

LA STUDIO VISIT

Carol Es

by JACK CHIPMAN

When I visited on an unusually cool summer morning, Carol Es was getting ready to move her studio from its present location to where it had been before she was granted a prestigious Pollock-Krasner Fellowship Award last year. Seems she had spent part of the grant money to get out of her garage and rent a storefront near her Highland Park home for a year. But this bright and orderly studio seemed light years away from what had been a dark and troubled childhood.

Over the course of an hour Es recounted how she and her older brother had been forced to work full-time (sometimes all night) for their father who was a successful pattern-maker in the local garment industry. Because much of the work was home-based, the patriarch literally turned his house into a sweatshop with the siblings spending most of their childhood as child laborers, missing out on a normal education among other deprivations. To make matters worse, Es' mother was mentally unstable and unable to right any of the wrongs inflicted upon the children. Adding to the dysfunctional family life was a seemingly unending cycle of moves and the competing religious viewpoints of the parents. Her father had been raised in the strict Mennonite ("Like the Amish ... with electricity") tradition while her mother was a Jew.

Carol Es, who was born in Los Angeles in 1968, finally left home at age 14 and slowly began a difficult self-education process. By frequenting local libraries she managed to gradually improve her meager reading skills and eventually uncovered a rich art history she had no previous knowledge of. At first she was particularly drawn to the abstractions of Kandinsky and Klee. These and other celebrated artists became touchstones that inspired her own artistic awakening. Because drawing had been her way to escape the troubles at home, a rudimentary groundwork had already been laid. What took time was the realization that drawing and painting could be a viable career path.

Poet and novelist Charles Bukowski became a key literary influence, just one of the literary gems she also discovered during her many hours at the library. Because I was unfamiliar with



Es in her studio, photograph by Jack Chipman

Bukowski she offered the following quote from the novel *Factotum* from 1975:

If you're going to try, go all the way. Otherwise, don't even start. This could mean losing girlfriends, wives, relatives and maybe even your mind. ... It could mean jail. It could mean derision. It could mean mockery — isolation. Isolation is the gift. All the others are a test of your endurance, of how much you really want to do it. And, you'll do it, despite rejection and the worst odds. And it will be better than anything else you can imagine. ... There is no other feeling like that. You will be alone with the gods, and the nights will flame with fire. You will ride life straight to perfect laughter. It's the only good fight there is.

Anyone involved in the art world knows that it's not uncommon for an artist to have an angst-ridden personal history. This can result in eccentricity and/or countercultural tendencies that are echoed in the work the artist produces over a lifetime. Es is no exception. Her pitiful childhood has brought forth a body of work that is edgy, with a knowing naiveté. The not-easy-to-pull-off guilelessness is most evident in her mixed-media paintings; less so in her handmade books that often exhibit an articulate even refined sensibility. This is not to disparage the artist books. They're charming and an important part of her output. It's just that the graphic work they contain is, to my eye, more clear-minded and sophisticated. In addition, the books that Es painstakingly replicates in editions of 50 or so are affordable and have helped spark a growing appreciation of her work.

The decisive mixed-media works that launched the artist's career incorporated thread, apparel schema and other trappings of her pattern-making experience. Loosely painted cartoon characters that mimic the actions of dysfunctional parents came later. Her more recent work merges these ostensibly incompatible elements in an affecting way. Handmade dolls that clearly extend the caricatures of her parents into three dimensions are the latest development for Es. Two of them were attached to a wall in the studio when I visited. Inert and non-threatening, they convey the same naïve sensibility as the paintings and represent an attempt at reconciling her family life. Ultimately the stuffed dolls, paintings, and even the artist books are her way of coming to grips with a painful past. **A**

A solo show of new work by Carol Es, ends Dec. 31 at the George Billis Gallery in Culver City.

The Deal, 2009, 36 x 48 inches, Oil, paper and embroidery on canvas.

