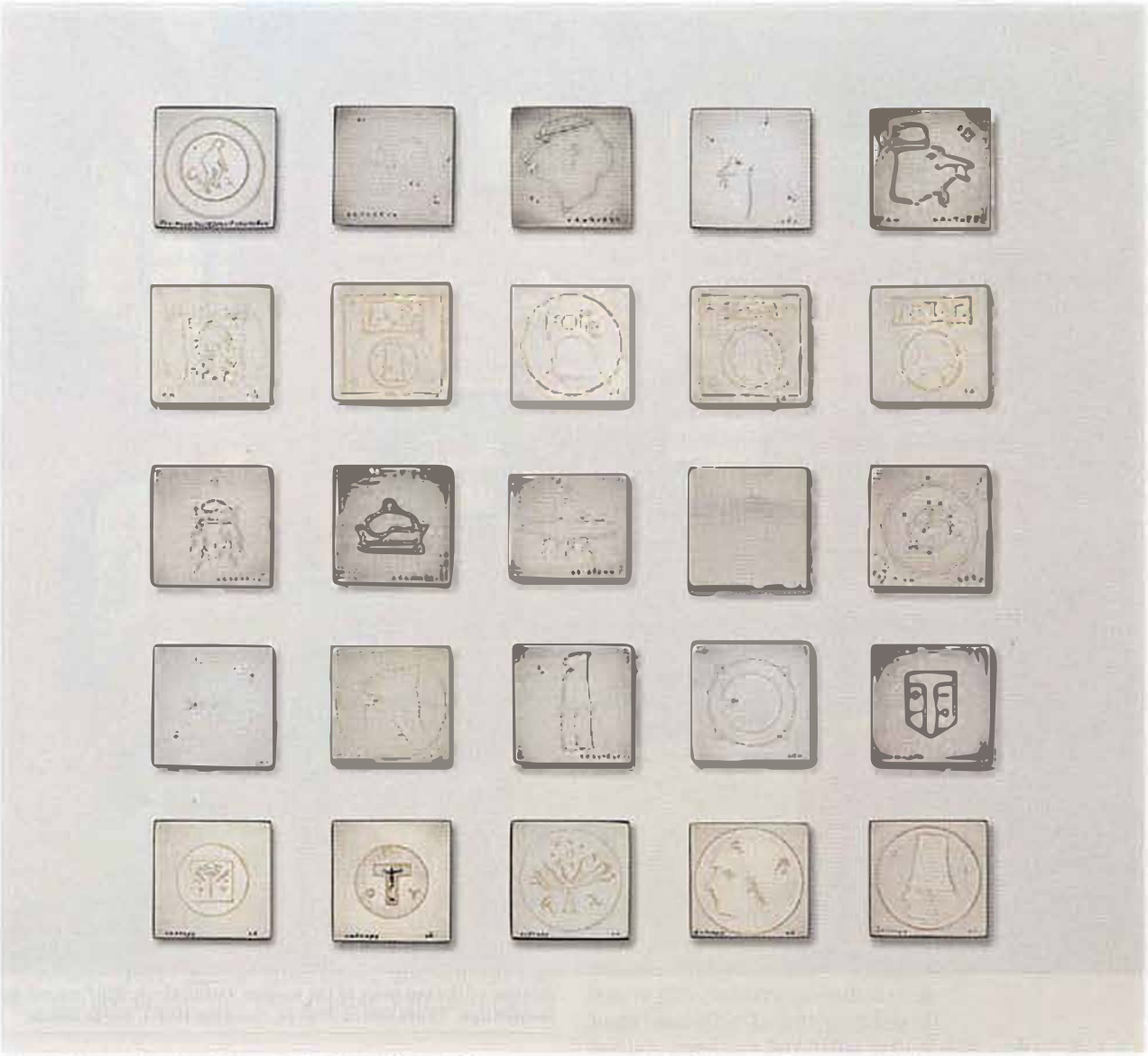
Art in America



Thomas Chimes: Untitled (Finnegan's Wake), *2000-06, oil on prepared panel, 25 paintings, each approx. 3 inches square. Photos this article courtesy Locks Gallery, Philadelphia.*

Faustroll's Special Agent

Retreating from contemporary art scenes, Philadelphia artist Thomas Chimes has, in successive phases, conducted a decades-long dialogue with the literary and artistic avant-garde of a century ago.

BY FAYE HIRSCH

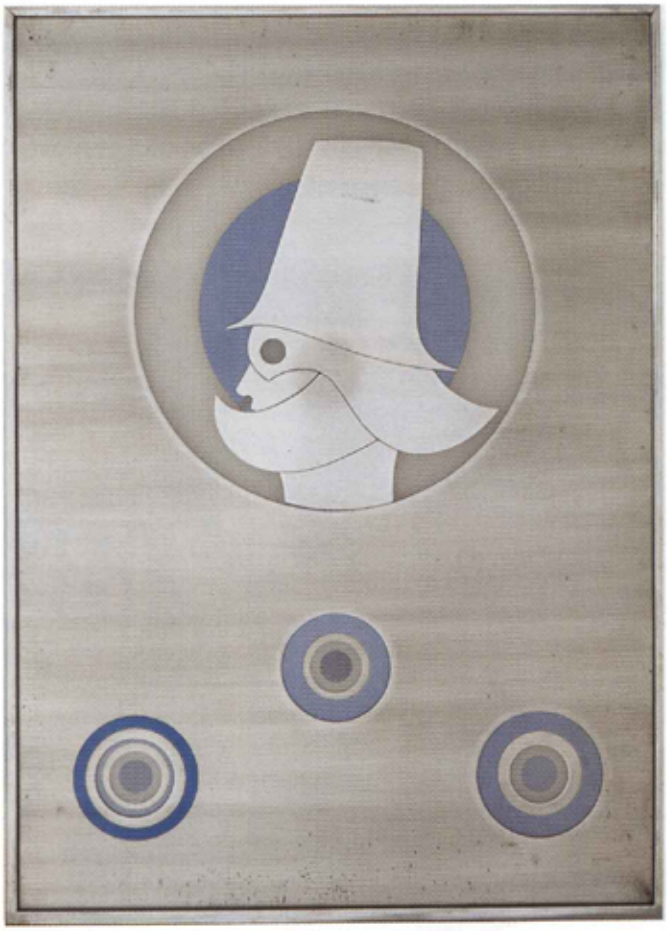
The latest work in Thomas Chimes's recent retrospective at the Philadelphia Museum of Art was a grid of 25 small white panel paintings, each around 3 inches square, presenting enigmatic figures and emblems. What could they mean: the mustached profiles, the hooded and helmeted heads, the seemingly random letters—some in Greek—a crown, a crucifix, a stovepipe hat? No parallel, in form or content, suggests itself in contemporary art. The work is an anomaly—no less than Chimes himself, who, at 86, has mostly plied his own, some might say hermetic, current outside the mainstream of art. Even the word "entropy," appearing several times in these panels, should not be taken as it was meant during the heyday of earthworks, to indicate the tendency of matter and energy to degenerate to a uniform disorder. For Chimes, the term is not critically fashionable, but rather has an autobiographical cast having to do with the course of his own art-making, now

scaled-down and dispersed into many parts that, not unlike words, he shifts about syntactically in different groupings.[1]

