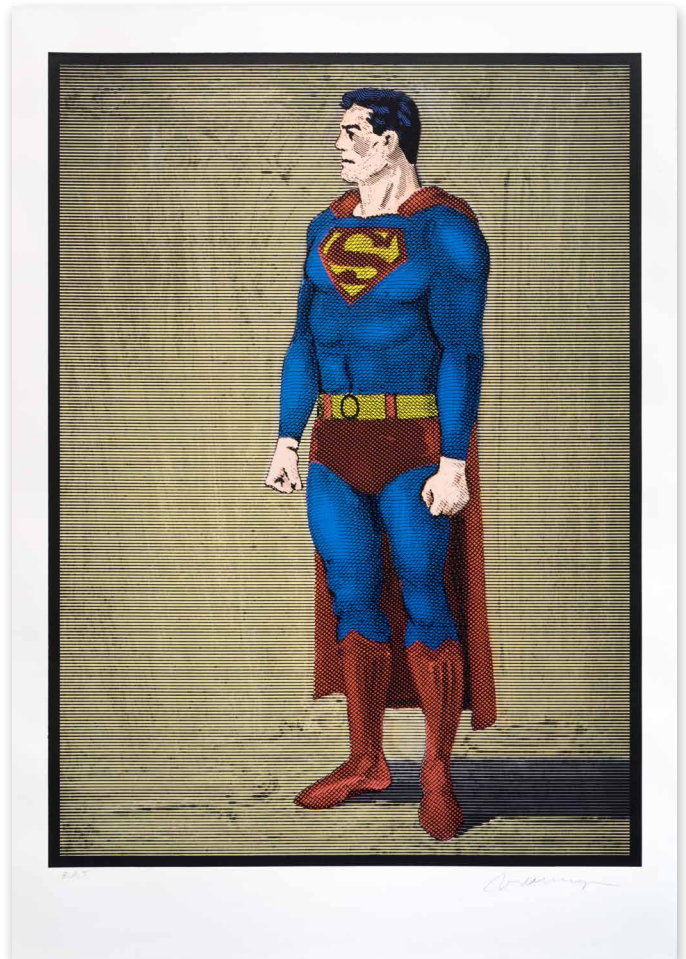


Mel Ramos: *Superman & Batman* Woodcuts

Following the Mel Ramos retrospective that traveled across seven major European museums in 2010-2011 to celebrate Ramos's 75th birthday and on the occasion of Batman's 75th birthday this year, it seems only fitting that Magnolia Editions revisit the iconic superhero paintings that started Ramos on the road to becoming one of Pop Art's most recognizable figures.

As curator Louis K. Meisel writes, "In mid-1961, at the beginning of what would be called 'Pop Art,' Mel Ramos produced what we would consider his first true mature image. That very well-known painting is Superman, and it displays a style and technique which Ramos has been identified with ever since. *Superman* [...] was the first true Pop painting that the artist produced. Followed by *Batman*, these paintings were straight out of the comic books, and in every way related to the commercial images of Andy Warhol, the cartoons of Roy Lichtenstein, and the word paintings of Ed Ruscha, not to mention the few others all hitting stride in 1961 and 1962."



Mel Ramos - *Superman*, 2014. Woodcut with acrylic. 37 x 26.75 in. Edition of 30

In 1960 I was wallowing in despair when I gave up painting abstract expressionism and painted something that I used to love as a kid, American super heroes, and I did a painting of Superman. My life changed, Pop Art was born and I was caught up in the energy of it all.

