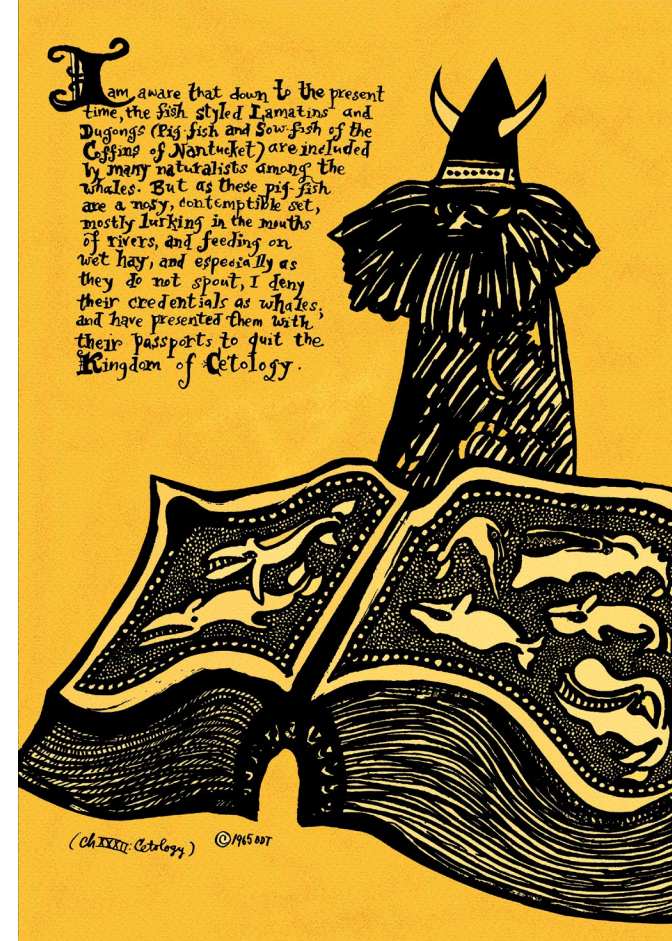
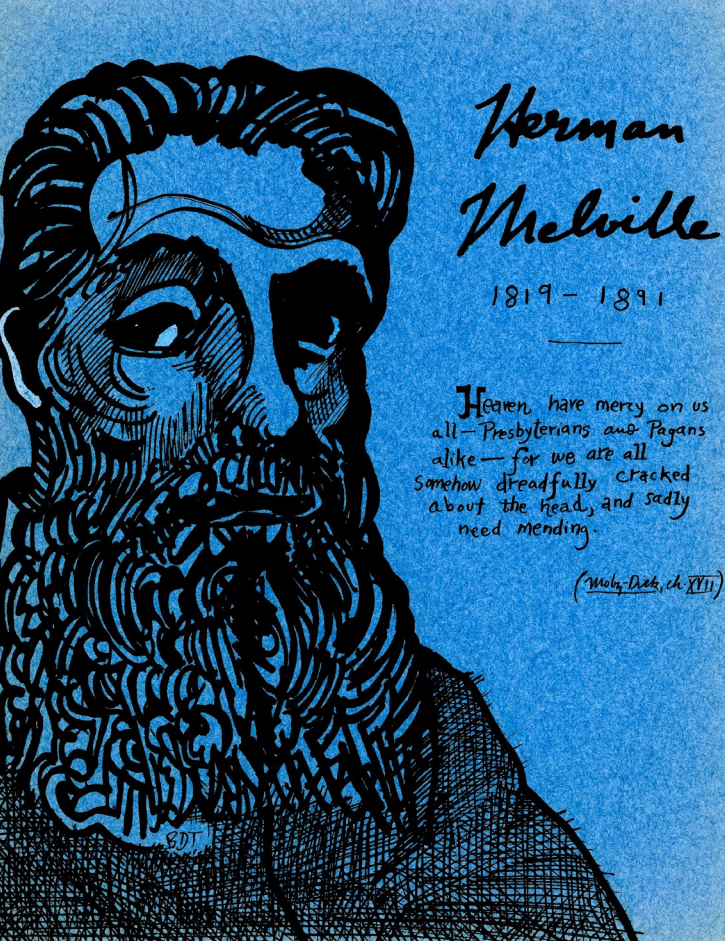




