

SENSITIVE SKIN

Assembling the American Uncanny – Interview with Shannon Cartier Lucy

Marian St. Laurent

Marian St. Laurent and artist Shannon Cartier Lucy discuss the unexpected ecstasies of disorder

The last time Shannon Cartier Lucy and I crossed paths was in the Lower East Side of New York City over twenty years ago, when her work was focused on words and typographic riddles. When I saw her paintings earlier this year, they seemed to cut through to something about the current American *mise en scene*.

I wasn't the only one who felt their resonance. Her new work first hit the world through **Instagram** and then was featured in three consecutive solo shows early this year which were covered by mainstream cultural press (***New Yorker*, *Art Forum*, *Vulture*, *Vice*** et al). She is now halfway through a new body of work for her upcoming show at Galerie Hussenot in Paris this November.

We spoke about how she negotiates symbols in her paintings to capture an experience of disorder, where the mind can no longer do its job of making sense of things.

Marian St. Laurent

So when I saw your work it hit a deep personal chord as well as a universal one. Although some of the details differ, we share the experience of being parented by someone with schizophrenia and the radical shift of perspective on reality this brings with it. On the one hand my mother has been a huge teacher and opened up a way of seeing which makes me so good at what I do, but it's created a lot of torture as well. Can you talk a bit about your growing up in this unique way?

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Shannon Cartier Lucy

Just situating yourself in the world on a deep level that you take for granted when you're younger, you see more clearly when you're older. I'm lucky that channeling it into art has given me some kind of gratitude for it. I don't think I could possibly see the world this way without this influence. But it absolutely is torture.

MSTL

There's this altered reality you grow up in. You don't really get that your reality is so altered until much later. It is like coming out of something gradually.

SCL

It's ingrained in you – it's your normal, right?

MSTL

I saw your new paintings and thought, "*Whoa she's so on fire!*" and then it turns out the world thinks so too – I'm really happy for you!

SCL

Last summer I was in my first group show just about a year ago exactly – and that's when I got the attention of a gallerist in NY who has **Lubov Gallery**. Francisco, who owns that gallery, offered me a show for January and that was my first solo show – in this little East Broadway Gallery. Out of that came a lot of press which was really welcome, surprising, and amazing!

Consecutively, within three months, I had two other shows which is kind of unheard of in the art world. Because I had been doing this work for over two years and kind of stockpiling it, I had enough work to sort of go "Bam. Bam. Bam." I think that's why you saw so much press because the shows were so close together.

After the NY show, there was **LA** and then within a week of LA there was a **Miami** opening. So three solo shows in a row is a lot. And since then, I have had a couple of pieces in group shows; one in **Karma Gallery** in NY and at **Soft Opening** in London. These are both people I am going to work with in the future – with shows set

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up for next year. My upcoming solo show will be at **Galerie Hussenot** in Paris this November and will be my first European show.

MSTL

It looks like most of your work is sold. Does that mean that the private collectors loan it so it can be seen?

SCL

Some do. Right now the gallery in Paris for instance, is trying to get a collector to make that sort of deal. And I'm just learning about how this works. There's one collector through the Karma group show who has agreed to donate it to a museum if he can get another painting from me. At this point, I'm not so picky about who owns it. Of course I would like a museum to see it because how else can people see the paintings?

They're still translatable though through print, luckily. There is nothing like a painting, yes, but I think they print well, so you can still sort of see what's going on in a book form when a book gets made. So I have faith that they're not going to disappear if someone can't get to an art show.

MSTL

Can you say anything about the body of work you'll be showing in November or are you too deep in it?

SCL

Like we were just talking about, when you're in the experience of having a schizophrenic parent you don't see it clearly because you're inside of it. This is the first time I'm getting such objective response, and I'm able to get mirrored by other people's perspective just reading press and having people say there's something violent within my paintings – *and* soft, – *and* funny. When I heard “violence” specifically, I kind of thought “*Oh!*” – I personally don't see the violence or constraint like someone else would see – that was something that was clearly just a visceral channeling.

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I'm bringing that up because in the show coming up in Paris, I would say there's overt reference to violence. So I can actually say there's a woman covered in blood. I got inspired by the film *Immoral Tales* by Walerian Borowczyk – a film about a queen centuries ago, who bathed in the blood of virgin children.