In fact, coming at the end of a survey of a 45-year career with five very distinct phases, this work—*Untitled (Finnegan's Wake)*, 2000-06—reiterated themes and motifs present throughout the show. The piece was titled after Joyce's novel, whose closing phrase, "A way a lone a last a loved a long the," has a special pertinence. The grid of 5 by 5 echoes Joyce's pentameter[2] and the smallness and separateness of the panels his swift monosyllables. In a reference to the last word of this last line, Chimes has said, "When you read that, you know almost instinctively that you have to go through the whole book to get the first word of *Finnegan's Wake* and then there's the circle again."[3] As well as the novel, we could take the "circle" to refer to the arc of Chimes's career, represented in Philadelphia by 100 works. Over that career, Chimes has recycled motifs in a manner reminiscent of Jasper Johns—and as with Johns, Chimes moves between impenetrable and discernible meanings. As we make out the delineated images in their whiteness, we recall elements and characteristics from earlier periods, and in the process of recontextualization they are enriched.

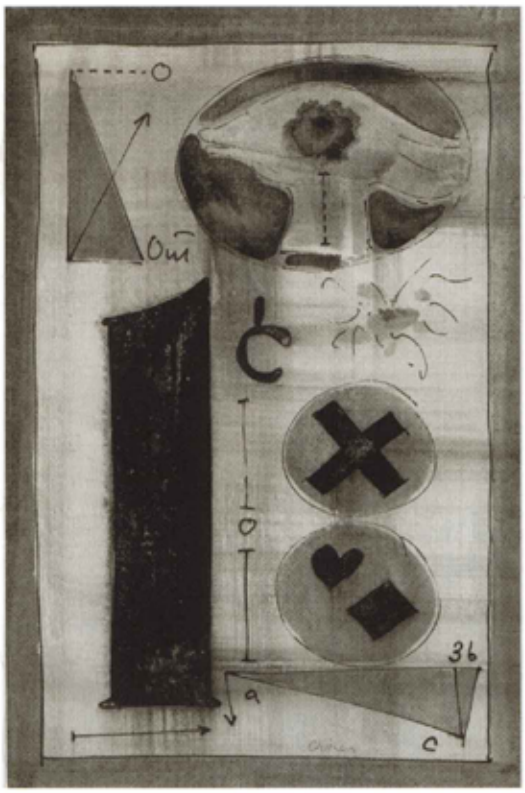
Untitled (Finnegan's Wake) also testifies to the robust intellect of an artist who has rejuvenated his lifelong obsessions in a distinctive material form. To make his recent works, Chimes tapes over small panels prepared with glue sealant, sanded and painted white. He cuts out his designs with an X-acto knife, plugging up the narrow channels with wood filler to make lines that stand in low relief; removing the tape, he then coats and recoats the panel's surface white until he achieves the desired level of opacity. The panel is deemed complete when he paints the sides black and neatly boxes it up. Standing alone or arranged in small groupings, the works are individually titled, then dated and initialed with the first two letters of his last name, all very tiny. Working in a small studio where he also lives, Chimes has created exclusively in this mode since the late 1990s.

Aside from *Untitled (Finnegan's Wake)*, the retrospective included just a few works from this phase, a gap that was filled by a substantial contemporaneous exhibition of them at Philadelphia's Locks Gallery, his longtime dealer. There the character of his enterprise was clarified in groupings with fewer components, arranged in single rows. Viewers had to move up and peer closely at them—quite otherwise from the experience of earlier white paintings that he did in the 1980s, wholly brushed works on canvas. There, evanescent images are better viewed at a distance, though they are no less difficult to regard for long periods of time (always, from Malevich to Ryman, the challenge of a white painting).



Top Hat, *1970, mixed-medium metal box, 18½ by 13 inches. Private collection.*

Momo, *1965, ink and wash on wove paper, 8½ by 5⅝ inches. Philadelphia Museum of Art.*



The fact that the process of viewing them is much like and often involves reading is apt, given the prime importance of literary influences on Chimes. These have been many, ranging from Nikos Kazantzakis in the early work to Antonin Artaud, the *poètes maudits* and, especially, as time passed, Alfred Jarry (1873-1907). Not surprisingly, the exhibition catalogue, by curator Michael R. Taylor, is a hermeneutical feat, minutely delving into Chimes's obsessive and multifarious allusions to these and other modernist figures—for Chimes, however independently he has pursued his career, is hardly an artist who disregards the past. As he has said, the present is "an arriving memory"—the past is immanent in the present.[4]

Chimes was born in Philadelphia in 1921 to Greek immigrant parents; the family name, "Tsamis," was changed to Chimis when his father entered the U.S. and then to "Chimes" when he married—a matter of later significance to Thomas, since "chimes" is a Latinization of the Greek word for alchemist, one of his great interests.[5] He studied art throughout high school and often visited the Philadelphia Museum of Art, where Eakins and van Gogh made an early impression on him. (The Arensberg collection, with its rich holdings in Duchamp, also significant to Chimes, arrived at the museum later, in 1950, and the *Large Glass*, bequeathed by Katherine S. Dreier, in 1952.) He began his formal training at the Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts in 1939 but withdrew and attended the Art

Hung together at the exhibition, the aluminum reliefs had a fetishistic quality, a result of both their gleaming perfection and sexual content.

Untitled, 1961, oil on canvas, 18½ by 20½ inches. Private collection.

