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SYRACUSE

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the art and style of
richard merkin




Plus:

- nationalism on the rise
- the lore of the lighthouse

merkin's world

and welcome to it

It's a short leap from pop culture to the canvas of artist and style guru Richard Merkin. 

BY KEVIN HAYNES

Stop right now. Before you can know anything about artist Richard Merkin, there are a few things he wants to know about you.

Are you familiar with the work of William S. Burroughs?

Merkin asks the question before he even sticks the key in the door of his Manhattan apartment. Say no and there's a good chance you'll be shown the mat below, the one that says GO AWAY.

Answer yes and you're allowed to proceed, though Merkin is far from impressed. He expects—no, he literally demands—that anyone interested in discussing his own eccentric art and life be aware of the aging author best known for *Naked Lunch* and other godless, homoerotic, drug-crazed prose.

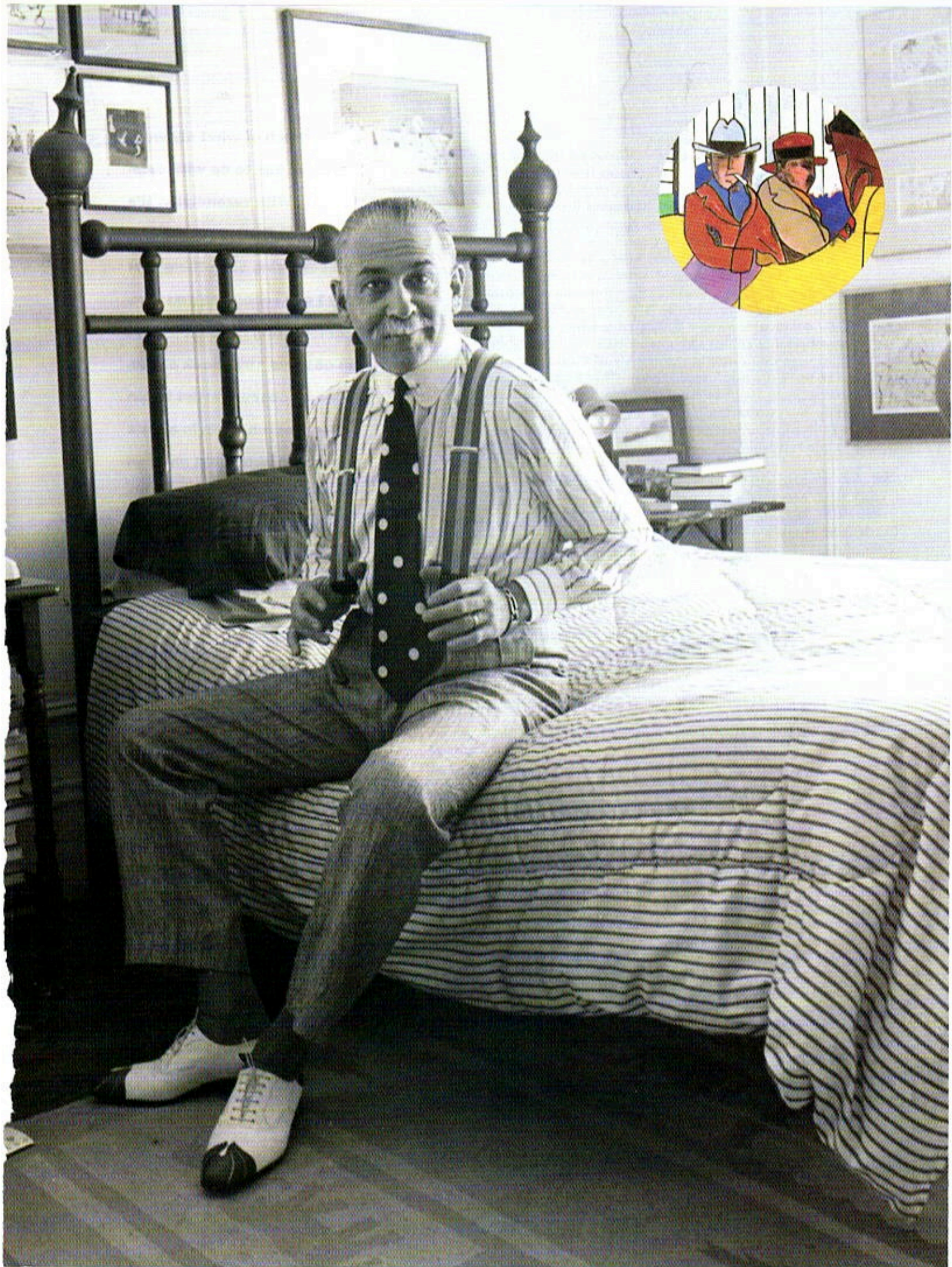
"I only talk to people who are hip," Merkin explains once you've successfully negotiated Burroughs. "If you don't know who Burroughs is, man, you're not on the Earth."

