clean approach—influenced by comic book artists from adventure and superhero maestros Alex Toth and Steve Ditko to humorists Owen Fitzgerald and Dan DeCarlo—can be viewed in contrast to the more ornate homegrown styles favored by the underground cartoonists (think no-frills punk rock versus hippie psychedelia); his style and subject matter reference artistic predecessors, but always with an idiosyncratic twist. The reliance on traditional genres is clear in the early work of both Jaime and Gilbert, but from the outset is marked by an unmistakable personal interpretation of past conventions, always tweaked by the brothers' aesthetic rooted in topical real-life human drama, and only explicitly for the first handful of issues, subsequently recurring through their more finely honed sensibilities as subtle nods. The time period that gave rise to ***Love and Rockets*** then can be seen as "in-between," in that personal, artistic-minded work employed numerous genre trappings, albeit in a recombined and increasingly removed and ironic manner. As the undergrounds demonstrated, comics are an inherently self-reflexive medium, so for an artist as immersed in the form as Hernandez, any and all commercial and artistic genres—romance, science-fiction, superhero, "real-life" character types (the underground bohemian lifestyle merely an additional genre)—are elements (fictional, in a sense) to be combined, exploited, and transcended all at once, reconfigured in the unique language of comics to create expansive, poetic inner reality.[3]

While such references informed his underlying sensibility, Hernandez's groundbreakingly "realistic" depiction of everyday lives, focusing to a large degree on women and minorities, is his most impressive achievement, and the aspect most critically commented upon. However, it is not the mere inclusion of a particular subject matter, rather ***how*** the artist treats the material in comic form that is revolutionary, and Hernandez perfectly fuses his content and the form in never less than surprising ways.

Jaime Hernandez,
Love and Rockets #15.
Comic book cover
(Fantagraphics Books)
1986



A close examination of a dizzyingly rich single page from the middle of his "Locas" installments, which touches on nearly all of the formal and narrative elements from his stories over the last twenty-five years, provides great insight into the artist's virtuosity. The page—taken from Hernandez's novel-length and arguably most impressive self-contained story to date, "Wigwam Bam," a panoramic meditation on absence (which also delves into ethnic and provincial stereotypes) collected into book form in 1994 from its early 1990s serialization within the pages of ***Love and Rockets***—is dominated by a single horizontal panel, which, at once chaotic and sharply composed, overwhelms the space. The first panel depicts a flashback experienced by Hopey, one of the primary characters in the story, triggered by a conversation with Maggie, Hernandez's main protagonist over the years. The artist fades into the flashback by gradually draining the second panel of background detail, focusing exclusively on the two characters and their immediately evident relationship in the foreground. As Hopey physically turns from Maggie in the second panel, the narrative also pivots away from the temporal and physical space leading up to the exchange.[4] Riot-gear-clad Los Angeles policemen replace the hallway of an East Coast apartment building. The shift is abruptly completed in the large center panel, the background emptiness replaced by a swarming mass of punk rockers taunting and facing off against the police; stark white is replaced by seething black. The police themselves do not appear again in this page; only their introduction in the second panel alerts the viewer to their presence, and thus the context of the flashback.

The transition is simultaneously decisive and gradual: both places and times are linked by the urban background, introduced in the first panel as an anonymous East Coast cityscape in the distance seen through a window, then Los Angeles. The fourth panel elaborates the scene, introducing other supporting characters. In the fifth, the significantly younger Hopey and Maggie, along with a friend, playfully sing as the aforementioned crowd surges toward impending confrontation. Contrasts abound in the page, yet visual and textual links bridge time and space. In no other medium could these scenes be interspersed and produced to the same effect; in no other medium could the reader/viewer experience the same collision of time and locale, emotional involvement, and formal and conceptual flow.

