



STUDIO VISIT 09.09.21

Meet Shannon Cartier Lucy, the Artist Whose Paintings You Can't Stop Staring At

By **Stephanie Eckardt**

In Shannon Cartier Lucy's darkly beguiling paintings, something usually feels a little off—like “bad-dream” scenes, as the [New Yorker](#) put it in a 2020 writeup of Lucy's solo exhibition at Lubov gallery in New York. It's a unique quality that's recognizable at just a glance. “There's a narrative in her work that has no resolution—it's like having an itch you can't scratch,” says Lubov's founder, Francisco Correa Cordero, pointing to scenes like three goldfish swimming in a bowl atop a lit stove burner. “People automatically try to decipher what's going on in the image. You can't stop looking.”

Cordero got in touch with Lucy in 2019, after seeing her work on social media, and the 43-year-old artist seized her chance: She loaded up a rented van with all the paintings she'd made over the past two years and drove 14 hours from her home in Nashville to the gallery, in Manhattan's Chinatown. Cordero tried to manage her expectations, but he needn't have: Lucy's show at Lubov in January of 2020 sold out on opening day. It's fair to say interest in [her next solo exhibition](#), which opens September 18, is already sky-high; one out-of-town collector has made it a point to attend every Lubov opening to doggedly inquire about the availability of her work.

What could be seen as overnight success has in fact been a long, circuitous journey. The 2020 show marked Lucy's comeback after a long absence from the art world; it was her first exhibition in New York in a decade. Born in Nashville, Lucy moved to the East Coast in 1995 to study art at New York University. She graduated in 2000, and showed at the influential, now-defunct Team Gallery alongside Genesis P-Orridge and Banks Violette that same year. But by 2011, when she left the city, Lucy's personal life was in shambles—so much so that she nearly gave up on art altogether. She went back home to Nashville to kick a heroin addiction, then moved to Los Angeles to start over in the aftermath of a “horrible” breakup. “Sweetie, this isn't just your divorce,” Lucy tells me over Zoom, recalling a reality

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check from a friend who had a long history with psychotherapy. “This is *everything* in your past, rising up to the surface.”



It took a few years, but that revelation ended up reviving Lucy’s practice—and transforming it. “Lots of things had to change, and the universe had to change me,” Lucy says. “I was just holding on, gripping. Thank god I fell apart.”

For a while, she simply stared blankly at the walls of her studio, incapable of and unwilling to force herself to make work. Eventually, in 2015, she moved back to Nashville and enrolled in the University of Tennessee to get a masters in psychotherapy. She had obtained her license to practice when art unexpectedly reentered the picture, prompted by a brief encounter with her ex. Lucy couldn’t get the thought of a goldfish bowl atop a lit burner of the stove they used to share out of her head. The image was puzzling, but reminiscent of actual vignettes she often encountered in her childhood, growing up with a schizophrenic father. “It was customary in my home to find a toaster in the freezer or The Holy Bible in the dishwasher,” she says in her online [artist’s statement](#). The goldfish bowl was so lodged in Lucy’s mind that for the first time in years, she had the impulse to make art.

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Having last worked in multimedia, Lucy first attempted to execute the image via sculpture. Unsatisfied with her efforts, she returned to painting—though not in the conceptual style she'd favored in the past. Painting realistically, she discovered, made the images she had in her head legible to everyone. "Painting has that kind of magic ability to bring people into your story, to get to a place where they can trust you and respect your craft," she says. "You bring an image out of nothing, and that takes a lot of grueling, attentive work."

Lucy's partner once described her as a "populist painter"—"it's like you're painting for your mom and her friends, and then your really edgy Norwegian black metal friends, all in the same work," he said. Lucy was thrilled with the description. She started intentionally removing defining details in her work, "neutralizing" anything that could hint at a specific time period or circumstance. "What's left is the psychological or emotional connection," she says. "You're like, *Oh, it's a girl with a knife and a fork*. We can all relate."



It's never quite that simple, though. Those utensils she mentions are strangely oversized for the child holding them, and we'll never know why. Another work soon on view at Lubov features a Dalmatian mid-autopsy. When she shows it to me over Zoom, I point out that the animal is the same size as her dogs, Shine and Tyranny, whom I can see in the background. "Those are my models!," she enthuses. *The Autopsy* isn't about shock value—something Lucy says she tries to avoid at all costs—but a challenge to herself to portray death in a way that's personal without being grotesque. To her, the Dalmatian's collar is

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a key detail: She wanted it to be clear that the dog was a pet. “I think it’s such a sweet sentiment to love your dog so much you get it an autopsy,” she says.

Lucy’s disquieting scenes had led me to expect the opposite of the bubbly personality I discover when she has me laughing throughout our two-hour conversation—particularly when we discuss the works I had considered among her darkest. Take a 2019 painting of a pair of scissors held up to a wrist, titled [*If My Hand Offends*](#): “I thought a biblical quote could elevate it a little more than, you know, the emo girl.” Or another of two men in ski masks looming over a semi-nude, bound woman: “I thought if I called it [*Intruders*](#), clearly, I’m like, these are bad guys,” she says. “Imagine I had called it, like, *Night With the Boys*.”

Her upcoming Lubov exhibition features nine paintings loosely centered around an 18th-century piece of furniture called a loo table. It’s the first show since she’s returned to painting that isn’t, as one would say in Instagram parlance, a “photo dump”; rather than a purge of works that have piled up over the past few years, it’s somewhat organized by theme. She anticipates the same to be true of the three focused shows she has confirmed into the fall of 2022—two with Massimo De Carlo, in Hong Kong and Milan, followed by a solo outing at Night Gallery in Los Angeles.

When I ask what themes she’s thinking will emerge from this new stage in her career, Lucy turns to the titles of the folders on her computer desktop. She always works from an image, often a collage of JPGs haphazardly thrown together on Photoshop; current categories include “popcorn,” “funeral,” “crutches etc.,” “awkward legs,” and “breeding goose.” One in particular—“oven, washing machine”—makes her laugh. “You know what that is?” she says. “A man putting a woman inside the oven or washing machine while he has sex with her. I haven’t decided which appliance yet.”



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For all her seeming lightheartedness, though, it's clear that Lucy is utterly serious about her work. "Whenever I give myself a hard time, I have to remind myself that no one has seen what I originally set out to do but me," she says, then pauses. "I'm getting to a place of, I think, maturity. Isn't maturity all about learning to let go, no matter what?"

<https://www.wmagazine.com/culture/shannon-cartier-lucy-interview-studio-visit>

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