

ENTERTAINMENT

CAPTURING MARVEL

‘Marvelocity’ exhibit celebrates a superhero Chicago artist’s take on the superheroes

BY KYLE MACMILLAN
For the Sun-Times

The name Alex Ross might not spark immediate recognition, but almost everyone has heard of the superheroes he has built a distinguished 30-year career drawing and painting, including Black Panther, Captain America, Spider-Man, Superman, Wonder Woman and the Fantastic Four.

Few artists are more revered within the comic-book realm than Ross, a longtime Chicago-area resident who will be showcased in a touring exhibition that opens Saturday and runs through Aug. 20 at the Elmhurst Art Museum.



Alex Ross

REMSY ATASSI PHOTO

The show, titled “Marvelocity: The Art of Alex Ross,” features more than 50 gouache drawings, sketches, life-sized busts and other objects

related to Marvel Comics and the artist’s 2018 retrospective, coffee-table book with a similar title.

John McKinnon, the museum’s executive director, expects the summer exhibition to draw 8,000-10,000 visitors — a large number for the small suburban institution.

“We know families are off, looking for things to do, and we have a big family audience as our base,” he said.

Accompanying “Marvelocity” is “Superheroes in Wilder Park,” a public-art installation (through July 31) with creations by area artists and youth groups, and such programs as costume-figure drawing workshops and Be Your Own Superhero Day on July 16.

Comic-book imagery was not traditionally presented in art museums, but all that has changed as boundaries between so-called high and low art have disappeared and famed artists like the Chicago



Alex Ross’ gouache images of Storm (from left), Dr. Strange and Captain America from 2018 are part of the “Marvelocity” exhibition at the Elmhurst Art Museum.

Imagists have drawn inspiration from such work.

“Over the last several years now,” Ross said, “we’ve had an acceptance within traditional art museums to allow for popular art, of the world that I’m part of, to break through in that field.”

“Marvelocity” was organized in 2019 by the Bess Bower Dunn Museum in Libertyville and it has been seen at the Museum of the Rockies in Bozeman, Montana, and Museum of the Shenandoah Valley in Winchester, Virginia.

The Elmhurst presentation will be the first time Ross’ art has been showcased in a closer Chicago

suburb, and he is excited.

“It would be nice to get some recognition within my own general area, that’s for sure,” Ross said.

Ross, 53, got interested in the world of comic-book heroes when he was 4, after seeing Spider-Man on an episode of “The Electric Company,” a children’s television pro-

gram, and later being given comic books adapted for younger readers. “It all led from that,” he said.

The youngster, who grew up in Lubbock, Texas, began experimenting with making his own comic books, which at first were just folded-over sheets of 8½-by-11-inch paper — a cover image with some interior art. As he got older, he developed longer, more complex stories, including a graphic-novel adaptation of the 1980 Flash Gordon movie.

Ross never made a conscious decision to become a professional artist.

“It was an instinct,” he said.

‘MARVELOCITY: THE ART OF ALEX ROSS’

When: June 3-Aug. 20

Where: Elmhurst Art Museum, 150 S. Cottage Hill Ave.

Tickets: \$18

Info: elmhurstartmuseum.org

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ALEX ROSS, Chicago area resident who will be showcased in a touring exhibition that opens June 3 and runs through Aug. 20 at the Elmhurst Art Museum



IMAGES COURTESY OF ALEX ROSS

Earth” for NOW Comics, released a year later.

After working on a few other projects, he and writer Kurt Busiek landed a significant breakthrough with Marvel Comics in 1994. “That was the big way we got in,” Ross said.

Titled “Marvels,” the four-issue mini-series offered a look at Marvel Comics history through the eyes of a fictional news photographer. “You’re getting this human perspective, going into that human being’s life along the way, but seeing the backdrop of the superheroes,” Ross said.