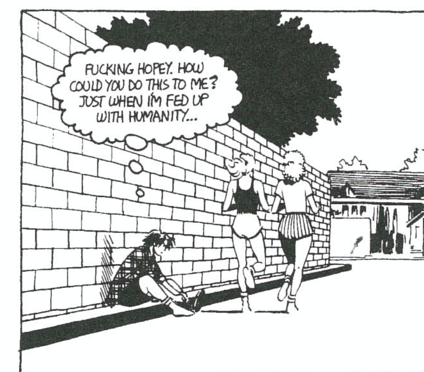
Hernandez foregoes superficial formal experimentation in order to concentrate on the narrative: his layout is exactly symmetrical and the focus is within the panels rather than on the structure of the panels themselves (which relies on a traditional comic book grid of three tiers, each composed of one, two or three panels), and variation of form is always rejected in favor of narrative progression. Deceptively simple black-and-white lines define space and weight. Extreme backgrounds are predominantly solid black or white, foregrounding the emphasis on the individual characters and their interactions (or lack thereof); this focus on visceral emotional involvement is reflected in the formal arrangement, which lands the reader squarely in the middle of the action. While it may not be immediately evident, the adherence to such a repetitive format is as conceptually reflective and formally tied to the emotional underpinnings of the narrative as overt design and layout experimentation, merely more understated, as the reader is effectively integrated directly into the narrative; every element is considered—even the hand-rendered quality of the panel borders ushers forth the overall tone. In both cases, the formal language painstakingly paints the emotional backdrop for the projected worldview, and in Hernandez's work the format is subsumed by the continual flow of the story; while finely crafted images serve numerous purposes simultaneously, there are no hard melodramatic breaks. It goes on and on. The structure is intentionally repetitious, without splashiness, only slight variation, always inexorably moving forward—toward life's uncertain future.

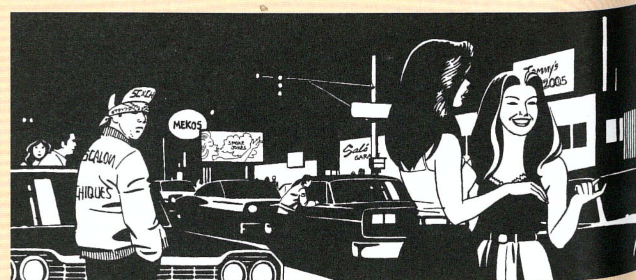
Jaime Hernandez, "Wigwam Bam," *Love and Rockets* #33, page 8. Comic book panel (Fantagraphics Books) 1990

Jaime Hernandez, "Locas Tambien," *Love and Rockets* #4, page 1. Comic book panel (Fantagraphics Books) 1983

VIDA LOCA 2

The sprawling middle panel is a contemporary frieze frozen in time. The smaller surrounding panels incorporate word balloons, providing interaction, while the center panel is entirely devoid of text — language — reduced to pure image. The figures are spot-lit, an effect that heightens the inherent iconic stature of the cleanly inked comic image. A single character stands apart from the crowd, pushed even further forward in the picture plane, his scale punctuating the band of figures behind him. Despite the cramped inclusion of at least nineteen clearly delineated figures, the image is static, and the potential rioters do not interact, rather react simultaneously to the off-page presence of the police mass.
As in the most successful comics, temporality is halted in a manner not possible in any other medium, not in isolation but in both narrative and "real" time. The visual language of cartooning always serves at least a dual purpose: static expressions and gestures are framed and rendered iconic, and each, expertly composed, lurches the eye to a halt even as it is led, faster or slower, through the narrative, paced by the empty gaps between panels, the implication of the before and after always lurking. Here the gaze of every figure strikes directly out at the viewer, activating the scene. Space is flattened and pushed forward to the extreme of the panel surface; the viewer is thrust into the foreground while the shallow diorama foregrounds the artifice of the drawn symbols. In the face of the implied police threat, expressions range from arrogant, antagonistic, and fearful to bemused and disinterested, a diverse gamut that serves as metaphor for both the reaction of the depicted subculture to pinning down (by art), and of the comic language to superficial prejudice.