Contemporary
Arts Center

CHASING THE WHALE AND OTHER ENDLESS PURSUITS



SHAPE-MAKERS CHASE THE WHALE

Chasing the Whale, and Other Endless Pursuits presents the work of Matt Kish and Robert Del Tredici – two of the most gifted, persistent, and prolific visual interpreters of *Moby-Dick* this generation has seen. Since Rockwell Kent's first illustrated version in 1930, Melville's novel has become one of the most visualized books in the world. Kish and Del Tredici follow in this tradition while adding significantly to its richness and variety. This exhibition brings the work of these two protean artists together for the first time, celebrating highlights from the 200 works that Del Tredici has created since 1965, and the 700 drawings that Kish has created since 2009.

Del Tredici was "saved" by *Moby-Dick* in the mid-1960s after losing his faith as a seminary student. The 70+ prints he made from pen-and-ink drawings got little attention at the time, but they gave Del Tredici a baseline buoyancy that carried him through two decades of pioneering anti-nuclear photography until his *Moby-Dick* images were resurrected by Elizabeth Schultz in her 1995 volume *Unpainted to the Last*. Del Tredici returned to *Moby-Dick* in 1999

with a series of large, gestural silkscreen prints that he reproduced (along with many of the prints from the 1960s) in the 2001 artist book *Floodgates of the Wonderworld*. This seemed like the culmination of his pursuit of Melville's whale, but an invitation to speak at Northern Kentucky University in November 2013 launched a third voyage in his pursuit of *Moby-Dick* – resulting in more than 70 new prints on metallic paper that intensifies the theatricality of his lifelong engagement with Melville. This exhibition features a rich selection of the earliest prints and the subsequent silkscreens as a prelude to an expansive survey of the recent metallic prints, most of which were created specifically for this show.

Kish began chasing the whale on August 5, 2009, when he made the first of 552 drawings that he reproduced in the 2011 book *Moby-Dick in Pictures: One Drawing for Every Page*. Kish also came to *Moby-Dick* in a crisis. As a full-time librarian, he had created drawings for more than a decade that interested no one but himself and a few friends. So he set himself the challenge of creating one drawing for every page of *Moby-Dick*, every day. A small internet following expanded quickly, an agent approached him, the book was published, and suddenly he had sold all of his original drawings to people around the

world. As with Del Tredici and his *Floodgates* book, one might have expected this to be the culmination of his work on *Moby-Dick*. His re-entry instead came in 2014 when the Melville Society Archive in New Bedford commissioned 12 drawings of *The Crew of the Pequod*. For this exhibition, Kish has created three new groups of *Moby-Dick* related art: 14 *Cetology Whales* (cetology is the branch of zoology that deals with whales, dolphins, and porpoises); 81 *Extracts* from early in the original novel; and 10 *Broadsides* in which Kish tries to imagine why healthy young men in Melville's day would have signed up for three-year whaling voyages.

These two artists have taken dramatically different voyages through Melville's book. Del Tredici's 50-year pursuit of the whale is an open-ended exploration of those passages that have best expressed his sense of existential doubt, cosmic joy, and human duality. Kish in the last 7 years has more methodically addressed himself to every page of Melville's novel, to each of its major characters, to each of its Cetology whales, and to each of its introductory *Extracts*. Yet these artists have much in common beyond their separate compulsions to visualize Melville's book. Each responds intensely to Melville's actual text. Each has a joyous creative hand and a quicksilver imagination. Each addresses existential realities as well as mundane

ones. And each is finding the compulsion to explore the novel as inexhaustible as the novel itself.

These two artists met for the first time in November 2013. Their exhibition fills a gallery of the CAC that is approximately the size of the hull of a 19th century whale ship. They fill this space not with blubber and oil but with drawings and prints that give graphic expression to the way our view of the whale and the world in which we live has changed since Herman Melville wrote the 1851 novel. A novel that itself greatly enriched and informed the way we see the world.

