

BILL SIMON'S QUEER PROBLEM 13 NUDE THEATER 34 RABBIT KILLER 14
EXOTIC ELECTRONICA 30 THE BLUE CRUSH COMMERCIAL TSUNAMI 28

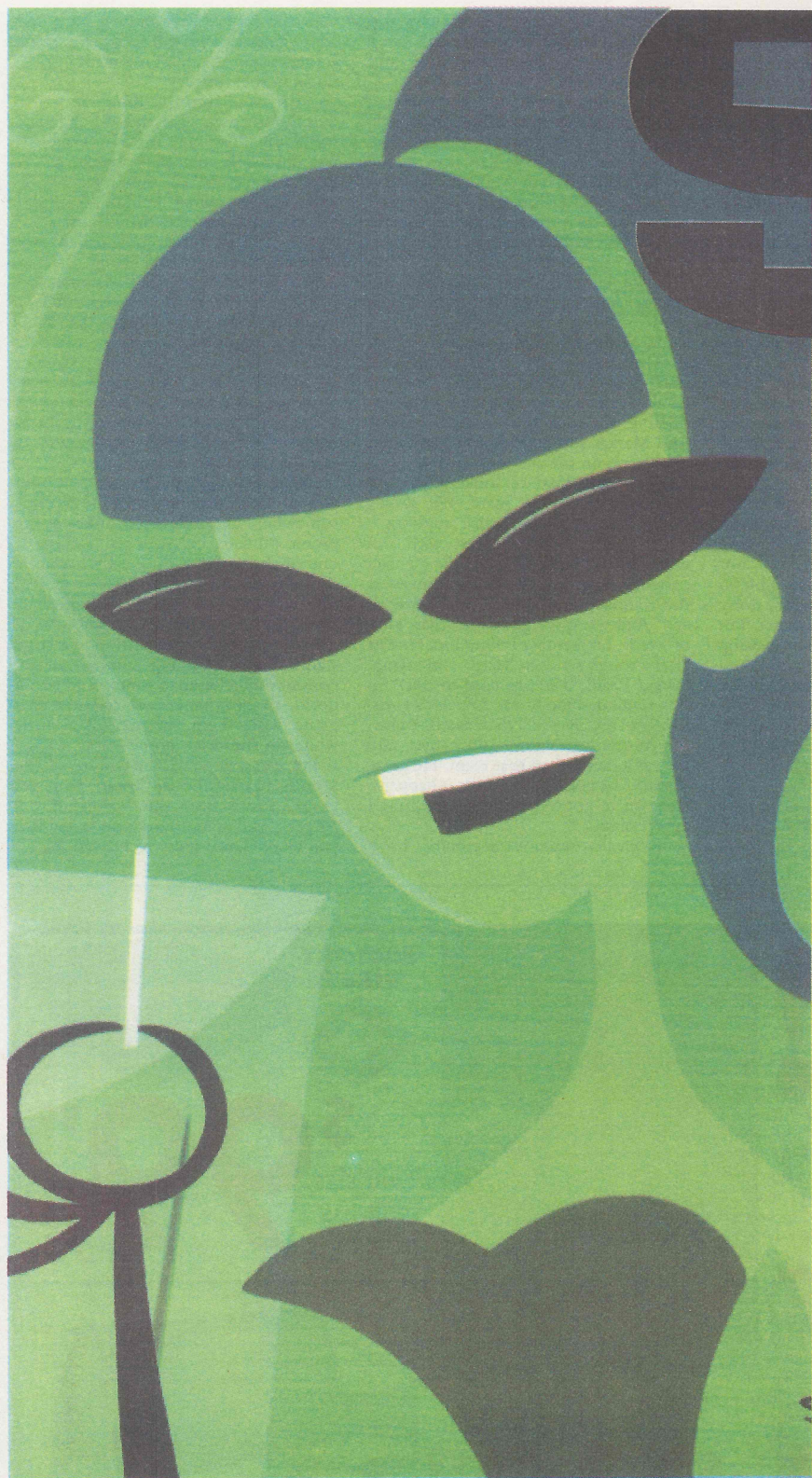
OC WEEKLY

FREE

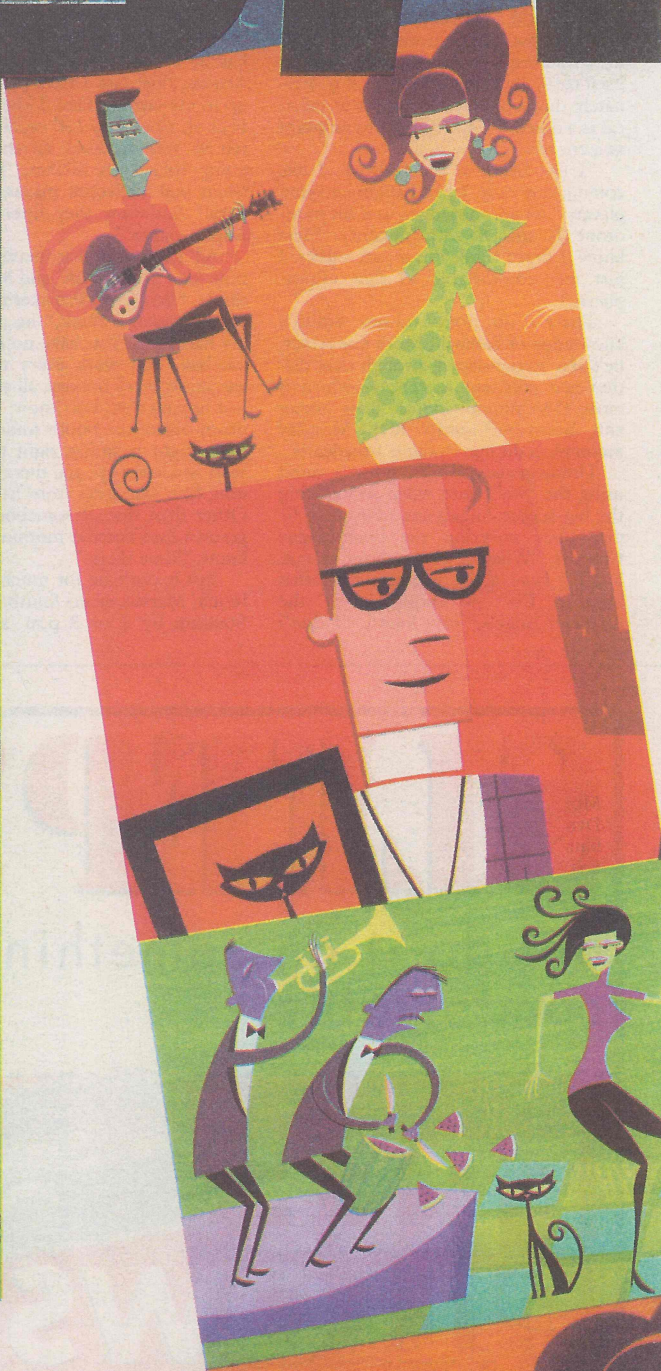
RAINING ON PARADES SINCE 1995



SHAG



SH



ADELIC!

AGAL

JOSH AGLE—A.K.A. SHAG—IS OC'S HIPPEST PAINTER, AND HE HAS THE CULT TO PROVE IT by rich kane

illustrations by shag

Giddy art freaks queue up on the sidewalk outside the Starlite Room, one of several retrofied shops lining a block of Fourth Street in Long Beach. More freaks are packed inside, waiting to ring up at the cash register or watching the surf band play on the back patio. All these people have stuff with them—books, magazines, lamps, mugs, posters, shirts, handbags—and everybody, especially the five Japanese kids who flew all night to be here, will hand this booty to the lanky, bookish guy standing behind a podium in the corner. He'll take a black Sharpie and scribble a four-letter word onto everything that's thrust before him: SHAG. Not Brit slang for "fuck," though; Shag is his name, the one with which he signs his pieces and paintings. Otherwise, he's Josh Agle, a 39-year-old recovering Mormon and onetime Swamp Zombies and Dynotones guitarist who created "Shag" by combining the last two letters of his first name with the first two letters of his last. It's a hip tag and easy for people to remember, which is the whole point.