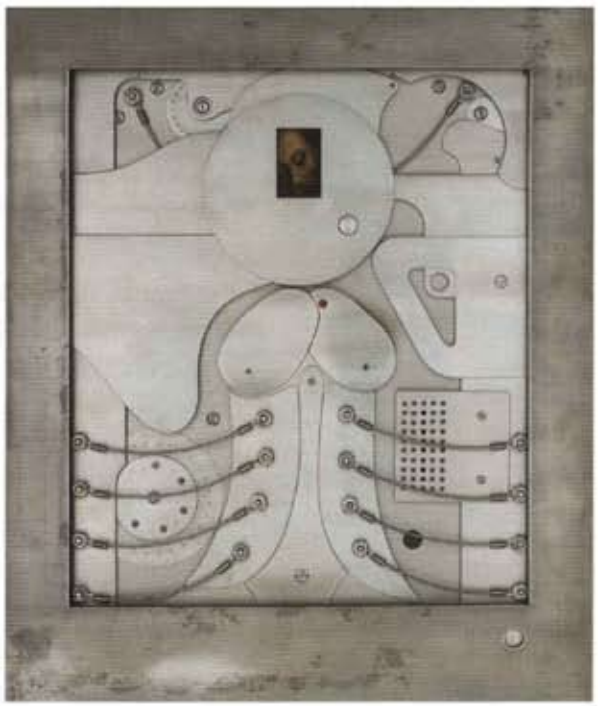
Below right, **Construction #403,** *1967, mixed-medium metal box, 14 by 11 inches. Buckingham Family collection, Larchmont, N.Y.*

Students League in New York, first in 1941 and again, after the interruption of the war, in 1946-48. He lived in New York off and on during the next five years, and traveled with his wife and son to Europe for six months in 1952, spending most of that time in Paris but taking trips to Greece and Vence, where he visited the Chapel of the Rosary of the Dominican Nuns, which Matisse had recently completed.

Chimes moved back to Philadelphia for good in 1953 but maintained strong ties to New York throughout the 1950s and early '60s, mounting a one-person show at the Avant-Garde Gallery in 1958 and, in 1963 and 1965, at the Bodley Gallery, run by Georgie Duffee and David Mann, a former employee of the well-known dealer Alexander Iolas, who had recommended Chimes but declined to show him.[6] At the Avant-Garde show, Chimes was clearly under the sway of the Russian-born French painter Nicolas de Staël (1914-1955), whose work he had admired in Paris, presenting abstractions with heavy surfaces built up in rectilinear patches with the palette knife. After a period in which his colors brightened and he began exploring landscape, looking to van Gogh, a breakthrough came in the early '60s in semi-abstract landscapes with nestled signlike motifs and crucifixions. At the Bodley shows in 1963 and 1965, these works sold to eminent collectors and were critically acclaimed. Alfred Barr purchased *Untitled (Study for the 'Inner World')* in 1961 and *Crucifix* (1961) in 1963, donating both paintings along with a related drawing to the Museum of Modern Art.

These landscapes culminated in 1963-65 with *Mural*, at nearly 7 by 18 feet the largest painting Chimes has made. Commissioned by the John and Mable Ringling Museum of Art in Sarasota, Fla., which gave him a "retrospective" exhibition in 1968 (the term feels wrong given that he was, as it turns out, only in the early stages of his career), this work epitomizes Chimes's labors from the first half of the '60s, showing in many details the strong influence of Matisse, especially the Vence chapel. Flatly pressed to a single plane, the lateral composition has no horizon; in place of a small seascape at the top left in previous works, Chimes substituted an abstract, cornflower-blue patch with a floating yellow shape like a branch of coral. White, black and colored Xs and other patterns appear in a ground of puffy brown forms and colored near-rectangles. At the center is a boxy, black-on-white Crucifixion, with Christ indicated by two raised arms. Its apex shows a black disk inscribed with an a, or alpha; above, on a four-lobed white shape, is a second Crucifixion, even more abstract, with a St. Andrew's cross. At Vence, puffy brown shapes similar to those in *Mural*, along with schematic renderings of elements of the Passion, including the Crucifixion, appear in black-on-white tile designs, and the Xs and branching forms are reminiscent not only of the chapel's stained-glass windows but of Matisse's cutouts in general. Yet their signlike quality links them as well to American artists like Marsden Hartley. In these paintings and related drawings, Chimes's renderings of Christ on the cross can include surreal touches like lettered geometric diagrams and sexual elements, for example lobular appendages or breastlike forms blooming from his groin.

In 1965, Chimes framed one of his landscapes in aluminum and collaged to its surface aluminum cutouts echoing the irregular rectangular patches in his paintings. The painting is called *Hieropornophany*, an invented word that, in its use of a Greek root and erotic implications, indicates what's to come. Here, the branchlike glyph of the landscapes has sprouted a head, and the puffy forms suggest body orifices, as Chimes pushes the surreal turn he was taking. This change coincided with his discovery of Artaud, who inspired Chimes's depiction of "le Momo," named for the narrator



of the 1946 poem "Artaud le Mômo." Written by Artaud after he was released from Rodez Asylum, it is filled with obscene and otherwise transgressive language; to many artists and writers, it became the paradigm of resistance to bourgeois complacency. Chimes conceived his Momo as a birdlike head in profile, with a long pointy snout on one side and stylized tufts of hair on the other. The image appeared in a number of drawings and in several new wall-mounted wood boxes of shallow depth clad in aluminum. The sheathing is made up of closely fitted rectilinear panels attached with screws and additionally decorated with nonfunctioning hardware and suggestive metal fittings. Rectilinear or round openings frame painted areas on the wood surface or drawings adhered to it.

Stylized into a penislike head, Momo occurs in the largest of Chimes's aluminum boxes, *Master and Own* (1966). The Momo drawing is framed in squares and a circle, above which appears the phrase "master and own," colorfully painted like sign lettering in three different scripts. The word "master" has a Pop feel, like the lettering in contemporaneous advertising or in cartoons. At the lower left corner of the piece is a large metal screw and repoussé form that together resemble a male organ; the female counterpart is at the top right, also in beaten metal—a circle enclosing a fleshy slit. There is also a small circular drainlike insert resembling a speaker, accompanied by a switch; a tiny attached plaque calls it an "abusophone." The switch has directionals ("up" and "down"), as if *Master and Own* were actually functional. Next to the word "master" is another plaque that reads "plus" and below, next to "own," one that reads "minus." In fact, as the catalogue shows,[7] the "plus" plaque hides another plaque beneath that reads "baiting"—i.e., the two words would read "master-baiting" if the plaque below were visible—however, there is no hidden plaque beneath the "minus," where, in a parallel, one might expect "anism"—"own-anism," to complete the work's masturbatory subtext.