Merkin also expects you to possess at least a game show contestant's knowledge of Francis Bacon. Not the 17th-century English philosopher touted by some as the true author of Shakespeare's plays. But Francis Bacon, the 20th-century artist (now in his mid-80s) who, as Merkin points out, was "the first person to paint post-atomic angst.

"Like Burroughs, he was homosexual and quite self-destructive," Merkin notes. "Bacon, for instance, spent much of his life getting beaten up by sailors and drinking

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champagne in the morning.”

Now all you need to win a friend for life is to name the two catchers on the 1944 St. Louis Browns baseball team.

Okay, Merkin will forgive anyone who draws a blank on Red Hayworth and Frank Mancuso. But now at least you know a few of the reference points integral to this eclectic fellow with the round eyes and slick gray hair. Merkin, who thinks everyone should wear a hat more often, wears several himself. He's one of America's leading representational painters, with works in the Smithsonian Institution, Whitney Museum and the Museum of Modern Art; a fashion and style writer; dedicated teacher; and meticulous collector of erotica and obscure baseball memorabilia.

“I'm very interested in outsiders and eccentrics, people who buck the tide,” says Merkin. “My heart goes out to those people. Even in baseball, I'm not interested in the Wade Boggses or the Pete Roses. I'm interested in Hiram Bithorn, who was the first Puerto Rican to play major league baseball.”

While rescuing others from obscurity, Merkin has been elevated to celebrity status himself. He was immortalized by the Beatles and English artist Peter Blake, a friend, on the cover of the 1967 album, *Sgt. Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band*. He's also earned renown as a fashion dandy, partial to white doubled-breasted suits, bowler hats, and custom-made shoes. (A seven-tiered shoe rack is tucked in a hallway corner.)

Judging by the blue mechanic's jumpsuit he's wearing today, however, that distinction is getting as worn as the simple wooden bookcases that abound throughout his neat Upper West Side apartment. He lives there with his wife of 10 years, Heather, a former biochemist who now deals real estate.

“The fashion aspect of my life has really become less important to me,” says Merkin, 54, who paints daily. “I'm still a very good dresser, and I won't wear the wrong things, but there was a time when dressing up was an enormous part of my day. I'd paint in the afternoon and then I'd get dressed and do the boulevard.”

Back then, he'd meet friends for cocktails at the Yale Club or play squash at the New York Athletic Club, then head out for dinner. But today he's perfectly content to spend an afternoon in his dining room, sipping take-out coffee and munching hard pretzels while talking about the three Bs that infiltrate his art: Burroughs, Bacon, and baseball.

