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People

'Along the Way, Life Took Over': Painter Shannon Cartier Lucy on Her Wayward Path to Art-Making and Personal Redemption

The artist opens up about her complicated past, her winding career trajectory, and the strange imagery in her work.

Taylor Dafoe, August 27, 2020



Shannon Cartier Lucy, *My Signature Act* (2017). Courtesy of the artist and Lubov.

Sometime around 2007, artist Shannon Cartier Lucy had an image stuck in her head: a goldfish in a bowl resting on a lit stove top. It was a symbol for her new domestic reality, she says. She had just gotten married and moved in with her husband in New York. They were creating a life together.

A young artist still trying to find her medium at the time, Cartier Lucy sought to have the scene fabricated, even going so far as to have a fish taxidermied for the job. But the idea never coalesced. Neither did her marriage, it turns out, and soon thereafter, everything fell apart. She got divorced. She stopped making art. She moved multiple times, finally settling back in her hometown of Nashville with the intention of becoming a psychotherapist.

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Around 2015, the man who divorced her came back into her life—and so did the mental image of the goldfish. So she decided to paint it, something she hadn't really done since her early 20s.

For the first time in almost a decade, she had made a work of art, and the floodgates opened. Since then, Cartier Lucy has been painting nonstop. Her drab tableaus merge dreamy, middle-class mundanity with matter-of-fact magical realism. It's like Normal Rockwell meets David Lynch: a girl grips a shopping bag full of swans, another naps below sheets of cellophane. A naked woman bows before a man in slacks on the beach.

Almost all of them feature a young woman whose features, while just out of focus, bear a resemblance to the artist's own. "Maybe my world, the way I see things, is just strange," Cartier Lucy tells Artnet News over video chat. She's speaking in the empty room of a house she's just purchased with her partner in Nashville, where she was born. Behind her are drop cloths and furniture covered in plastic. It's like a scene from one of her paintings.

"For me, it's familiar, it's comfortable. I'm tapping into what I think is purely me."

Let's begin by looking backward. You moved to New York in the mid-90s and had a rather auspicious entree into the art world not long after. Can you take me back to that time?

I was 17 years old when I moved to New York for NYU—wet behind the ears. At 17, what do you know about anything career-wise? I didn't have a clue about what I was going to do. All I knew is that I wanted to be in New York city. I loved Jean-Luc Godard and arty films and Tower Records and New York was just where I had to go. I didn't know I would do fine arts. I was in a multidisciplinary program at NYU, but I took an art class with Lisa Yuskavage. I had to get approval to do it, because it was a class with second year art majors. Halfway into the term, she was like, "Why are you the non-art major? I would think that you're the one who's going to be doing this in the future." She put this idea in my head that you can actually be an artist. It just had such an influence on me.

What was your work like then?

Well, I didn't have a real vision yet. I was too young to really have a vision. I was more in that phase of copying the work of other artists I liked. I painted in college, then sort of got sidetracked with fabricating things, having things made. This was like 2002 to 2005. I made this set of furniture that I still haven't done anything with. During that period, I was also doing all these weird photography sessions where I would dress as a clown—a lot of strange things. The thought of painting was just so boring to me at the time. One of the last ideas I had during this time was to fabricate a sculpture of a goldfish in a bowl on a stove. But I couldn't figure out how to make it not look so contrived. It was silly. I had a fish taxidermied, even though I didn't have a gallery or a place to show the thing. But along the way, life took over.

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I ended up moving two or three times during this period. I moved to LA for a couple of years and then I went to northern Kenya for a year, living with a tribe. It was the trip that I always said I would do someday, then suddenly I was like, "There is no someday. I have to do this now." I was just kind of fearless.

Ironically, this is when art came storming back into your life, right?

Right. One day, my ex-husband, this person who had broken my heart, came briefly back into my world. All of a sudden that image of the goldfish on the stove came back to me too and I thought, "Just paint the image."

This was around 2016 or 2017, correct? You had been stymied creatively for years—you hadn't painted in more than a decade—and suddenly you were able to realize this image on a canvas. Other than your ex-husband coming back, what changed?

When I started just painting again I was doing it from a place of not thinking anything was going to come from it. I was back in my hometown, I had gotten a master's to become a psychotherapist. I felt relaxed. Maybe I just needed to be in that place for all this work to come.

Why paint? Why did that image, which had been in your head for all those years, manifest as a figurative painting, rather than, say, the sculpture you originally conceived?

I just wanted that image to be very clear. I wanted to express that very thing as clearly as possible. And painting for me is a repetitive, meditative practice that helps keep the crazies away. And I appreciate the craft. I appreciate what torture it is to like create a painting. I've had to Google modes of like layering and the viscosity of certain paints, which I hate. [Laughs] But I also love it. Maybe I just like putting myself through the torture of learning something that I don't know how to do. That's what keeps us alive, keeps us trying to do better and better.

The title of that first painting is *OUR NEW HOME*. Metaphorically speaking, there's certainly a lot to parse through there. Can you tell me what that work represents to you?

I want to allow people to think for themselves and feel what they feel when looking at my work, but for me the image of the fishbowl was about me feeling a sense of discontent within a marriage. You know, I got married, I had this beautiful home, I was doing all the right things, but I think that inherent discontent was still there.

Now, I think of it like this: if you build a home on something broken, then you can't break it. So building your home on a place that's already broken is freedom. Once something has been broken on a level of relationships falling apart or the death of a loved one, and you get beyond it, you get to a wiser, freer place. We just getting stronger and freer. That stuff can't take us down to the place it's taken us before. It's like the Japanese technique of *kintsugi*, where they fix broken things by filling the cracks with gold.

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Through that process, the original thing becomes even more precious. Instead of trying to set the fishbowl up where it's supposed to be in a new home, you put it on the stove.

We've been talking about how loaded the idea of the home is for you while you're sitting in a new house you just recently bought. How are you feeling?

It's overwhelming! I'm so excited to fix it my home, that my partner is afraid I'll never paint again. [Laughs] I think I'm like a child getting a gift I've always wanted. I just made a painting for an upcoming show in Paris with a girl shoveling. I've never shoveled in my life! I didn't even know I was going to buy a house, but recently I've been shoveling dirt every single day. Who knows, maybe I'm psychic. I have a great relationship to what's going on right now, that's all I know.

Do you think the new home experience will influence your work moving forward?

The way that I paint, I have these ideas already. I have an idea—girl in situation X, for instance. Those ideas are lined up to make enough paintings probably for the next two years. So right now I'm just getting them out.



Shannon Cartier Lucy, *Naptime* (2018). Courtesy of the artist and Lubov.

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