– Robert K. Wallace 2016

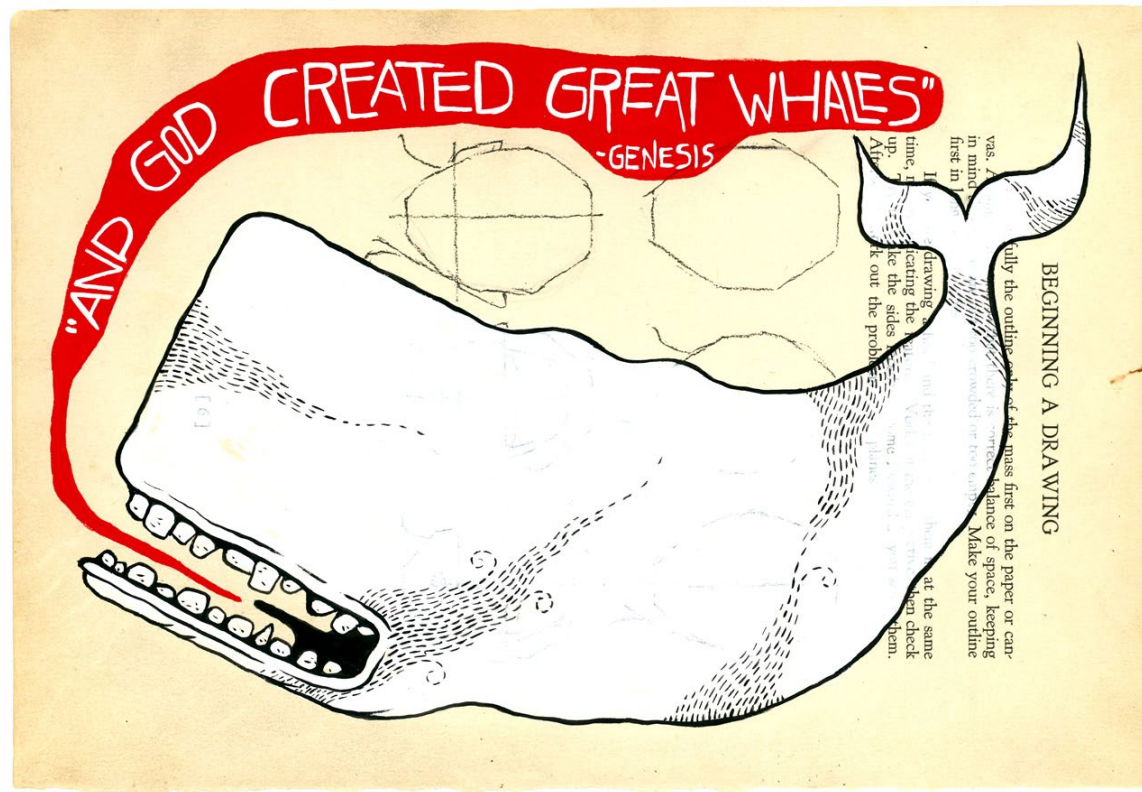
From left to right:

Robert Del Tredici, *Cracked about the Head*, 1964

Matt Kish, *Extracts 75: Suddenly a mighty mass emerged from the water...*, 2016

Matt Kish, *Extracts 76: The Whale is harpooned to be sure...*, 2016

Robert Del Tredici, *Kingdom of Cetology*, 2011 [detail]