But it's overt right? When you see blood, it's overt. Whereas in the other paintings, there was no blood. This one has more tools of violence but I would say it's still subtle in that there isn't reference to horror film or the ways we typically see violence. It's not overly politicized – it's still very emotionally based or psychological – and I'm aware of it in this coming show.

There's always some kind of conflict and tension between elements. With this overt violence I also have baskets of flowers. Maybe subconsciously and consciously, I like to counter those things so that there is sort of a revolution happening – so that there's a whole picture and not just sort of a trope. So that they're not “goth” paintings. With the dark there is something soft and feminine, and violent. I like to assemble factors that sort of create that tension that is familiar and not familiar at the same time.

MSTL

I think that's the reason why it feels like a reflection of the current cultural environment. It feels 'on time,' so to speak.

SCL

I think what I saw underneath the surface that has always been there is being revealed right now because everything is uncertain. Such is life, right? We all have these ways of trying to have things so secure and set – the home life, the family life, the job.

Everything turned upside down has made people sort of groundless.

It's always been groundless. You and I know this from addiction, or seeking a spiritual path in life right? – but a lot of people have not. I think just that right there – that having the “rug pulled out from under us” feeling. Which I guess I'm lucky for having already experienced in life a few times. I think normal people who haven't are getting to feel

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that and are really sort of unsettled right now. And maybe the feeling of “unsettled” in the work, taps into this you know?

MSTL

Uncanny is a word that covers it. It’s unsettled – but then at the same time it’s like everything is kind of in place.

SCL

It has to be if I’m painting. A painting is an organization of sorts. So just to put it in a picture means I’m confidently presenting it. So there’s something to that. We’re used to having paintings having a design. When you design chaos, it automatically makes you feel like its planned or together. There’s a dichotomy being composed but not composed the way we’re used to. It’s a funny thing.

MSTL

I guess it makes sense that your work is deeply personal and that through that, you’re tapping into the collective experience of uncertainty and disorder. Something in your art brings people together.

SCL

I love that – god I love that.

You know why? I don’t exclude. Because you see figures – if I dress them in a certain way...I always use goth as an example I don’t know why – if I dress all my figures in goth clothing, I’d be excluding every single person that does not relate to the gothic style. Similarly, if I dress everyone in rapper wear, you all of a sudden position yourself for or against rapper wear. I try to pare down everything to such a simple visual and symbolic vocabulary. Yes, there are women. That’s because its personal.

MSTL

You were also talking about breakdown and uncertainty – the idea that in a way, losing your dreams is a doorway into something else. I wanted to ask you to talk about what your hiatus / breakdown / hibernation meant.

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SCL

It tore down the things that kept me stuck within the framework of what it is to be an artist, or what it is to be female or what it is to have a career. All those human constructs and things we get caught up in. Like identity – *How do I fit in? Am I being accepted? Is this cool?*

I think when you're dealing with base emotional pain, the breakdown is of all of those ways of getting caught up – to where I feel more organic now. I'm not forcing myself to continue to be a creative person.

I found an art practice again from a place of psychological necessity. There wasn't this pressure to make a living. I left New York City, so that rat race was gone. My relationship to making art became – 'natural' is a terrible word – because what is natural? – it was just more...how do you even say that? I had grown up – so the pressures of the outside world weren't a factor anymore.

I think pressures of the world create fear. Being broken down emotionally so much, I just became fearless at some point. I have lot less fear of life. When you feel so much pain, you're not afraid of feeling more. When you lose so much, you're not afraid of losing any more. So I think fear of failure is out the door. And without the fear of failure, it gave me so much freedom to just do exactly what's coming from here [my heart] – without that over thinker or the questioner in me. And there must be something to that because it really is communicative when I hit that place.

I think there's something to not painting for so long. As you know, I did that text based stuff and all of sudden I'm doing figurative work. Honestly I couldn't tell you how that shifted. I just decided I had learned how to paint realistically at some point and there was a certain image I wanted done and so I just decided to try painting it. I could paint – I just didn't know I could paint like that until I did it. Now I'm using that breakthrough with figurative painting like a scientist uses a constant when they carry out experiments.

