

Handmade Memory



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“The moments of the past do not remain still; they retain in our memory the motion which drew them towards the future, towards a future which has itself become the past, and draw us on in their train.”

Marcel Proust



“It’s all neurotic,” Los Angeles artist Carol Es tells me while taking inventory of several stitched canvases layered with text, paint and pattern paper in her home studio. “Live without being” is scribbled on the surface of *Argument Park*, a work that presents a literal head-on vehicular collision, and also the collision of dichotomous states of being. The text continues with “walk without stepping and feel without touching,” which suggests that we remove all vestige of ourselves and go through the motions blindly, much like the time cards that Es draws on that enforce the work ethic she learned early on – clock in and clock out. Her works present a pictorial history of familial dysfunction,

and psychological torment, but Es also combines text written in an uneven and aggressive hand that provides an additional narrative in her work. Her handwriting is seemingly childlike, resembling early assignments from grade school before we decided how to construct the letters in the alphabet and make them our own.

Several of Es’s sculptures are homemade dolls made of “cloth and stuffed with plastic bags from the grocery store,” which is why “they’re kind of lumpy and sad and weird looking.” Hanging from fish wire in the corners of the room and moving slightly at the occasional passing

of a breeze, the sculptures were made to represent Es and her late father, but they also indicate what it means to “live without being,” as their cloth faces can barely emote a blank smile. Es is a pattern maker, not a seamstress, and although the stitch work appears to be intentionally amateurish, Es has not “purposefully made them to look like Frankenstein stitching,” rather she admits, “it’s actually the best I can do.”

IMAGE: Opposite page, *Eve’s Dilemma*, mixed media on canvas. Above, Carol Es in her studio.

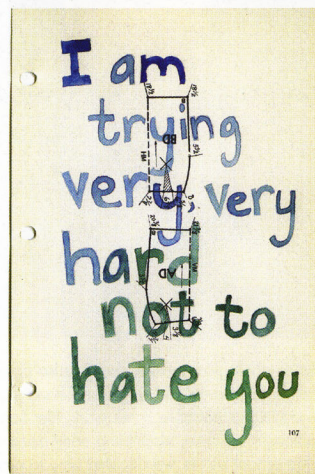


Though Carol Es insists that her work channels a certain neurosis, her studio space is nothing short of meticulous. There is not a single stain of paint to be found on the hardwood floors, and all of her works are carefully placed on the surrounding walls. The paint brushes are all cleaned and arranged with their bristles exposed, occupying a former coffee can. Stacks of her most recent book project *Horsebucket* are aligned with their spines facing out, while sheets of pattern paper fill a corner on the fold-out worktable on the other side of the room. What did she mean when she said, "It's all neurotic?" Was she referring to the art or the cleanliness? Es reveals that the years she spent as a pattern maker contributed to the state of her studio. The "concentration required of following the line that was endless. But I think it taught me how to focus, and it did wonders for my OCD." She folds her hands on her lap revealing intricate and hallow tattoos that form an indeterminate object – as a collapsed image the ink looks like elastic thought bubbles growing out from her wrists.

A work of art is inexorably tied to the hand of its maker but Carol Es's practice is contingent on its handmade quality. On first inspection her works appear cartoonish and child-like but it is through this guise that Es presents a style that communicates the torment of her childhood as a victim of sexual abuse. Having endured a loss of innocence so early in her life, the artist now embraces a childlike won-

derment that she never had early in life. The molestation, at the hands of a man hired by her family, went on years while she worked for her father as a pattern maker in a sweatshop in downtown Los Angeles.

Es has re-appropriated materials once associated with her labor such as scissors, thread, pattern paper, and



sewing needles. By stitching her canvases – something that doesn't need mending – Es has assigned a new meaning to the material and her role as pattern maker. By repeating the collar shape, Es found comfort in the repetition. "I decided to kind of reclaim pattern making because I grew up doing that," she explains. In order to reconcile with a past of monotonous and grueling labor, she set up her own workshop in her garage to "look exactly like the workshop where [she] worked with her father and brother, and it was kind of a therapeutic experiment and an artistic endeavor. I want to see what happens if I go back to the repetitive motions of cutting patterns. If I could relive the experience and make art out of it, I could almost rewrite the past. Rewrite it and make it something that it wasn't and just basically rewrite history and make it a positive thing."

Es suggests that memory is a current theme in her recent work. "I've been really focused on memory and loss of memory, and what that means and what people are made up of and if we really are our memories." If we really are our memories, then we are also our history. As inescapable as our own shadow we can reconcile with our history, accept it, embrace it, or just move on. Carole Es has done it all to relive her past, and make art from the pain.

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Her family influences much of Es's work and provides the viewer insight into the divide that characterized Es's family life, particularly the divide between her parents who separated as many times as they united. This uprooted the family over and over again. Es explains that with "each break-up, there was a buying and selling of a house." The family moved all around Los Angeles and the San Fernando Valley and then sought a "fresher start" by moving to Miami where her parents first met, but they only stayed for three months. When they returned to Es's father's hometown in Pennsylvania and lived among the Mennonites, religious tension divided her mother and father further. "When we were all together my dad would win over with the Christianity thing," Es recounts as she remembers her father's devotion to the Christian faith.

Hostile Family Portraits are cathartic studies of the emotional and psychological upheaval of Es's family life. She admits that, "I am definitely exploiting the hell out of them, but at the same time I love them. They're crazy. They're totally nuts, including me, but they're the only family I have." *Take 2 for No Reason* shows Es's brother faithfully kneel-

ing before a cross while a girl in the center of the canvas holds the Star of David in one hand, a bottle of pills in the other desperately looking to the heavens for an answer. Meanwhile a figure, presumed to be Carol's father, points a chastising finger toward his daughter angered by her association with the Jewish faith. Es explains that *Take 2 for No Reason* is about more than finding a religious identity. It also characterizes her childhood with feuding parents. Just as the girl in the painting seems trapped in the middle of Judaism, Christianity, and the patriarch, Es describes her own divide. "When I was with my dad he would baptize me and send me to church camp, and when my mom had me, she would take me to synagogue."

Judaism won out for Es, and she incorporates Hebrew text in her work. "I actually don't know how to read Hebrew," she confesses, "so I have to go through a lot of different channels to translate it. I really don't want to spell things out in English, and I thought Hebrew would be good because it wouldn't be so obvious that it says something. It's backwards so it has something to do with me

and my family." Herein lies another dichotomy in Es's work. Is the use of Hebrew letters appropriated because she sees her life operating backwards, or because it relays an image while being encrypted, or does it serve an aesthetic purpose? Just as the text continues in *Argument Park*, "walk without stepping, float without moving," the participation of the viewer is active when surveying Carol Es's work. Our gaze helps to weave a tapestry of past and present, and we must piece together a disjointed narrative characterized by the layering of materials and text in English and Hebrew. The viewer activates the past as Es rewrites the story by mending a broken history and constructing a new narrative. Carol Es has transformed the past that once plagued her existence into her *raison d'être*.

IMAGE: Opposite page from top left, *Argument Park*, *Calvin Doll*, *Not to Hate*. This page above, *Forgive*, all mixed media.