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VULTURE

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NYC Almost Killed This Up-and-Coming Artist, But Now, at 40, She's Back

By *Hilary Reid*



Photo: Photograph by Matt McKnight. Courtesy Lubov; New York.

Shannon Cartier Lucy moved from Nashville to go to NYU in 1995, and had a lot of luck, early. She happened to take a class with Lisa Yuskavage — who took a liking to her. She started painting full time, became the nanny for gallerist Andrea Rosen's and painter Sean Landers's kids, and by the year 2000 was in a group show at the Team Gallery, alongside cult-y downtown figures like Genesis P-Orridge and Banks Violette. Team was followed by three solo shows in three years, at Cynthia Broan and Kathleen Cullen. It was the kind of quick ascendancy most artists in their 20s hope for — and one that came with a number of personal crises. She got married, then divorced. She got deep into drugs. By 2011, she'd left New York, and returned to Tennessee to try to save herself. But she continued to paint.

Now she was far from the seething center of the art world which almost did her in. But that doesn't matter so much these days. After putting some of her work up on Instagram, they got noticed, and now, at 40, she's back. This month, "Home Is a Crossword Puzzle I Cannot Solve" opens at Lubov Gallery in Chinatown. The show includes seven uncanny and eerily appealing figurative paintings that look like something you remember from a dream:

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There's a goldfish in a bowl on an unlit gas stove; a girl carrying a plastic shopping bag full of swans; a girl practicing piano with a cup of hot coffee perched dangerously on her wrist.

You're about to have your first solo show in New York in ten years — how are you feeling about it?

I'm excited; not so much nervous. Now that I'm 40 a lot of that fear from living in New York City and having my identity caught up in the results of things is gone now. I know it sounds all Pollyannish, but I truly do want to share my art, and I love what I do. I don't have that anticipation of, like, *Oh what does this mean? Are people going to like it?* I don't have the same attachment to the outcome.

That's a very real thing, having your identity as a young artist tied to how people receive your work. Was that something you were thinking about during your 20s in New York?

Absolutely. Once I decided I wanted to be an artist, not only was my identity attached to it, but I knew I had to make a living. I saw other people being able to do it — and who knows, maybe those people had money to begin with, but I didn't. Once I decided to be an artist, it meant, *Oh, now I need to struggle and have this be my means of survival.* I didn't like having all that stress.

You grew up in Tennessee, right?

Yes, I grew up in Nashville and beelined straight for New York City, to NYU. At first I didn't commit to being an art student. I was in a school called Gallatin, but then I chose a second- or third-year class for art students with Lisa Yuskavage. By the end of our class she said to me, *Why is it that out of all these students who are art majors, you're the only one who seems to be more inclined to paint?* She's like, *You're the best student in the class, don't tell anyone I said that.* And I was like, "Really, you can be an artist?" Lisa was like, *Well, don't come to me five years after you graduate, struggling. Don't blame me if this is what you decide to do.* But sure enough, it had a major effect on me and I was like, you know what, maybe I will.

What was Lisa like as a teacher?

She was the best teacher I've ever had. She said, paint what you see. The craft of painting has everything to do with painting what you see. Maybe this is a great metaphor: If you look at a white wall it's rarely white — it's usually

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shades of gray or blue or green or even red. If we're really trying to show what we're seeing, it will be green or blue or shades of gray. It was all I needed to hear.

Who were some of the other painters in that class? Were you friends with other artists whose careers were starting to take off?

Well, I'm kind of embarrassed — if you knew this guy, you'd be like, ugh. But I grew up in the same town and the same high-school friend group as Harmony Korine. I worked for his parents in a little children's shop, and was absolutely influenced by him going to NYU. There were some interesting artists in this little group of friends I had, too. Katherine Bernhardt is a painter that hung around — she had a good career when I was falling apart. [*Laughs.*] I worked for Sean Landers. But I was kind of a loner type. I wasn't in a crew, but I knew enough people that I could say, *Hi, guess what, I'm making art now.*

So what happened after NYU— did you commit fully to painting and being an artist?

I committed to the craft of painting at that moment, but ten years into it I got a little sidetracked with wanting to make installation art because that was hot at the time. What was that, like 2000? People were doing strange things in the gallery. I was comfortable making paintings, but there was this moment of identity crisis. I was at an art fair that Cynthia Broan Gallery took me to and Jerry Saltz came through and said something to Cynthia like, *Painting is dead*. Oh, poor little me! Twenty-five-year-old Shan was like *Oh, I just knew it*. Without even being conscious of it, I took that to heart and started experimenting with getting things fabricated, which on a nanny's salary was really hard to do. All of my paycheck would go to, like, building some weird table.

How was it being an artist-nanny?

It was great after just moving to New York because I got to know the neighborhoods very quickly. It was for a lot of interesting wealthy people, like in that building where John Lennon lived. Eventually I became a sort of artists' nanny — I nannied for Andrea Rosen and Sean Landers, and a bunch of artists, which was kind of frustrating.

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How so?

Well, I knew I was an artist. I got to see people making a living doing what they loved to do, and saw it was possible, but honestly it was a lot of men that I was babysitting for. It wasn't a lot of women having that success. I saw women being the wives who were supporting their husbands being famous artists. I thought, *Oh this is how you have a kid — be a man.*

To go back to the work you were making at that time, what were the fabricated objects you made?

One of them was having a taxidermist create a goldfish that I could put in a goldfish bowl that I could put on a stove. No gallery was even in the future for me to even put this stuff in. What's funny though is that the first painting that came out of me after ten years was a painting of a fishbowl on a stove — that's in the show at Lubov. It took me all this time. In order to make the art, it was just about life circumstances. You know, getting a divorce, leaving New York City, getting sober, all kinds of life things that took center stage.

