Review of:

by Tof Eklund

1. Scholarly work on comics has embraced the use of images, but for the most part in a limited role as “figures” to the text. Causes for this may include formatting and printing constraints imposed by print journals, copyright concerns and scholarly expectations in the humanities. It is exciting, then, to open a book like *The Rubber Frame,* in which considered page layout, quality reproduction and copious illustration cohabitate with critical scholarship.

2. There is a simple reason for this. *The Rubber Frame* is the companion book to a Washington University gallery exhibition. The exhibition itself was split into two parts: *The Rubber Frame: The Visual Language of Comics from the Eighteenth Century to the Present* (10/1/04-12/31/04), and *The Rubber Frame: American Underground and Alternative Comics, 1964-2004* (10/1/04-10/30/04). As such a hybrid project, it brings with it the sensibility of scholarship for gallery exhibitions, predominantly that of art history, where high-quality reproduction of an artist’s oeuvre is expected, while the critical orientation for most comics scholarship up to this point has been more akin to film studies, where illustrating an essay with a few still images is common.

3. Under D.B. Dowd and M. Todd Hignite’s guidance, *The Rubber Frame* is more than a catalog of the exhibition, as Dowd’s own essay demonstrates by acknowledging the complex and still debated origins of the comics medium and giving a credible and concise history for it. He pays particular attention to the creative and technological interplay between comics and animation, from Windsor McCay to Flash animation, in his “Strands of a Single Cord: Comics & Animation.” Sometimes the exhibition-catalog elements of the book take over, and things of marginal relevance to Dowd’s essay are given visual primacy, but there is no feeling that his essay is catering to the artwork.

4. Despite this auspicious start, the book sometimes falls short of its aims in ways that have unfortunately become endemic in the field of comics writing, where the boundaries between comics scholarship and comics journalism are consistently blurred. This conjunction is sometimes productive but also sometimes leads to a facile style and to cavalier attitudes toward citation of sources.
5. Daniel Raeburn’s contribution, “Two Centuries of Underground Comic Books” is both more ambitious and more problematic than Dowd’s. Eschewing the term “comix,” he wants to redefine “underground comics” to include not just those texts associated with the ‘60s and ‘70s counterculture in the US, but everything from Rodolphe Topffer’s work through the Tijuana Bibles and Jack Chick’s tracts to Chris Ware’s *Jimmy Corrigan: The Smartest Kid on Earth* and other “alternative” comics, thus extending the “underground” as far back as 19th century Switzerland and forward to the present day.

6. There is considerable slippage in Raeburn’s term “underground comics”: at times it seems to mean comics that are produced in a certain manner (self-published or published by a small press), at other times to refer to a political opposition to mainstream culture, at still other times to indicate a breaking of the taboos of “mainstream” comics, or, at yet other times, to indicate work that is sexually explicit and/or contains drug use.

7. His argument is convincing when he compares Jack Chick’s evangelical tracts to the counterculture they opposed (and also preceded). Raeburn is well known for his groundbreaking research into Chick’s œuvre, and all of the above elements are just as present in it as in any of the “hippie” comics. Obversely his suggestion that there is a creative continuity between Topffer and the undergrounds of the ‘60s and ‘70s is tantalizing but remains in question because Raeburn fails to footnote his essay, instead giving only a short list of works consulted.

8. These problems are relatively nonexistent for the most narrowly focused as well as the most successful essay in the collection, Hignite’s “Jaime Hernandez’s ‘Locas.’” This is a timely piece, as Fantagraphics just published (2004) a deluxe hardbound edition of *Locas: The Maggie and Hopey Stories*, collecting Jaime’s work from *Love and Rockets*, the comic which was created by Jaime and his brother Gilbert Hernandez. The Hernandez brothers’ contributions were republished in similar format under the title *Palomar: The Heartbreak Soup Stories* (2003). In considering the oeuvre of a single creator over time, Hignite’s essay is the most similar of all the essays in *The Rubber Frame* to a work of art history.

9. The principal sources in this essay are the images themselves, supplemented with a few quotations from Jaime Hernandez about his work. Hignite considers the intent and effect of the uncluttered art and uncomplicated paneling style and explicates the connection between *Love and Rockets* and the Los Angeles punk scene, whose aesthetic and independence are recuperated in its pages.