Master and Own, *1966, mixed-medium metal box, 6¼ by 48 inches. Private collection, Bethesda.*

The polished craftsmanship of *Master and Own* is characteristic of all the metal reliefs. Hung together at the exhibition, they had a fetishistic quality, a result of both their gleaming perfection and the sexual content, both visual and textual, embedded in their imagery. The obvious precedent is the onanistic "bachelor machine" of Dada and Surrealism—especially Duchamp's *The Bride Stripped Bare by Her Bachelors, Even (The Large Glass)*, 1915-23. As in that earlier work, the male section (here the head of Momo as well as the repoussé phallus) is located at the bottom and the female at the top in a self-enclosed, self-perpetuating system. This arrangement—male component at the bottom and female at the top—is, according to Harald Szeemann, one key to the imaginary combustion of the bachelor-machine.[8] But the *Large Glass* is not the only precedent; one thinks, for example, of Picabia's drawings and paintings of erotic machines from the teens, or of Jasper Johns's sexually charged relief paintings *Plaster Casts with Target* (1955) and *Painting with Two Balls* (1960), which Chimes evidently admired.[9]

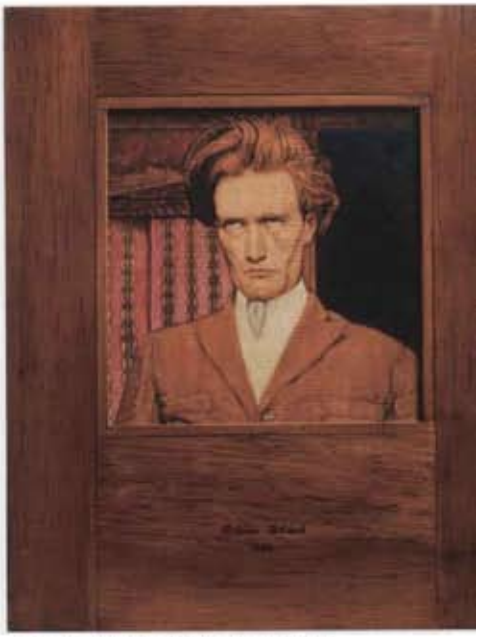
The most explicit of Chimes's eroticized reliefs is *Construction #403* (1967), in which a phallus centered at the bottom is rigged with wires and, above, curvaceous forms suggest a reclining female nude. At the center top is a painted head of Christ, looking downward, making of the

To be included in Chimes's pantheon, these various cultural figures, as he says, "had to have experienced something mysterious, psychological and mythical."

phallus a crucifixion. Along with another relief of the same year, *Crucifixion*, which contains the headless torso of a crucified Christ (taken from a painting of the subject by Chimes, which he cut down),[10] this work reiterates the eroticized Christ of Chimes's earlier landscapes.

Chimes also made suggestive though less explicit reliefs during the mid-'60s that alluded to actual machines, though clearly fantastic—a "radio" with an exaggeratedly curvilinear "speaker," for example. By the late '60s, the machinelike quality in these works began to fade; hardware was no longer used as imagery, and there are smooth surfaces rather than the closely fitted, clearly relieflike rectangular plates. The works began to look more like paintings—as in *Top Hat* (1970), which shows a profiled figure wearing the title haberdashery. The pale blue aura behind his head is echoed beneath in three medallions with concentric rings of color set in a delicately striated metal surface, and the work has an emblematic quality that Chimes was to return to in his latest work.

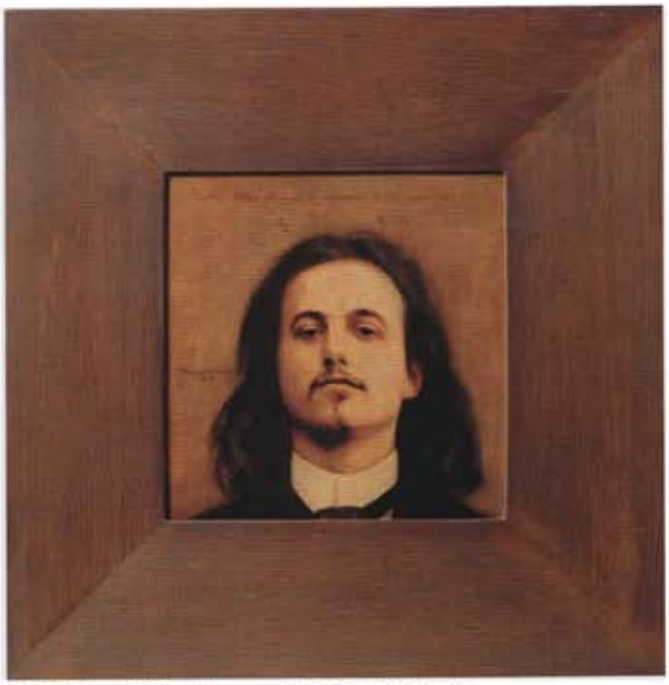
However, the turn he took immediately after the aluminum pieces, beginning in 1973, is foretold in *Set (The Descent)*, 1972, among the last of them, in which a small portrait head of Duchamp appears in a painting framed by an opening in the metal sheath. Somewhat altered, the image of Duchamp was copied from a photograph of the artist enacting his *Nude Descending a Staircase* for *Life* magazine in 1952.[11] Chimes's painting is executed in gold and in ocher and brown, colors that come to dominate his work in the next phase. And the reference to Duchamp is not random. It is almost as if Chimes had wandered in his later reliefs too far in the direction of Pop and with this painting was offering a corrective—away from contemporaneity and back to the earlier avant-garde.



Antonin Artaud, *1974, oil on panel, 17¾ by 14⅝ inches. Philadelphia Museum of Art.*

In 1973, Chimes embarked on a series of portraits on panel, ranging from 8½ inches square to a couple of feet at their largest dimension, that were to exclusively consume his attention for six years. Occupying their own room in the exhibition, these works, executed primarily in shades of brown, presented a pantheon of avant-garde literary and artistic luminaries, mainly of the late 19th and early 20th century but also including later figures. According to Chimes, their qualification for inclusion was that they "had to have experienced something mysterious, psychological and mythical. And were deeply affected by it."[12] One might add that all of them have some connection, however tenuous, to Alfred Jarry, whom Chimes had discovered (in 1964) in a 1960 issue of *Evergreen Review* (titled "What Is 'Pataphysics?" and focused on Jarry).

The brown portraits began with two of Jarry, in which his small painted image is seen floating within the grain of a bare wood panel surrounded by a flat, wide wood frame carefully notched and fitted. One shows Jarry above a cloudlike form on a black patch—perhaps a reference to the "luminiferous ether" that Jarry saw as the medium that allowed one of his fantastical creations, a time machine, to function;[13] the other includes a geometric diagram and writing. In the rest of the series, the "sitters," mostly seen in head and shoulders, fill the entire central panel and are set against painted backgrounds. The wood frames are always sensuously sanded and finished to bring out the grain, and sometimes fitted with small identifying



Alfred Jarry, *1974, oil on panel, 22½ by 22⅛ inches. Philadelphia Museum of Art.*

Right*, Michael Faraday, *1973, oil on panel, 29 by 22⅛ inches. Private collection.

