

It is rare that a small show of painting and drawing in an alternative space aptly glides up the line between art and life. But Carol Es pirouettes between the beauty of formal composition and the subtext of layered content as precisely as any Los Angeles painter exhibiting these days. We had a pleasant conversation overlooking the beach at her San Pedro home studio she shares with her poet boyfriend Michael. Carol had given a talk about her art amidst her solo show at the Highways Gallery in Santa Monica the week before.

Mat Gleason: In your talk at your solo show, you went over what was a pretty angstful relationship with your family and the tailoring business, and yet there is no apparent negativity in your art. It isn't sentimental either, and work drawing on deeper personal issues tends to wax toward one or the other of these. What about your artistic approach allows you to avoid the cliché-riddled pitfalls that entrap so many other artists?

Carol Es: I don't know really. I can probably answer this in a few different ways. I wasn't aware there was such a cliché-pitfall when artwork gets personal. I find it weird when art isn't personal. Other artists get entrapped in being negative or sentimental, eh? I didn't know. Is it maybe that some shit is just cheesy when it's not really honest? It IS my angst that drives me, but I still try to make sure the work looks good.

Q: You mentioned your beginning in the outsider art world being riddled with more rules and standards than the fine art world. Was there a conspiracy there to keep the artists dumb and removed from the commercial part of things?

A: It's not a conspiracy, well yeah maybe it is. What is an outsider? The guys that painted the caves in France? I can talk about this subject all day. The "experts" in the outsider field (which make up a total of like 5 people) need to sell a story and that story has to go with a style. The style is either childish, obsessive, or makes one think of a mental patient. There's no room for evolution beyond that box. God forbid an artist matures or picks up new skills, or takes new risks, or gets proper medication.

A famous outsider artist named Albert Loudon was a poor van driver in England who got discovered by dealers in the early 80s. But once he learned a bit about the business and got involved in the selling, the "experts" in the field actually asked him to give back his out-

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finite field the experts created. This is why "outsider" is a horrible description of work because it really describes nothing, and it's even indefinable by the people in the field. I'm sure they will tell you their view is all about integrity and this kind of crap, but who's integrity? There isn't any freedom for the artist to define what that integrity might be. Dealers will say they are protecting their collectors by keeping a line drawn between a regular eccentric artist and one that's outside. It's a line they like to erase and redraw depending on how it serves them. In a world so seemingly supportive and nurturing of artists outside the mainstream (whatever that means), you should have seen their reactions when I started to change my style. It was a kind of "you can't just do that" kind of response. But I had never belonged in the first place - not because I was lacking a good sob story, but because I was an ambitious self-promoter and my work was not consistent with the style rules. I was even told that my work didn't look self-taught anymore. What do you make of that?

I believe there are only a handful of real outsider artists and their work is obvious. Their dealers exploit them (especially when they are mentally ill), and they have ripped them off intensely (more so than the contemporary art world). After they die their work is worth even more, so I guess there's no justice even in the afterlife.

Q: What percentage of your art, and I am particularly referring to the cartoon imagery in some of your pieces, would you say still has an outsider authenticity and how much of your work is using a non-verbal or emotive method of expression through the blending of composition and conceptualism?

A: I wouldn't call it "outsider" authenticity. Let's move on from that word. I wish I hadn't brought it up at the talk. None of it is pretension or baloney if that's what you're driving at. In fact, it's so truthful that it might be the non-cartoony stuff that could be considered contrived. I made a very conscious decision to change my style a couple years ago because my older work was way too telling of my pain. I really am a little kid who's pissed off, but I've also matured and got some therapy. It's the adult that forces me to rethink my actions and plans in my work.

Once I started to understand my older work (because I will tell you I did not know what I was screaming about back when I created it), it would have been dishonest to continue down that road. I had to change. At the same time, I am learning not to hide what I am and continue to practice the guttural work so I don't get too bored with being a grown-up. Cornball answer, but that's the truth.

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Q: You've passed your first public speaking test with flying colors, why is it that the art world seems so lecture-oriented? You seem like the last person in the world to give a lecture, so I have to ask you.

A: My reasons for doing the lecture had nothing to do with the art world. It was personal. It was more about conquering my fears. Recently I had surgery, which left me feeling like I had to give back to the earth by teaching or mentoring since I wasn't going to be breeding any monkeys of my own. I figured if I could get through a lecture then I could possibly one day teach.

But once I recovered from the lecture and processed everything, I realized I do not owe any philanthropy to young adults as a teacher, especially since I despise being amongst groups of people. I learned more about what it is I do and do not want to do.

