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ART

The Lady of the Castle Caroompas

Fairy tales, Hawthorne and Zorro inspire recent works by the artist, the subject of a new retrospective.

November 02, 1997 | Hunter Drohojowska Philp | Hunter Drohojowska Philp is a frequent contributor to Calendar

Artist Carole Caroompas looks like a '50s Italian movie star with her short-cropped black hair, heavy eyeliner, black shell and slacks and violet velvet sling-back shoes. The best indication that she lives in 1997, not 1957, are the black tattoos on her arms.

"I've always had this strong attachment to popular culture," Caroompas says. "Neon signs, cocktail napkins, rock 'n' roll, Frederick's of Hollywood. I had a studio on Hollywood Boulevard for about five years in the late '70s and early '80s. It seemed like a wonderful, peculiar and wrong place for making high art."

Today her studio is in a downtown L.A. warehouse where the walls are hung with recent paintings that will be seen in her retrospective at the Otis Gallery, opening Saturday. "Lady of the Castle Perilous," as the show is titled, was organized by gallery director Anne Ayres and spans work from 1973 to the present. It traces the influence of Caroompas' early collages and performance art on her recent large-scale paintings, which are based on fairy tales and fiction. Ayres borrowed the show's title from a series of collages the artist created in the late '70s, drawn from Sir Thomas Malory's "Le Morte d'Arthur," because, she says, they define Caroompas' principal subject matter: "a modern feminist gloss on the fables and myths that define the character of the feminine in history."

During the last decade, Caroompas' paintings have evolved as unpredictable amalgamations. Hanging on her wall is the recent "Dear Caught in the Headlights," a sepia rendering of four aging prostitutes in lingerie juxtaposed against a bright checkerboard background and embroideries of a doe, a car and a poodle. An image of a frightened Richard Widmark is the black-and-white circular at the center of the square canvas--the "dear."

The painting is part of a series focused loosely on Hester Prynne of "The Scarlet Letter" and the masked brigand Zorro, Caroompas says.

"Sometimes there are more obvious and literal representations of Hester and Zorro," she says. "In this work, the aging sex workers are stand-ins for Hester and the central image of a film noir character becomes the stand-in for Zorro. It addresses issues of fear, power and gender roles. These women are trying to seduce, but they are aging. I wanted to paint them like the four Graces, with a gracious beauty. The male character is in the spotlight and looks as if he is in fear. In their sexuality, they have a certain power that he fears. There is a seesaw of desire and fear that comes up in the work."

"I have always done a lot of reading and writing before I start anything," Caroompas says. "I come up with a list of titles and gather visual information, do working drawings, then translate them into a painting."

Her sources are evident on her bookshelves, which are filled with well-worn volumes of illustrated encyclopedias, poetry and art books as well as hundreds of

record albums--not CDs. A coffee table is crowded with '50s ashtrays in vibrant colors (Caroompas remains a defiant chain smoker). The sitting area is hung with drawings and paintings by artist friends and students; she has been on the faculty of Otis College of Art and Design for 16 years.

The artist's distinctive personal style is inseparable from her art, if far from her roots. She was born in Oregon, and her family moved to Newport Beach when she was 8. Her father was a chiropractor, and her mother worked in his office. Caroompas considered becoming a poet and wound up majoring in English literature at Cal State Fullerton.

Most of her friends were art majors, so she took some classes and, after graduating in 1968, went on to earn a master's in fine arts at USC. When she graduated in 1971, the women's movement was in full swing, and she found herself in consciousness-raising sessions with pioneering feminist artists of that era including Judy Chicago and Miriam Schapiro.

"I was doing installations that involved pouring paint over grids," Caroompas recalls. "They said my work was too formal and not female enough. Afterward, I started working with fabrics, feathers, glitter and party favors. For me, it came from an attachment to Hollywood and low culture, but lo and behold, they fit into 'the movement,'" she says with a laugh.

