The Gloriously Anxious Art of Roz Chast

I n many of the cartoons in her graphic memoir, Can't We Talk About Something More Pleasant?, Roz Chast draws herself as frazzled and harried, her eyes aglow behind off-kilter glasses and her blond hair frizzing wildly with her emotions. The book, after all, is the story of her parents’ aging and passing almost 10 years ago, and of her maddening relationship with them.

Chast, 61, has built her reputation on chronicling the anxieties, absurdities and simple joys of contemporary life in her wry, neurotic style that is immediately evident. Her unpretentious and comfortable surroundings are decorated with craft projects from origami to hand-painted eggs, and her art and cartoon collections—works by Helen Hokinson, Jules Pfeiffer, Saul Steinberg and more—extend into the bathroom. Casually dressed in jeans and a purple shirt decorated with flowers, she apologizes for the holes in her pet parrots, Jacky and Eli, who have pecked in her beige living-room sofa.

At her home in Ridgefield, Conn., Chast is a little calmer than her cartoon persona. Two of her three loves—art and birds—are immediately evident. Her unpretentious and comfortable surroundings are decorated with craft projects from origami to hand-painted eggs, and her art and cartoon collections—works by Helen Hokinson, Jules Pfeiffer, Saul Steinberg and more—even extend into the bathroom. Casually dressed in jeans and a purple shirt decorated with blue hummingbirds, she apologizes for the holes in her pet parrots, Jacky and Eli, who have pecked in her beige living-room sofa. They squawk interminably from their cages nearby, and she calls to them, “Hi baby, I’m here, I’m here.”

Chast enthusiastically brings out her latest project, a small embroidered tapestry of horses with the word “neigh” repeatedly stitched—imperfectly. “Uniformity and perfection are not my highest values,” she says. Her art, too, features distinctive shaky lines. Those imperfections, in art and in life itself, are the essence of her cartoons.

Bob Mankoff, cartoon editor for The New Yorker, calls Chast’s style “primitive, sophisticated, playful, whimsical, intensely personal and completely attuned to her subject matter.” Chast, he says, “is the pre-eminent New Yorker cartoonist of the late-20th and early-21st century and has an integrated body of work that transcends any publication.”

Subway Sofa, a large mural she created for “Cartoon Memoirs,” mirrors her New York-centric view. A motley group of people crowd together uneasily on one of Chast’s ubiquitous sofas, a lamp, linoleum-patterned wallpaper behind them. Yet this domestic scene takes place on a subway train, where bombastic ads shout, “Buy This Soda, It’s Life-Changing,” and the train’s destination is marked, “The Unknown.”

Chast juxtaposes the “familiar and the terrifying,” says curator Frances Rosenfeld. “Her blend of discomfiture and coziness reflects a complex voice that strikes many notes at once.” Chast’s style is “deceptively approachable,” Rosenfeld adds. “There’s something affectionate and sympathetic about how she draws people. It’s her genius to make it look like she’s just dashed it off, but it’s actually very well thought out.”

Though her cartoons are not autobiographical, everything is fair game. She pours all her “anxieties, fears, superstitions, failures, furies, insecurities, and dark imaginings—the kit and caboodle of her psyche” into her work, writes New Yorker editor David Remnick in the introduction to Chast’s opus, Theories of Everything: Selected, Collected, and Health-Inspired Cartoons, 1978-2006. It is her “gift for comic invention that makes them funny.”

Nowhere is this truer than in...
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CHAST HAS LEARNED THE CRAFT OF JUGGLING WORK AND FAMILY, A DELICATE BALANCE SHE EXAMINES IN HER ART

giving her pencil and paper. Because cartooning was not thought of as “real art,” Chast majored in painting at the Rhode Island School of Design. But, she acknowledg-
edges, she was not a very good paint-

New Yorker cartoonist was female. A role model for other female cartoon-

mains a debilitating issue—she hasn’t had a physical in over 25 years. Chast submits a batch of six to eight cartoons to The New Yorker every week. Of those, the magazine “hopefully” chooses one. File cabinets in her second-floor studio are filled with “rejects” that she some-
times redraws and resubmits. Above the tools of her trade—pens, paint-

W hat’s courageous for Chast is routine for others. On her website (rozchast.

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Tell Me How You Really Feel
The joys and ills of couplehood.

Can’t We Talk About Something More Pleasant? Chast records the decline of her parents, Elizabeth and George Chast, and her role as an only child with the responsibili-
ty to care for them. She reveals her thoughts uncensored: When returning to Brooklyn for the first time in 11 years, she muses that she had done a pretty good job of avoiding her old neighborhood and fantasies of her parents, “Maybe they’ll both die at the same time in their sleep…and I’ll never have to ‘deal.’”

Her father, a French and Spanish high school teacher who spoke Italian and Yiddish and loved words, was kind and sensitive, a dilly-daller with chronic anxieties, she writes. Her mother, in contrast, was a critical and uncompromising perfectionist who once wanted to be a concert pianist. When she got angry, she didn’t hesitate to deliver what she called “a blast from Chast.”

CHRIST WROTE THE BOOK TO REMEMBER HER PARENTS. “The more they are gone from my life and the older I get, the easier it is for me to have empathy with them,” she says. The book seeks to strike a universal chord. “This is the first time I feel that the things I was saying were not just about people who live in the New York area. It surprised me.” She hopes the book will raise awareness of the critical issues of aging. Some situations her parents experienced were so appalling—for instance, the high cost of assisted-liv-


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