Matt Kish, *Extracts01: And God created whales*, 2015

COMIX & CALLINGS

The comic strip may arguably be the most popular modern form of illustrated narrative, even if its historical trajectory is anything but a left-to-right progression. The development was slow and the legends littered with many contested claims to be the first strip, book or style of its kind. Some say the original newspaper comic strip appeared in 1895 with Richard Felton Outcault's (1868-1923) *Yellow Kid* in *The New York World*, followed over 30 years later with the first true comic book – *Funnies on Parade* – in 1933. Yet once they were established, the production and readership of comic books quickly proliferated across tales of monsters, mystery, adventure, and even religion as the pioneering M.C. Gaines (1894-1947) founded a successful line of "Picture Stories from the Bible." The collegial relationship between comics and the church would, however, be short-lived as the Catholic establishment carried out an oppositional campaign in the 1940s that involved public burnings of books said to be "corrupting kids". Escalating charges of promulgating lewd and violent behavior amongst youth put increasing pres-

sure on industry leaders to self-regulate – leading to the institution of the Comics Code Authority in 1954. The ensuing censorship and mounting social unrest around the Vietnam War produced a counter movement in the 1960s of "underground comix" ("x" for x-rated) that reveled in taboo subjects of sex, drugs, fantasy and crime. Moreover, many of the most popular comix treated religion with willful irreverence, led by *The New Adventures of Jesus* by Frank Stack and purportedly the first underground comic book – *God Nose* – by Jack "Jaxon" Jackson in 1964. But it is here, at the intersection of two arenas that lend themselves to, and perhaps even cultivate an obsessive, vocational following, that we find the foundations of a shared tradition in which Matt Kish and Robert Del Tredici operate.

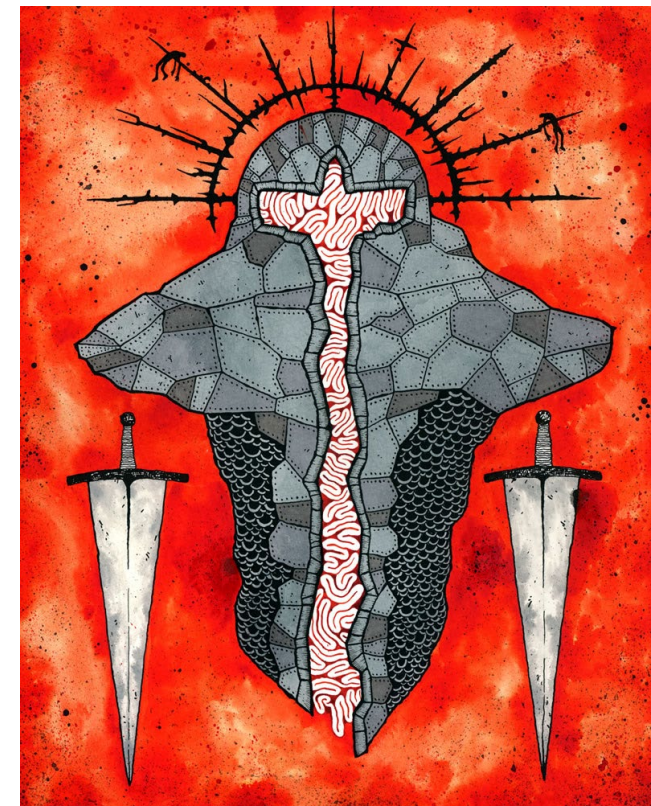
Whether we are discussing the King James Bible or Herman Melville's now storied 1851 novel *Moby-Dick*, the translation of epochal tomes into the serial "low brow" language of comix speaks to a missionary-like process of finding personal visions within enshrined parables. Where the rabid fandom, colorful cadence and graphic lexicon of comic books meet the devotional allegiance, abiding faith, and epic narratives of religion we find a place where there is always more story to tell – swelling the con-

tours of singular texts with a constellation of subjective renditions. There is no end to a calling, wherever the voice may come from or the oath may lead. And there are artists at various points of history – often working prolifically on the margins – that have married verse and visualization to animate words with the flight of illustration. For British artist and poet William Blake (1757-1827) the Bible was the greatest work of poetry ever written, and he sought to emulate the High Renaissance in producing art that celebrated both its spirit and letter. Starting his career as an engraver and the sole proprietor of a short-lived print shop, Blake's subsequent invention of a "relief etching" process allowed him to produce illuminated books entwining verses of scripture, Shakespeare, Milton and others with visuals. With no recorded exhibitions or commissions he toiled in obscurity much of his life, unlike the resplendent Georgia-born artist and minister Reverend Howard Finster (1916-2001) who, centuries later, translated a directive from God to "paint sacred art" into thousands of works and a paradise garden to display them. Many so-called "outsider" artists have been compelled to do much the same, but far fewer have found such prominent symbiosis with pop culture as Finster did in painting portraits of Elvis Presley and illustrating album covers for groups like REM and *The Talking Heads*.

