





# SEX, CRIME &

# VIDEOTAPE

**A filmmaker wins praise for a high-minded look at low-budget art** BY TAYLOR McNEIL



Filmmaker Jamie McDonald traveled across the country tracking down pulp art painters and collectors.

A redhead speeds by on a motorcycle, her .38 caliber pistol blazing, her square-jawed partner tumbled into the bike's sidecar, clutching wads of cash, gun at the ready. A film noir scene, if ever there was one, but hardly in shades of gray; bright reds and yellows scream for attention. It's the cover of *Private Detective* from January 1945, one of hundreds of pulp fiction magazines that crowded newsstands and provided cheap thrills to millions of readers in the 1930s and 1940s. ✦ Pulp art is easy to spot: the steely-eyed men, many in wide-brimmed hats, the voluptuous women in tight dresses, the implied violence, all in vivid, almost garish colors. In the pulps' heyday, many of the artists were embarrassed by their work, refusing even to sign their art, and publishers trashed most of the paintings. After World War II, the popularity of pulp fiction — cheap magazines with breathless adventure stories set in the inner city, the wild West, or the highly fictionalized future — declined. But the cover art is enjoying a resurgence, showing up in museum exhibitions, art galleries, and now a documentary. ✦ The award-winning 2007 film *Pulp Fiction Art: Cheap Thrills and Painted Nightmares* took Jamie McDonald across the country in search of painters, dealers, and collectors and their stories about the art and artists and the genre's history. "I knew pulp art when I started making the documentary," says McDonald (COM'92), "but I didn't really know what a pulp fiction magazine was. Most people my age don't. Then I started to dig into this, and I began to see it all over the place. Pulp art influenced so much of pop culture, and we don't even realize it."

COURTESY OF THE ROBERT LESSER COLLECTION



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Pulp fiction magazines were first published in the 1880s. Popularity peaked in the 1930s.

McDonald points to the in-your-face, shock-value, instant-message quality of today's movie posters and other advertising, whose roots are in pulp art. "You see it in so many things now," he says. "It's almost like we've got pulp fiction eyes."

As a producer for Fox News, McDonald filmed a three-minute human interest segment on Robert Lesser, probably the foremost collector of pulp art. But he knew there was a greater story to be told about the genre. Starting with Lesser, who happened to live in his Manhattan neighborhood, McDonald built a network of sources to interview all over the country. First, though, he needed to learn more.

The pulps — named after the cheap paper they were printed on — were first published in the early 1880s and peaked in popularity in the 1930s, as the Depression ravaged America. "You have to put yourself in that era," McDonald says. "We tend to forget how dreary people's lives were. The worst thing about poverty is not going without. It's the boredom, the monotone. Reading these pulps was the only adventure they had."

That's when the covers — the only parts of the magazines that weren't printed in black-and-white on cheap paper — became bold and audacious, shouting out their lurid tales to make quick sales. "The purpose of pulp art was to sell a magazine, to capture your eye," says

## IN 1961, A NEW TAKERS. FORTY MUSEUM OF ART

Lesser. "You look at the picture on the cover of a pulp magazine on the newsstand and you think, I have to buy that and find out what the heck is going on there."

Western pulps might feature two cowboys duking it out over a helpless blonde in a torn dress. Character pulps, like *The Shadow* or *Doc Savage*, featured heroes fighting crime in the streets as danger lurked just around the corner — and on the cover. Every type of adventure was for sale: crime, science fiction, war, aviation, and then the more far-out categories, like the "shudder" and "spicy" pulps with their risqué covers — "as far as you could go with sex in the 1930s," McDonald says.

"This is a time when you either played cards with the family at the kitchen table after dinner or you listened to the radio or you read a pulp magazine," Lesser says. "When my father would get *Argosy* magazine [one of the pulp adventure pioneers], my sister and I knew to leave the old man alone. He had just joined the French Foreign Legion."

The stories were done on the quick and on the cheap; writers were paid a quarter of a cent a word. "You could tell when the writer went to lunch," Lesser says. "The story changes, and he never had time to go back and revise." If you read them, adds McDonald, "you'll notice some are about third-grade level. I joke around with Bob that I've never been able to read a complete pulp story. Often they're just awful." W. Ryerson Johnson, a pulp writer who went on to write scores of paperback novels through the 1960s, summed it up in the title of his memoir: *Freelance Odyssey: We Don't Want It Good, We Want It Wednesday*.