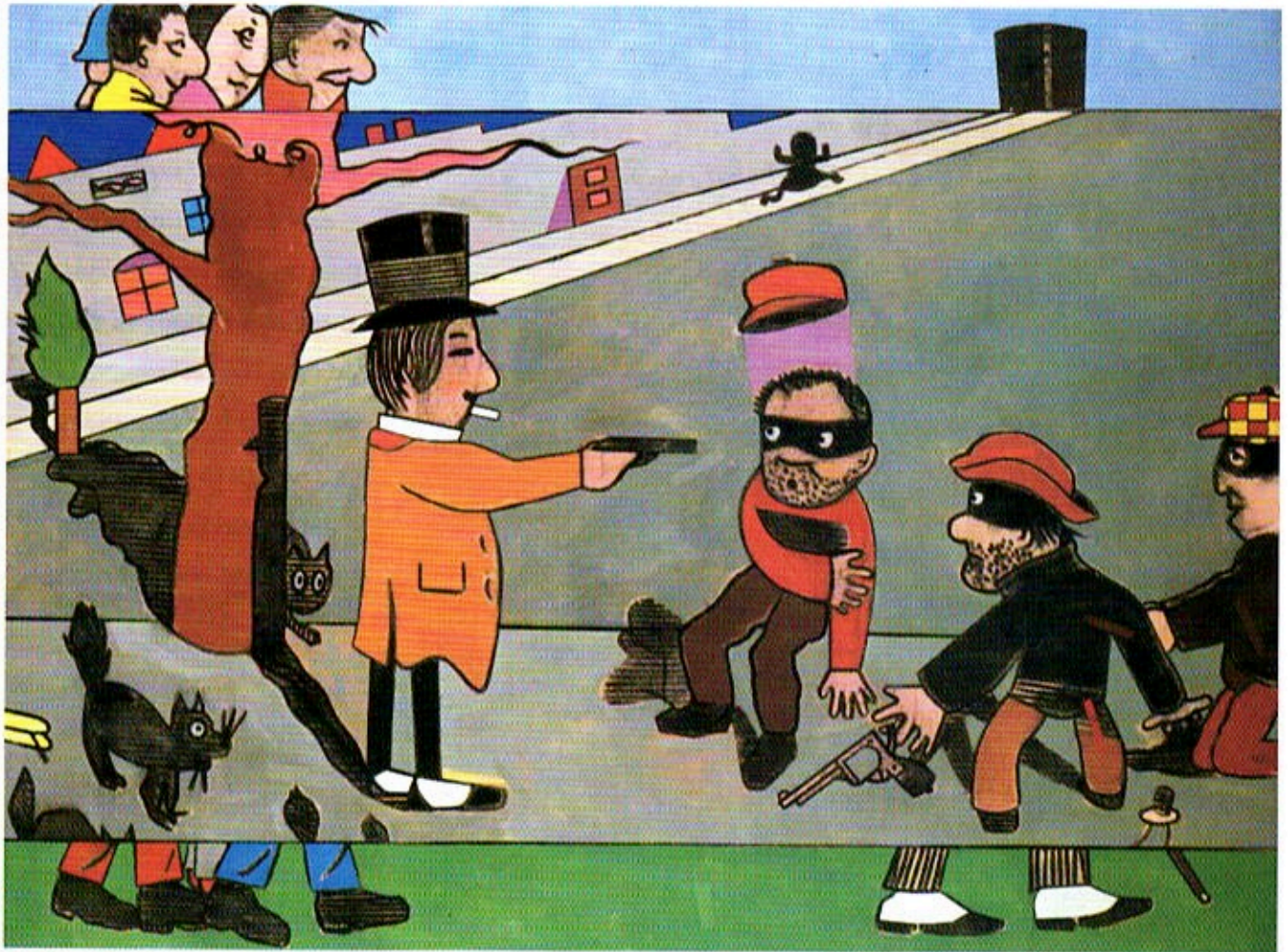
“And bosoms!” he adds. “The five Bs!”

Indeed, bosoms are a staple of Merkin's colorful paintings, which he always calls “pictures” and describes as “a kind of stream-of-consciousness visual poetry.” His work, which draws upon a compendium of 20th-century pop culture, is also rife with cigarettes, hats, and likenesses of his own white-mustached self.

“I am, by nature, a conserver, an archivist, a put-into-its-proper-placer, a completer of sets,” says Merkin. “My pictures are really about finding things. Cultural fragments. Garbage, perhaps. Innuendo. Rumor. All these things excite me. Rumor is to me what a great oak tree is to a landscape painter.”

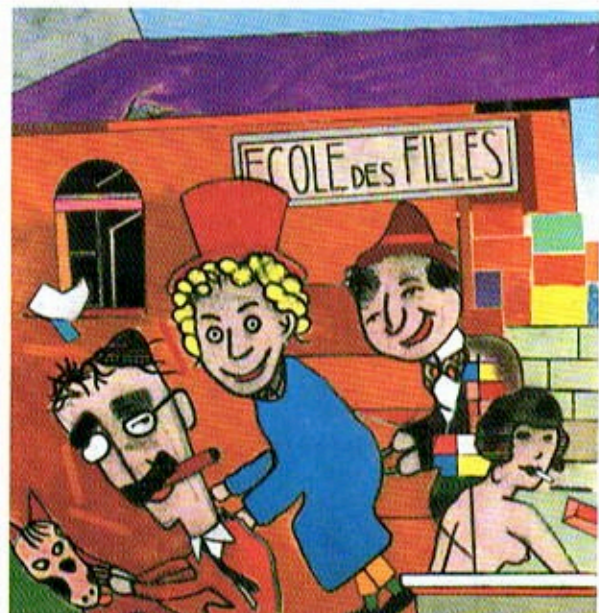
“So much of what my work is about has to do with celebration. With serendipity. It's about finding something. Recognizing something that only I can recognize and then celebrating it.” Based upon an obscure 1899 book of cartoons by obscure artist Ralph Bergengren, “this is a little gentle scene of what goes on in New York all the time. We live in the midst of all this horrendous business.”

