

Kurt Fisk's Monkey Fishes

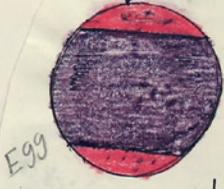
~~~~~ *Patrick Collier*

I first saw Kurt Fisk's Monkey Fish drawings at ArtWorks, a gallery/project space that is part of Collaborative Employment Innovations (CEI), an employment service for people who experience disabilities in Corvallis, Oregon. I was drawn to one work in particular, a bright red, marquee-sized, collaged and hand-drawn promotional poster for the DVD release of his short animated film, *The Original Sea Monkey Fishes*. In short, it is the tale of a scientist's exploration of a sunken ship and his encounter with a merman-like Monkey Fish. Included on the DVD are drawings from various stages in the 45-year development of these fantasy creatures, the Monkey Fishes (the plural spelling is Fisk's).

In 1971, then twelve years old, Fisk ordered his first sea monkey kit from the back pages of a comic book. The brine shrimp he received looked nothing like the happy little alien creatures in the ad, so he decided to start from scratch, change their name to Monkey Fishes, and create his own cast of characters. Over the years he has filled notebook upon notebook with pen and marker drawings of these quasi-human aquatic beings, and modeled dozens of painted clay Monkey Fish figurines.

The first thing one might notice about Fisk's extraordinary creatures is that they are a fairly happy lot, often portrayed with big, open-mouthed, sharp-toothed smiles. Although they come in a variety of colors — frequently brown, and also vibrant blues, oranges, or yellows— all have hairy heads, scaly bodies, and webbed feet and hands. Taking cues from comic-book super heroes, Fisk has endowed them with the ability to shoot heat rays from their eyes and, when frightened, to camouflage themselves to blend into their surroundings. Captions on some drawings inform us that the males stand about twelve feet tall, and the females

