

Nerd shows his brilliance

NICK HACKWORTH | **EVENING STANDARD** | Thursday 31 March 2005 00:00 |



Click to follow
The Evening Standard



"I hate most of humanity - I hate most of what passes for civilisation. I hate the modern world - I hate the hordes, the crowds in their vast cities, with all their hateful vehicles, their noise, their constant meaningless comings and goings."

For 40 years Robert Crumb, "America's favourite underground cartoonist" has communicated his general revulsion with life and specific contempt for the capitalist American Dream in a vast outpouring of idiosyncratic comic titles.

He has also, much to his cynical indifference, become the only major contemporary cartoonist to be embraced by the art world, hence this much-hyped major retrospective at the Whitechapel. But this is the least interesting fact about Crumb, for in whatever context it's shown, the main thing is the work, which is, without doubt, brilliant.

A talented and obsessive cartoonist from childhood, he worked for a greetings card company before running away to San Francisco to become a hippy and drop Acid. It was the making of him, loosening him up creatively.

His best-known characters, Mr Natural, Flaky Foont, Shuman the Human and the Truckin' guys, emerged from his shattered consciousness to help him savage the hypocrisies and idiocies that pervaded the small-town America of his youth.

Cartoons that illustrated slogans like "The family that lays together, stays together!" and characters like the African "native" Angelfood McSpade, undermined mainstream sexual and racist prejudices.

But keen to avoid becoming a goodie-two-shoes spokesman for Sixties counterculture he delved, unedited, into his personal sexual fantasies. Big, strong women with powerful thighs and thick ankles, engaged in and subjected to every act including buggery and decapitation, became a leitmotif. As did the presence of Crumb himself, who saw the comic as a legitimate vehicle for selfexploration as the novel.

Crumb's story has been regarded, not least by himself, as the ultimate "revenge of the nerd" tale. Sexual and social unpopularity embittered him, as exemplified in one cover of Weirdo magazine, shown here, where a lonely, tearful nerd sniffs a rose whilst attractive jocks and cheerleaders play in the background beneath the legend, "How glorious it is and also how painful to be an exception".

The panacea of fame and success made good these deficiencies. But not all such rage can be written off as merely sublimated wish-fulfilment. Crumb's jaded vision ranges rather further than that, being a sustained and highly personal attempt to "counteract all the lame hero-worshipping crap that is dished out by the mass-media in a never-ending deluge."

From tomorrow until 22 May. Information 020 7522 7888. ■