You are right - the art world is very lecture-oriented, and while I haven't been to all that many artist lectures myself, the ones I had seen and heard were pretty boring. Friends of mine that saw Laura Owens and Elizabeth Peyton were completely disappointed with their lack of depth in meaning. I too would have high expectations from such artists. Since nothing was really expected of me, I figured I could maybe pull it off, or at best, have less distance to fall if I bored everyone.

Mary Mileczik, the curator of the Highways show, encouraged me to give a talk because she felt I had a compelling story. She knew it wasn't going to be art-speaky or filled with academic bullshit. She and others also convinced me that people would be interested, so that's also why someone like me would do an odd thing like that.

It has always amazed me that people go see other people talk about themselves when it isn't stand-up comedy.

Q: Tell me about the Durfee Grant you were just awarded...

A: Well, I was just recently awarded a grant from the Durfee Foundation for my show at George Billis in September. This is a big honor as an L.A. artist. The funds will be used for an art book that is accompanying the show and some frames.

The Durfee Foundation grants up to 2500 bucks to L.A. artists 4 times a year for specific shows that mark a sort of distinct turning point in their career. I've applied for it several times in the past and am really happy to be selected this time. All you can do is keep trying. For me there isn't another choice. I apply for things constantly and once and a while I get something. Mostly it's all about rejection, but I'm always getting back up no matter how many times I get run over.

I'll take the good where I can.

Q: After a few years of group shows you are finally showing more as a solo artist, does

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that help you in the studio, knowing that work complementing each other will be shown together? I ask because so many group shows tend to be artists work that service the theme of some curator...

A: Planning for solo shows has completely transitioned my work because I am better focused and more in touch with the art now than when I was vying for all those group shows each year, but being in-group shows has been a necessary experience. It's a good way to get out there, gather tools, network, meet artists, be proactive, gain momentum, insight, confidence, feedback, discipline, and see how it all works. Being a member at L.A.A.A./Gallery 825 has really helped me in that sense. At the same time, I do think that most group shows are limiting and cater too heavily on themes. As a curator I know it's a lot of fun to select work that fits your message, but it wears me out as a general exercise.

It didn't even cross my mind to pursue a solo show until I met artist Susan Woodruff. She encouraged me to start thinking in terms of creating larger impressions and presenting whole bodies of work. I was already working in terms of series, but had a naive idea that you had to be 65 years old or dead to have a solo show.

I still try to make singular pieces, while focusing on a whole body of work. There's been more freedom in that. Naming shows after the work is already chosen is probably a better idea, but difficult. This recent solo show was hard to title because there was a lot going on in terms of subject matter and influence. The next show is going to be called *I-self* and that wraps up a lot of dual meaning while keeping it open to interpretation. *I-self* is what is marked on garment patterns that require single pieces of fabric in the cutting room. Most patterns are marked 1, 2, 3 or 4 "self." Having solo show opportunities also helps me to simplify, something I have been working on for a lifetime it seems. I am always working quite hard to work less.

Q: What was your most memorable group show experience

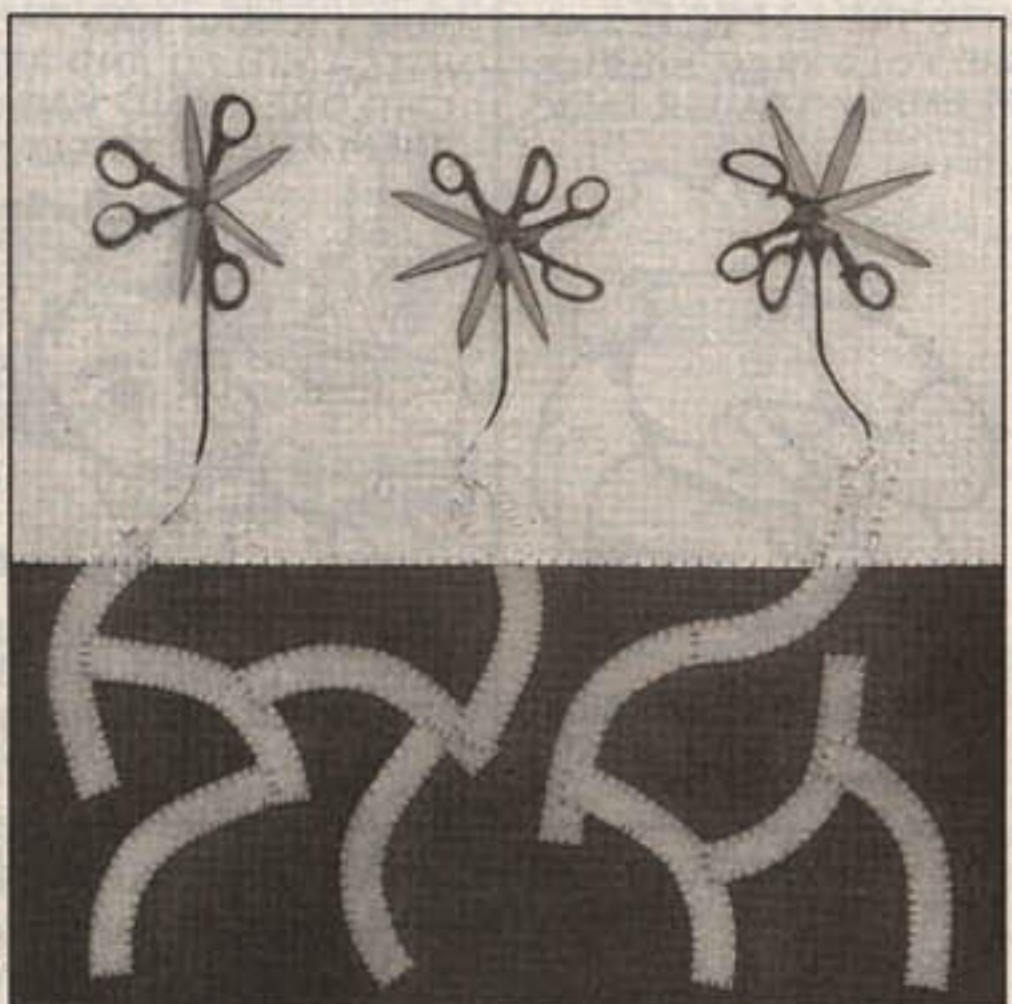
A: Lilli Muller put me in a show of 5 women artists at Bedlam Gallery in Los Feliz once that wound up to be a nicer experience than my first solo show.