There have been many others in this kaleidoscopic trajectory of serial, self-taught artists marrying text, vocation and image, but few as influential as R. Crumb. As the founder of numerous underground comix and characters, Crumb's importance is, in the words of author David Hajdu, "rooted in his ability to give vivid form to taboos of the imagination with unapologetic bluntness and extravagant explicitness." In this light of unabashed lewdness, Crumb was arguably the most unlikely candidate to turn to a sacred text for subject matter, and certainly not one of the most famous of all time. He had long shed his Catholic upbringing but from 2005-2009 Crumb illustrated all 50 chapters of the Book of Genesis – meticulously crafting 207 drawings that spanned the beginning of light to the end of Joseph. Speaking of a "spiritual quest" outside the typical parameters of Western religion, Crumb luxuriates in the inherent carnality of the text without being graphic or gratuitous. Resisting the temptation to mock, ridicule, or go "all-out Crumb on us", the artist explains, "The stories are so strange that it doesn't need satirizing." He sought instead to "expose the text with illustrations," adamantly espousing that, "comic books can illuminate a text... [they] bring to light things that people might pass over in a written text...adding pictures is a whole other dimension." Seeking to peel away the theological and academic treatments obscuring what he saw as the tantalizing eccentricity of the book, Crumb did not "want to edit it at all. I wanted every word in there." To do so in-

"I find my way into it, and out of it, through images."

- Matt Kish



Top: Matt Kish, *Extracts45: Soon to the sport of death...*, 2015
Bottom: Matt Kish, *A Beastiary: Golem*, 2014

volved an intense process of reading and self-reflection – forging an elaborate mirror that lives somewhere between a parallel narrative and self-portrait.

Such an acute, incisive, all-consuming reading parallels that of Matt Kish, who explains that working on his illustrations is “like being a reader...and sometimes, as a reader, you feel lucky to be alive at the end.” When he reads what he respects, Kish reveals that he consumes “very jealously and selfishly” – absorbing and processing every sentence, word and punctuation as if pieces of himself. He has long been a voracious bookworm and his household growing up was full of comic books, fantasy rags, sci-fi novels and MAD Magazine (his dad’s favorite) – fueling an abiding taste for, according to him, “the strangest thing I could get my hands on.” Placing his work on the outer margins of the mainstream, in the niche camp of comic book artists, Kish elaborates, “A big part of what has influenced me all my life is what would probably be termed low brow art, very pop cultural art.” He has no formal training in art or aesthetics but writer RJ Smith suspects that, despite his current job at a library, “a whole lot of un-civil, haunting, and adolescent ideas have dug their fingers deep into his cortex.” All of these variegated influences come together in *Moby-Dick*: a touchstone Kish describes as a “massive, sprawling, mosaic of a book” that feels as if Melville smashed 10 different novels together. Alternating between “hugely amusing” and “incredibly bleak” moments, Kish reveres the story as “an education on what it means to be alive,” adding, “*Moby-Dick* seems to show me something new and something familiar on every reading. There is an almost-impossible-to-believe richness and complexity of the book, and our own slightly dif-

fering takes on it are a good indicator of that.”