Shag is not merely an artist; he's also an art-marketing monster. And if you don't know him already, you will. Very soon.

Agle/Shag is hot. Famous folks such as Ben Stiller and Whoopi Goldberg collect his work. He has slightly creepy, obsessed fans who ring the doorbell of his house in Orange and ask him to sign things—in one case, a guy wanted Agle to do a sketch for him on the spot. (He politely declined.)

"The people who come up to the door? I'm always nice to them," says Agle, who's reclining in his cramped home workspace, a converted bedroom. "If they want me to sign stuff, I'll sign. I'll usually let them into the living room, just because I feel bad. I feel that's my part of the bargain, that I have to sort of allow that to happen because of where I am in my career."

Japanese groupies? Celeb fans? Semistalkers? That's about as rock-star as a painter can get in America. Agle has had solo shows in Europe, Japan and Australia, but in OC, where he got his start doing graphics work and designing album covers for the old Doctor Dream indie label, he has been largely ignored by the galleries, exhibiting just two paintings. That will change Aug. 30, when the Brea Gallery opens *Sophisticated Misfits: 15 Years of Shag*, a retrospective that will include more than 100 paintings and assorted pieces of Shag-related merchandise.

Why Brea?

"They were the first to ask," says

Agle. "No Orange County gallery ever called me before asking if I wanted to do a show." LA galleries, meanwhile, phone him up two or three times a month inquiring about exhibitions.

THE 1950S-ERA TRACT HOUSE IN ORANGE, WITH ITS Agle-sculpted tiki on the front chimney, won't be his much longer. Agle, his wife and young daughter are moving to more spacious digs in Cowan Heights, and things are strewn everywhere. His 300-strong tiki mug collection has been boxed up, and several recently finished paintings lean against a wall, one of which is a typical, cartoon-like, Shagian take on Edouard Manet's *Luncheon on the Grass*.

"If I start counting up the value of all the paintings sitting here, it'll start to scare me," he says. He picks one at random and pulls it out. "You've got maybe \$10 worth of materials there, with the paint and the board. And yet, for some reason, people pay \$7,000 for this."

People do. Partly, perhaps, for nostalgia. Shag paintings look like stills from old cartoons that were never made: bright, color-drenched scenes populated by strange, funny-looking characters: women with exaggerated eyelids, men with twig-like fingers and feet, anorexic-thin cats. They're often gathered at some sort of lounge or party—circa, say, 1962—where at least one wooden tiki is part of the décor, and drinking, smoking and having a fabulous time is a requirement. Print and TV advertising from the 1950s and '60s, of-the-era furniture designs, tiki, lounge culture and Googie architecture are his major reference points.

"It's definitely a look of that time," Agle says, and then launches smoothly into a contemporary graphics history lesson. "Up until the late '40s, magazine illustrations were like Norman Rockwell or something, very realism-based. Then suddenly these art directors got into more abstract figures. Instead of rendering a nice pair of legs on a figure, it'd be a straight line with a little foot coming out. That's the thing that really appeals to me."

"You see his paintings, and you want to be there—you want to be one of those sleek-looking, accepted, A-list people," says Brea Gallery director Dianna Miller, who's responsible for organizing the Shag show. "His work is like a Rothko—you just look at it, and you like it."

The fun of Agle's work can sometimes mask a tinge of Fellini-esque mystery. A skeleton serenades a grinning, cocktail-swiggling female. Satan and his gal pal picnic on the beach while watching TV police chases. Wolves, bulls and monkeys sit at tables and

converse with nonchalant humans.