10. The mix of single-panel and full page images in *The Rubber Frame* is crucial here. Full page reproductions allow us to observe as Hignite discusses Jaime Hernandez’s use of associative transitions and balanced page composition, while the single panels and issue covers serve to show the way the artist’s style has changed over time. Here, Hignite’s narrow focus pays off, as some of the
assertions he makes about Jaime Hernandez’s art would be problematic if taken as universal claims about the mode and function of comic art in general, but here they are comfortably grounded in the work itself.

11. For instance, a reader may disagree with Hignite’s most risky claim, that Jamie Hernandez’s simple, clean style promotes emotional affinity, but The Rubber Frame’s format allows him to make this claim, and substantiate it with a multitude of expressive but very simply rendered human faces.

12. Gerald Early’s “The 1960’s, African Americans, and the American Comic Book” draws upon numerous sources, some obscure, that track an ambivalent change in racial depictions in comics. He starts with the blatant racism of jungle comics in the 1940s, describes the Marvel’s Black Panther (unrelated to the Black Panther Party), as the first black superhero, and continues through the civil rights movement and the counterculture, up to the present day.

13. Stronger earlier on, his argument about post-Silver age material seems incomplete and misses a number of important characters, including Marvel’s Blade, the basis for the Wesley Snipes movies, and DC’s John Stewart, one of the Green Lanterns who is treated as “the” Green Lantern in the Cartoon Network’s Justice League cartoon. Todd McFarlane’s Spawn, an obviously provoking case because the title character is a black man who is reincarnated as a “hideous” but also ambiguously racinated hellspawn, does not even get a mention. Their absence would be a relatively unimportant if the essay confined itself to the titular decade (the ‘60s), but the attempt to focus on a single decade while also giving a complete history makes problems for this essay.

14. The only “comix” artist Early considers at any length is Robert Crumb, and even here over-simplification weakens the essay. He refers to Crumb’s character, Angelfood McSpade, as “a grotesque, sexualized stereotype of a primitive African woman.” This description is accurate as far as it goes, but it glosses over the way that all of Crumb’s women from the same period, regardless of race, tend to be tall and very thick, with large buttocks and enormous thighs. They also tend to be dim-witted sex objects who either dominate men or are subject to sexual humiliation by them—but more often than not the purpose of Crumb’s stereotypes is to reveal white men’s complicity in the oppression of women and minorities. As Early notes, Crumb’s historical comics about the lives of blues musicians, tend to eschew caricature and to be respectful in tone. He correctly cites Crumb’s Zap-era work as ambivalent in terms of its depictions of race and racism, but it seems that sex, in both senses of the word, is too dominant a theme in his work to treat it as subordinate to race.

15. Bizarrely, Early seems to marginalize comics by African-American creators: passing mention is made to Larry Fuller, but his role as creator of sexually explicit undergrounds is tucked into a footnote. “Black-operated” superhero imprints Milestone and ANIA are mentioned, but no images are given. And comic
strip artist Aaron McGruder doesn’t receive so much as a mention. Even though The Boondocks is neither from the 1960s nor a comic “book” per se, the strip is of such importance that its omission is an index of the essay’s selective historicizing.

16. Tucked into the back of The Rubber Frame is a treat: a comics-history timeline by Dowd and Melanie Reinert, with contributions from the book’s other essayists. Though chaotic at first glance, once the timeline’s color-coded icons and connecting lines have been mastered, it’s easy to follow and, up through about the 1950’s, remarkably complete. The timeline’s final pages are a little less satisfying as more events slip through the cracks, and the focus shifts somewhat toward the comics in the exhibition.

17. The concluding timeline reflects the virtues and failings of The Rubber Frame as a whole, with its considered visual design and careful integration of apposite images, but also with its incompleteness and an at times overly casual style that makes it difficult and even impossible at times to determine where the information that it incorporates originally came from. In this respect, Rubber Frame reminds us of the interdisciplinary and multi-media nature of comics and scholarship that often frees itself from the formal rigor of academic scholarship. In doing so, it suggests an appealing possibility for the future of comics scholarship even as it also struggles with some of the difficulties that are continually being faced by those working in it.