James Joyce, *1986, oil on canvas, 50 by 62 inches. Private collection.*

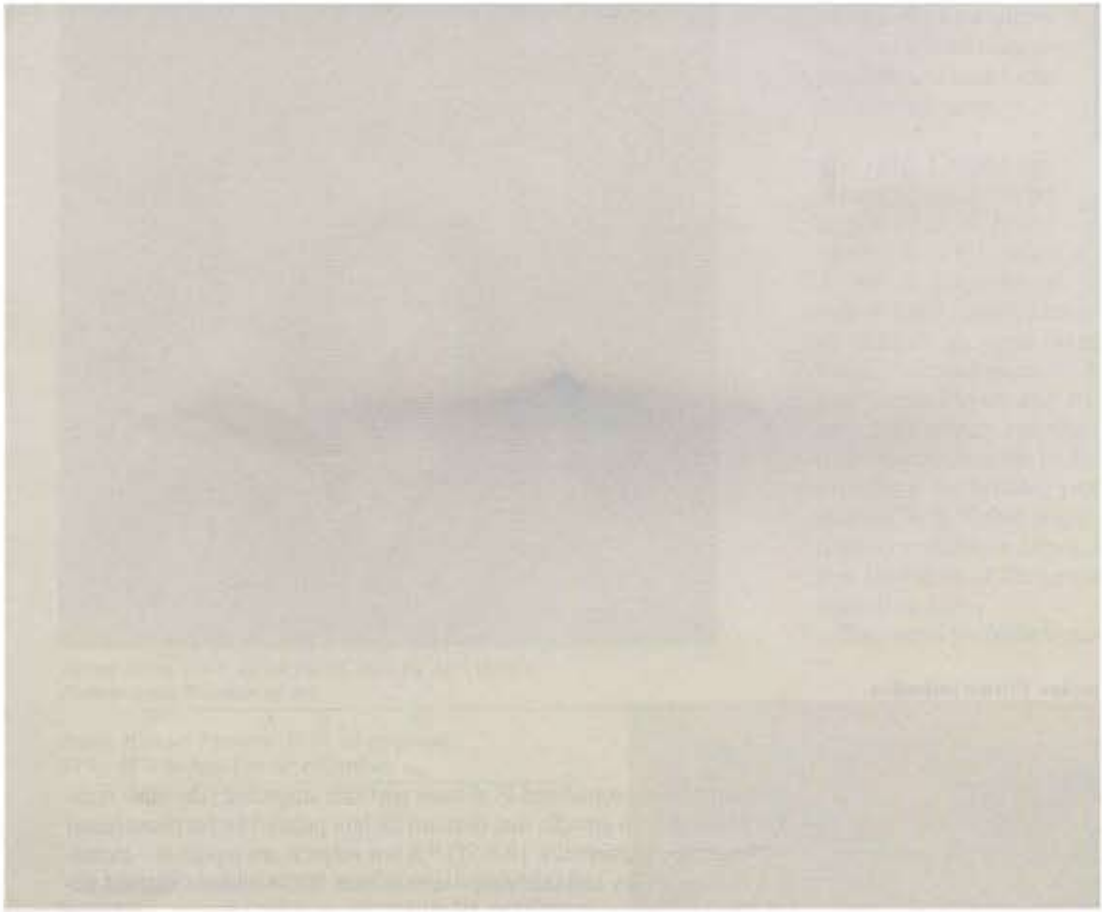
Faustroll Helmet, *1984, oil on canvas, 18½ by 22½ inches. Private collection.*

plaques. Chimes completed 48 of these portraits altogether (the same number of portraits in grisaille that Gerhard Richter painted for his photo-based series of oils, *48 Portraits*, 1970-71).[14] A few subjects are repeated—including Poe, Beardsley and Duchamp—and at least 10 of Chimes's portraits are of Jarry at different stages of his brief life.

Jarry had begun increasingly to preoccupy Chimes,[15] more so than any other author or artist. He is best known for his "Ubu" plays, with their raging, tyrannical anti-hero. He was inventor as well, via his alter ego, Faustroll, in the posthumously published novel *Exploits & Opinions of Dr. Faustroll, Pataphysician* (1911), of "'pataphysics," defined in the book as "the science of imaginary solutions."[16] As Szeemann wrote, 'pataphysics "is to metaphysics as metaphysics is to physics," using the absurdist logic typical of anyone under the sway of Jarry's "science."[17] Szeemann and many others have shown that the iconoclastic and outrageous Jarry was a guiding spirit to many artists and movements throughout the 20th century—particularly to the Dadaists and Surrealists, but to others, as well. The dealer Ambroise Vollard, for example—himself no slouch in the arbitrary wielding of power—seemed drawn to the persona of Père Ubu, and even invented his own texts based on the character, persisting under threat of lawsuit by Jarry's estate.[18] The American conceptual artist William Anastasi in 1994 mounted an exhibition consisting of

Chimes has obsessively "channeled" many aspects of Alfred Jarry—his personas, arcane fictions, literary devotions and arc of influence.

1,700 sheets of paper filled with notes evidencing the various ways that Jarry influenced Duchamp and Joyce.[19] More recently, William Kentridge has cast the Ubu character in a political vein.[20] Perhaps no one as much as Chimes, however, has for so many years obsessively "channeled," as it were, so many aspects of Jarry's life—his personas, arcane fictions, literary devotions and arc of influence. In *The Imaginary Solutions of Thomas Chimes*, a 2006 film by Michael Blackwood, Chimes poses next to one of his portraits of Jarry to demonstrate how, by the mid-'80s, he even began to tweak the representation to exaggerate an undeniable physical resemblance between himself and the author—though Chimes has claimed he is not so much "identifying" as "dealing" with Jarry.[21]



From Paris to Paris by Sea, *1988, oil on canvas, 18½ by 22½ inches.*

Earlier, in the mid-1960s, after first discovering Jarry, Chimes had made some nightmarish and fantastic drawings inspired by Jarry's own illustrations of the Ubu plays. The 1970s portraits are of a different order, modeled on the actual Jarry from period photographs. They are realist in form, as Chimes followed an impulse that had previously surfaced only sporadically in his work. In tonality, the portraits are reminiscent of the work of Thomas Eakins, who himself used a subdued palette and frequently relied on photographs—and who also enclosed some of his paintings in broad wood frames. It is an odd mixture of influences. Chimes at once offers tribute to another native Philadelphian, the realist Eakins, whom he had admired from childhood on, but also to a modernist avant-garde whose emphasis, among other things, is on a flight of the imagination away from the mundane world.

