In the first pages of Derf Backderf’s new graphic novel, *Trashed* (2015), J.B.—the 21 year-old protagonist based on Derf—has a memorable rookie experience as a garbage man. While gingerly attempting to dispatch a maggot-infested trashcan (a “cooker”), J.B. is sprayed by the back splash of rank garbage “soup” that he pours too quickly into the truck. Derf skillfully portrays J.B.’s classic reaction. Vibrating words like “SCHUP!,” “SLOSH!,” and “SPLAT!” evoke the thick, gelatinous muck that drips out of the can, hits the truck, and catapults back into J.B.’s face. Emphatic hash marks around J.B. tell us he is shivering in utter disgust as he sweats, rips off his shirt, and frantically wipes maggots off his body. Nearby stands Curt, a tenured garbage man whose solid, sturdy demeanor balances J.B.’s frenzy. The scene ends with a close-up image of the filthy steel garbage can lying on its side, flies buzzing above; in the upper right, the word “CHOKE!” notes that J.B.’s revulsion continues.

Weeks later, J.B. encounters another “cooker” and handles it with ease. It is simple but potent statement about time, perspective, and experience, but one that resonates with the themes of *How to Remain Human*. The book ends with J.B. introducing “Betty,” their truck, to two newbies who soon whimper at the site of maggot-covered garbage bags.

The life cycle continues. *Trashed* is a twentieth-century coming-of-age story that is, in many ways, ageless. The book is organized by seasons, tracking a year’s worth of J.B.’s experiences. Some, like harvesting “yellow torpedoes” (pee-filled water bottles that truckers throw out their windows) give unique flavor to the story. Many serve as subtle metaphors for broader sociopolitical and existential conditions: bar brawls (class); trash collecting blues (culture); government bureaucracy (democracy’s failings); foreclosed properties (capitalism’s failings), unsuccessful come-ons (sexual rejection), used condom hunts in a civic baseball field (sexual fulfillment), trips to the cemetery, lots of dead animals, and Marv’s (the curmudgeonly city dog catcher) passing (mortality).

The ultimate symbol is, of course, all the garbage. Page after page, Derf portrays the relentless gluttony of consumer culture. He even offers a CliffsNotes-esque brief history on garbage, tracking the human production and management of trash from Ancient Greece to current day. At the end, he cautions our disposable predilections, representing a world literally buried in trash.

Trying to dig one’s self out is a framing device in many of Derf’s graphic novels. His work examines
poverty, ignorance, bigotry, apathy, entitlement, psychosis, anger, disappointment, and other unsavory conditions. Derf’s characters tend to embody, in look and spirit, the core aspects or consequences of these ailments. He gives no leeway to his subjects, unapologetically depicting, even amplifying, their essence, even if repugnant. In True Stories, there is no shortage of crazy homeless guys speaking nonsense or nasty, tasteless women casting judgment without regard for their own flaws. Like the maggots, Derf portrays vile characters so vividly that your fingers feel dirty turning the pages.

Derf has a unique talent for translating personality through line and gesture. In Trashed, this technique is most palpable in the eccentric character, Magee, J.B.’s roommate and occasional co-worker. Magee is introduced early in the book as the crazy cemetery lawnmower, and is the only character that regularly gets full-spread portraits. The first of these gives life to Magee’s unconventional personality: seated on a thin pad in Sukhasana (a cross-legged yoga position), Magee wears sunglasses, pants, striped socks, and a CREEM t-shirt (a monthly rock magazine out of Detroit). Burning cigarette in hand, he is meditating in the dark by simultaneously watching Mister Rogers’ Neighborhood and listing to a Sun Ra 8-track tape. A plate of nearly finished Chinese food sits beside him. J.B. offers Magee a mid-century lamp that he found while trash collecting, to which Magee replies, “Bertrand Russell said ‘It is the preoccupation with possession that prevents men from living nobly and freely.’” Moments later, he recants this ideology when J.B. offers him free 8-track tapes.

Throughout the book, Magee provides flamboyant commentary that is at once forceful, educated, contradictory, and ruthless. His actions are as bizarre as his words: defecating behind a private bus shelter, getting in unwinnable bar fights, and leaving town suddenly with four months of J.B.’s rent money. Just before this final event, Derf includes a third portrait of Magee, this time after his clothes have been soaked by a drenching trash haul. He stands in the service lockers reading a porn magazine, still dripping wet, wearing only saggy men’s briefs, cowboy boots, striped athletic socks, and a bug-spraying hat. The mayor and other officials enter to get coffee, but stop short, aghast at Magee’s appearance. His indifferent expression is the cherry on his “screw the system” outlook.

The last time Derf portrays Magee, he is wearing a “Half-Cleveland” t-shirt. The shirt could be interpreted many ways: Magee’s partial association with the city, a nod to its strange East/West divide, a glass-half-full (or empty) metaphor. Yet, it also suggests how Magee plays yang to J.B.’s yin throughout the book. If J.B. is the down-to-earth, astute, industrious side of Cleveland, Magee is its cultured, crazy, crooked counterpoint. And both are garbage men. Like so many other special nuances in Trashed, this small detail grounds the story in our complex, strange city. The book offers innumerable allusions to Cleveland’s strengths, weaknesses, and enduring realities. At its core, though, is trash, which as J.B. notes in his final line, “never fucking stops coming.”
AIGHT! YOUR FIRST STOP, TIME TO
LOSE YOUR VIRGINITY.

SNIF! OH, MAN!
YOU GOT A
GOOD ONE, TOO!

PEW! MAN, THIS THING
REALLY REEKS!

GAG!!
FLIES!

BUZZZZZ

RAAAA

WH-WH-WHAT
ARE THOSE
THINGS?