This lasting influence made the task of picturing *Moby-Dick* what he calls “a terrifying endeavor” as Kish agonized over what “rights” an illustrator assumes when choosing what to include and/or exclude. Declaring “I find my way into it, and out of it, through images,” he ultimately crafts a parallel visual narrative “that shows the writing...in ways that make the ideas real.” The results entwine muse, material and maker as Kish admits, “In a strange way, my Melville is probably a synthesis of him and me.” Much like Blake, Finster and Crumb (re)made the Bible in the likeness of themselves, Kish’s *Moby-Dick in Pictures* is one of personal obsession – translating Melville’s literary eclecticism into the “freedom to do whatever I wanted” with materials, structure and style. Described by Editor Lee Montgomery as a “madman in his details,” Kish parlays his obsessive drive to make and map into what *The Atlantic Monthly* deemed, “a modern day epic voyage of creative restlessness.” Beyond homage, he transcends denotation to revel in visionary renditions of the spirit of his subject matter – both heavenly and hellacious. Smith affirms that Kish’s “graphic art is unsettling in ways that aren’t immediately understandable” – inundating us with hybrid creatures, fantastical lands, vivid colors and decadent details too voluminous to ever fully consume. What is more, Kish still believes he could draw another 600 illustrations from *Moby-Dick* – making abundantly clear that his work and vocation is much like he describes Melville’s masterpiece: “almost bottomless.”

Del Tredici is an implacable artist, writer, teacher and activist who has translated his studies in theology, philosophy, literature and film into an equally

unrelenting practice that provides us with a compelling self-portrait. In his section text for this exhibition professor Bob Wallace recounts how Del Tredici found *Moby-Dick* in a state of personal crisis, and how, in the artist’s words, the novel came to “save my life.” After 8 years studying to be a Catholic priest in Mountain View and Palo Alto (he was born in California), Del Tredici lost his faith and bid a contentious farewell to the Roman Catholic Church. In its wake, he took up comparative literature at Cal Berkeley, and as a teaching assistant, began illustrating novels like *Don Quixote* and *Crime and Punishment* in mimeographed sheets highlighting key texts for students. When he got to *Moby-Dick* this practice ascended to a new height as Melville’s words, characters and conflicted world amplified, in Wallace’s observation, “the perils and promise of the world [Del Tredici] saw and felt.” In the early 1970s and 80s he also began studying under (and photographing) the renowned Tibetan Buddhist guru Chogyam Trungpa who bestowed on Del Tredici the name, “Good Eye of Enlightenment.”

His penetrating black-and-white portraits of Trungpa anticipate his nuclear-related portraits while also recalling his brooding pen-and-ink drawings from the 1960s that render passages of *Moby-Dick* in deep pools of shadow and blistering planes of white. The stark tonal contrasts of this work convey Del Tredici’s ambivalent appraisal of the world around him and would influence his penetrating documentation of the nuclear age across the globe. After learning of the 1979 nuclear reactor meltdown at Three Mile Island and hearing accounts of a hundred thousand people fleeing overnight for their lives, he began a project that would last for decades to document in words and pictures those affected by the nuclear industry. And much the way Ahab pursued the great Whale across

waters far and wide, Del Tredici chases the unfathomable impact (and evolving legacy) of “the Bomb” in factories and laboratories here and abroad, as well as in homes and hospitals. Grappling with impossible questions, he returned to Melville in the late 90s at another crossroads – transforming early pen-and-ink drawings into shimmering poster-sized silkscreen prints. Since 9/11 his prints, photographs and collages have come to inform one another as he confronts the leviathans of terror and fear as they manifest across art and life, ocean and earth, people and politics. Whispers of Buddhism underpin work that is relentless without resignation – confronting existential threats with an unwavering sense of mission, meditation, and the sanctuary found in small pieces giving glimpses of a boundless whole. With viscous arrangements of heavy line work, rich tonal contrast and sinuous figures swimming in mercurial states of becoming, Del Tredici orchestrates in-between spaces that forever evade resolution. Momentarily at rest but perpetually restless, his amorphous images embody the unfinished nature of subject matter and muse. This is his passion and his cross; this is our endless pursuit.