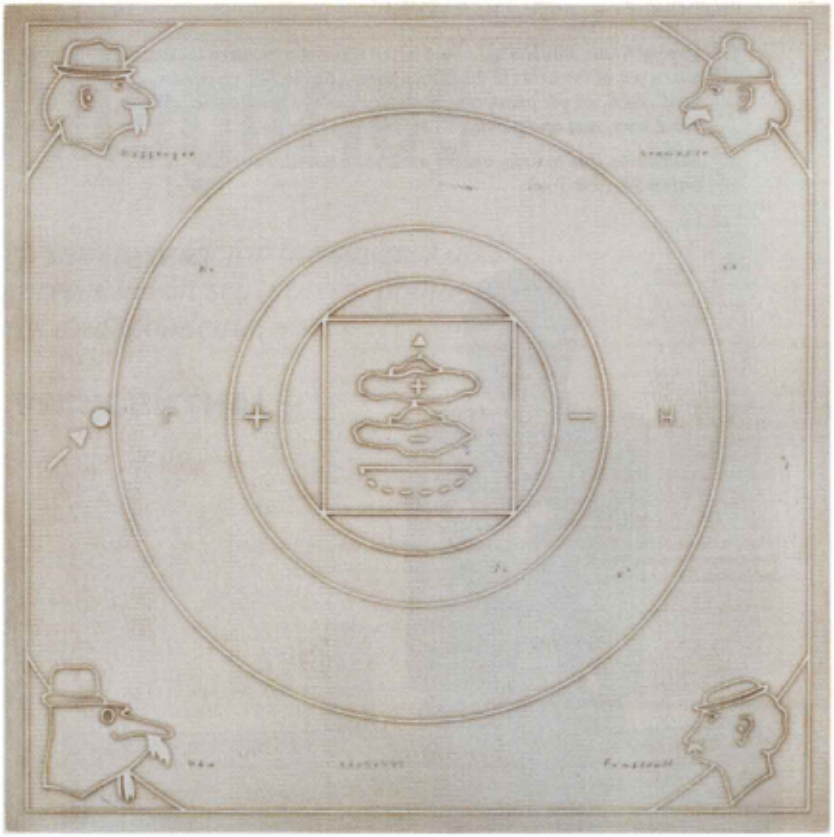
A number of the subjects of the brown paintings are mentioned in Jarry's novel. Baudelaire and Poe, Verlaine, Beardsley—all appear either as authors of books in Faustroll's library or as the dedicatees of islands to which Faustroll, accompanied by a bailiff named Panmuphle and the "dog-faced baboon," Bosse-Nage, travel in a skiff that is also a sieve. The Scottish mathematician Lord Kelvin appears in Chimes's constellation; in the novel, he is the recipient, toward the end of the book, of a telepathic letter from Faustroll. Some of Chimes's subjects had an actual connection with Jarry—Oscar Wilde, for example, with whom Jarry was friends. There is at least one imaginary character—Sandomir, who was invented in a hoax (complete with a photograph) as the founder, in 1948, of the "Collège de 'Pataphysique" (which actually exists). Many of the remaining figures have an inspirational connection to Jarry—Artaud, Joyce, Duchamp. The latter appears three times, as the naked Adam, Rrose Sélavy and, in surrogate, as *L.H.O.O.Q.* André Breton is uncharacteristically represented not by a portrait but by two images from his novel *Nadja*—a fallen glove and a shot of the Tuileries. One of the most striking of the portraits, *Antonin Artaud* (1974), shows Artaud in a rigid pose, with his eyes rolling upward and placed against a relatively colorful (for these works) backdrop. Based on a photograph of the author shortly after his release from the asylum, the portrait was included in the 1975 Whitney Biennial.

Several of the subjects—Sarah Bernhardt and Ludwig Wittgenstein, for example—have nothing whatsoever to do with Jarry except through affinities that Chimes himself discerned, in the kind of fanciful logic that allows him great leaps in time, place and imagination. Michael Faraday, who historically had consulted with Lord Kelvin, stands in a field of jittery lines that seem to refer to the electromagnetic waves Faraday discovered and named. There are also a portrait of Chimes's then-wife Dawn—they separated in 1979 and divorced in 1986—and another of Jarry's schoolmaster Hébert, on whom Ubu was based. This is the only image done not from a photograph but from a painting (by Jarry). Chimes's version is a scary little painting (1978) of the pale, doughy-faced Hébert in a very dark ground, the last in the series.

Moving to a new studio in 1979, Chimes discovered that the previous occupant had left behind an enormous (90-by-114-inch) stretched canvas. On it he painted an image of Niagara Falls (*Waterfall*), 1980, from a postcard he had acquired on a trip he took there 30 years earlier. It shows the falls from a vantage point in what seems like midair, and is reminiscent of earlier sublime renditions of the scene by such painters as Albert Bierstadt and Frederic Church. Chimes visited the Tate in London in 1980, and

the effects of mist on color seen in *Waterfall* were also influenced by J.M.W. Turner, whose paintings he studied there. Though the painting was unique in scale, Chimes produced a number of smaller colored landscapes in the next few years. These include memory-scapes of Memorial Hall, a local monument, as he imagined he saw it at a great distance across the Schuylkill River from his childhood neighborhood, Brewerytown. In its color and lightness, such work marked a singular break from what had come before, and made possible what came afterward. By 1984, Chimes began slowly but surely to strip color from his palette, eventually using just Mars black and titanium white. He returned to some of the subjects of his brown paintings—here working mainly on canvas or linen, and occasionally panel—using many of the same photographs. In addition to Jarry—many of Jarry—there are Joyce and Poe, and several of the writer Rachilde (Marguerite Vallette-Eymery, 1860-1953) and of the composer Eric Satie, both young and old. He also continued his landscapes with Memorial Hall.

Most of the images of Jarry are taken from a photograph of the writer riding a bicycle. Chimes first painted the image in color in 1979, removing the bicycle but showing Jarry still tooling along holding a set of handlebars. As time passes, Chimes focuses on the bodiless head, enlarging it and placing it close to the lower edge of the painting, or centering it in the frame. Jarry always wears a cap, but his nose is sometimes shorter, sometimes longer; in places the back of his head where the cap and hair meet resembles a silhouetted profile—perhaps, as Chimes once told me, Bosse-Nage, whose only spoken words in Jarry's novel are "Ha-Ha!" The titles of the Jarry portraits vary; most frequently they are called "Faustroll," but they are often subtitled—as in *Faustroll/Hermes* (1989), an indication of one direction in which Chimes was taking the Faustroll identity, conflating it with the Greek messenger god.



