***Self-Confessed!*** *The inappropriately intimate comics of Alison Bechdel*

The Fleming Museum, East Gallery, University of Vermont

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Before she was a renowned graphic memoirist and winner of a MacArthur Foundation “genius” grant Alison Bechdel was an archivist of the self. She plundered the flotsam and jetsam of her childhood to unearth the richly layered complexities of her adult life that became the subject matter of the work now featured in her first major exhibition at the University of Vermont’s Fleming Museum.

The core of the exhibit revolves around three major projects: *Dykes to Watch Out For,* the syndicated comic strip she wrote and drew for twenty-five years; her graphic memoirs, *Fun Home/A Family Tragicomic* (2006)chosen Best Book of the Year by the New York Times and also the basis of a Tony Award-winning musical of the same name; and the acclaimed, *Are You My Mother? A Comic Drama* (2012) a New York Times, USA Today, Time, Slate, and Barnes & Noble Best Book of the Year.

Bechdel’s consummate ability to tell her own story is reflected in every aspect of the exhibition. It was Bechdel who came up with *Self-Confessed,* the title for the show and designed the graphic iteration of it that sits above a near life-sized drawing of herself, in black ink, directly on the wall, scooping poop out of a cat-litter box. Spontaneous, self-deprecating, and humorous we immediately feel the artist’s presence, inviting us to enter her world. Moving into the exhibition we are confronted by another large scale wall drawing, *Plate # 27 From Dykes to Watch Out For “Marianne, dissatisfied with breakfast brew…”* 1983. This character was the first “dyke to watch out for” appearing in a letter Bechdel wrote to a friend. The artist is now playing with the power of scale in this age of social media. The elongated limbs, the full frontal, spread-legged female, her clearly defined pubic triangle traced in nervous, itchy-twitchy lines is reminiscent of the erotic, deeply psychological portraits by Egon Schiele. Viewers who are familiar with Bechdel’s work on the printed page will encounter an artist to be dealt with in a new arena. Just as she narrates her life in graphic novel form, Bechdel now becomes the arbiter of her work in the citadel of “fine art”, the museum.

While excited by the opportunity to organize her work for a museum show Bechdel, “struggled with the idea of the artist in our culture. Being a cartoonist was a way to rebel against the idea of high and low art.” Tackling her fraught relationship with her father in *Fun Home* felt “intimate and not quite so silly. I had to reconnect with the fact that I was engaged in making art.”

Thanks to an enthusiastic collaborative effort made possible by Fleming curator Andrea Rosen and collections manager Margaret Tamulonis, Bechdel has created a vehicle that opens the door to an audience unfamiliar with the artistry inherent in the medium of the graphic novel. Rosen recognized, “mapping, the graphic representation of place, played a significant role in Bechdel’s work.” A map on page 30 of *Fun Home* encapsulates Bechdel’s father’s life, “a circle a mile and a half in diameter circumscribes Dad’s grave, the spot on route 150 where he died near an old farmhouse he was restoring, the house where he and my mother raised our family, and the farm where he was born.”

Although it was a random act that drew Bechdel to Vermont 27 years ago, it is not accidental that she remained and established her studio here. “I so love Vermont! And this exhibition was a great statement of faith in my work.” On April 6th 2017 famed New Yorker cartoonist and fellow Vermonter Edward Koren passed the title of Vermont Cartoonist Laureate on to Bechdel. What other state so enshrines this graphic art? The honor was initiated by the academic Center for Cartoon Studies, a professional, MFA degree granting institution in White River Junction, Vermont. Gallerist Anni Mackay, owner of the well-established BigTown Gallery in Rochester, Vermont handles the work of Edward Koren. Mackay represents artists, “deeply dedicated to exploring what fine art means: both to create and experience.” She also acknowledges her role in “driving interest to her artists work”, but unlike many art dealers Mackay feels “reducing the value of art to a dollar sign is distorting the story. Art is about creating dialogue, selling to collectors is a side effect, not my goal.”

Chris Ware is another talented American cartoonist straddling the worlds of popular culture and fine art. In 2007 Ware curated an exhibition at the Phoenix Art Museum titled *Unlinked: Paintings, Sculpture and Graphic Works by Five Cartoonists*. Ware has indicated that he, “found inspiration in artists like Joseph Cornell.” Fleming director Janie Cohen programmed the exhibition *Honoré Daumier’s Les Bas Bleus* or *Bluestockings* (1844), a series of lithographs satirizing upper-class women who defied gender norms, “as a counterpoint to the work of Alison Bechdel, who sites Daumier as an early influence.”

Original sketches from Bechdel’s *Great Romances* series were on loan from the Sophia Smith Collection at Smith College, a repository for primary sources in women’s history. These enlightening examples revealed the artists process moving from rough pencil layouts through storyboarding, text placement, and use of color as accent and visual unifier.

For Bechdel, “the act of writing and drawing at the same time remains a mystery.” But she perseveres, “my next book, *The Secret of Superhuman Strength* is about fitness, aging and mortality.”