

TOMI UNGERER

TOMI THE ALCHEMIST

THE MAGNUS OPUS

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To medieval practitioners, alchemy is the ultimate Science, condensing the virtues of all others. Its subject is life. Tomi Ungerer too has studied life; that of women, men, animals, all the way to the lives of shoes, water taps, coffee pots and other daily artefacts.

Young Tomi failed his high school diploma, but he did receive an honorable mention: he was hailed as a student with a “perverse and subversive imagination.” These adjectives, stemming from the latin words *perversus*, *subversum*, mean ‘to overthrow’. And that is precisely the essence of metamorphosis: the total transformation of a being, a thing. “One observes people and then they meld together.”

Ungerer looks to natural sciences, anatomy, and to the principles of metamorphosis itself. The human body becomes a favorite theme – bestialized, mechanized, repaired... Tomi the Alchemist does not strive to bring life and perfection to impure objects; on the contrary, his *Magnum Opus* aims for the more mysterious transformations, the strangest beings. Over the years, Tomi built a collection of oddities of all kinds, which he ingeniously uses in his sculptures. No philosopher’s stone for him, but a piece of rock observing us disdainfully behind a pair of sunglasses, a sly grin emerging from a simple crack in the stone...



Gothic

From ‘metamorphosis’ we slide into ‘fantasy’, melding myths, legends, the wondrous and the fantastic; all things to do with imagination.

Thus, animals become human, men and women become beasts: sprawled on an armchair, a crocodile watches TV, still wearing his business suit; a scantily clad woman, wearing stockings and high heels, turns into a swan whose long neck mischievously slides between her legs, lifting her skirt some more. Nothing is safe from Tomi’s eye and mind.

“The cogs of Strasburg cathedral’s astronomical clock modeled my brain, fashioning the basis of my elucubrations”; and women turn into mosques or cathedrals, columns and palm trees become garter belts, rose windows become bustiers, and a judiciously placed door (naturally) invites us into the ‘house of god’... Even metaphors are transformed.

Tomi goes from anthropomorphism to trans-humanization with an unscrupulous and confusing ease, and peers into interstitial, forbidden realms; the result is a “baffling instability of classifications” (Roland Barthes).

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2023



Untitled

VALLOIS

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TOMI THE ALCHEMIST

THE MAGNUS OPUS

Similar to an ever-changing cloud, Tomi's Magnum Opus never repeats itself, guided always by doubt ("why not?", he says) which opens the mind's doors. But above all, the artist strays from reality, from "the fact that we are in an irreparable world", personified by the piano losing its keys one by one in a black and white avalanche... or by the car, made of bones, a man attempts to fix. "Living is learning to die" says Tomi.

To alchemists, death is equal to life in the process of transformation, the starting point. Then comes purification and recombination towards perfect union, fusion. Thus, what was dead comes alive. Tomi emphasizes that he was born out of death, having barely known his watchmaker father – and has consciously ignored the passing of time, while revelling in an ambiguous relationship to the representation of death. Death is everywhere, both discreet, all-encompassing, sardonic, and cumbersome. In his work, death is the beginning and the end, foreshadowing a transmutation.

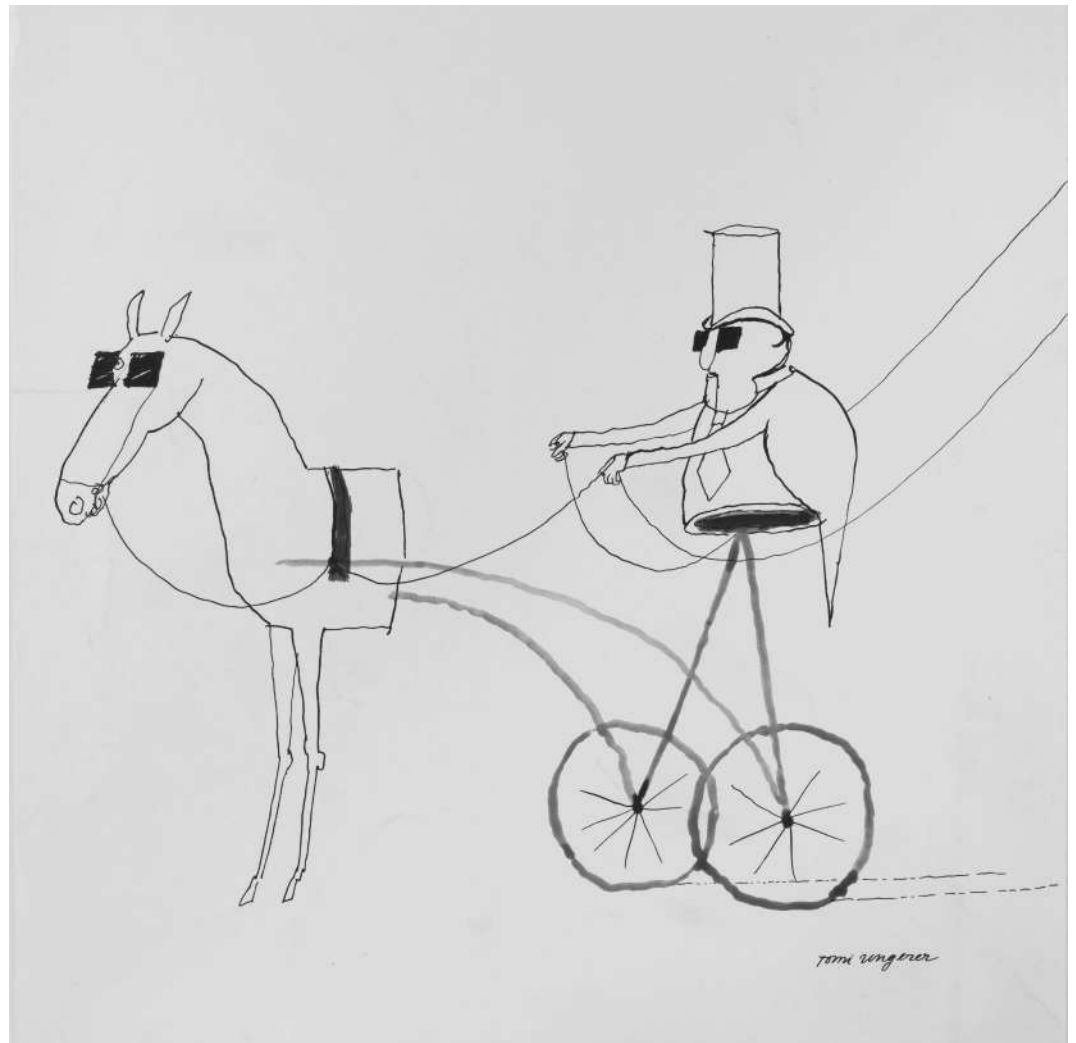
Death is the void beyond a cliff off which a skeleton, wearing wings and aviation goggles, is about to jump; death also sneers behind its clown nose or gives a final blessing under a priest's robes. But death is mostly this black shadow, ever behind us, or a large door opening unto a mountain vista where water flows in a long, calm river.

Agate Bortolussi

OPENING

23.03.2023

6 PM - 9PM



Untitled (Sketch for Underground Sketchbook)