—MEL RAMOS



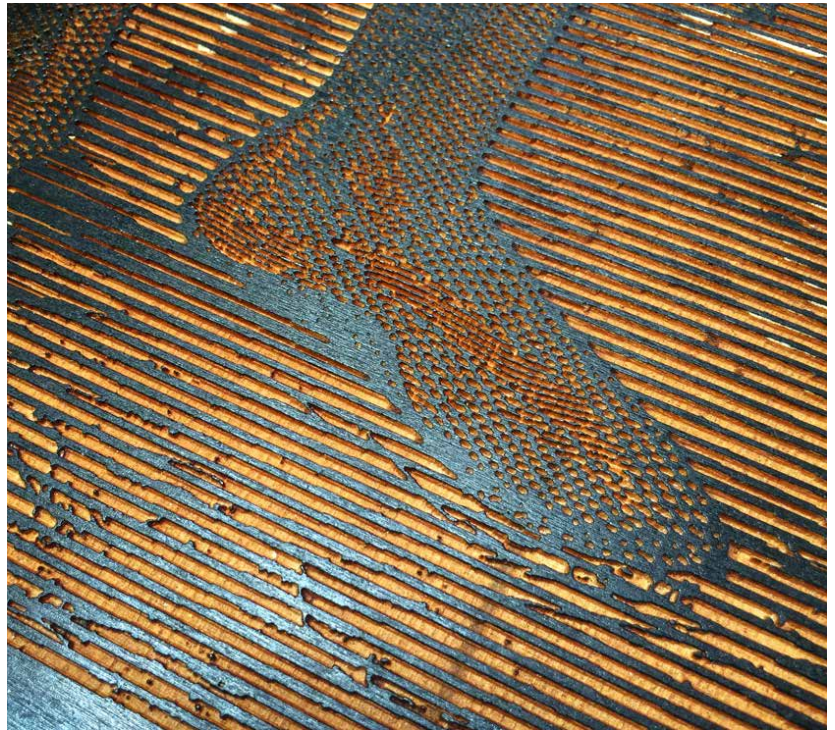
Mel Ramos - *Batman*, 2014. Woodcut with acrylic. 37 x 26.75 in. Edition of 30

Ramos's *Superman* and *Batman #2* oil paintings of 1961 were notable for their appropriation of well-known imagery and for the thickly applied impasto that Ramos inherited from mentor Wayne Thiebaud. The paintings also found

their heroic subjects cast in an unusually lonely light: Belinda Grace Gardner writes that “Ramos’s early impasto paintings of solitary figures almost merging with the void surrounding them reveal distinct influences of Diebenkorn’s and Oliveira’s interpretations of isolated figures on the canvas – vibrant Californian variations of the existential drama.” In an essay on the importance of networks and collaboration, designer Paddy Harrington uses Ramos’s heroes to exemplify the powerless and vulnerable nature of the loner faced with a situation beyond his control: “Mel Ramos painted a Superman who had lived through two world wars, and seen the beginning of the cold war. Things had become a little too complex for the solitary crusader to handle all on his own.”

Luckily, unlike his subject, Ramos has the benefit of decades of printmaking experience and a corresponding knack for getting the most out of his collaborators. In this case, the artist worked closely with Magnolia director Donald Farnsworth and Bay Area realist painter and frequent Magnolia collaborator Guy Diehl to develop the wood block matrices and the corresponding layers of acrylic color. Ramos is well known for his color lithograph editions (a 2006 lithograph revisited *Superman*) but these prints represent an unusual and bold move toward woodcut — a very different print medium and one which Ramos had rarely explored before this project.

Over the course of several months, Farnsworth and Diehl worked with Ramos to digitally translate his two compositions into raster files, creating a digital template for a computer-guided laser to carve the basic matrix from a block of wood. Ramos and master printer Nicholas Price then proofed this image in black ink and Ramos used white paint to indicate areas that should be carved further; Diehl, whose own paintings demand an extraordinarily still hand and eye for detail, performed much of the subsequent hand carving. The woodcut medium required that the team at Magnolia



Detail view of the woodblock matrix for *Superman*.

re-interpret the thick layers of paint applied by Ramos’s distinctive hand in the original composition, using only a series of crosshatched and staggered lines of varying frequency and thickness. Ultimately, a wide range of textures were achieved by overlaying discrete passages of lines pitched in multiple directions. Areas where Ramos’s original brushwork shows through — the vertical marks in Batman’s legs, for example, or the subtle variations in the character’s background — are actually carved into the wood block itself. The artist proofed new colors for both *Superman* and *Batman*, which were printed by master printer Tallulah Terryll in UV-cured acrylic ink over the black relief ink of the woodcut. Each print is an edition of 30, signed and numbered by the artist and available directly from Magnolia Editions.

Ramos’s caped protagonists may be existential antiheroes after all; the labor-intensive woodcut process has certainly lent his compositions an additional sense of gravity. Superman appears grounded by his own shadow, his fists clenched in a gesture that seems more powerless than aggressive. Meanwhile, Batman’s confident stance is undone by the downward tilt of his face and a subtle air of vulnerability. Nevertheless — or perhaps as a result — an appealing playfulness pervades the artist’s reinterpretations of these dynamic American icons. As Ramos, a dynamic American icon in his own right, declared in a 2011 interview about his prints and paintings: “If you don’t walk away with a smile on your face, you don’t quite understand the work.”

—NICK STONE