Jaime Hernandez,
"Vida Loca 2,"
Love and Rockets #22,
page 1.
Comic book panel
(Fantagraphics Books)
1987

Jaime Hernandez,
"Vida Loca 2,"
Love and Rockets #22,
page 5.
Comic book panel
(Fantagraphics Books)
1987

Jaime Hernandez,
"Mechanics,"
Love and Rockets #2,
page 1.
Comic book panel
(Fantagraphics Books)
1983

Jaime Hernandez,
"The Return of Ray D,"
Love and Rockets #20,
page 1.
Comic book panel
(Fantagraphics Books)
1987

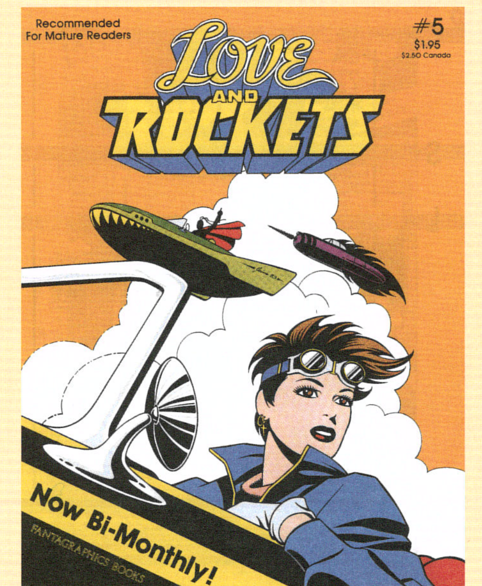
form & content

Hernandez is able to tell extremely complex stories through details and the unique combination of the visual and textual properties of the language. There is an inherently fetishistic quality to the form, and the always carefully rendered minutiae in his art, folds of clothing, the gleam of leather, and the slightest hand gesture, blossom into unseen emotional and physical universes. The symbolic truth found in his snappy and increasingly pared down shorthand style, which provides only the vital marks necessary to define characters and hint at unseen narrative offshoots, transcends realism. Notice the hatch line delineating the jeans of the center panel's leading figure, swiftly rendered with a swagger that matches the combative stance of the jeering young man. (Compare this effect to that of Robert Crumb's fuzzed-out droopy inking style for his spiritual-questing hippies, and the conceptual underpinnings of the form are immediately evident.) While the art reads fast and slow simultaneously — fluttering between the traditional commercial prerequisite of moving the story along and the art of forcing the eye to linger on telling/symbolic details — Hernandez's narrative rhythm is never interrupted. He, more than any contemporary cartoonist, has harnessed the ability of a previous generation of craftsmen to delicately exploit the perfectly rendered, slick (seemingly the antithesis of expressive) line to create a world unimaginable in another medium. As the artist states of his aesthetic: "I felt if one line could do the same job as a hundred it would make a far more impressive image. It's like growing older. There are just some silly details in life that don't matter as much as they did when you're younger. I'd like to think my line has matured over the years, for lack of a humbler anecdote."[5] The details that do remain practically vibrate with emotional intensity, transcending the functional goals of mere illustration.

In "Wigwam Bam," as in all his work, Hernandez movingly weds multi-layered narratives with radical fissures of time, place, and point of view. Entire histories are implied by understated visual cues, triggered by slight marks on paper. Hernandez's command of black-and-white weight, static solidity, and perspective highlights the inherent unreality of the comic language as a blatant distancing device effective at critiquing any action or situation. He creates multi-faceted (i.e., realistic) depictions of women, replete with humor and pathos, always resisting didacticism, within stories that incorporate an instant back-and-forth totality, representing the challenge of the medium: to visually depict the non-visual — thoughts and memory — by using the form's collectively remembered, standardized techniques, incorporating genre clichés in the creation of radically new subject matter and stylistic invention. Unlike many artistic-minded cartoonists, whose protagonists seem thinly veiled stand-ins for the author's viewpoints, Hernandez allows his characters to be contradictory and fully modeled, more and less aware of their environments — he is always warmly accepting, never embarrassed of foible, and never proffers one-dimensional moralizing judgment.