Portrait of All Four (CH 09.14.99), ***1999, oil on prepared panel, 11⅞ inches square. Delaware Art Museum, Wilmington.***

In these paintings, the images coalesce as if through a thick fog, and their brightness, their sense of holding a density of light, brings back that quality in his aluminum-relief paintings. Ever the metaphysician, Chimes has described the whiteness as "emerging consciousness."[22] The amount of black he used varies, so that the paintings can also range considerably in their degree of legibility. In the case of Chimes's portrait of James Joyce (1986), this fading in and out of view fits the subject. In it, the author is encircled in a bubble at the center of the painting, as if floating (this device is often used by Chimes in the white paintings). Looking downward, as if reading, Joyce wears rimless spectacles whose shape echoes the framing disk and whose thickness alludes to his severe myopia—a condition we feel a bit in gazing at the painting. *Satie Senex* (1986) has no such framing device; instead the roundish head of the old composer emerges at the center like an apparition, and he is surrounded by tiny words (the title, repeated) of the sort that appear in a number of the paintings—a bit like the fortunes in a Magic 8-Ball.

Perhaps none of the images are more difficult to look at for long periods of time than those of Memorial Hall. This view, which changes as often as that of Jarry, is sometimes no more than a blip on the horizon, other times barely visible as a mere thickening of darkness (*Rise Up, Man of the Hooths*), 1985, or more generously as a strip of land embellished with the "nipplelike dome," as Barry Schwabsky described it in these pages.[23] Such is the case in a 1988 version, *From Paris to Paris by Sea*, a reference to the route Faustroll and his companions took when visiting the islands of writers and artists. Indeed, Chimes's titles become increasingly literary, with allusions both to Jarry and to Joyce's *Dubliners* or *Finnegans Wake*, as in *O Tell Me All About Anna Livia Plurabelle* (1981-88). This is the refrain in the last chapter of *Finnegans Wake*, in which the sexual exploits of Anna Livia meander through a riverine language-scape. In this work, the domed Memorial Hall looks especially "nipplelike," placed within a bubble with barely visible edges, little more than a numinous world contiguous to our own.[24]

By 1990, Chimes had returned to painting on panel, continuing with white but with imagery that was becoming increasingly arcane. Raised sections of maps and profile outlines appear, as well as texts, words and letters—Greek and Latin—like black constellations in a white night. However, in offering an overview of his career, of Chimes's artistic obsessions as they have developed over 40 years, the retrospective gave such imagery a greater transparency. So that, in seeing a work like *Untitled (Finnegan's Wake)* or *Portrait of All Four (CH 09.14.99)*, 1999, at the end of the show, much had already been clarified.

Portrait of All Four is particularly amusing in that, in a single work, it quadruples Jarry in four different personas. At the lower left is Père Ubu, taken almost exactly from one of Jarry's illustrations; in the other corners are Faustroll, the "Messenger"—Chimes's alter ego for Faustroll—and the "Geometer," a figure who occurs near the end of *Exploits & Opinions of Dr. Faustroll, Pataphysician*. At the center of the panel, within concentric circles reminiscent of the disks in the earlier white paintings, appear two strange forms—clouds, crowns or spaceships—inscribed with plus and minus signs (an echo of *Master and Own*). Since the Geometer is present, one wonders if this is not representative of the final chapters of Jarry's narrative, in which this character is called into service, as it were, to calculate the "surface of God." Writes Jarry:

> DEFINITION: *God is the shortest distance between zero and infinity.*
> "In which direction" one may ask.
> We shall reply that His first name is not Jack, but *Plus-and-Minus.*

It's a tall order, calculating the surface of God, yet somehow, in its credible absurdity, just the sort of task that would appeal to Thomas Chimes, irresistibly following the impossible methodology—self-invented, at this point—of Jarry's science of 'pataphysics. □

1. Speaking of the term "entropy," Chimes says, "At the beginning it was the 'infinite soup'—there were no distinguishable parts. But once a couple of those infinitely small parts

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return to China in 2006, a giant leap in scale took place. Intrigued by the fragments of Buddhist statuary that he found in the markets during his travels to Tibet, he began to create monumental hollow-copper versions of the holy sage's body parts. Two examples are in the show: a 21-foot-long forearm and hand and an 18¾-foot-long leg with an effigy of Zhang's head protruding from the foot. These impressive works share a gallery with selections from his mundane "Memory Doors" series: old photos, collaged and transferred to antique wooden doors that are then partially incised with scenes relating to the artist's provincial upbringing in China's pre-capitalist era. Much more arresting is the room's *Ash Head No. 3* (2006), an 18-inch-high bust of Zhang in wood and iron covered with ash gathered from incense burners in Buddhist temples.

Dominating the last gallery stands the over-12-foot-high *Long Ear Ash Head* (2007). Made of ash-covered steel in several sections, like the slightly separated plates of a skull that houses an outsized brain, the work bears Zhang's facial features, along with the long earlobes associated with the Buddha's origins as an earring-wearing young noble, and a baby figure clambering on the gargantuan forehead. Bracketing the sculpture on the gallery walls are two ash-on-linen paintings—one depicting the Chinese flag, one the American. Here Zhang's self-identification as a spiritual messenger between two cultures, a task combining the determination of a Hercules and the self-absorption of a Narcissus, seems at last explicit and complete. □

1. The title specifies the size of the latrine, 129 square feet.
2. Biographical information in this article is drawn primarily from the artist's firsthand account, "A Piece of Nothing," in *Zhang Huan: Altered States*, ed. Melissa Chiu, New York, Asia Society, and Milan, Edizioni Charta, 2007, pp. 51-97.
3. According to Thomas J. Berghuis, "*fen*, or incense, is a girl's name, but it is also a homophone for *separation*." In one performance as Fen, Ma masturbated and drank his own semen. In 1994, his "indecent" activities cost him three months in jail. See Berghuis's *Performance Art in China*, Hong Kong, Timezone 8 Limited, 2006, pp. 103-04.
4. In China as in the West—think Hannah Wilke, Marina Abramović, Carolee Schneemann, Karen Finley, Tim Miller—nude performance artists tend to be individuals with attractive bodies to display and charges of titillation to refute.
5. Cultural-political group actions, essential to the birth of the post-Mao avant-garde, were increasingly supplemented by individualized performances following the publication of a Chinese translation of Jerzy Grotowski's *Towards a Poor Theater* in 1986. In an impromptu cross-cultural exchange, Gilbert & George, visiting Beijing's East Village in 1993, were confronted by a bare-chested, paint-smeared Ma Liuming, who vainly attempted to break their signature unflappability and prompt a reaction to his Chinese colleagues' work.
6. The title refers to the artist's weight at the time, 143 lbs.
7. This work was very similar to *Pulling the National Art Museum Away*, a rejected proposal made by Huang Yong Ping and others for the "China/Avant-Garde" exhibition at the National Art Museum of China in 1989.
8. Although primary authorship of this collaborative piece has long been in dispute, one of the videos shown at the Asia Society offers persuasive evidence that Zhang was the principal organizer and director of the event. "Altered States" omits *Nine Holes*, performed later the same day on a nearby peak, where nine members of the group sexually humped the earth for 10 minutes.
9. The action was part of "Wildlife," a year-long, seven-city, 27-artist project organized by Beijing artist Song Dong.
10. A likely influence was Qiu Zhijie's ink-on-paper performance *Writing the "Orchid Pavilion Preface" One Thousand Times* (1986) and his painted-body work *Tattoo 1* (1997), in which his torso was partially obscured by the character meaning "no."
11. Not included in the show is the more peculiar *Window* (2004), shot in Shanghai, where the marmoreal gods have been replaced by a live donkey.

