



Philip Martoglio: The Wow Factor

by René Grayre

Encountering **Philip Martoglio's** paintings and sculptures for the first time, one might think — or perhaps, sense: “Wow.” Or perhaps “weird” or “awesome” or maybe simply “outrageous” — or, most likely, some simultaneous combination of all three as you hear the clang and feel the distinct sensation of Clarity and Truth suddenly banging against the side of your head. Certainly, one smiles — because Mr. Martoglio is having *fun*, and we're invited in.

There's a great deal of wit and intelligence in this work, and the layers only deepen as one pushes past the surface subject matter, which is at times arcane, at others deceptively facile. At first blush — and some folks in some quarters very well might — it can seem a mixed bag.

There are portraits, of course, and of friends; but past those, this is a world of *Hollywood Babylon* and *Minsky's Burlesque*; women's Roller Derbies and Friday night wrestling with Gorgeous George. Of *Freaks* and *Eraserhead*, Gypsy Rose Lee and Busby Berkley; Xavier Cugat and Keely Smith.

The paintings are striking and playful, abounding with word play, visual play — interplay — and their joy and sometimes dark whimsy celebrate a lost American pop culture which is nevertheless still ever-present, ever-changing, always with us and timeless.

Like **Warhol**, Martoglio looks at and plays with the commercial pop veneer, the cultural icons and pastimes of the moment. Like **John Waters**, his work can push that same cultural envelope to its most outrageous edge, making unexpected and radical juxtapositions.

Some of the titles tell it: *Mussolini in Heaven*; *The Three Graces / Lesbian Illusions*; the startling sculpture *The 7 Deadly Sins* - interpreted as the rough “bad girls” from Martoglio's high school days. Along with nuns and strippers and transvestites, these are works that explore the *film noir / bête noire* side of life, the bump-and-grind, shuck and jive side of the American dream.

Martoglio was born in Brooklyn, which is appropriate since Brooklyn was known at one time as the “city of churches,” and he's the most catholic of artists — that's “catholic” with a small “c” and in the purest sense of the word, with “*universal, all-inclusive, broad and comprehensive*” tastes, according to *Webster's*.

A graduate of SUNY at Stony Brook, New York, Martoglio is a long time resident of Manhattan's Hell's Kitchen. Both places have added to the mix, as does the following little story. When asked about Brooklyn, he said:

"I remember when I was very young in Brooklyn, my mother used to take me to a Chinese restaurant for lunch sometimes, the Ridgewood Terrace Chinese — where they had strip shows at night.

There, at lunchtime, you'd find reasonable Chinese food — but at night, almost every night, they had strip shows onstage, and in the lobby, glamorous pictures of all the not-always glamorous girls "