Best Drawing 1993 BABY'S MEMORABLE FIRSTS



Hatched out Egg Earlier today

Looks at Family suddenly

LAUGHS a LOUD Bubble giggling

RESPONSE to sister or brother very well

Imitates Growls and screams Cry, scream, Growls

FIRST TOYS Rea pearl,

HANDLES OBJECTS Not to Bad

UNCONTROLLABLEY Not so much,

TAKES FIRST STEP toward Humans three times

TANTRUMS some days

Feeling or HUGS lots of Hugs

FIRST FEEDING After Hatching

SIZE 1 in.

WEIGHT 40 BLS

SEX male

LIKE OR DISLIKE He Likes good people and Dislikes evil people

DISCIPLIN no to young yet,



Figure 1. Kurt Fisk, Baby's Memorable Firsts, 1993. Ink-pen, marker, graphite, White Out, collage on note-book paper, 11 1/2 x 8 in.

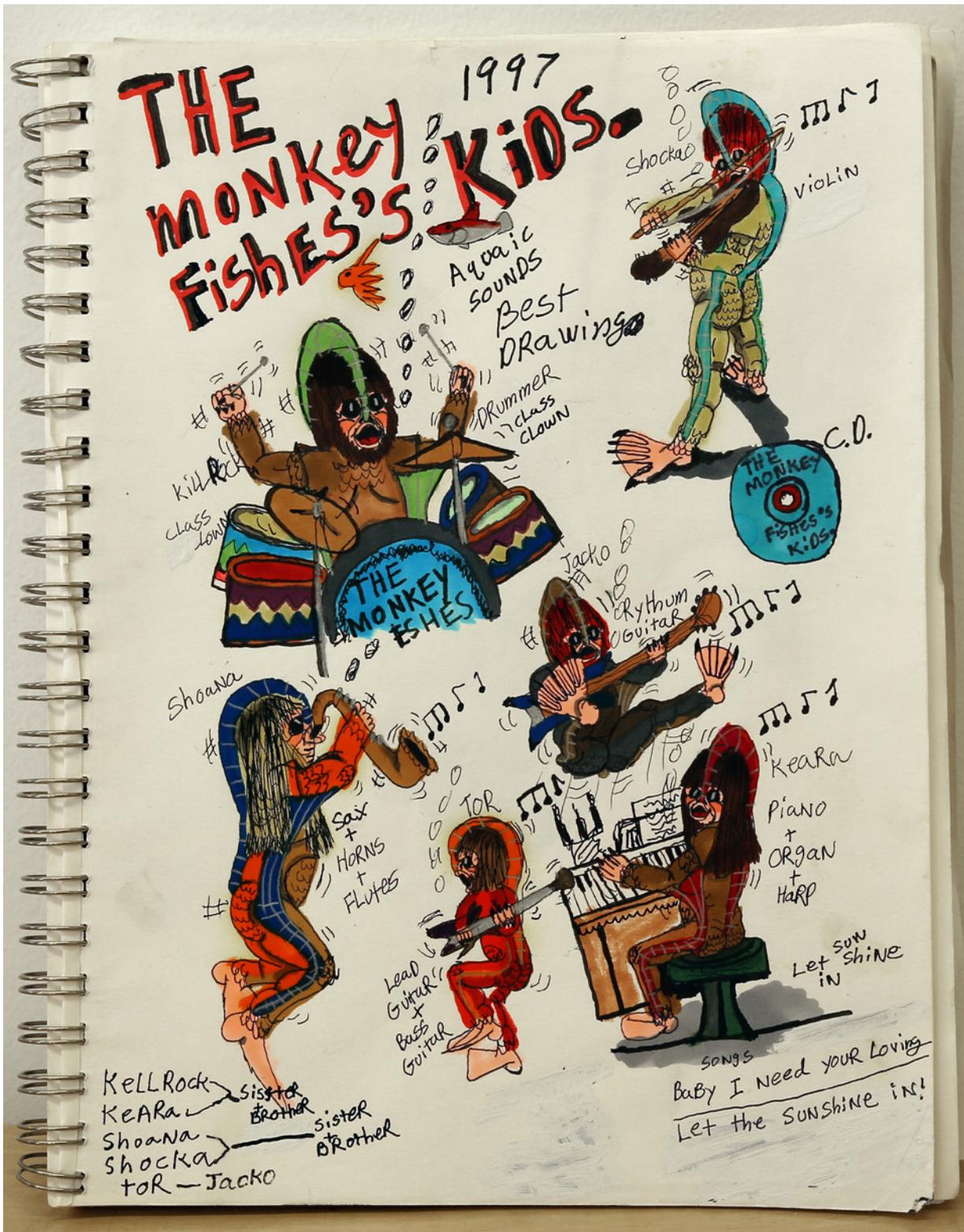


Figure 2.  
Kurt Fisk, *The Monkey Fishes's Kids*, 1997. Ink-pen, marker on drawing paper, 9 x 12 in.

Figuring

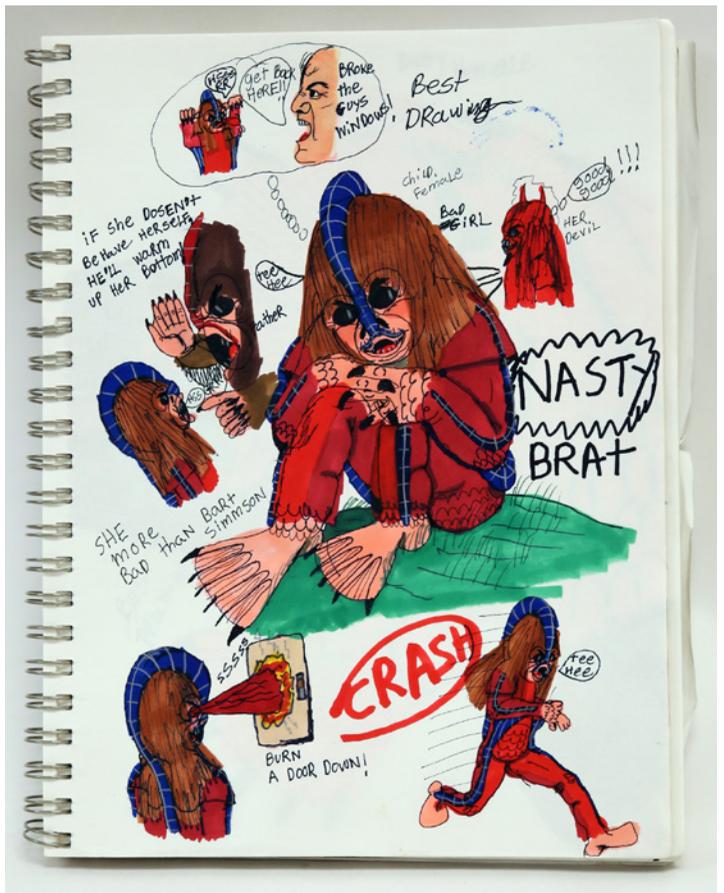


Figure 3. Kurt Fisk, Nasty Brat, n.d.. Ink-pen, marker on drawing paper, 9 x 12 in.

Figure 4. Kurt Fisk, Untitled (Eight Child Monkey Fishes), n.d. Ink-pen, marker on drawing paper, 9 x 12 in.

reach ten feet. In a drawing of the Monkey Fish skeletal structure, Fisk has added an additional ulna attached to each humerus and an extra fibula next to each femur, this to provide the webbed extremities the additional support the Fishes need to swim exceptionally fast. Perhaps most fascinating is their ability to shapeshift into human form.

