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Interview, Art

Do Not Ignore the Gift: Shannon Cartier Lucy Interviewed by Osman Can Yerebakan

Paintings that delve beneath the surface of everyday life

Four years ago, Shannon Cartier Lucy painted a goldfish whose bowl sits atop a lit stove. At her Nashville home, she was both the helpless fish and the insistent fire. After a lucrative start in the early twenty-first-century New York City art circuit with her conceptual take on pop culture and consumerism, a wrenching divorce and substance addiction followed. Done with New York, she moved back to Tennessee and pursued a psychotherapy degree. The goldfish, though, was pressing; the water above the flame was starting to boil.

Cartier Lucy continued painting and eventually connected on Instagram with Lubov gallery owner Francisco Correa Cordero. She drove a rented truck from Nashville to the Chinatown gallery to show him her amassed work. The rest is as nearly surreal as her paintings. The artist is currently having her second exhibition with Lubov, titled *The Loo Table*, which follows solos at Massimo De Carlo in Milan and *Soft Opening* in London earlier this year. Her first monograph, *Better Call It Grace*, has just come out from Hassla Books and covers her work from 2018 to the present.

—Osman Can Yerebakan

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Shannon Cartier Lucy, *The Autopsy*, 2021, oil on canvas, 35 × 44 inches. Courtesy of the artist and Lubov.

Osman Can Yerebakan

The Autopsy (2021) is both grotesque and mellow, which, I think, is the overall duality in your work. We are looking at a Dalmatian with its guts wide open during an autopsy, but there is an unusual serenity to the scene.

Shannon Cartier Lucy

It came as a vision that I didn't know what to do with. I wanted to paint a dog undergoing an autopsy, but had no further idea. The animal had to be on a table, which is a trait that a few paintings in this show have, and it evolved from there. Dalmatian, to me, is the most obvious pet dog because it's sweet and cartoonish on a universal level. I researched autopsy photos, but no one can tell the anatomy is incorrect except a doctor, although that doesn't matter either.

The collar, which normally would not be on during an autopsy, adds both some surreality and warmth. I am usually very conscious about sartorial details on human figures because I try to avoid markers of era or class. If I am painting shoes, they have to be very plain white sneakers or ballet shoes. High heels, for example, would take the work somewhere else. I prefer a clean slate in that sense.

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OCY

This ambiguity gives the feeling of looking at an abstract painting, although obviously your work is completely figurative. The question of “what am I looking at?” is similar: we see people, but their motivations are nebulous at a degree of abstraction.

SCL

I’ve always been curious about what prompts someone to live with a stranger’s portrait; I’m not sure if I would like to look at another person’s face every day. I prefer the figures’ anonymity which might give that abstract effect because the viewer creates their own path about each story. This might be one reason I often use children: their faces haven’t settled yet, and the characteristics are still ambiguous.

OCY

How about social media? Do you look at grids, stories, or Snaps for inspiration? That’s where the fastest stream of images is taking place.

SCL

Aren’t we all looking? I am from a generation that witnessed this transition to the digital and image filtration becoming the norm. In the early 2000s, I used to go to the New York Public Library to look through its image files and photocopy them. Now, I can Google “tablecloth” for hours and piece together the most fitting ones. The rugs, for example, are mostly based on those I come across on eBay.

OCY

There is an element of hygiene in your work in which things could easily get dirty but not yet. In Threading Berries (2021), the blackberries with needles through them could bleed and stain the tablecloth.

SCL

Yes, or that balance between things on the floor and on the table or about to fall from the table onto the floor. I always had a thing about having stuff figured out and keeping it together. And I like white linens! Yes, blackberries would bleed when you pierce them, but this is surreal, not painterly Surrealistic. That freedom to paint things that don’t exist makes me ask myself how do I get to that otherworldliness?

OCY

There is a thin line between the animate and intimate, the living and the non-living, such as a table and a girl or a dog that was alive but now dead.

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SCL

I looked at Sotheby's website for the history and examples of still life. There were Chaïm Soutine paintings with bloody carcasses and meat. For me, they seem alive and personal. The information mentioned that back in the eighteenth century the genre of still life was considered low and secondary after figurative painting and landscape. I wanted to challenge that value aspect and make them emotional and engaging.

OCY

How about the shock value? That instance of witnessing something gory right before it happens? This could be as simple as a plate falling off the table, like in *Threading Berries*, or something bloodier.

SCL

People reacted to *Our New Home* (2017) with shock: "Oh, my god, poor fish!" But it's a painting, and it shows how we are emotionally invested in images, even though they're painted. It shows it's about seeing. I sometimes find the shock value sweet. You want to know how your dog died and spend a fortune for an autopsy, which is usually a process we only see on crime shows on TV, not in this way.



Shannon Cartier Lucy, *Threading Berries*, 2021, oil on canvas, 34 x 28 inches. Courtesy of the artist and Lubov.

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OCY

This makes me think about the paintings' film-still aspect. You must have considered this before.

SCL

In fact, a lot of them are tweaked film stills. Girl at the Loo Table (2021) is from a Spanish film from the 1970s. She wasn't holding a big knife, of course. For years, I wanted to paint a girl with a giant knife, and the best result for my search was this girl in that film. I cropped her out of the still, and I'm not sure if she was even cutting food in the scene.

OCY

Are you a reliable narrator? How filtered is your interpretation of the original source or even your own dreams? Are you luring viewers to believe things in your subjective universe?

SCL

Am I luring you to believe? I'd agree that is exactly what I am doing. (laughter) I looked at so many pine cones for Loblolly Pine (2021) that the final source is a blur. When someone looks at my painting and makes comments like, "Hmm, so intriguing, so interesting," my response is: "Is it?" (laughter) I don't have the answer for what is behind the curtain. One discovery I've made is that I refine my references. All these women tied up in the paintings, is that kink? No, that's why I remove things. I like a blur that causes references to go against each other. She might be tied, but her skirt has flowers and the setting is calm. If I told you that an animal is split open, you would think of gore, but the painting is sweet. There is a way to lead someone to a feeling, to things we don't have words for but paintings do.

OCY

Is it a coincidence that this moment came after your psychotherapy studies?

SCL

When the goldfish painting came in 2017, everything changed. But, yes, I am attracted to the type of painting about the realm below the surface.

OCY

Do you believe in major breaking points and their influence on the rest of your life? Is your intense break-up and divorce, for example, a moment you will always remember?

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SCL

Regardless of what shit happens, it stays with you. Normal break-ups are hard, but sometimes it's like death. Any experience like that touches every deep emotional part. I was working out something similar with my schizophrenic dad. A friend explained those moments as shaking a bottle of creek water: all that weird stuff inside slowly resettles, at least until someone shakes it again. After that experience, I couldn't take anything for granted anymore. People would tell me I was doing fine, and I would freak out because I was not. But that's a beautiful experience—a rich, mysterious, intense, phenomenal, human experience. You are shocked how it changes you. This is predictable to say, but I became a new person, confident and fearless. Just do not ignore that gift, and learn from it.

Shannon Cartier Lucy: The Loo Table is on view at Lubov in New York City until November 14;
Shannon Cartier Lucy: Better Call it Grace was recently published by Hassla Books.

Osman Can Yerebakan is a curator and art writer based in New York. His writing has appeared in T: The New York Times Style Magazine, Paris Review, The Guardian, Artforum, Artnet, Brooklyn Rail, BOMB, Observer, New York Magazine, Wallpaper, Village Voice, and elsewhere.*

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