

# Los Angeles Times



## Review: Erin Cosgrove at UCLA Hammer Museum and Carl Berg Gallery

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Erin Cosgrove's pseudo-historical, multimedia epic "What Manner of Person Art Thou?" turns a sharp eye on matters of faith, revelation and the quasi-religious longings of secular society. By turns comic and bloody, silly and harrowing, the project, whose various incarnations span the [UCLA Hammer Museum](#) and the [Carl Berg Gallery](#), is impressive in its breadth and astute in its satire.

The story, told most directly in a 65-minute animated video at the Hammer, revolves around the figures of Elijah Yoder and Enoch Troyer, sole surviving members of an isolated Christian fundamentalist sect that's been decimated by a mysterious epidemic. Aiming to replenish their numbers and rebuild their community, the two set off in search of a handful of previous defectors.

It is a strange and increasingly psychedelic journey, rendered in a stiff, rudimentary animation style that falls somewhere between Monty Python, "Scooby-Doo," "South Park" and those hellfire-and-brimstone comic books one finds littering the parking lots of strip malls.

The motley cast of characters that Yoder and Troyer encounter -- a brooding circle of "D&D"-style gamers; a cultural studies professor who puts even the vitriolic Yoder to sleep; a quasi-Scientologist self-help practitioner digging for latent strains of homosexual longing; the two buxom stars of a reality television

show titled "Who Wants to Marry Siamese Twins?"; a corrupt corporate executive; and a failure of a would-be whistle-blower, among others -- present a sardonic cross-section of contemporary America.

The heterogeneity of secular culture, however, proves a tad overwhelming for our righteous protagonists, who believe themselves to be in direct communication with God and thus endowed in every reaction and compulsion with a sense of divine authority. That most of these compulsions tend to arise with scythe in hand makes this also a very violent journey. Heads fly, limbs are severed, blood spews in every direction, as this team of would-be evangelicals meets difference with intolerance and basically slaughters all hope for the resurrection of the community.

The video itself is only the beginning -- the primary text from which a slew of "interpretive" materials has evolved. These are the works are on view at Carl Berg Gallery: a 15-foot scroll depicting another version of Yoder and Troyer's story, "starting from the beginning of time and ending in apocalypse"; a photocopied pamphlet detailing the "discovery" of the scroll in the possession of a person named Nigel Hertson, a recently deceased recluse and role-playing game enthusiast who claimed to have received the tale from a mysterious figure named "M."; a seven-minute, filmstrip-style pseudo-documentary video speculating (often erroneously) on the meaning of the scroll's enigmatic imagery; and a series of paintings on clear film resembling the pages of illuminated manuscripts, supposedly executed by Hertson.

The strength of Cosgrove's satire is that it cuts in all directions, skewering the folly of the secular as thoroughly as the presumption of the righteous, in a manner refreshingly devoid of the knee-jerk liberal scorn of faith. There are no heroes here, no martyrs and no true prophets, nor are there any easy paths to redemption. What Cosgrove does scorn, it seems, is ignorance; what she prophesies are the consequences of the insufficiently considered action (and, by extension, life), whether that of the religious zealot, the cultural critic or the corporate executive.

-- Holly Myers

**UCLA Hammer Museum**, 10899 Wilshire Blvd., L.A., (310) 443-7000, through March 15. Closed Mondays. [www.hammer.ucla.edu](http://www.hammer.ucla.edu) **Carl Berg Gallery**, 6018 Wilshire Blvd., L.A., (323) 931-6060, through March 14. Closed Sundays and Mondays. [www.carlberggallery.com](http://www.carlberggallery.com)

*Photo: Detail from "What Manner of Person Art Thou?" scroll. Credit: Carl Berg Gallery*