Although I am aware of some of Fisk's personal story, it would be difficult for me to make a direct correlation based on the characteristics he has given to his creatures. The majority of his Monkey Fishes are shown in dynamic, supportive family units, the images laid out much as they would be in a family photo album. Some drawings depict naughty child Fishes being punished, yet often on the same sketchbook page Fisk shows tender moments between adults and their offspring. The most distressing, albeit rare portrayals are of children in foster care with humans, for these young Fishes seem to suffer terribly. I did not feel the need to quiz Fisk about any of this when we met, as it seems to me that the work of self-taught artists too often runs the danger of being subsumed by the tales of their lives. That said, he does provide his Fishes with enough of a range of emotions in combination with their abilities to make his art engrossing, and this in itself can lead one to make broad speculations about his personal history.

I asked Fisk to walk me page-by-page through several of his sketchbooks, and he was more than happy to oblige. As we began turning pages, it became clear that Fisk did not limit himself to his Monkey Fishes, for intermingled with those drawings were characters from *The Simpsons* and various other cartoons, creatures from the *Alien* films, robots galore, film stars, and television personalities. All seemed equally important to him. I didn't ask him if he watches a lot of TV, but he offered that he likes "mostly the old shows." It is clearly his primary source of inspiration and, I suspect, a reflection of his insularity.

Some of the notations Fisk makes in his drawings hint at that isolation. Many pages in his sketchbooks are marked with a given year, sometimes out of sequence. ArtWorks director, Bruce Burris, cautions that these dates cannot necessarily be trusted. Instead, they indicate when an earlier rendition of the same drawing was made. Many drawings are peppered with notes that declare "Best Drawing" or "My Fave." I might suggest such archival notes work for Fisk in two ways: The dates and annotations are for a future audience while also giving him an immediate sense of self-relevance. Anticipating his own critical reception, he provides himself a compliment, something that might be rare in his experience.

However, there was a point in Fisk's life when he began to feel a connection with and response from the world outside—even if it was still the television. In 1992, CBS broadcast a Saturday morning live-action television program called *The Amazing Live Sea Monkeys*. Imagine how thrilled Fisk must have been, twenty years into drawing his Fishes, to see a television show based on those creatures from the back pages of comic books—the very concept that set him on his path! Suddenly, television not only inspired but validated him. We may not be surprised that when in episode 10 the characters created a rock band for a TV talent search, Fisk started drawing his imaginary rock band, The Monkey Fishes's [sic] Kids.

Noteworthy here is the focus Fisk brings to these particular drawings. Instead of pages peopled with a variety of characters from a number of sources, he

Figure 5.  
Kurt Fisk, *Untitled*  
(*Infant Male*), n.d.  
Ink-pen, marker  
on drawing paper,  
9 × 12 in.

Figure 6.  
Kurt Fisk,  
*Skeleton and*  
*Model Kit*, 1971.  
Ink-pen, marker  
on drawing  
paper, 9 × 12 in.



dedicates whole pages to the band, full of both inventive and practical details: There is a rotation of four to seven members, sometimes with a green space creature, Sorack from Amadon, sitting in; each performer is assigned specific instruments; and Fisk even goes so far as to create setlists for the band. He apparently entertains ambitious hopes for his efforts as well. In one drawing he writes, “Move over Bart Simpson and Dennis the Menace,” and in another, not settling for television ratings, he gives the same challenge to the band Kiss. In this way, Fisk is like any kid in the last fifty years who has jammed with schoolmates in garages and paneled basements, collectively dreaming of rock stardom. The difference being the absence of mates.

## I want to say, ‘This is what I am doing with these hands.’

In 2014, Fisk’s drawings finally saw the light of day when he was invited to participate in a pop-up exhibit in Corvallis. Burris arranged the exhibition under his Outpost1000 projects, which promotes regional and underrepresented artists. Burris remembers, “One of the things that Kurt said to me when I interviewed him for the pop-up was... ‘What took you so long?’” Fisk now has four exhibitions to his credit, in Corvallis, Eugene, and Salem, all arranged by Burris, who seeks to give or find him (and a number of other CEI-affiliated artists) a venue, for this is how artists get recognized (and written about). And Fisk is eager for the attention: “It’s time,” he states, “for people to see what kind of talent I have. I want to say, ‘This is what I am doing with these hands.’”

*This piece was originally published in March 2017 by the Visual Arts Ecology Project.*

Patrick Collier writes criticism for *Oregon ArtsWatch* ([www.orartswatch.org](http://www.orartswatch.org)) in Portland. When he lived in Chicago, he wrote for the *New Art Examiner*. He is the author of a number of catalogue essays. Holding a BA in Philosophy and an MA in English Literature, both from Southern Illinois University at Carbondale, Collier is also an artist, with an MFA from the University of Illinois at Chicago. His approach to art making is multidisciplinary, including poetry, painting, sculpture, photography, and video, often in the same artwork or installation. Recent exhibitions include *The Suburban* in Oak Park, Illinois; *Nine Gallery* in Portland; and *ArtWorks CEI Project* in Corvallis. His photography is in the permanent collections of Hallie Ford Museum of Art and Art about Agriculture at Oregon State University. Collier and his wife, Gillian, moved to Oregon in 2003. They live in Corvallis.