MAGGOTS!!
WHEN IT GETS HOT
LIKE THIS THE
CANS FILL UP
WITH THEM.

THIS ONE IS A
BEAUT. LOOKS
LIKE IT'S BEEN
COOKIN' OUT
HERE FOR DAYS!

WHAT D-D-DO
WE DO? JUST
LEAVE IT?

WE DON'T
LEAVE ANYTHING!

TOSS IT
IN THE
HOPPER.

MAGGOTS
AND ALL?

YEP!

DERF BACKDERF
Excerpt from Trashed, 2015
Pen and ink, spot color
11 x 14 inches
Courtesy of the artist
Derf Backderf
Excerpt from *Trashed*, 2015 (detail)
Pen and ink, spot color
11 x 14 inches
Courtesy of the artist
Derf Backderf
Excerpt from Trashed, 2015
Pen and ink, spot color
11 x 14 inches
Courtesy of the artist
June 12, 2015

Museum of Contemporary Art Cleveland Management
11400 Euclid Avenue
Cleveland, OH
44106

Dear Misguided Ivory Tower Dwelling Dilettante:

I am shocked and dismayed that despite my previous eight letters of protest and petition with OVER a dozen signatures of concerned citizens that you are still intent on displaying work by "Derf." As if that’s a real name! I've heard that Facebook banned his account upon learning that this dubious individual was using an alias. I assume that the museum is publically funded; Don’t my taxes buy some due diligence? Do some research or at least background test!!!

Aside from his craven use of a bizarre and nonsensical pen name, I wonder if the curatorial team has even looked at this guy’s body of work, as it is offensive to the core.

For years, the liberal media foisted Derf’s hipster observational humor on us with his weekly cartoon strip “The City.” The strip was laden with supposedly true stories that are, in fact, just concocted potshots aimed at wounding the pride of white middle class America. If we are the 1%, as the media is so proud of pointing out, aren’t we worthy of protection from being brutalized as a minority!? I’m sure you could imagine the uproar if you featured artwork taking similar pokes at women or the African American community, and would take pause before offering it up for public consumption. Clearly this exhibition is a case of double-reverse discrimination and I hope you are prepared for the repercussions.

By the artist’s own admission, for a significant run of “The City,” he was in a “brutalist” phase wherein normal people were drawn with popping bloodshot eyes, bulging veins and splattering bodily fluids...like some damn Big Daddy Roth Rat Fink Monster. That brutalist phase prepared him well for what was to come...the tyranny of his career as a comic book creator. (Oh... excuse me, I forgot to translate that into your own high faluting jargon... Graphic Novelist)

While The City was the longest running of Derf’s offenses, I suspect that his graphic novels will make up the bulk of your exhibit.

When I was growing up, comics were a wholesome form of entertainment featuring morality plays that reinforced good old fashioned American values.

DERF BACKDERF

DEAR MISGUIDED IVORY TOWER DWELLING DILETTANTE
BY KEN EPPSTEIN
When Superman saw a wrong, he righted it. Superman had integrity and a strong moral core. Derf’s comic books are about trash, both literally and metaphorically. Is that what the kids are reading today? The integrity and morality of GARBAGE!?

Just look at his recurring “Otto Pizcock” character. For the sake of propriety, I’ll skip a discussion on the juvenile genitalia joke inherent to the character’s name in favor of a more adult conversation about what this character represents symbolically, namely Derf’s heroically trashy alter ego. Otto is a seven foot tall band geek who spouts Tolkien references, befriends sleazy punk rock icons, works in grungy bars and dirty bookstores, beats up “rednecks” (Read: young men with conventional and clean taste) and still somehow manages to have premarital sex with numerous women of questionable character. Otto refers to himself as the Baron, a royal designation flying in the face of our democratic values. The endless paganistic Tolkien quotes spewed by Otto represent his disdain for Christian values. Your fantasy life is showing Mr. Backderf, if that is indeed your real name.

It’s not even a particularly original idea. Derf’s hero, Jack Kirby, created test pilot and football star Ben Grimm as his own alter ego in the pages of the Fantastic Four. There are significant differences between the two alter egos. Kirby’s Grimm rises from his destitute beginnings in the squalor of Yancy Street in New York City like a true blue American hero, while Derf’s Pizcock remains mired in filth. Where the noble Ben Grimm pays karmically for trusting an eggheaded scientist by being transformed into the monstrous Thing, Otto Pizcock revels in his sinful lifestyle and monstrous form. Instead of being a proper handwringing and apoplectic hero, Otto swims in the pool of garbage in Derf’s Twilight Zone world of topsy turby amorality and dirt.

I suppose you think I’m exaggerating about the filth. The man’s first graphic novel was titled TRASHED and it was about GARBAGE MEN.

I remember when comic book characters were secretly military officers, lawyers, and corporate CEOs. You know...college boys. Who wants to read about characters who labor all day in garbage? Apparently the artsy-fartsies at Abrams Arts, who have ordered up a brand new edition of these sanitorial chronicles. Everyone has had embarrassing summer jobs. It teaches us the value of a dollar. But most of us have sufficient etiquette not to talk about our hard labor. One year father made me work at the country club, I had to wait tables because all of the caddy positions were filled. You don’t see me glorifying that miserable experience!

In summation, I have skimmed through Derf’s work and see nothing of value. I hope that your institution will reconsider inclusion of this controversial figure and perhaps add a more acceptable cartoonist to the exhibit. Is the guy who does Marmaduke from Ohio? I love those cartoons...That dog is SO DARN BIG!!!!

Sincerely,

Ken Eppstein
A “White Middle Class Suburban Man”
5783 Eagle Nest Dr.
Bentleyville, OH, 44022