

Photographs of the Infinite City



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*JULIUS KNIPL,
REAL ESTATE PHOTOGRAPHER:
THE BEAUTY SUPPLY DISTRICT*

Ben Katchor

Pantheon
108 pages; cloth, \$22.00

Hulking in the daylight and shadows of all cities is the vast, unknowable bulk of The City, that ultimate metropolitan accumulate of the small pleasures and grave indignities, schemes and schematics, desires and threats, which is infinite. The City is equally reality and possibility; as any city dweller understands, the pleasure of living in a city is its potential to confound. The famous cities of Gabriel García Márquez, Italo Calvino, and Jorge Luis Borges are dream states as much as they are metropolises, but that makes them no less realistic; likewise, when Sonic Youth's Thurston Moore declares in the song "Master=Dik" that "I know every nook and cranny in New York City," he is being intentionally audacious—no one can know a city so well.

The city in which Ben Katchor's comic strip, *Julius Knipf, Real Estate Photographer*, is set has no name. Its density and structures resemble New York, but this is not that place; Katchor is staking out his own surreal version of the infinite city. Knipf trudges through a seemingly familiar, cluttered landscape of storefront signage, news vendors, parked cars, brimming dumpsters, and lonely cafeterias, rendered in scratchy lines and dirty gray inkwash the color of caked city grime. At every step, he encounters the men and women whose dreams have created this city and its strange artifacts: the briefcase that unfolds as a wastebasket, the National Rectal Thermometer Observatory, perfume crafted to smell like "Phone Booth, circa 1961." Collected into three volumes so

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far—*Cheap Novelties, Stories*, and *The Beauty Supply District*—*Julius Knipf* is a stunning rendition of the details, accidents, refuse, and opportunities that comprise his own urban mythology.

Comics create their own world in a way that books or film never can; this single medium manages to perfectly bridge the gap between the literary and the literal. Books, for all their rich detail, have no visual component and, because we perceive our world visually, there is a permanent disjunction between the worlds we read and the world we live in. Film is lushly graphic—but the use of real people, voices, and sets is perhaps an imaginative limitation for being too completely realized. Comics exist in that space between the artist and the reader. You read the words, but you supply the voices and intonations; you see the drawings, but you make the connections between panels. The entire environment of the story is a creation of the artist, an utterly complete rendering of a world, no matter how simple or detailed.

As Katchor's *Julius Knipf* strips accumulate into collected books, his version of the city grows more complex and fascinating. The endless march of real and surreal details pile up on one another, tracing the vague outlines of a city that, read a week at a time, doesn't get a chance to make so much of an impression. In every strip, there are a dozen minor elements—a play called "The Informal Flu," the Senseless Elaboration Parlor—that are left unexplored and become more evidence of the city beyond the panels' edge. The city is so large and complicated that Knipf himself cannot serve as an adequate guide, a Virgil to the reader's Dante; he has no insight or inside information. When

he appears, he is simply a human agent of the city's grand mechanism. Often, he isn't even present, and it's not his voice that invisibly narrates the story. Instead, as you make your way through the books, Katchor gradually reveals the real protagonist and narrator of his strip: the unnamed city itself.

The narration is a critical, and mysterious, element of Katchor's comic. Disembodied, omniscient, and tinged with melancholy, the narrative boxes are a depiction of some small but vivid tableau unfolding in one forgotten corner of the city;

underneath, various denizens enact the story, unaware of how their experience is being distilled above. The effect is remarkable: a revealing detail of city dwelling is rendered as both a unique, transitory moment and an instance of elusive allegorical significance. "Regardless of our wishes, this accident has inextricably linked us together in a wonderful way,"

one man says to Knippl, after spilling a bit of ice cream on him. "The true import of this accident has penetrated far deeper into the fabric of our lives. Tell me, what brought you to this particular street at this particular moment...? Do you even know yourself?" The phenomenon of the accident is revealed as the city's motive force, operating on a level both smaller and larger than Knippl and his companion.



At first, the title of "real estate photographer" seems spurious, or just another example of Katchor's constant absurd wit. Though he almost always has a camera strapped across his chest, Knippl never appears to use it. Eventually, though, as the city steps into the foreground and Knippl recedes into a more and more passive role, the title of "real estate photographer" begins to make more sense: all observers of a city could be considered real estate photographers. Photography is the act of capturing a context so that the viewer can glimpse the

outlines of one narrative thread plucked out from among all the others happening concurrently. It's only ever a glimpse, of course: there's no way to perceive all of it at once. Even James Joyce's *Ulysses*, a 700-page book about a single day told in a jostling disarray of possible narrative voices, is only a partial construction of the moment in which two men cross paths for a

brief evening.

After a couple of weeks reading only *Julius Knippl*—in my own real life, in the real city of Seattle—I feel more a citizen of his city than my own. The logic and rhythms of Knippl's fictional city, its coincidences and intrigues, have induced a sympathetic vibration in me, or in my city; I can't tell which.

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