

Dominique Le Duc
University of Brighton

COMICA: Confessions & Convictions, June 5th - June 13th 2004. At the Institute of Contemporary Art and the French Institute, London. Featuring comic artists from South Africa, Serbia, India, France, Belgium, Canada, USA, UK with curator Paul Gravett

The events took place at "London's temple of cutting-edge culture"¹, the ICA (Institute of Contemporary Art), and at the French Institute in South Kensington. The National Maritime Museum located in Greenwich - which hosted an exhibition celebrating Tintin's 75th birthday, *The Adventures of Tintin at Sea* - was also the setting for a talk by Hergé's biographer, Benoît Peeters, whilst the Victoria and Albert (V&A) Museum was opening to the public Ian Rakoff's collection of graphic literature, featuring several thousand titles.

The COMICA Festival's uniqueness resides in its selection of international comic artists, its presentation of cutting-edge themes, i.e. autobiography and political commentary, and its state-funding (from the British government through the ICA and from the French government through the French Institute).




A range of events, featured in the national press, included talks, exhibitions, screenings of films (including UK premieres) and live drawing sessions. High-profile guests included:

- - American Book Award Nominee Chris Ware (*Jimmy Corrigan: The Smartest Kid on Earth*), also winner of a UK literary prize, the 2001 The Guardian First Book Award, in conversation with Canadian cartoonist Seth.
- - British Posy Simmonds, whose *Literary Life*'s excerpts feature weekly in *The Guardian*, discussed her literary adaptation *Gemma Bovery* - a hybrid form the French like to call an 'illustrated novel'.
- - Frenchman David B., whose 'scope and artistry', according to *Time* magazine, put his two-volume autobiography *Epileptic* 'on a par with Art Spiegelman's Holocaust masterpiece - and Pulitzer Prize winner - *Maus*'², debated memories as an integral part of his work with Craig Thompson, the American creator of *Blankets* (*Time* magazine's graphic novel of the year).
- - Quentin Blake, from England, and Joann Sfar, from France, both giants of illustration (around 80 publications to date), who have revolutionized the conventions of children's books, discussed 'the child in all of us'.
- - Franck Margerin, who influenced the rock trend in the SF magazine *Métal Hurlant* discussed how comics connect to urban cultures with other urban artists.
- - British distributors debated the status, and recent and fast rise, of graphic novels.

The informal and friendly atmosphere of both venues provided a unique setting for the public to meet their stars. It was indeed possible to enjoy a strong coffee in the company of artists at the French Institute over the ten-day Festival. The book signings - a must and a very exciting part of attending such events - turned out to be even more enjoyable at *COMICA*. This was a totally new experience. Indeed, in its second year, the Festival is relatively new and has not yet attracted the large crowds of Angoulême... Thus, Chris Ware signed his books under the warm starry night outside the ICA after his talk... Later on in the week, I sat down in the bistrot at the Institute with French cartoonist Charles Berberian for a lengthy chat about romantic Barcelona, the Dutch comics Festival in Harlem he had just attended, and his unique collaboration over the years with Phillipe Dupuy, while he demonstrated his artistry on my newly acquired *Barcelone carnets*, using delicate brushstrokes with ostensible pleasure and dexterity. The live-drawing sessions offered the public a first-hand insight into the graphic style of each artist (with a twist in the case of French cartoonist Lewis Trondheim in his spontaneous collaboration with Joann Sfar). The Festival also opened its doors to lesser-known artists from India, South Africa and some new EU member-states.

For ten days, *COMICA* fulfilled its dream of bringing awareness to the public - and not only the coterie of comics fans - that the comic art form is "no longer the runt of the arts" as quoted in *The Times*³, but is indeed at the cutting-edge of political and social commentary with highly innovative works. Its director, Paul Gravett, receives full credit for his great skills as an interviewer and as a choreographer for this issue of the Festival.

Notes

- 1  Kean, Danuta. 2003:22. "Graphic reading". *The Bookseller*. October 24.
- 2  *Time Magazine* at <http://www.time.com/time/bestandworst/2002/comics.html>
- 3  Greenwood, Phoebe. "'Stars and Strips'". *The Times*, 8th June 2004