You mentioned getting sober — do you feel like the addiction was related to the pressures of becoming an artist at that time?

I think the addiction was just accumulated pressure of untreated childhood traumas. I know everyone throws that word around these days — but like for a lot of people, it just culminated in my early 20s with a hip scene where drugs were available, like heroin. Every artist who comes before you has some kind of drug addiction, so it's like you're following in the footsteps of your heroes, though not purposefully. I wouldn't trade it. That, and having a nervous breakdown. I'm not scared to use that phrase or brag about it anymore. I'd wish it on anybody. It gets rid of all the unnecessary fog that keeps you from just being real. I think in the art world, and any world of entertainment where there's "the star" — the "art star" in this case — there's the phony façade, and I just don't feel comfortable in that role.

Had you felt yourself coming into that role at the time?

Yeah, without knowing it. It's only in retrospect that I see that I wasn't quite fully myself, and didn't have my feet on the ground.

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One of the shows you were in around that time was at Team Gallery.

That was actually the first show, in 2000. Team was a tiny gallery, and I wasn't prepared. I think I was 20 years old, and my feet weren't planted in the ground — and I don't know whose are at age 20. Maybe people who have a really steady upbringing. I just wasn't ready, though looking back I feel like my art had similar themes as it does now.

What were those themes?

Well, I was paired with Genesis P-Orridge, who at the time was showing these latex sort of fetish sculptures. I thought that was a sort of obvious way to be edgy, to be into some sort of cult sex shit. I wanted to be more subtle. The reason Team paired us together — and looking back I totally see it — was that I had these children in my paintings, set in a scene where there were adults in the painting cut off at the top. All you could see in one painting was a little girl sort of cringing in almost a Japanese school girl-looking outfit, and you could see a red-tipped baton coming in from the corner of the painting, being held by an adult. I can see now how that, combined with this fetish art, seemed like it had some sort of sexual punishment connotation. Honestly, if anything, it was really subconscious on my side — in no way sexual, more just psychological.

A lot of the women in your paintings have obscured or undefined faces, can you tell me about that decision?

Sometimes when I'd look at other art and see people's faces depicted, I'd think, *No, I really don't want to have that photograph in my house, why would I want to look at that person all the time?* It's sort of invasive. When I started making paintings, I thought if I left that part vague it would be a little more generous to my audience, so people could step into it more easily. And a lot of these are self-portraits, like I took iPhone videos to set up scenes with myself in it to paint.

What were some of the paintings that you did that for?

For one painting, I covered myself with plastic in my bedroom, and a bunch of other stuff in plastic, and then painted that. I painted myself with a chair on my back, falling off the dining room table onto the floor, and in my bedroom doing a yoga-type pose with my leg on a table. But is it important that it's me? No. I just needed a good reference for the lighting.

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In your artist statement you write that you grew up with a parent with schizophrenia, and that “It was customary in my home to find a toaster in the freezer or the Holy Bible in the dishwasher.”

That’s literal.

How do you see that experience playing into your work?

It’s a tough life to grow up with a parent dealing with that. I wasn’t necessarily aware of how much that came through in my work until people pointed it out to me. Good friends of mine and family know where I come from, and some have seen my father’s apartment and the furniture turned upside down on the bed or peanut butter on television screens. A true art installation. *[Laughs.]* In the art, there’s maybe a positive thing to it, in that it’s mysterious and kind of charming and catches people off guard. It’s uncanny — but in my situation, it’s my normal. I’m not trying to create a surreal world. I guess my world really was surreal growing up with a father like that.

What has being an artist in Tennessee been like?

Honestly, there’s no visible community that I’m connected with in Nashville. It’s kind of my own private Idaho. There’s something that works for me about being really isolated. I get to just really focus inward and generate ideas from such an untainted place. The studio rent is cheaper. Maybe also that it’s my hometown, there’s sort of a comfort that allows for more of a freedom of imagination or freedom of production. An ease. Is that age, too? Probably. But I think it absolutely has to do with not being in the relationship that I had with New York City.

How did you come to have the show at Lubov?

I thought, *Okay, I’ve made 20 paintings, and people started responding saying these are great, what are you going to do with them?* So I put some on Instagram. I don’t even know who it was, but someone who follows me on Instagram and wasn’t even a personal friend, an angel, showed Lubov my paintings at an art fair and then they contacted me.

So you drove up to New York with a van full of your work ...

Yeah, so I got a phone call from a gallerist saying that he was going to be in L.A. for the Frieze Art Fair, and would love to come by my studio. When I told him I don’t live in L.A., he was like, Well, I’ve got to get down to Nashville at some point, and I thought, *When is some point?* People are so busy. I didn’t

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care if I looked like a total desperate nerd — I texted my friends and everyone I knew asking if they had a studio in New York I could commandeer for an hour to show my paintings. And then I got the rental van. There was one day when I was seeing Emma Fernberger from Bortolami Gallery, and I was like, *You know, it's raining and my paintings are in the back of this rental van.* And she was like, Sure, let's just get in the van and look at the work. I loved that. When I was younger, I wouldn't have thought that was acceptable. Now, I don't give a shit.

Do you see your work fitting into any larger art lineage?

I'm not a complete outsider artist, but I'm kind of naïve when it comes to who's doing what. When people have pointed out the similarities to someone like Balthus, I see it — although there's something kind of pedophilic about him, and I don't relate to that. I'm not trying to be über feminist in any way, but I like that I'm a woman painting women. I'm influenced less by paintings and drawings, and more by Godard, or Michael Haneke, or old Robert Bresson films. There's this sort of spiritual, emotional, psychological theme to his films. They have a sort of innocence.

<https://www.vulture.com/2020/01/painter-shannon-cartier-lucys-comeback-at-40.html>

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