Nevertheless, the feminists had an important effect on the young artist.

"It may have been observing them as role models. I gained more of an awareness of who I was and how I functioned in the world, which was probably more important than any of the theories," she says.

In the mid-'70s, Caroompas began to work in collage, which became the undergirding of her work.

"There was always a reference to the self, the identity and the body," she says. "I started using autobiographical references, using images from art history, but with my face over them."

Studying the writings of Carl Jung and Joseph Campbell inspired Caroompas to use a mandala format.

"Information from the unconscious and dreams was very important," she explains. "'The Dreams of the Lady of the Castle Perilous' were all mandalas. In the center of each was a heraldic shape. My dreams were inside."

Such interior investigation and an interest in writing led the artist, for a decade beginning in the late '70s, to performance art, which entailed writing and singing rock songs. But Caroompas considers herself a painter first and foremost.

In the mid-'80s, Caroompas decided to address what she calls "proper painting."

"I left the intimate format and went up in scale because I wanted the work to be more confrontational, more direct. I took out the autobiography. But the way I research information and structure the pictures still reflects a collage sensibility."

Her first series of large-scale paintings was based on Grimm fairy tales.

"I wanted to work with a body of known information that came from the culture, that everyone would have some association with," she says. "Fairy tales deal with morality and metaphor. I picked the Grimm brothers because they did not really write the fairy tales, they rewrote them. All those tales essentially were told by elderly women, and that voice was changed into a male-dominant voice. In terms of the moral codes and the gender relationships, it was the perfect source. By restructuring these elements, it put them up for question."

Such interests led, in the early '90s, to a series of paintings titled "Before and After Frankenstein: The Woman Who Knew Too Much."

The artist explains: "Here we have this story about a man giving birth, essentially. I also realized I have a fascination with 19th century literature, the romantic aspects and moral codes."

One of the most controversial aspects of Caroompas' later painting is in the explicit representation of sex, ranging from soft porn to the Kamasutra.

The artist smiles as she adds: "The work not only deals with the psychological and mythological but also the corporeal.

"It involves the ideas of romance and sexuality but brings humor and irony into it. When you place fairly explicit sexual imagery in relation to other images, it has a certain kind of confrontational nature. People immediately reflect their own experience. It's a way of seduction but also a way of confrontation. They are meant to be beautiful, but they are not done as erotic art. They are not set up to create that sensation."

Though critics laud it, collectors and curators have found the work difficult.

"I think there is a certain taboo associated with it," Caroompas acknowledges.

Although much of her art is about romance, she has never married.

"Some parents push their girls to grow up and get married and have children. My parents were more interested in what I was going to do. I never had that pressure," she says. "When I decided to become an artist, I was really cautious in terms of my career. I think of a relationship as being in love with somebody, but I never associate it with being married."

Since 1994, her concerns have played themselves out in a series of paintings titled "Hester and Zorro."

"I'm a mail-order junkie," Caroompas confesses. "I was looking through a catalog and ordered this book on Zorro. I started reading it and thinking. Then it was obvious. Who would his girlfriend be but Hester Prynne? They have so much in common. They both had double lives, secrets; he makes a mark, she wears a mark. They are both non-privileged. He's a Latin man, she's a female. The list I started writing made me see they had all these things in common." Since Hester Prynne was talented in needlework and embroidered her own scarlet A, Caroompas made many of these paintings with embroidered borders or painted them on embroidered tablecloths or pillowcases.

As the artist looks back over the last 25 years, she sees her work as consistently questioning both herself and her viewer.

"I don't have answers, but the paintings are really about asking questions," she says. "How does this exist? Why is it OK? What happens if we change it? Why is that threatening? What does that mean not only in terms of past history but 1997?"

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CAROLE CAROOMPAS: "LADY OF THE CASTLE PERILOUS," Otis Gallery, 9045 Lincoln Blvd., Westchester. Dates: Saturday through Jan. 24. Phone: (310) 665-6905.



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