"Zhang Huan: Altered States" is currently on view at the Asia Society, New York [Sept. 6, 2007-Jan. 20, 2008]. It is accompanied by a 178-page catalogue with essays by Melissa Chiu, Kong Bu, Eleanor Heartney and Zhang. Ash paintings and woodcarvings by the artist will appear this spring, along with demonstrations of his workshop process, at the two PaceWildenstein galleries in Chelsea, New York [May 9-June 21, 2008].

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came together, you have the beginning of an increase in size. This continues until the whole universe is filled with matter. At a second point it reverses itself. . . . I look at my own work that way. I began that way, with these little strokes, culminating in the huge canvas which I can hardly see all of while I'm working on it and now I'm back down." Thomas Chimes interviewed by Phillip Mitsis, in *Thomas Chimes: The Entropy Paintings*, Philadelphia, Locks Gallery, p. 7.
2. Michael R. Taylor, *Thomas Chimes: Adventures in 'Pataphysics*, Philadelphia Museum of Art, 2007, p. 199.
3. Mitsis, p. 10.
4. From a 1978 conversation with Eileen Berger, quoted in Taylor, p. 124. This, in turn, as Taylor points out, was based on Jarry's concept of the time machine; Taylor, ibid.
5. In recent years Chimes has come to see the stages of his painting as corresponding to four stages in alchemy, which are accompanied by four colors, though he scrambles the alchemical order in which the stages and colors proceed in order to analogize the correspondence between them and the phases of his career. Taylor, pp. 5 and 221, n. 10.
6. In 1962, when Iolas visited his studio, "Chimes was horrified to see Iolas's negative reaction to the plethora of Greek and Saint Andrew's crosses in his latest paintings, which the dealer argued were antithetical to the anti-clerical stance of the Surrealist movement." He accused Chimes of being a "subversive Catholic"—which Chimes denied; Taylor, pp. 30-31. With surprisingly few exceptions, the second Bodley show marked the end of Chimes's exhibition history outside of Philadelphia. The exceptions at museums were "Thomas Chimes: A Retrospective Exhibition at the Ringling Museum of Art in Sarasota, Florida," 1968; "Tom Chimes: An Exhibition of Portraits, 1973-1978," at the Museums at Sunrise, Charleston, W.Va.; "Thomas Chimes: Survey," at the Alexander Onassis Center for Hellenic Studies, New York University, 1994; and "Portraying Ideas," at the Royal Hibernian Academy, Dublin, 2001. Locks Gallery in Philadelphia has shown him regularly since 1983 and each time has published a catalogue.
7. Taylor, p. 68.
8. Harald Szeemann, *Le Macchine Celibi/The Bachelor Machines*, New York, Rizzoli, 1975, pp. 5, 7.
9. Taylor, p. 68.
10. Ibid., p. 70.
11. Ibid., p. 80.
12. From a panel discussion of Duchamp held in 1987 at the Philadelphia Museum College of Art, "Duchamp and Art Today: Where Do We Go from Here?" quoted in Taylor, pp. 119 and 227, n. 164.
13. Alfred Jarry, "Commentary and Instructions for the Practical Construction of the Time Machine," *Adventures in 'Pataphysics. Collected Works I*, trans. by Paul Edwards and Antony Melville, London, Atlas Press, 2001, p. 213.
14. The number 48 might be merely a coincidence. Taylor, p. 126. The only figure who appears in both Richter's and Chimes's series is Oscar Wilde.
15. Ibid., p. 60.
16. Alfred Jarry, *Exploits and Opinions of Dr. Faustroll, Pataphysician: A Neo-Scientific Novel by Alfred Jarry*, trans. by Simon Watson Taylor, introduction by Roger Shattuck, Boston, Exact Change, 1996, p. 22. Shattuck's influential book *The Banquet Years*, New York, Harcourt, Brace, 1958, a study of Jarry and his peers, has been an important resource to Chimes over the years.
17. Szeemann, p. 10.
18. Vollard published the *Almanach Illustré du Père Ubu* in 1901, illustrated by Bonnard, in which Vollard claimed to have collaborated on the text with Jarry himself. He published three other volumes based on Jarry, illustrated by Bonnard and Rouault; see *Cézanne to Picasso: Ambroise Vollard, Patron of the Avant Garde*, ed. Rebecca A. Rabinow, New York, Metropolitan Museum of Art, New Haven, Yale University Press, 2006, pp. 331, 332-33 and 401.
19. See review of the exhibition at New York's Sandra Gering Gallery, by Raphael Rubinstein, *Art in America*, April 1994, p. 120.
20. For example, in his theatrical collaboration with the Handspring Puppet Theater, *Ubu and the Truth Commission*, first staged in 1997. Somewhat earlier, he made a series of prints casting himself as Ubu.
21. Mitsis, interview with the artist, p. 13.
22. Conversation with Marian Locks, in *Thomas Chimes*, Philadelphia, Locks Gallery 1990, n.p.
23. Barry Schwabsky, "Theater of Memory," *Art in America*, January 1995, p. 94.
24. Faye Hirsch, "In the Manner of the Luminiferous Ether," *Thomas Chimes: Faustroll Landscape*, Philadelphia, Locks Gallery, 2003, p. 10.

The retrospective "Thomas Chimes: Adventures in 'Pataphysics" was on view at the Philadelphia Museum of Art [Feb. 27-May 6]. There is an accompanying 255-page catalogue by curator Michael R. Taylor. "Thomas Chimes: The Entropy Paintings" appeared at Locks Gallery, Philadelphia [Mar. 2-Apr. 7].