Although the authors of the pulp stories may have been more typists than writers, as Truman Capote famously had it, the people who painted the covers often had real art training and were glad of the \$50 paycheck for a finished piece. But that didn't mean they were proud of their work. In McDonald's film, one of the best and most prolific pulp painters, Rafael DeSoto, talks about how he refused to sign most of his paintings. He wanted to be a fine artist, and fine artists didn't paint pulp covers.





# YORK AUCTION OF PULP ART DREW NO YEARS LATER, VENUES LIKE THE BROOKLYN ARE MOUNTING EXHIBITIONS.

Lesser tells of visiting a pulp artist in the 1970s whose work he wanted to get signed. The artist refused. "He said, 'I'll explain it to you once, and only once. If a pretty girl comes up to you and says, Robert, I want to go to bed with you because I like you, that's fine art. If a pretty girl comes up to you and says, I want to go to bed with you, but it will cost \$100, that's commercial art. Only whores paint for money,'" Lesser recalls. "That was the cultural prejudice in their minds."

That's one reason that of the 50,000 or so paintings made for the pulps, only about 900 remain, by Lesser's count. He says that when in 1961 Condé Nast bought Street & Smith, an old pulp publisher, it inherited hundreds of the paintings. "They had an auction and nobody came," he says. "They went to their employees and said, 'Why don't you take a painting home?' The workers said, 'Oh my God, I can't hang one of these at home; my mother would kill me.' So they took hundreds of paintings, some by N. C. Wyeth, who also worked as a pulp artist, and put them out on the sidewalk with the trash. It was a cultural holocaust."

At least one artist is proud of his work. In the film, the well-respected portrait painter Everett Raymond Kinstler tells how at a gallery opening in New York around 1960 he insisted that his early work for the pulps be listed in his biography. The gallery director told him, "We can't have that — that's merely commercial art," reports Kinstler, whose papers are collected at BU's Howard Gotlieb Archival Research Center. "But I must have had some balls, because I said, 'That's where I come from.'"

"You start to realize that illustration is true art," McDonald says. "It's the composition. They really knew how to make the compositions work. Go to the Metropolitan Museum of Art and look at the religious paintings — it's pulp fiction art; it's the same stuff." The two art forms have similar motives, he explains. "They are trying to get you to buy into a feeling by tugging at your emotions. And they both also have strong points of good and bad, with most of the time good winning and sin losing out. Church and pulp art and their stories give comfort that there is order in the world and in the end, goodness prevails."

The pulps began a precipitous decline in the aftermath of World War II. "It was a smarter United States," says McDonald, "and we had television and cheap paperback novels. Society got more sophisticated." By the early fifties, the pulps, home to budding artists and authors like Raymond Chandler, Isaac Asimov (HON.'80), and Ray Bradbury, had all but disappeared.

But pulp fiction art, dead some fifty years, is enjoying a rebirth. Lesser, who started collecting in the early 1970s, when originals "could be had for a song," almost single-handedly brought the art back to public consciousness. The Brooklyn Museum of Art exhibited his collection in 2003, earning a rave review from the *New York Times*. *Smithsonian* magazine did a cover story on Lesser's collection of pulp art, and Connecticut's New Britain Museum of American Art mounted a full-scale exhibition this past fall. Not to mention *Pulp Fiction Art*, which McDonald financed, produced, directed, wrote, and narrated. The film, which won best documentary at the Dragon•Con Film Festival

and best documentary at the International Sci-Fi Horror Film Festival, is available in the Guggenheim Museum gift shop — a recent exhibition there featured an artist inspired by none other than pulp art.

Those pulp artists would likely have been surprised to see their work displayed in fine art museums. Not Lesser: "I think it's one of the great unknown American art forms." **B**



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Spicy pulps were the object of scorn and desire; they cost a quarter. Tamer pulps cost only a dime.



## WEB EXTRA

A trailer for the documentary *Pulp Fiction Art: Cheap Thrills and Painted Nightmares* is at [www.bu.edu/bostonia](http://www.bu.edu/bostonia).