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MSTL

One of the things that gets mentioned but not expanded upon in press is the work you were doing as a psychotherapist. Did you bring any of this to your painting when you returned to it at the other end of this period?

SCL

It's not the psychotherapeutic practice itself. I just chose that as a second choice because I just had so much angst and anxiety regarding the art part that when I went, "Ok I'm putting that on the back burner and here I am." That magical thing unfolded.

MSTL

We have discussed what a challenge and how gradual it is to recognize the impact of being parented by someone with schizophrenia. What was the set up? Were you raised by your dad? How did the family unit deal with it?

SCL

I was raised with my mom and dad up to about age 8 until my father exhibited symptoms of mental illness. I witnessed a lot of insanity. There were a lot of mental institutions involved, police – you know, all that kind of chaos as a child. And then, when they were separated, there was this dynamic with my mom being the caregiver on the one hand, and my dad being this sort of lovely, spiritual, untethered figure in my life. So I did get this unconditional support and love from the sweetheart that is my dad, that is completely bonkers.

Before I moved to NY I saw him constantly. And now that I'm back in Nashville, he may live with me within a couple of weeks. We will see what happens.

MSTL

That you would extend yourself to provide a space for him to live seems to be a sign of coming full circle.

SCL

And I'm still scared. There's going to be a trial period. He's always just been in the state system or homeless. Because of selling paintings, we just bought a house and I

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can finally probably offer him a space. Because I just don't want to see him in those state – run homes. In this country, they're horrible.

MSTL

Only in recent years has there been a conversation opening up regarding neurodiversity and one of the reasons I love your work is for its celebration and investigation of disorder / disordered thinking.

On the one hand we want to project ideas about quality of life on other people. But then there's also not one way of experiencing reality. We can see that the agreed upon reality of unregulated capitalism is quite insane. How could we possibly imagine it as the measurement of normal?

SCL

Right – our morals, aren't they displaced?

There's a couple of things in there. Most people with mental illness, I have found, don't consider themselves mentally ill. There's this denial. He's one of those and he's never really wanted to be medicated. And unmedicated is where that true madness, and sort of genius or strangeness comes out. *It's unmedicated*. And during those periods which were many, many, many years of my dad's life, he for instance, would write all over the walls of his apartment.

When I would see him or be the one to call the cops and get him hospitalized it was not because of the unruly behavior itself, but about how it affected people living their normal lives around him. In a rental, he would destroy the rental property – or he would get harassed by people around him. Or he was a threat to himself because people would threaten him. Our society is really uncomfortable with people like that.

But those people used to be considered the shamans in certain cultures that respected the mystery of channeling whatever is going on. In this culture, they're weirdos, they're hobos.

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The last time I saw him unmedicated, I saw him on the street and it hit me emotionally in a deep way. He looked me straight in the eye and said, “Shannon, I’m at *peace*”. I knew he meant it. I mean he was manic and tapped in, but I knew he meant it and that saddened me because I believed him and I just knew, “*There’s no place in the world for you. There’s just no place in the world for you to be at peace the way you are right now*”.

Because there is no order. We make this ridiculous order that doesn’t make sense. I think on a deep level, we all know it’s kind of ridiculous – the way we live our lives and the way things are set up. People that sort of don’t adhere to that, relate or even feel envy for or an affinity with that freedom on some level, but judge it on another level because it’s just not allowed. It’s just not acceptable.

MSTL

When I read the word “hiatus” I understood it perhaps meant you had come through something profound and were fundamentally changed. As someone having been parented by someone with disordered thinking, were you afraid of losing control?

SCL

Looking back, I can say that absolutely happened and thank god it happened. But not everyone has that sort of major psychic, emotional, spiritual shift. It happened to me and I let it happen. I didn’t fight it. I didn’t judge it. I just felt it and had people around me sort of holding me up. I went through the motions and thank god – I mean, it changed everything.

It took a loooooong time but when I reentered the world something big had happened. Those were the years when I wasn’t painting – so a lot was happening. Maybe three or four people I know in my life have gone through something like this. And when I meet someone who has, I feel a special bond because I know what they’re talking about. It wasn’t that I had kids or I quit my job. It was a deep psychological shift.