The Sins of New York
(for Tom Wolfe) 1991,
oil on canvas, 54 x 72 inches



"My pictures are usually responses on my part to something I've learned or something I know or something that just spurs me to wish to make a picture. This was in response to a photograph of a 1920s French girls' school being painted by a friend who was sharing my studio."

Los Hermanos Marx at L'Ecole des Filles
 1991, oil on canvas, 43 1/2 x 45 inches



Merkin says his artistic influences range from Krazy Kat creator George Herriman to Dutch cubist Piet Mondrian and the abstract painter Willem de Kooning. But his friend and fashion crony, author Tom Wolfe, says Merkin's work reminds him to some extent of one of this century's great Modernists.

"In the past he has been as much a colorist and all-over designer as, say, Matisse," Wolfe writes in the catalog for Merkin's latest exhibition at the Helander Gallery in New York City and in Palm Beach, Florida.

"The typical Merkin picture takes legendary American images—from baseball, the movies, fashion, society, tabloid crime and scandal—and mixes them with his own autobiography, often with dream-style juxtapositions," Wolfe continues. "The truth may well be that Merkin is impossible to characterize."

Oh, let's try.

The Brooklyn-born Merkin came to Syracuse in 1956 "quite naive," hoping to major in art and zoology. "I didn't know what I wanted to be," he says. "I was not the kind of kid who was acclaimed as a great child artist. I never drew for my high school yearbook. I had lousy grades. But I did have some inclinations."

One was to join a fraternity, specifically Psi Upsilon, where Merkin first discovered what he calls "the world of WASP values." His heart raced when he saw the MGs parked out front and the frat boys wearing gabardine suits or their grandfathers' old sport jackets.

"I was in awe," Merkin recalls. "Well, of course, they wouldn't touch me with a barge pole. They were astounded that somebody like me would even come to rush. I was crestfallen."

He joined another frat—Pi Kappa Alpha—and became friends with a freshman named Ted Koppel. During their junior year, they shared an apartment and the old trick for alerting a roommate when a "visitor" was present. "The shade was always down," Merkin says, still impressed.

Merkin left SU with new resolve. He's never forgotten the frat snobs who snubbed him. "All my life I have wanted to outdo those bastards who wouldn't have me in their fraternity," he says. "I've wanted to tell them, 'I can dress rings around you!' And you know something else? I've had a 1946 MG for 30 years."

That's how long Merkin has been on the faculty at the prestigious Rhode Island School of Design, where he studied after graduating from SU in 1960. He teaches painting and drawing two days a week. Over the years his students have included musicians Chris Frantz and Tina Weymouth of the Talking Heads ("adequate but not distinguished" artists, says Merkin) and comedian Martin Mull ("a wonderful artist and one of the 10 most amusing men I've ever met—maybe five").

Merkin is also a contributing editor at *Vanity Fair* and an illustrator (not cartoonist) for *The New Yorker*. "I can think of nothing I like better than having *The New Yorker* as an arena," he says.

From 1988 to 1991, he enjoyed an entirely different forum, writing a fashion column for *Gentleman's Quarterly* dubbed "Merkin on Style," a monthly mix of fashion

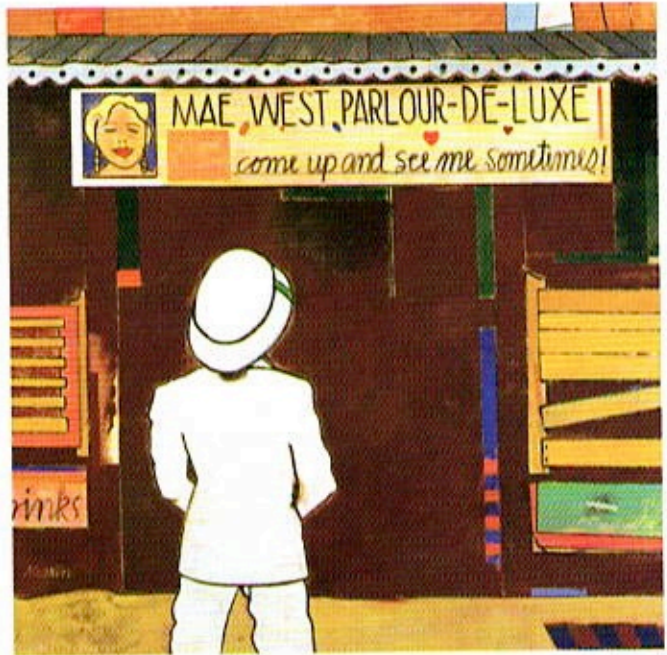
"Jefferson Burdick, who lived in Syracuse, is the man who began the whole idea of card collecting and cataloguing in the United States. He amassed this huge collection and willed it to the Metropolitan Museum of Art. Those cards are still there and are enormously valuable."

