

Nicole Rudick

Nuclear Family

Marguerite Van Cook and James Romberger came of age artistically in the 80s, in New York's East Village. Their views of the city, of artmaking, and of family crystallized amid a freewheeling artistic community galvanized by a sense of collaboration and steeped in unfettered, socially engaged experimentation. This environment set the trajectory of their work for the next three decades.

Both Romberger and Van Cook arrived in the East Village in the early 80s and met soon after. In the first half of the decade, Romberger made comics for Seth Tobocman's political anthology *World War 3 Illustrated* and composed pastel drawings of a neighborhood he initially found "frightening, chaotic and alien"—scenes of ghetto palms rising from tarred rooftops and of junkies searching garbage for found treasures on Fifth Street. The layered environments of Van Cook's films, performances, and paintings from this period refer back to her cerebral art school studies of structuralist film and semiotics, which had been filtered through the physicality of playing in the punk band The Innocents after university. Together, Van Cook and Romberger produced *Ground Zero*, a science-fiction comic strip set on the streets of New York that ran in the *East Village Eye*, and in the mid 80s embarked on a project with David Wojnarowicz, a gritty autobiographical comic book published in 1996 as *7 Miles a Second*.

The galleries in the East Village (a mix of dealer- and artist-run spaces) positioned themselves as distinctly "anti-SoHo" and tended toward group exhibitions over solo shows; many chose names that reflected this aesthetic and political stance, among them Nature Morte, Fun Gallery, and Civilian Warfare. Van Cook and Romberger opened their own gallery, Ground Zero, in 1984, and hosted an array of group shows and projects by artists such as Wojnarowicz, Martin Wong, Calvin Reid, Richard Kern, Peggy Cyphers, and Mike Osterhout. "We do and show what we like," the couple told *The New York Times* in 1985. "When we can't do that anymore, we'll go on to do something else." After the gallery closed in 1986, Romberger and Van Cook went on to do much else: painting, drawing, films and comics as well as sculpture, collage and photography, both individually and in collaboration with each other. Their son Crosby was born in 1985, and by his early teens he had joined the family business of making art out of life.

Though the East Village art scene soon fell apart, a victim of gentrification, incursions from the high-end art world, and the ravages of AIDS, its participatory spirit took root in Van Cook and Romberger's familial approach to artmaking. It's possible to parse the different strands of their work—for instance, Van Cook's themes of reflection, doubling, and transience; Romberger's engrossing, sensitive views of the contemporary city; or Crosby's fascination with the intersection of temporality, identity, and celebrity culture—yet much is gained by considering it collectively. Their art engages with different aspects of the personal, social and political, and yet because their identities were partly shaped within the family circle, their concerns appear in various guises in one another's art.

This may be nowhere more evident than in Crosby's work, which frequently draws on the hip-hop and graffiti culture that was born in New York in the 80s. His series of clocks that feature "melted" human faces seem apocalyptic and demarcate a kind of cruel transience that could easily refer back to the decimation by AIDS of his parents' East Village cohorts, particularly Wojnarowicz, who took the infant Crosby out for walks in his stroller. Romberger and Van Cook have shown the influence of family more literally: portraits of Van Cook appear throughout Romberger's work, and Crosby is the subject of numerous paintings by Van Cook, in works that span his life. What's more, Romberger's more recent pastels incorporate visual ele-

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ments from Van Cook's and Crosby's work: turns toward abstraction, for instance, or simply the hands of a clock. Van Cook, for her part, circles around notions of motherhood—in history, as subjects of art, as lived experience—and weaves domestic elements such as sewing, fabric, and wallpaper into her constructions.

Overlapping interests come to the fore, too, in the work they make together. *Post York* is a father-son venture: a comic book, published in 2013, by Romberger that includes a flexi disc containing a song by Crosby. Both story and song are set in a post-flood New York City, an apocalyptic wasteland through which a solitary young man must make his way. The comic's character is based on Crosby, but it could easily have been a variant of Wojnarowicz's struggles as chronicled in *7 Miles a Second*, an account of his youth spent hustling in the city's less friendly quarters. But in its multigenerational construction, *Post York* also reflects *The Late Child and Other Animals*, Van Cook's 2015 memoir, created with Romberger, of her mother's survival in Britain during World War II and of her own youth, as a child born out of wedlock.

Van Cook has described feeling an abiding urge to “construct rather than to deconstruct. . .to make something rather than nothing.” Romberger expresses a corresponding impulse in the preface to *Post York*, where he writes that the book is in part for Crosby, “who must deal with the world that I am leaving him.”