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Monday, November 13, 2006

Art Space Talk: Mila Sterling



I recently interviewed artist Mila Sterling. Sterling's portraits convey a strong sense of mood. When I view her portraits I can see the personality of her subjects trapped within the painting. Thus, her portraits have a very intimate quality about them. They reveal great insight into the human condition. I was delighted to discover her work.

The first aspect I noticed was her great skill for creating textured paintings. Her bold use of paint is marked by her strong sense of line. Together they form images that are a perfect example of what an artist can accomplish with the mere stroke of a brush.

Sterling utilizes her painterly technique in order to take full advantage of her talent as an expressive painter. However, the expressionistic quality of her work does not end with painting. Mila also creates interesting collages. (Example Below.)



Q. When did you first discover that art would be an important part of your adult life?

A. "I studied painting at UC Berkeley, and assumed it would be a part of my post-collegiate life, but it was on one of those Eurorail trips after graduation that I realized how important that part would be without the push of assignments and peers and professors. Specifically, the moment happened when I saw a Bacon triptych at the Tate (Three Studies for Figures at the Base of a Crucifixion) and felt viscerally excited with an intensity that surprised me. I had seen that painting (and many other works of art that we saw in the countries we passed through afterwards) in books, but seeing the pieces in person, quite simply, turned me on... and gave me a million ideas. It was unexpected. Although I had been doodling all of my life, it was only then I discovered it was to be my main focus. There was so much I HAD to do on my own, so much I still have to do."

Q. How has creating art shaped you professionally and personally?

A. "It's made me more disciplined and honest as a person. I haven't yet achieved the professional goals I have, but I have faith I'll get there."

Q. How has society influenced your art? Are there any social implications in your art?

A. "Well, I think the cultural impact of being a Manhattan-bred, Los Angeles/San Francisco raised city girl is implicit in everything I do. My work has been interpreted in many different ways, but I don't have an overall social or political agenda."



Q. What are your artistic influences? Has anyone inspired you?

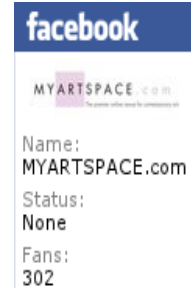
A. "There are certain painters that have influenced the way I paint... at the top of the list are Bacon, Van Gogh, Degas and Goya. I've been to the Prado about 20 times and at each visit felt simultaneously inspired and depressed by Goya's pinturas negras. At times it felt like, why bother? It's all there. Then I find another way.

I'm inspired mostly by artists today who find a way to incorporate their practice into real life and whose work is what I consider, for one reason or other, the 'real deal.' One example is the amazingly talented and prolific Elizabeth McGrath, whose style is completely different from mine, but whose work has had a real impact on me and who as a person inspires me to work harder."



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Q. Tell me a little about your background. Are your past experiences reflected in the work you do today? If so, how?

A. "As I previously mentioned, I'm a city girl. I was born in Manhattan, grew up in Los Angeles, moved to the Bay Area for university. I studied fine art and English literature at Berkeley, moved to San Francisco for a few years and then moved back here. In 2003 I moved to Madrid for a year to see if I could do it really, without speaking Spanish, knowing anyone, having a job or a place to live. Everything fell into my hands and made me braver and more confident, which has definitely influenced my work. I'm from a family of artists (my mother a pianist, father an actor, grandmother an animator, etc.) so the family joke is there was never a question of paying for med school."



Q. How long have you been a working artist?

A. "Based on when I first sold a painting, it's been almost 13 years."

Q. If you could pinpoint the characteristics of people who collect your art, what would they be?

A. "Mainly other artists and creative professionals. A celebrity here and there."



Q. Discuss one of your pieces. What were you thinking when you created it? What is your artistic process?

A. "I'm combining these two questions together. I often think in terms of producing a series, and I'll usually come up with an idea by accident. For example, I stumbled across a Frank Gehry structure while it was in the process of being built in downtown L.A. (now the Walt Disney Music Hall.) I thought it was one of the most beautiful, masculine and disturbing things I had ever seen. It seemed like a living or dead being, and I began to think of how urban structures can be seen as having their own cycle of gestation and decline. (Gehry himself, I found out later, wanted to design a building that looked like a fish with the Bilbao museum, which is similar in design to the Music Hall.) I took some photos off the carcass-like building and other buildings in town that were either in the process of being 'born' or 'dying' and used them as a base for my architectures series. I often work from photograph, alternately working directly from them and putting them away. I really like to see the sense of emotional depth I can get in a painting that doesn't come through in the photograph. The painting "emergence" in retrospect probably encapsulates what I was thinking about most successfully. My audience has seen it as many different things: a ship, a crane, an abstract expression of movement, etc." (Image Below)



Q. Why did you choose the medium(s) that you use?

A. "Oils are like a language, so I always feel challenged and I'm constantly learning. I love the texture of canvas but am often drawn towards wood for its sense of indestructibility and utilitarianism. Also, practically, it's less expensive!"