The Triumph of Jefferson Burdick
1990, oil on canvas, 36 x 70 inches



**"There's lots and lots of refer-
ence around my studio. This is
based on an old photograph I'd
had for years. The picture was
so perfect as a photograph that
I really couldn't touch it for a
long time. It suddenly dawned
on me that I could actually do
it. I didn't want it to slip by."**

**Our First Detective of the Broken Heart:
Arrangement In Chinese Green
and Caput Mortuum
1991, oil on canvas, 60 x 60 inches**



advice and social swagger, heavily influenced by S.J. Perelman and *Roget's Thesaurus*. It made Merkin an easy target for *Spy* magazine. "Merkin understands the value of the big word," chided *Spy*.

"Richard covered this interesting swath of culture and style," says Paul Scanlon, Merkin's editor at *GQ*. "He is a man of great flair and old-style class. I used to like walking down the street with Richard just to watch people watching him. I miss his company."

That's because *GQ* axed his column after a three-year run.

"I loved the column," says *GQ* editor Arthur Cooper. "It was a curmudgeonly take on style, very informed, very witty. I thought it was one of the best and most original things in the magazine. The problem is, like most columns, you sort of run out of things to say."

merkin rarely has that problem in conversation. He's quick to cite his "little pantheon of heroes," ranging from Wolfe and pianist Bobby Short to Clint Eastwood, Harvey Keitel, Tom Waits, and novelist Richard Price (*Clockers*).

But Merkin is at his best when he discusses his dislikes, especially classical music and fish. "I deplore classical music from start to finish," he says, getting animated. "I mean all classical music. And I don't eat fish. I don't eat any fish. Nothing from the sea. No lobsters, no crabs, no shrimp, no nothing."

Perhaps the only thing Merkin hates more than fish is Kevin Costner. "He is just awful," says Merkin. "He's pabulum. Aside from the fact that *Dances with Wolves* is just viciously politically correct, I can't stand him."

He also "deplores" Bruce Willis, wants to "throttle" Woody Allen, and believes there's something "very perverse" about Marky Mark, the rapper better known for modeling Calvin Klein underwear.

Then again, adds Merkin, "Anybody who is that smug and that arrogant and that self-confident can't be all bad."

Neither is Merkin, whose proudest moment has nothing to do with his art, his baseball artifacts, or his never-ending quest to illustrate a cover of *The New Yorker*. He likes being forever linked with the Beatles. He beams when a copy of *Sgt. Pepper* is pushed in front of him. There, top row center, right between Fred Astaire and the silent film star Binnie Barnes, is a very young Richard Merkin, wearing a smile and a hat.

"I've never met a Beatle," he says. "But I'll say this: more than anything else that's ever happened to me in my life, it's been a big help. I can't tell you it's actually sold a painting for me, but it's the most famous thing I've ever done."

There's something else Merkin likes about the album cover. He points a forefinger one row down, just to the left of his photo, to a man with a prominent forehead who is partially obscuring Marilyn Monroe.

"You know who that is?" Merkin asks, genuinely excited. He pauses before announcing the name with all the irony and dramatic impact he can muster. "William Burroughs."

Then Merkin laughs a long, satisfied laugh that fills the room. Hip. Definitely hip. ■

"I always think of myself as a collagist. It's helpful to think of my work as cerebral collage, as a kind of conceptual collage. Things are taken from various places and put in a new arena and function in a new kind of way. This was done with my friend, painter Duncan Hannah, in mind."

The Collagist: Exotic Landscapes with Duncan Hannah and (a billboard of) Louise Brooks
1992, oil and collage on canvas, 48 x 60 inches

"My pictures are very rarely literal interpretations. There is something very elitist about my work—perhaps even snobbish—in that it helps to understand the references. But then again, you can get into it on any number of different levels." A self-portrait.

A Middle-Aged Saint at Nicollet Park
1992, oil on canvas, 19 1/2 x 25 1/2 inches