The paintings are also highly musical works. In a lot of his work, either dancing, guitar playing, record spinning or bongo banging is going on, so vibrant you can almost hear the tunes. If Juan Garcia Esquivel or Martin Denny had been painters, they probably would have come up with work close to Agle's. "I assume there's music playing in almost every piece," Agle says.

Anaheim composer Hans Karl has picked up on that, going so far as to put out his own instrumental CD, *Shagxotica! New Music Inspired by the Paintings of Shag*. Karl's parents were into Polynesian culture when he was growing up in the '60s—tropical trees in the back yard, torches around the swimming pool, stacks of Martin Denny vinyl everywhere—so coming across Shag's work last year took him back.

The idea for the album, Karl says, was to create a soundtrack for 15 different Shag paintings, capturing what he thinks would be the music playing if the paintings had speakers attached to their frames—like Mussorgsky's *Pictures at an Exhibition* in Orange County. Each track is named after the Shag work that inspired it: *The Ghost of Augie Colon*, *The Three Enablers*, *The Torrid Holiday*, *The Uninvited Guests* and so on. (The paintings are reproduced in the CD booklet.)

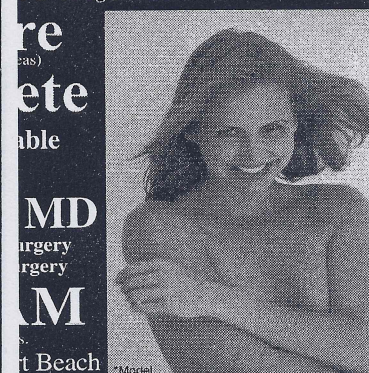
"There's this notion of 'ancient-future' or even 'retro-future' in his paintings," Karl says. "So I tried to infuse the music that way, like it could play in a cool lounge bar circa 1963 or 2063."

THE MAN WHO WOULD Become Shag almost became an accountant.

That was Agle's major at Cal State Long Beach for a couple of years, until he realized he hated >



Surgery
le Prices
have both!
on Board Certified?
use many aren't!
nesia and operating room?
use many don't!
mentation
omplete
 st 100 patients to respond to this ad.
 Financing available.



G SAD
OWN?

Nothing seems to brighten
 your day. You or someone
 you know could be suffering
 from severe depression.
 nical Innovations is currently
 conducting a research study
 using an investigational
 cation for severe depression.
 All study related visits
 and medications are free!

TO FEELING BETTER.
14-547-4100

SHAGADELIC!

it. "It was easy, and I got good grades, but if I had stuck with it, I knew my life would be miserable," he says. "The thing that actually made me change was this flier I saw for the accounting students softball league. I thought, 'God, who would want to play softball with an accountant?' I switched my major to art on the spot. Even if I was completely poor my whole life, at least I'd be doing something I liked."

Agle sold art on the side to help pay for school, and he eventually got the Doctor Dream gig (it helped that the Swamp Zombies were on the label). "Doctor Dream would call me up when other bands came in with crappy ideas for art work, so I'd redo it for them." There, he designed album covers for such bands as the Cadillac Tramps. When people started pestering him for originals, he complied.

What Agle painted first were pictures with tikis—forests of them, just when exotica/lounge/surf culture was coming back in vogue. "Most people paint what appeals to them," he says. "Picasso always painted bullfights, things that were directly related to his life. And me? I was really into tikis. I hate the word 'retro,' but the whole look of the '50s and '60s appealed to me. I collected a lot of the furniture, books and magazines of that time, so it just informed what I was doing."

Agle says his tiki fetish flourished during 1980s excursions with friends to old LA bars. "We'd go to these Polynesian places, and if you ordered a drink, they'd serve it in a tiki mug, and you could either buy the mug or it'd be included in the price—or you could just stick it someplace and walk out with it. So we started collecting these as little souvenirs of our fun evenings out. Then I noticed you could get them in thrift stores and flea markets."