Midge Lynn invited me into a show with her and Elizabeth Hoffman at 1-5 Gallery in downtown L.A. and that was a great show.

Ed Pelissier put an interesting show together at the wedge building that used to be the women's building in downtown, which turned out great and proved you don't need a known gallery space to put together a great show.

But once I took a train up to Salem, Oregon to see a show I was in and didn't tell the curator. I was able to experience the show anonymously as if I were just a viewer and did not have to speak to anyone about my work. The curator had 4 of the artists do short lectures and I just loved being an onlooker not having to say a word. It was like I was invisible and got to eavesdrop on people talking about my work. That was my best experience. Although the curator was a little upset when she found out I was there and never introduced myself.

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Q: You had a background in the music industry, tell me about signing with a record label and maybe contrast that with working with a gallery, being represented in the art world.

A: I was a drummer in a little rock band and we signed a deal with Sony that got us new equipment, some tour support and studio rental. Past that, our recordings were paid for but things didn't pan out. Then we signed to an indy and went into debt an additional 300k. I say in debt because these band deals are really loans. You have to recoup the money back to the company with the billions of records you're going to sell.

Both industries have their vices. It's kinda cutthroat vs. financial fairness. In the music biz,

GROUP SHOWS CATER TOO HEAVILY ON THEMES

the artist is screwed financially from all sides, which is probably why there is more camaraderie between musicians than artists. Gallery representation is more personal / one-on-one. You get a lot more credit being an artist too. Musicians are treated like dirty street bums and unless you're Bruce Springsteen (who I dislike by the way) or something, you aren't "the boss!"

At least with gallery representation you get half the profits! With a recording contract, you are lucky to get a fraction. And like I said, you also owe the money they put into you, plus all the manager/lawyer fees, or anyone else who was working for you for "free" because they "believed in you." ...am I sounding bitter yet?

The chances are slim to none your album

will even go gold, and depending on the deal, gold is as good as tin. At least in a gallery deal the artist is essentially treated well and your relationship is built on mutual respect. With a record company - unless you sell millions of "units" there isn't any real love. Even your producer and the guy who signed you in the first place get sick of you after 3 months. But maybe this happens in the art world too.

A major interesting difference in the two worlds are the artists themselves. In a band you learn to work together and there is real support there. Even between "rival" bands there is a true bond that I hardly ever see between visual artists. Maybe because art is a stand-alone thing the competition is cutthroat, but I just don't see artists genuinely happy for other artists' successes. There is just a strange, suspicious coating on friendships between artists that is just non-existent between musicians.

Q: Are the groupies in the art world cuter / studlier than the groupies in the music industry?

A: No way. Rock n' roll is sexier by a long shot.

Q: Are there any musicians who influence your art?

A: No.

Q: Has living in San Pedro had any noticeable impact on your art?

A: Actually, I'd be making the same art whether I lived in Hollywood, San Pedro or Joshua Tree. This question has an answer, but my response is boring. How bout a different question?

(the tape ended as I was saying "Uhh... in response to that). c