The abrupt switches in locale and compositional density from panel to panel are achieved through harsh black-and-white contrasts that create a disjunctive swirl through positive and negative space. Each panel activates the oscillating psychological space between characters as a physical presence. In his exploitation of such visual and narrative devices, Hernandez draws on and experiments with the medium's intertextual past. The use of a slick "cartoony" approach references a history of seemingly innocuous strips

Jaime Hernandez, "Jerusalem Crickets," *Love and Rockets* #21, page 2. Comic book panel (Fantagraphics Books) 1987



Jaime Hernandez, *Love and Rockets* #5. Comic book cover (Fantagraphics Books) 1984

focusing on cute children in quaint situations (specifically Charles Schulz's ***Peanuts*** and ***Dennis the Menace*** by Hank Ketcham). However, here the codified, reductive line work is injected with narrative elements that have no direct precedent in the medium. By drawing the reader in with an immediately recognizable shorthand cartooning style, Hernandez is able to create a shock of awareness that ciphers greater emotional involvement in the narrative. Crucially, his clean style is used as a means for the reader to easily inhabit an unfamiliar world (a juxtaposition that can be likened to Art Spiegelman's use of cartoon animals in his Holocaust survival tale ***Maus***). If the art was superficially expressive it would overwhelm, and the message would be lost.[6] Hernandez's devotion to expressing such a personal vision in the realm of comics is more striking and impressive when taking into consideration his widely acclaimed graphic talent. No matter the specifics of the narrative, the gracefulness of Hernandez's art conveys the perpetual warmth of humanity underlying all situations.

His is pure cartooning where meaning lies firmly in the combination of textual details and the overall narrative rhythm — the in-between — where abstraction and figuration are perfectly merged. Of critical importance is Hernandez's aforementioned ability to consistently massage the medium to function on numerous levels simultaneously.[7] The cool artifice of the shorthand language never purports to be "reality," rather it is always partially empty, allowing for interpretive embellishment between the panels, and is ripe for explorations into the symbolic function of the form's pictorial artificiality. In drawing on this constant in-between quality, self-reflexive nature, and the medium's nebulous cultural position, the most successful contemporary work is always effective as metaphor. So form is always content, and vice versa.[8]