Q. Do you have a degree or do you plan to attend school for art? If so, how has it helped your art career?

A. "I have a BFA from Berkeley (I doubled in English Literature, but was more intensely involved in the art program). I originally intended to get an MFA and was accepted into the Slade School of Fine Art in London, my first choice. Sadly, I was unable to gather the funds to go. At this point in my life I'm on the fence as to whether to continue my education. I'm attracted to the idea of having a peer group of artists to bounce ideas off of, and I'm aware that having an MFA increases your opportunity to exhibit in reputable galleries. But I've also met many artists who have become burnt out and less productive after their master's, and I don't want to lose my enthusiasm or optimism."

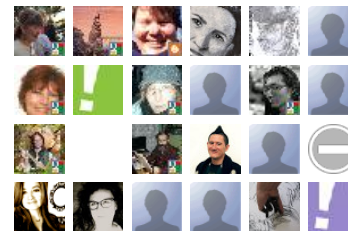
Q. Where can we see more of your art?

A. "Presently my work is either in my possession or in private collections. Almost all of it can be viewed on my website, www.milasterling.com."

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Q. Are you represented by a gallery? Do you have any upcoming exhibits?

A. "I'm not presently represented by a gallery. I am hoping to have a series ready for exhibit early next year in a downtown Los Angeles gallery and possibly showing the remainder of available pieces in the madrilena series in Echo Park. stay tuned."

Q. What galleries have you exhibited in?

A. "I've exhibited at Create:Fixate, Inshallah, Sushi Performance Art, the Art Collective Gallery, the Retiro, and unconventional art spaces like Scavenger's Paradise and Enrico's restaurant."

Q. Any tips for emerging artists?

A. "I was quite recently contacted by a student at the University of Pennsylvania who found me through the web. She had an assignment to interview an artist she liked, and one of the questions she asked was if I had any advice. This was my response: Don't self-censor, and work as much as you can. Try and be honest and not make something because you think it's cool... although there's nothing wrong with being cool, that won't help you grow your own voice. Don't be too concerned with being derivative but do try and add a different flair to a piece that's your own, even if it's unsuccessful. Stand behind what you set out to do but also listen to what everyone else has to say. And if you're a painter, always clean your brushes. My parents supported me until I graduated, and I found out the hard way that in the 'real world' when you have to pay for all the practical things in life, they are really fucking expensive."



Q. Has your work ever been censored? If so, how did you deal with it?

A. "My work has never been censored. If it was, obviously, I wouldn't support or exhibit in the organization that did, and would probably make a big stink about it."

Q. What was the toughest point in your career as an artist? Have you ever hit rock-bottom?

A. "This year has been the toughest, actually. I haven't hit rock bottom, but I've had some major personal setbacks and health issues I've been dealing with that have weakened my creative output and drive. Just in the last month I've gotten back to working and it feels fantastic. It saddens me that it's been over a year since I've had an exhibit, but life sometimes interferes and you just have to draw from it."



Q. In one sentence... why do you create art?

A. "The artistic process satisfies my natural creative inclinations in a way nothing else does, although the proces can sometimes be tortuous, challenging and physically/emotionally demanding... but if you create something that you think is any good it's extremely rewarding and for me, it's an added bonus if anyone else gets something from it."

I hope you have enjoyed my interview with Mila Sterling. Remember to view her website:

<http://www.milasterling.com/>

Take care, Stay true,

Brian Sherwin

Posted by Balhatain at 5:13 PM

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5 comments:

katie pine said...

Mila Sterling is an extraordinary artist with a rich and complex depth of expression. I hope

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to see her in a showing very soon....Katie

6:44 PM

Anonymous said...

Mila Sterling is **rad**.

9:31 AM

Anonymous said...

Beautiful, haunting work. An inspiration on so many levels. I can't wait to see a full gallery show.

4:41 PM

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t.rex said...

i have the distinct honor of being mila's friend & i must say two things: one - thank you to the site's owner for having such an inquisitive, insightful, and inspiring site (i am looking forward to returning for another read!); two - having the chance to see mila's works progress is amazing. i am a lover of art - especially some artists that remind me of her (and vice versa) bacon, schiele - and her work holds its own with the best. thank you!

7:53 PM

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