

Mort Künstler exhibit

An artist you can't refuse

BY DEIDRE S. GREBEN
Special to Newsday

Making a slight adjustment to his jawline — by stuffing cotton wool in his cheeks — Marlon Brando snagged the lead in “The Godfather,” and arguably gave his greatest performance.

“He tried to look like the Don Corleone I created,” says Mort Künstler. The 92-year-old artist who lives in Oyster Bay first gave the mob boss visual form in his 1969 cover illustration for *Male* magazine, where a synopsis of Mario Puzo’s “The Godfather” initially appeared. Now, that image of the crime family kingpin commands the front jacket of an exhibition catalog and the front lobby of the Heckscher Museum of Art in Huntington announcing a show of more than 80 original pulp fiction works from the 1950s through the 1970s by the prolific Long Island artist.

“Mort Künstler is the don of illustrators in the genre’s Golden Age,” says Michael Schantz, the museum’s director. “His full-throttle, action-packed, in-your-face images represent the very essence of the pulp era.” The Heckscher show offers up a wide range of subjects depicted by Künstler in such men’s adventure magazines as *Stag*, *For Men Only* and *True Action*, and are divided into themed sections, from famous criminal heists to dangerous encounters in the wild to Cold War espionage.

Künstler’s attention to detail and dynamic compositions also landed him assignments for *The Saturday Evening Post*, *National Geographic* and *Newsweek*, among other publications. But it is his portrayals of scenes from the American Civil War for which he is most recognized, with exhibitions of Künstler’s meticulously rendered and researched historic paintings appearing in galleries throughout the Northeast and Southeast.

“Künstler uses techniques that were employed by narrative painters that go back to the Renaissance,” says Schantz. All one has to do is compare John Singleton Copley’s 18th

WHAT “Mort Künstler: The Godfather” of Pulp Fiction Illustrators”

WHEN | WHERE 10 a.m.-5 p.m. Wednesday-Friday and 11 a.m.-5 p.m. Saturday-Sunday, Heckscher Museum of Art, 2 Prime Ave., Huntington

INFO \$8, \$6 age 62 and older, \$5 students; free age 9 and younger; 631-351-3250, heckscher.org

century masterpiece “Watson and the Shark” with the artist’s “Shark Attack on the U.S.S. Juneau,” the October 1958 cover illustration for *Male* magazine. Schantz notes that the action in both is brought “front and center” and the viewers’ eyes are directed around each rendering by “dramatic diagonal thrusts.”

“Michelangelo did narrative art, too. His story was the Bible,” says Künstler, referencing the Sistine Chapel ceiling. “It was just that his page size and folds were different.”

Künstler’s own self-described “gods” are American illustrators like Norman Rockwell, N.C. Wyeth, Winslow Homer and Dean Cornwell,



“Corleone Family Meeting” (1969) is one of “The Godfather” pieces featured in the exhibit.

and he collects and displays their works throughout his home.

In addition to the Heckscher exhibit, Long Islanders can learn more about the man and his work in the documentary “Mort Künstler: The Strongest Image,” which will air on WLIW/21 at 8:30 p.m. on Oct. 28.

With the genre’s constriction over the years, Künstler considers himself extremely fortunate for his continuous stream of employment in an occupation he loves. Though he is still receiving commissions, says the nonagenarian, “I feel like I never worked a day in my life.”



“Buried Alive for Four Months” (1965) shows the action-packed and adventurous style Mort Künstler is known for.