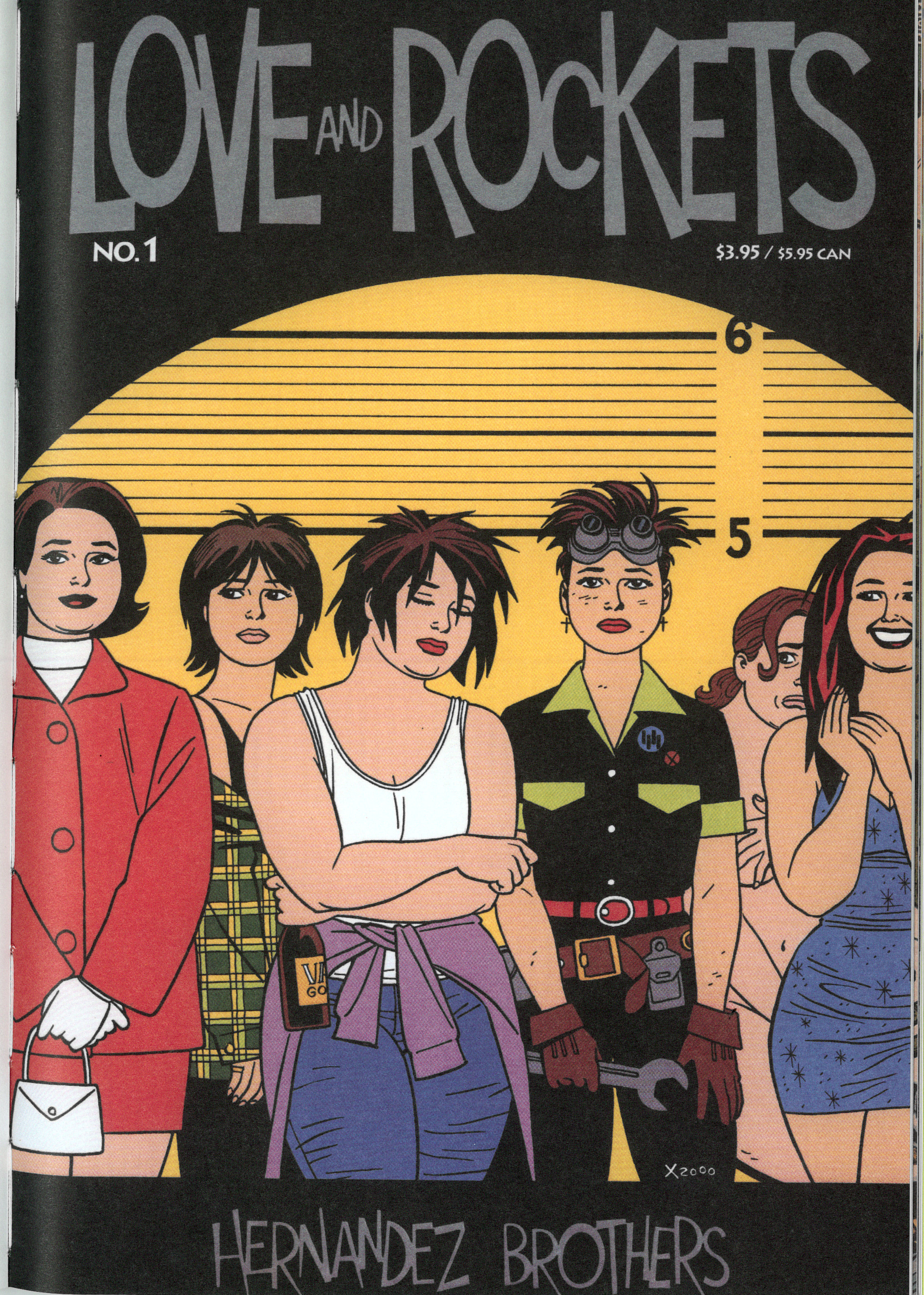
The recurring underlying subtext of Hernandez's work for the last

decade—building since virtually the outset—has been the reconciliation of youthful idealism and blind faith with the hum-drum world of workaday normalcy. Crucially, Hernandez continues to tell stories after their superficial appeal has passed, detailing lives once the excitement of youth and all that goes along with it fades to memory. How much of life after a given period is made up of remembrances, reactions to that time? The seeming formlessness or lack of firm narrative direction in later "Locas" stories is exactly the point. While richly engaging, as only the most complex art can be, Hernandez's all-encompassing stories are also endlessly entertaining, altering one's perception of the world while the full range of humanity dances on and below the surface of the page; in other words, all of his formal virtuosity and refinement is in the service of characterization. The focus is always on lives writ, on the characters to whom he returns as they age over time. Hernandez's evolving dramas, which have become deeply ingrained by nature of the installments' serial form, set his work apart; the reader is perpetually looking forward to the future. Characters are followed forward and backward in time, always there for the reader to return to—this is how they remain alive. The primary reward of a prolonged immersion in Hernandez's ongoing world is the continued resonance of his intricately rendered landscape. For all the discussion of "realism" and well-rounded characters, the potency truly lies in the in-between—in-between perfectly paced "real life" and symbolic fantasy—that makes the emotional reaction all the more heightened (his early superheroes and space princesses—and rockets—can at this point be read as almost purely internalized, wistful metaphors).