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MSTL

So can we discuss the symbols in your work? Do you want to talk about domestic interiors and the theme of home in your paintings?

SCL

It's ironic that I just bought my first house a week ago.

Before the break, I had a very cozy, cute home and every place before that I felt very attached and contained. Since then, never in my life until now, could I settle down. I was just floating within spaces and not grounding myself in homes, in apartments. It's interesting that right now is the first time I have done it. The flood gates have opened. I'm trying to secure myself – do my garden, do my fences.

The first show was called, "Home is a Crossword Puzzle I Can't Solve" because there's so many different layers of home. Again, that word 'spiritual' doesn't cover it, but is a kind of blanket term for finding a place that feels right, that feels comfortable, that feels connected. But I'm so visual that it's what I see in my environment. And because I'm a hermit – being a painter, I'm constantly alone – it's my environment that I'm seeing all the time. I'm not so social, I'm more social with my surroundings and I get so into the creative aspect of interiors, visual and color and design.

But the home part – it's probably what's kind of obvious maybe or not obvious – back to that stuff about childhood – my parent – and the chaos of my father's house where you walk inside and there's a mattress against the wall, tables stacked up on top of it and then a chair on top of that, writing all over the walls and the countertops and trash sculptures or some sort of jars on top of that you know? *That's my 'home' right?* That is not "normal". That to me – all the possibilities of that – is what is ingrained in my head.

MSTL

On the one hand there's surreality and disorder in the displaced objects of your paintings and then you have very traditional interior furnishings and textiles. Are they specifically referencing something real in your home?

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SCL

Yes, I've painted my actual rooms. I have set myself up with my iPhone in certain positions and then just painted exactly that scene. A lot of times they're just really in my house. Unless I have to reference something better. If I don't like my actual rug, I will look up some beautiful rug and decide I'm going to paint that.

MSTL

What about the happy white wicker couch in "Woman With Machete"? Is that an actual wicker couch you're referencing?

SCL

Yes, the wicker couch was referenced. The idea was very specific. I lived in Africa for a year and I remember telling a friend or my mother, "Wow I was just walking on the street by myself along a long dirt road passing a man with a machete" – and you get used to it. My fear mechanism went off the first time I saw someone walking with one. But it's just a tool – an everyday tool.

I knew that if I had something as strong a symbol as a machete – which obviously, in our culture you don't see a lot of – displaying that in our culture with something very – I don't want to say 'White' – but "white – centric" or "American" and a white girl in simple, classic wear, it's *displaced*. It doesn't automatically become violent, but it has this sort of air of power and it's...*strange*. So that's a very good example of how I reference but how I purposely displace things because that feels right to me. That feels more real. That feels more empowering. So I *am* specific.

MSTL

We have talked a bit about tension – and the public feedback on the theme of violence and constraint in your work. Can we talk a bit about BDSM and fetish references in your work? Where do you locate that – how is that playing in your imagination and across your images?

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SCL

Specifically in reference to BDSM, I'm not a fetish person – I know that those images of a woman in latex pants or the towel I made that says “humiliation” reference that world but I want to take away any references to the way sexual fetishists use it. It's more of a psychological relationship for me. Making ‘humiliation’ into a kitchen towel – that's again a displacement so that it's more that home life in general is the humiliation. The constraint of this weird human way we have of doing things is the humiliation. Having to be me within that is the humiliation.

While I get a lot of visual reference material from BDSM, I hope not to make my art “fetishy” so I purposefully make an effort to take out the obvious connection. But if people want it to be that, that's fine too.

MSTL

There's one thing about “Finish Fetish” as it relates to West Coast Pop Art and Post Pop Art that was present in your work before it took this figurative turn and now. To me it feels like an aesthetics of commerce and consumerism.

SCL

I think the baseballs on the girls back is a good example. Someone asked me if it that was a feminist statement. Well, it's more like a power thing. It's that capitalistic “the bigger man wins” / “every man for himself” shit.

MSTL

Can you talk about your “Day at the Beach” painting where there is a nude woman and two clothed male figures with different footwear stepping on her hands and feet?

SCL

Well, it's a woman on a beach, quite beautiful – I know that's a general term – with not a very specific face in this delicate, kneeling, sitting-on-her-knees stance with one figure holding her feet down and one figure stepping on her hands. If I could put into words what that feeling was, I might not have to paint it, you know?