What has set apart Ross’ work along the way is his sense of

realism, attention to detail and unusual use of gouache, an opaque equivalent of watercolor. “I was always wondering: What can I offer that’s going to be unique in terms of comics?” he said.

For part of his career, the artist was most identified with Superman, because of “Kingdom Come,” a highly successful four-issue mini-series published in 1996 by DC Comics.

“The way he is presented in that particular story line,” Ross said, “there is a gravity and heft to him that is not what is normally brought across. And that was very satisfying for me — feeling like I had brought a certain character to life.”

‘SANCTUARY’ CREEPS LESS INTERESTING THAN THEY THINK THEY ARE

Two tedious people — a rich businessman and his predatory dominatrix — play mind games in empty-calorie psychological drama ‘Sanctuary’



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It’s just the three of us in a luxury hotel suite for virtually the entirety of Zachary Wigon’s slick and cynical, empty-calorie psychological sexual drama “Sanctuary.” Let’s see, there’s Margaret Qualley’s Rebecca, Christopher Abbott’s Hal — and the viewer.

About halfway through the night, this particular viewer was thinking about calling a Lyft and leaving these shallow, petty and immature narcissists to themselves. Although “Sanctuary” is stylish and initially intriguing, it’s eventually a chore to spend an entire feature-length film (even with a relatively brief running time of 96 minutes) with two boors who are also kind of boring, despite all the histrionics and fang-baring and manipulative mind games. They find themselves and each other a lot more interesting than we do.

“Sanctuary” begins with Qualley’s Rebecca in a blonde bob and velvety, hunter green business suit, sitting across the table from Abbott’s slightly disheveled and sweaty Hal, screening him for a position as CEO of his father’s hotel empire. The questions become ever more personal and bizarre — until they break character, and we see they’re actually role-playing from a script, literally a script.

While it’s true that Hal is the presumptive heir to his recently deceased father’s hotel regime, Rebecca is actually his longtime dominatrix. Next thing we know it, Rebecca is commanding Hal to strip down to his underwear, get



A dominatrix (Margaret Qualley) resists the efforts of her client (Christopher Abbott) to end their arrangement in “Sanctuary.” NEON

‘SANCTUARY’ ★★½

Neon presents a film directed by Zachary Wigon and written by Micah Bloomberg. Rated R (for sexual content and language). Running time: 96 minutes. Opens Thursday at local theaters.

down on his hands and knees and scrub the bathroom floor (“I want you to clean *behind* the toilet, that’s where the dirt is”), and the weak-spined Hal is complying, bowing like a puppy that’s been scolded.

This is but the first time Micah Bloomberg’s script pulls the rug out from under us, but the subsequent reveals aren’t particularly surprising — up to and including a denouement that feels arbitrary and forced.

We can see Hal is a privileged jerk, but when he tries to cut off his arrangement with Rebecca or remind her that he has the wealth and power to destroy her, it rings hollow. She clearly has the upper hand, and he secretly wants it that way, so we’re subjected to numerous scenes in which Rebecca subjugates Hal and humiliates him sexually and psychologically.

Margaret Qualley is a wonderful actor, but she’s slight and she looks and sounds even younger than her 28 years, and at times it’s a stretch to believe her as a predatory dominatrix. Abbott, on the other hand, perfectly plays the insecure, not particularly bright Hal, who keeps telling Rebecca (and himself) he’s well-suited to succeed his legendary, late father.

One of the problems with “Sanctuary” is while these two are convinced they’re involved in a chess game with the highest possible stakes, it really boils down to whether or not Hal will ascend to become CEO of his father’s empire (which he doesn’t really seem to want all that much), or just continue on as an ineffectual and wealthy jellyfish, and whether Rebecca will extract millions from Hal, or keep working in her chosen field, which seems to pay pretty well. However it plays out, it’s a good thing these two found each other, no matter how unorthodox their arrangement, because it’s hard to imagine a lot of folks volunteering to spend much quality time with either one of them.