Above all, there is an honesty in Hernandez's comics, even when framed in superficially unbelievable situations: this honesty lies in the constantly conflicting emotions and motivations that lead to all manner of heartbreak and self-destruction on the way toward spiritual fulfillment. The punk milieu and its aftermath, remembered in its romantically idealistic light, is a true, over-saturated, microcosm of such pitfalls. These themes are beautifully articulated, yet it is impossible to reductively pigeonhole Hernandez's ineffable vision—as messy and sometimes contradictory as life itself—which is perfectly realized (if not contained) by his spare, virtuosic art. The much-lauded reality of ***Love and Rockets*** then does not stem from documentary exactitude (although the accumulation of telling details creates a subliminal piecing together of events into a perfectly integrated world in the mind of the reader), but rather from the combination and juxtaposition of what is depicted and left out, internal monologues, too often humble existence, and dream life. Hernandez, more skillfully than any cartoonist the medium has seen, creates a total reality, much more effective than one-note reportage, from all-encompassing artistic invention. Here "real life" is evinced as the cumulative effect of his ongoing anticlimactic rhythm. This achievement is infinitely more realistic than "realism," as it accentuates the fantastic and ever-shifting internal impressionism of the human experience.

The strengths of Hernandez's work are the strengths of the best contemporary achievements within the current golden age of the medium, which continually occupies a shimmeringly multivalent, in-between state. Comic art's unique characteristics position the medium as the permanent interloper, always nimbly straddling a nebulous status between high and low, writing and drawing, and literature and art, that has proved resistant to definition and led to the form's perpetual misreading. Cartoonists exploit expected genre conventions as allegory and cultural critique, in order to achieve a visual poetry, a universal truth, the implication of the general (larger themes) through the depiction of the specific. Such volatility provides a formal and narrative spark for the medium.[9] A key to understanding Hernandez's work is the manner in which it epitomizes how inherently self-reflexive comic books have become. The lack of firm categorization is reflected in his subject matter, content, and artistic approach—characters in-between youthful idealism and adulthood—and is a defining characteristic of work stemming from the alternative movement of the 1980s. In the hands of Jaime Hernandez, then, the medium has become an amazingly conceptual language, wherein an entire history, a shared past, is referenced in a single brush stroke or pen flourish. But while Hernandez's work is symbolic of artistic advances that began in the '80s and continue to blossom today, he stands alone in his creation and continued exploration of a profound, fully realized cast of emotionally inhabitable locales and lives, articulated with unerring poetic precision and warmth.

Jaime Hernandez,
Love and Rockets vol. 2, #1.
Comic book cover
(Fantagraphics Books)
2001



notes

1 The first incarnation of *Love and Rockets* was a magazine format comic, published from 1982 to 1996 by Fantagraphics Books. After taking a five-year break from the title and creating separate comic books, Jaime and his brother Gilbert Hernandez returned to *Love and Rockets* as a comic-book-sized comic in 2001, with the same content format as the original magazine: individual work by Jaime and Gilbert, with occasional contributions from older brother Mario.

2 During the 1980s a number of factors made it possible for artists to create comics outside of the work-for-hire system used by the two major publishers, Marvel and DC. The direct market system of distribution and the related proliferation of specialty comic shops enabled a market to develop outside of the traditional mainstream venues of the past; an alternative framework for disseminating comic books had become prevalent by the early 1970s as a means for the undergrounds to flourish. More obviously important than developing new venues for comics, underground creators demolished content restriction, radically altering standard genre domination. For an in-depth discussion of the relationship between underground and alternative comics in form, content, and distribution, see the first chapter of Charles Hatfield's forthcoming book *Alternative Comics: An Emerging Literature* (working title), set for publication in spring 2005 by the University Press of Mississippi.

