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Little Creatures, Witty and Erotic

By **KEN JOHNSON**

Stop by Ubu Gallery this month and you may find yourself asking, “How did I not know about this guy?” Unless you are exceptionally well informed about the history of French Surrealism, the name [Georges Hugnet](#) (1906-1974) may have slipped your notice. It did mine, and the gallery’s exhibition of his collages and altered postcards comes as a delightful revelation.

A poet, critic, publisher, book binder, rare-book dealer and collage maker, among other occupations, Hugnet (pronounced OON-yay) was a minor but busy player in the interwar Parisian art scene. He collaborated with Picasso, Duchamp, Miró, Gertrude Stein and other luminaries on numerous fine-art publications, and a selection of his suavely designed and highly inventive volumes is on display here.

The main attraction is “The Love Life of the Spumifers,” a series of small works produced in 1947-48 that is based on black-and-white postcards from the Belle Époque picturing pretty young women posing in breast- and buttock-exposing garments.

To each of these racy images Hugnet added, in gouache with a fine-tipped brush, a colorful, comical monster: a goggle-eyed chimera composed of avian, reptilian and mammalian elements. These randy, diminutive gargoyles cling to, fondle, mount and otherwise consort with their objects of desire. The women respond either with dreamy indifference or by beaming back at the camera.

Hugnet called his little creatures “Spumifers,” a made-up word with erotic resonance. He meant to collect 40 of them into a book called “The Love Life of the Spumifers,” but he never completed the project. This show includes more than 30 of the originals, as well as a number of reproductions of missing ones.

In the 1960s Hugnet gave 33 of the Spumifers names and fancifully humorous descriptions, which Ubu Gallery has published in English translation in a paperback volume. One of these wittily corrosive texts is thought to be an unflattering portrait of the pope of Surrealism,

[André Breton](#), with whom Hugnet had had a falling out. (Breton had accused him of being a police informer and a Stalinist.)

Although only an “average” Spumifer, the Breton stand-in known as the Conceited Woolleton “feels himself to be marked out for the highest moral and political destinies,” the artist wrote. This insecure alpha male is a “professional phony” who “bangs his drum, calls together his gang at the pub every day, and there, greasily playing the host, he directs, he bosses, he commends, he disparages, he defames, he is happy.”

The convergence of woman and creature is a one-liner, but it cuts to the core of a distinctively modern state of mind. Psychoanalytically, the Spumifer can be read as a projection of the viewer's unruly sexual response to the lubricious image.

But a sense of propriety is built into the postcard images too. While they display their charms for the viewer's prurient perusal, the women appear in poses of classical elegance, like marble sculptures. They are closer to the odalisques of the French academician [W. A. Bouguereau](#) than to the fully uninhibited models of today's pornographic imaginarium. So there is a tantalizing tension between politesse and unrestrained desire.

The theme of beauty and the beast reverberates. It implies that formal beauty is cold, lonely and sterile without the warming vitality of erotic urgency. Christian tradition, however, separated the spiritual and the carnal into the angelic and the demonic. The Spumifers look as if they had escaped from the margins of a Medieval manuscript illumination, from a borderland where miniscule demons were sometimes allowed to cavort freely. They come to rescue and ravish the virginal soul of a modern consciousness still haunted by ghosts of puritanical religious dogma.

Hugnet's satire extended to the hyper-refined presentation of the Spumifers series. He framed and matted each image with an inner band of shiny gold, as if it were the work of an old master. Titles on the mattes appear to be printed, but are in fact drawn by an exquisitely refined hand. The precious framing and labeling make fun of bourgeois taste; for Hugnet, rules of decorum repress instinctive spontaneity as effectively as religion.

Some Surrealists — Breton in particular — took very seriously their campaign to subvert norms in the service of psycho-social revolution. But Hugnet, unlike Dali, to name another monster of self-importance, had an appealing sense of humor and an allergy to sanctimony. He was playing a sophisticated, subversive game of his own with clichés: those of the classical nude and the kitsch pornography that imitates it; those of framing devices that

domesticate expressions of erotic exuberance; and even those of Surrealism itself. Fundamentalism of any kind was Hugnet's enemy, irreverence his scourge.

Hugnet's demons do not threaten to topple anyone's world. They are like weird house pets, which is a helpful way to think of the crazy works of art that collectors fold into their tastefully appointed homes: pets that may seduce, bark and nip but never escape the confines of their gilded cages.

"The Love Life of the Spumifers" runs through Jan. 28 at Ubu Gallery, 416 East 59th Street, Clinton; (212) 753-4444, ubugallery.com.

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ADAGP/Myrtille Hugnet

"The Hesitant Minosis," by Georges Hugnet, a minor but busy artist in the interwar Parisian cultural scene.

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