– SM 2016

From left to right:

Robert Del Tredici, *Celebrate a Tail*, 1965

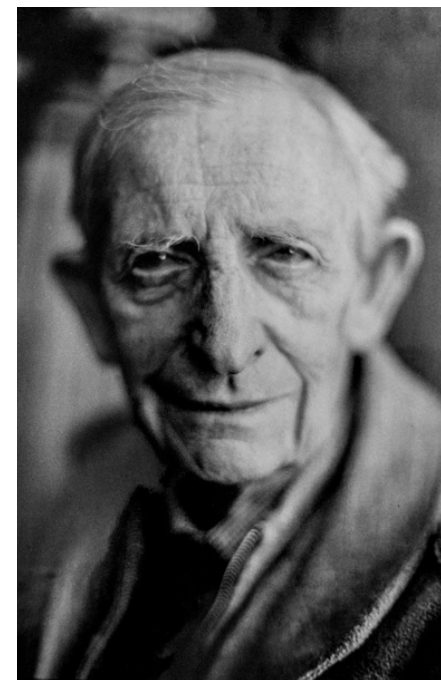
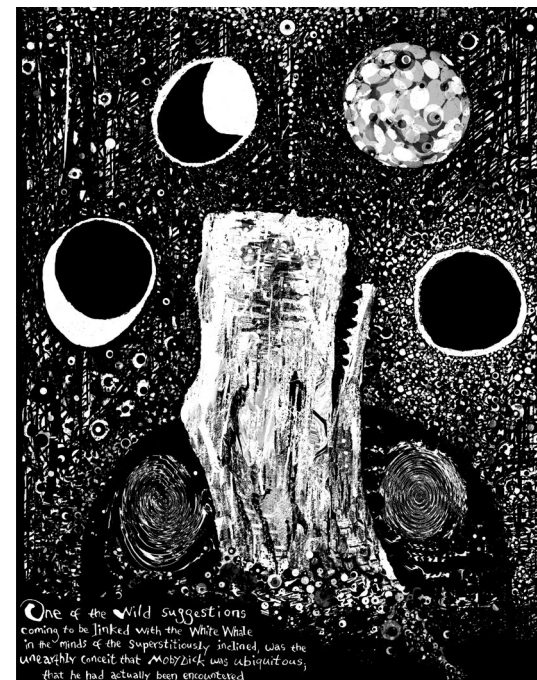
Robert Del Tredici, *Hyena*, 1965

Robert Del Tredici, *Metallic Pieta*, 2016

Robert Del Tredici, *Ubiquitous*, 1965

Robert Del Tredici, *Juliy B. Khariton, Moscow*

June 12, 1992 - *Ahab* (2), 1992



CONTEMPORARY ARTS CENTER

CHASING THE WHALE AND OTHER ENDLESS PURSUITS

April 22 - August 14, 2016

Co-curated by CAC Curator Steven
Matijcio and Northern Kentucky
University Regents Professor of English
Robert. K Wallace

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Matt Kish is a self-taught artist and a librarian. He lives in Ohio with his wife, their frog, and far too many books. His art, shaped by his reading habits and his personal obsessions, functions as an external memory for him and how he records and orders his life. His primary media are found paper which is often scavenged from old books, cheap acrylic paint, and ink with occasional ball-point pen and collage.

Robert Del Tredici is a California native who, in a galaxy far away, once studied to be a Catholic priest. He left the seminary and earned an MA in Comparative Literature at Cal Berkeley. There he first discovered *Moby-Dick*. Melville's questing spirit, zest for adventure, and wicked sense of humor were a lifeline for Del Tredici, who spent 4 years illustrating the book from Ishmael's point of view. He went on to teach drawing, photography, and cinema in Montreal, then took a leave of absence to cover the nuclear meltdown at Three Mile Island. This led to a six-year project documenting the US nuclear weapons complex. In 1979 he founded The Atomic Photographers Guild, which now has 25 members. After 9/11 he tracked the mindset and impact of the American War on Terror in collage works called *Evolution Pages*. In the early 2000s Melville scholar Robert Wallace invited Del Tredici to teach and show work at NKU; this triggered a renewal of his passion for illustrating Melville's epic in an arc of new work that continues to this day. Del Tredici has exhibited his photographs in Europe, Russia, Japan, Canada, and the USA. This exhibition is the first time the full range of his *Moby-Dick* work has been seen in public.

Cover:

Matt Kish, *A Beastiary: Leviathan* [detail], 2014