3 If on one level Hernandez's virtuosity can be seen as a combination of American mainstream cartooning traditions and the liberties of underground subject matter (although notably without the over-the-top shock value; Hernandez is always subtle, even when overt), it is important to note that underground cartoonists performed similar deconstructions of past comic influences by isolating formal and textual elements and exploding genre conventions, and that such self-awareness was in turn strongly influenced by the cultural critiques of the Harvey Kurtzman–edited *Mad* from the mid-1950s—truly a touchstone for virtually everything that followed.

4 This is merely one example of Hernandez's mastery and the constant polyphony in his work, which harmoniously juxtaposes two or more simultaneous narrative threads, be they visual, verbal, or both (a quality inherent to the comic language).

5 Jaime Hernandez, email correspondence with the author, 27 September 2001.

6 Regarding his stylistic approach, Hernandez has stated, "I want the presentation to be as clear as possible. I didn't want to fool anybody…I wasn't trying to make a fool of anybody, I wasn't trying to dazzle them with my new groundbreaking work…It was pretty much 'These stories, this world, these people are interesting enough where they don't need help, they don't need any help from stylizing or anything like that.'" Jaime Hernandez, interview by Chris Knowles, *Comic Book Artist*, no. 15 (November 2001): 58.

7 In the work of contemporary cartoonists, the historical cultural status of the comic form can be frequently read as a subtext within the narrative. Depending on subject matter and audience, a strategic shifting positionality is used in order to critique various high and low stereotypes. Due to the perpetual marginalization of the medium by the fine art world, what are seen to be the pretensions of high art are frequently attacked through cagey reveling in the stereotypical low, or outsider, subculture. In this page, the perceived reception of the form by the art world may be read as an implied commentary by the subject matter itself: the misunderstood, exploited, and co-opted culture of punk rock. The mohawked figure in the right corner of the center panel exemplifies this stance, symbolically mocking interpretive attempts as he literally mocks the attempted control by the police. In addition to a rejection of stratified high cultural values, sophisticated cartoonists often express disdain at the continuing superhero tradition, presenting this slowly dying form as low "trash" in comparison to more personal and subjective subject matter, thus adopting an aestheticized stance versus more standardized aspects of popular culture. Hernandez demonstrates how contemporary cartoonists employ the status of the medium as a critical, self-reflexive tour de force, perpetually floating between high and low, enabling a critique of both.

8 While such a close reading of individual panels within a single page taken from a lengthy narrative provides an introduction to understanding the formal richness of the medium, it is done with an awareness of the limitations of divorcing an individual page as singular art object from its larger context. Such analysis alone is an interpretive mistake in reading that constantly occurs in art world discussion of the comic form, an approach that presupposes a vocabulary already in existence within the theoretical framework of art history. What such discussion fails to take into account is the unique position, aesthetically and culturally, of the historical comic book and strip, and how the contemporary comic book draws on such a history in order to create a unique language begging for alternative theorization. The confused search for the medium's "art" in single panel, page, or entire story is reflected in the confused reception of individual artistic achievement within a "mass" form. Hernandez's opus must be read in its entirety to be fully appreciated.

9 Hernandez's description of his primary ongoing character again reinforces the fact that cartoonists are intimately aware of this history—and internalize it as an inherent element of the language, mirrored occasionally in the narrative itself: "Maggie is told 'You're a great mechanic,' and she thinks, 'Oh, OK.' She has that guilt of being a girl mechanic when she wasn't supposed to be; when she should have been dating boys. It's her Mexican upbringing that she just can't shake. She's learned to be a good Mexican. When she's a Mexican-*American*, she's kind of caught between being a good Mexican and a good American. I take that from my upbringing: You're caught in the middle, and you can't please either side. So she feels like a failure, even though she's very intelligent and very talented at what *she used to do*. But she just has this block that doesn't let her get anywhere." Jaime Hernandez, interview by Amy Benfer, 20 February 2001. "Los Bros Hernandez duet, with kissing," on Salon.com.

Strips, Toons, and Bluesies

Essays in Comics and Culture

D.B. Dowd and Todd Hignite, editors

Princeton Architectural Press, New York
Washington University in St. Louis