



Charles Pachter
***Egg Woman*, 1969**
Essay by Sara J. Angel
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Charles Pachter, *Egg Woman*, 1969, lithograph.

Charles Pachter is best known for being Canada's Andy Warhol. Since the early seventies he has been transforming everyday national icons—mounties, moose, hockey players, streetcars, and the queen—into brightly coloured, celebratory, and often satirical works of arts that force Canadians to reassess how they see the familiar.

But his oeuvre did not start out this way. One of the most striking features of Pachter's career is that his earliest works are intense, brooding, and stormy. Long before he came to pop, Pachter was an Expressionist: one best described as a disciple of Edvard Munch, Ludwig Kirchner, and Ben Shahn. How did the artist move from the dark to the light? The answer lies in the story of *Egg Woman*, a 1968 lithograph that bridges Pachter's inaugural output and his mid-career style.

The work's genesis stretches back to a 1962 life-drawing class at the University of Toronto, on the sixth floor of the newly constructed Sidney Smith building. The 20-year-old Pachter was three years into his B.A. in art history, a program that made studio art a



mandatory course. For an academic assignment he was asked to render a line drawing of a nude female model positioned in a crouched pose.

Sketching and painting came easily to Pachter whose artistic talent was apparent by the time he entered high school. As a student at Toronto's Vaughn Road Collegiate he turned the attic of his family's mid-town Tudor home into a studio. Still, no one expected him to make a career of art. As Margaret Atwood put it (she and Pachter became life-long friends in the summer of 1960, when both were instructors at Camp White Pine): "The culture as a whole still retained its frontier-society distrust of the intangible and the impractical and its provincial conviction that art, if it had to be done at all, was done better elsewhere, preferably by dead Europeans." (1)

Yet in 1964 Pachter began a two-year Master of Fine Arts at the renowned Cranbrook Academy of Arts in Michigan. There he became skilled in a wide range of techniques including papermaking, typesetting, etching, silkscreen, and book design. He also mastered lithography, a medium that would become central to his work for the next five years and one he would use to transform his 1962 life-drawing-class sketch of a crouching woman into a new work of art.

Pachter embraced lithography for "its texture and subtlety" and because it allowed him to work "semi consciously." Drawing on a lithographic stone, using a grease crayon and tusche (an ink of grease particles in liquid), "there was no time to think through details" or fuss over accuracy, he says. "You succumb to the rhythm of drawing on stone, and playing with form. Nothing about the process is preconceived."

The meditative nature of lithography was perfect for Pachter's post-Cranbrook frame of mind, a time he calls his "fucked up period." Back in Toronto, he settled on Shaw Street, where he set up a lithography studio and printing press in his basement. There he continued a project that he had started while studying in Michigan: creating limited edition handmade books illustrating the work of Canadian poets. After creating a folio of Atwood's collected verse at Cranbrook, *The Circle Game* (1964), Pachter went on to produce visual volumes for John Newlove (*Notebook Pages*, 1966) and Alden Nowlan (*Yellow Yoyo*, 1968).

Between the creations of such literary works, he also threw himself into making emotionally charged lithographs that examined the dark side of interpersonal relationships. In the black-and-white *Funny What Love Can Do* (1966), he depicted himself scowling behind bars, next to an image of his happily embracing parents. (2) Of his art made during this period, Pachter says it coincided with his own introspection through psychoanalysis, and was characterized by anger and an "anxiety ridden inner self."

Part of Pachter's process in making art to sort himself out involved looking back to earlier works, including pieces he made while studying at U of T. One day in 1968 he came upon the sketch of a curled-up, circular female form that he drew six years earlier. "This is interesting," he thought and he started to re-work his 1962 line drawing on a lithographic stone. In the process Pachter enhanced and elaborated upon his source image. "I amplified the original," he says, "with a textured background executed directly on the stone."



Then, remembering how his undergraduate courses often involved class excursions to study historic artifacts at the Royal Ontario Museum, he re-interpreted his crouching figure as a deity on a black- and terra cotta-coloured ancient Greek vase. “That was the inspiration for the orange background in *Egg Woman*,” says Pachter. Then he framed his female subject in a sphere, a dominant motif of his recent work, including the picture he created to accompany the final poem in his edition of *The Circle Game* (1964) to illustrate Atwood’s line: “I want the circle broken.” (3) Satisfied with his image, Pachter pulled “6 or 8 copies” of the lithograph, which he named for its figure, who appears as though “she’s resting in an egg.”

With *Egg Woman*, Pachter made a definitive step away from the influences of Expressionism. His surface became flattened, dramatically simplified, and he introduced the use of a single bright hue as a backdrop for his subject, a signature feature that in the decades ahead would come to characterize much of his work. Pachter’s new direction would become solidified in the fall of 1969 when he began a yearlong teaching appointment in graphics and fine art at the University of Calgary.

While out west, he created the lithograph and silkscreen *Noblesse Oblige* (1970) depicting a Mountie reining in his horse against a near opaque yellow horizon. As he drove from Ontario to Alberta in his Mini Minor Pachter was so overwhelmed by the vastness of the country, and how little he knew of it, he felt forced to think outside of himself. *Noblesse Oblige*, a work that Pachter describes as “a step away from my internalized anguish” marks his turn to a Canadian vernacular. It has been likened to the world of pop art and the influence of comic books on the artist, but as *Egg Woman* reveals, that is only part of the story.

The form of Pachter’s proud Mountie was not unprecedented. Like *Egg Woman*, it features a figure simply drawn in black before an almost solid bright backdrop. It is part of a continuum that stretches back to a life-drawing class at Sidney Smith, and it is part of Pachter’s stylistic transformation on Shaw Street. Like the subject of *Egg Woman* who will break free from her shell, by the start of the seventies, Pachter’s art was poised to take on a new life.

(1) As quoted in Bogomila Welsh-Ovcharov, *Charles Pachter* (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 1992), 2.

(2) *Ibid.*, 23.

(3) See *The Circle Game*, 1964. Collection Musée d’Art Contemporain Montreal. Another work by Pachter from this period featuring the *Icon*, 1968.

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