Tikis became something of a Shag trademark, so much so that he still often gets branded as "the tiki artist." "There was a time when I did a lot of tiki stuff, and I still occasionally do," he admits, "but the majority of my work doesn't have tikis in it."

But the tikis got the attention of the Venetian Hotel in Las Vegas, which was opening a tiki/Rat Pack-styled bar there called the Venus Lounge. "How could I turn down the Las Vegas Strip?" Agle asks. "The way they described it was right up my alley."

Agle got to design the bar's cocktail napkins, wall murals, menus, ashtrays, signage, swizzle sticks, matchbooks and logo. He was too successful. Soon, Shag-signed barware began vanishing from the lounge—and reappearing on eBay. "I had some friends who went a few months ago, and they told me they were down to only three menus, and that the waitresses have to stand there while you look at them!"

A few weeks ago, the lounge told Agle that they'll have to redecorate the room, using a less-appealing motif. You know you've arrived when people start stealing your stuff.

"It's weird because it puts this pressure on me, like I'd better keep doing good art people like, so that somebody who spent \$16 on a Shag napkin off

eBay will feel they got their money's worth. It's a strange fate."

WHAT ALL THOSE THIEVES—TOURISTS, we'd guess—probably don't know is that there's tons of Shag stuff they could buy in boutiques around town and on his website (www.shag-art.com). Agle has merchandised Shag to a degree that would do Keith Haring proud—Shag mouse pads, Shag blank checks, Shag books, Shag clothes, Shag soap.

"The very first thing was the Zippo lighters," he says, running through the mental catalog. "The guy there loved the work, and at the time, I wasn't sure anybody would ever want to buy a Shag lighter. But he didn't care; he said he just liked the stuff. And when I got my first \$3,000 royalty check from lighters, I was like, '\$3,000?! And I didn't even have to work!' So the idea of royalty payments became really attractive."

He collaborated with Paul Frank to produce purses, handbags, wallets, barstools and CD cases, which are still among Agle's most sought-after items. He admits to have gone a little crazy with the licensing binge, though, and these days is more into the idea of limited-edition Shag shwag.

There's no hint that he's concerned about the purity of his craft or the holiness of his inspiration. "I always thought I would merchandise," he says frankly. "I wouldn't draw the line and say I'm a fine artist, that it would cheapen my work if I were to put it on a T-shirt or something. So if it's appropriate, I don't see why not."

Agle drew the line at just one thing: the bobblehead dolls. "The company that makes them wanted to do a doll, but not a tiki or anything based on my art—one of *me*. And I couldn't; I just said no. A Josh Agle bobblehead doll would be too far into the realm of novelty. The fact that they even wanted to do it was unsettling."

AGLE INSISTS HE'S NOT BECOMING A celebrity, but just now his work is making that unavoidable. This past spring, Agle reached his widest audience yet when the Showtime cable network animated his work to plug *Night Out*, the Wednesday lineup of gay and lesbian programming airing on their affiliate, Sho Too. It was great—except Agle says Showtime didn't actually have his permission. Still, exposure is exposure, and there are bound to be more people who find out about Shag from the Showtime spots. People who'll wait in lines a lot deeper than 50 bodies to have Josh Agle graffiti his alter-art-ego on something.

"People seem to like my work, which I'm very happy about," he says. "When I first started painting, I thought, well, there *might* be 10 people out there who'd like these. And it seems like there's a lot more." ☐

"SOPHISTICATED MISFITS: 15 YEARS OF SHAG" AT THE BREA GALLERY, 1 CIVIC CENTER CIRCLE, BREA, (714) 990-7730. OPENS AUG. 30 WITH A RECEPTION, BOOK SIGNING AND MUSIC FROM THE DYNOTONES, 7-9 P.M. EXHIBIT RUNS THROUGH OCT. 4.