

ALL THE ARTS, ALL THE TIME

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(<http://latimesblogs.latimes.com/.shared/image.html?/photos/uncategorized/2009/03/27/callis.jpg>) Living artists are hardly a priority at the J. Paul Getty Museum, so photographer Jo Ann Callis is still a little stunned to be having a show there. And grateful.

“I feel so lucky,” she says. “I was prepared to be anonymous. I was enjoying life. I was thinking, ‘It’s OK. I had some moments in the past, and that is enough.’ ”

“Jo Ann Callis: Woman Twirling,” as the show opening Tuesday is titled, refers to her warm-hued photograph of a woman in a circle skirt spinning around in a blur. Her furious yet solitary movement contrasts with the stillness of a carved wood sculpture of an entwined couple that doubles as the base of a lamp. Questions arise about the activity and the setting.

This sort of oblique narrative percolates through most of Callis’ carefully staged color photographs of the ’70s, ’80s and ’90s, which mine the psychological and emotional pressures of domestic life. They were selected to complement the historic work of the late Paul Outerbridge, whose commitment to color photography had impressed her at the outset of her career.

Callis developed her style “not in imitation of Outerbridge,” says Getty photography curator Judith Keller, “but she used his love of experimenting with color, his preference for creating work in the studio and constructing whole scenes to be photographed and his interest in images that appear to be beautiful and mildly seductive, before you realize something is not quite right.”



(<http://latimesblogs.latimes.com/.shared/image.html?/photos/uncategorized/2009/03/27/callis2.jpg>) Callis embraced working in color at a time when it was disdained by fine art photographers as a commercial gambit. Using mostly female models, with sets and props, she staged scenes suggesting desire and tension in her painstakingly printed Cibachromes.

Now, photography of this sort has become the domain of artists such as Gregory Crewdson, Jeff Wall and Thomas Demand, who take advantage of digital technology. “The history of photography has been forgotten,” says Keller, who acquired or borrowed 30 Callis prints for the show to complement the 50 or so the Getty already owns. “It is something students are not getting. I don’t think Jo Ann sees herself as a historic figure, but that is the sort of thing the Getty is known for presenting. For us, it is always about bringing things up to the present with a historic overview.”

Since 1980, Callis has lived in a tidy gray house in Culver City, where she completed all her work in a converted garage turned small studio. For each photograph, she painted the walls in various colors, added fabric backdrops and brought in props from the house.

In her kitchen during a recent interview, Callis, 68, places a plate of almond biscuits on a wooden table. Her white curly hair and pale complexion lend an aura of calm, though she confesses to being nervous. “I’m an anxious person,” she says. “It’s the way I was born. Happy-go-lucky I’m not.”

Reviewing her photographs for the show heightens her anxiety. “All those memories came flooding back. It was 35 years ago. I was in my 30s when I made them. In a way, it embarrassed me,” she says.

Callis’ work came about during a period of enormous change for women in society and for her in particular. They reflect her upbringing in the 1950s in Cincinnati, where her father owned a furniture store and her mother took pride in redecorating the home, regularly. Callis was studying art at Ohio State University in Columbus in 1960 when her husband, Gil Callis, finished medical school and accepted an internship at a hospital in Torrance. She left school, moved west and had two sons by age 23. While raising them, she pursued sculpture in night school.

“That was my salvation,” she says. “I could talk to other people and not be isolated. It was a hot time, the ’60s, but I was home caring for babies and making collages.”

After enrolling at UCLA in 1970, everything changed. “I was invigorated to be back at school. I was not cut out to be a housewife and mother, but the domestic role was embedded in my history.”

She started studying graphic design but took a radical turn after her first course with experimental photographer Robert Heineken. “He encouraged me, challenged me. He gave people permission to use sexual subject matter,” she says. “I found out you could take pictures of things inside your head, non-tangible things, and it didn’t depend on your ability to draw.”

The Getty show includes photographs made while studying with him, including black-and-white studies of a nude woman under the reflective surface of water. “I was making images that were sensuous, tactile, aesthetic, sexual,” she explains. “I never wanted to be overly sexual like today but to put elements together to be understood.”

Her early work was considered sufficiently significant to land her a position teaching at CalArts in 1975, a year before she finished her master's in fine arts at UCLA. (She still teaches at CalArts.)

She divorced her first husband in 1975. "I was afraid of how I was going to survive," Callis says. "I had two teenagers. Those were difficult times. I started to find my voice in my art, but I was still a mother and completely responsible to them."

In the '70s, the feminist movement was an active part of CalArts' curriculum, and Callis had her first show at the Woman's Building, a downtown L.A. feminist hub. Yet she felt conflicted. "I never identified. I always wore lipstick. It got ridiculous. It was like fascism."

"I photographed models, but all of them, female or male, are me. It's coming from me," she says. "My insecurities, my revenge, my disappointment."

Callis and artist David Pann married in 1980, divorced in 1984, remarried in 1989 and are still together. The events took their toll, and she addressed them in color photographs during that time: A woman juggles. Another wears a black dress and heels while standing on her hands and framed by swagged gold curtains. A cloth is pulled violently from a table, so that dishes and saucers go flying.

"All those tumultuous still-lives were during that period," she says. "The picture of the woman standing on her hands is about performance and making it look easy. Which is life. We are always performing. In the performance photographs, the people are moving and the objects are still. You can always count on the objects, they are always there for you."

Though she was a top photographer through the mid-'90s, her response to the digital juggernaut was to take up painting and printmaking. "As a career move, this is ridiculous," says Callis, whose work is shown at Craig Krull Gallery in Santa Monica. "But there is no point in making art unless you do what you want to do."

-- Hunter Drohojowska-Philp

Top photo: Jo Ann Callis peruses some of her work in her studio at home in Culver City. Credit: Gary Friedman / Los Angeles Times. Bottom: Callis' "Woman With Wet Hair" (1978). Credit: Jo Ann Callis and Craig Krull Gallery

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