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Again, it's that idea of tension. That boundless place with the beautiful ocean and waves and these clothed – which I think is very important – figures with shoes on, stepping on her hands and feet. It's figurative for that feeling that the sky is our limit – just existence in general is our limit. It's such a deep feeling of no matter what, we're still in the constraint of this unknown – *“Why are we here? What are we doing?”*

It's not political. It's not the female vs. male world – that's a very simplified version of what is going on. It's more psychic. No matter what, we're stuck in this being-ness for now that is so strange and uncomfortable and mysterious. It's a big uncomfortable mystery. It's a fact. It doesn't mean that I always feel that way. But it's always the undercurrent of existence – of me existing. *“There's something on my foot. There's something on my hands.”* We exist there and it's a matter of being comfortable with that or uncomfortable with that, right?

MSTL

In BDSM and fetish imagery the body is a vocabulary. Gestures and positions are highly ritualized and in a way they are about some kind of negotiation with materiality – negotiation with or transcendence of the physical.

SCL

Someone who is particularly interested in BDSM in my life was fascinated that I don't associate it sexually. It's that I'm objectifying the actual fetish. I'm not into it like *that* – I'm into it as a form of expression in the world. I can see the visuals and take what I want and leave the rest.

MSTL

How does nudity work in your paintings?

SCL

The nudity is sexual if you want it to be. I use it when it's necessary for the symbolic language of the painting.

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MSTL

When clothing is present – the clothing you paint is specific – the colors and specific elements seem to say something about performing or performance.

SCL

Yes, even if it's trying to be invisible. Even if its purposefully trying not to distract. They are still performing.

MSTL

How does Color work?

SCL

I like primary colors a lot – I think the rest is a visual puzzle in the moment within each work. It's visceral. It's just what I'm attracted to. It's that simple.

MSTL

Flowers and Keds?

SCL

I've been wearing Keds for about 25 years. That's my go-to shoe. I will order 5 pair at a time. Now that I have bought this house in the country, they are all covered in mud. That's because I wear them all the time. That's an aspect of self-portraiture. *Paint what you know*, right?

With flowers, maybe sometimes I dare myself. If I paint floral wallpaper its because I am daring myself to paint detail. It's a craft decision. How can I dare myself to just try a little harder? I admire craft and the craft of painting and I think putting work into detail is admirable. To satisfy my own need for that even though it's torture, I admire that and I like how it looks. Floral usually does that because it's hard and it's full of detail and has unpredictable shapes.

MSTL

There are tricks and riddles or subliminal messages that seem to come across the work.

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SCL

I guess riddle is a good word. It makes sense. I couldn't possibly put it in purposefully, like I'm holding the cards behind the curtain. I'm too am on the side of the audience being challenged to understand the riddle in there. Otherwise I wouldn't do it – that's my challenge.

MSTL

How do these objects / ideas come to you? Are they in dreams or meditation?

SCL

I will have sort of inspiration highs where I will put full focus on just creating the ideas. I will have a good few days where it's more ingesting and creating the ideas. And then I will have periods where I'm just checking off the list of doing all of those in paint. Right now, I have 40 ready images that I just need to paint. I try to put together an order because they seem to be coming out thematically, naturally – sort of reflecting my life. They just come to me. I will be out in the world I will see this and want to mix it with that and it's just that sort of organic.

Like a writer, you set yourself a two-hour window and you force things to come. There is a regimen to it at times. The ideas themselves, I don't know how my brain conjures this up. But now I know that there's a formula to it. And I'm good at that formula. So like with colors – "Here's brown. How are you going to get to that brown? You add red, you add green – oh it's too light – gotta add a little yellow, add a little blue." I know how to do that with symbols to where I've got that feeling. And I can see where I've messed up. *"Oh no I need to take that emblem off her shirt and it needs to be blue"*. I know how to sort of tweak that. I'm still practicing. It's editing. I'm just a visual editor.

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MSTL

Your paintings seem to tap into the American picture right now.

SCL

Our world is kind of unraveling a little bit. And I'm like, welcome to my club. Welcome to reality. It scares a lot of people.

–Marian St. Laurent.

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