

WESTERN ★ PROJECT

Selected Press on Carole Caroompas (2007-2008)

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Reviews

By Michael Duncan

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Carole Caroompas at Western Project

For Over 30 Years, L.A. artist Carole Caroompas has incorporated mass media images into patterned collages and paintings that comment on the impact of cultural archetypes on contemporary psychology and behavior. The troubled relationships between the sexes has been her work's chief subject matter, dramatized by using pictures of rock stars, Hollywood movie stills and children's book illustrations. collectively titled "Dancing with Misfits: Eye-Dazzler" (2006-07), her vibrant series of four mixed-medium paintings, each around 6 feet high, has as



backgrounds painted geometric pattern taken from "eye-dazzler" weaving, a later 19-century Navajo style that features explosive colors and aggressive zigzags.

The in-your-face patterning is a perfect field for juxtaposed images that evoke their own brand of fireworks. Painted black-and-white scenes appropriated from frames of John Huston and Arthur Miller's *The Misfits* – the classic, overwrought 1961 Western that features a troubled triangle of modern-day characters played by Marilyn Monroe, Clark Gable and Montgomery Clift – are juxtaposed with full-color images of other figures from other sources who contrast with or complement the film's tortured protagonists.

Watch Out for Those Pretty Little Feet, Dear (2006), for example, features images of Gable and Monroe dancing, the prom queen and king jut prior to the blood-bath in Brian DePalma's *Carrie* (1976) and a still from the 1969 marriage of Tiny Tim and Miss Vicki on the "Tonight Show" with Johnny Carson. Also making an appearance in the series are Lenny Bruce, Jackie Kennedy (at her husband's funeral), Jane Fonda (in Barbarella drag) and the self-destructive rock singer Arthur Lee. Each painting incorporates as well a piece of found embroidery — pure '60's kitsch — featuring images of storybook characters, animals or cocktail-napkin bimbos.

The exhibition included one working drawing in colored pencil and graphite on Mylar for the painting *Les Désaxés* (2007) – the word is French for, yes, "misfits" – which demonstrated the artist's painstaking compositional process. Caroompas composes like a visual DJ, modulating moods with her unpredictable source material, while the frenetic patterns and hand-rendering restore an intensity of affect to the clichéd images. Her finely tuned pop-culture antenna has never been more effective, as she sends angst-ridden signals from the heart and soul of the nation.

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ArtScene / December

CAROLE CAROOMPAS

November 3 - December 22, 2007 at [Western Projects](#), Culver City

by Rebecca Niederlander

Carol Caroompas has been working in a stroboscopic, image-dense and process-intense fashion for a long time. We saw it in the "Frankenstein" works. We saw it in the "Hester and Zorro" series, utterly ironic and at once utterly serious images wherein the fallen adulteress from Hawthorne gives up female guilt, owns her libido and seeks a place far away with Zorro, a man of real action. . .who happens to be invented and never shows his face.

The half humorous and dead serious issues regarding female roles, the equal opportunity existential terror that grips both genders, lives lived through simulation and fantasy, pent up desire, our disembodied lives--all these recur as intonations more than subjects in the new series of canvases subtitled "Dancing with Misfits."

More loosely related to a specific narrative than previously, the leitmotif of misfitting is addressed in the way Caroompas toys with our timeless and violent curiosity for all things freakish/aberrant/outside of us. This idea comes as non sequitur snippets from John Houston's film "The Misfits," and via images of that quintessential Pop culture "other"--Sissy Spasik as the homicidal Carrie spurned on prom night. In one canvas Carrie is a B movie ghoul, in another hopeful and dreamy, set next to the hideously enticing Tiny Tim and his Miss Vicky.

If with Caroompas we know what to expect by now, what we never quite expect is to be continually surprised, entertained, titillated, visually and intellectually challenged each time we encounter a way of working only the most disciplined of artists would take on. I am not naively confusing proliferation of detailed realistic hand skill (which Caroompas has in excess) for quality--like some super-size-me gauge for art whereby more means better. In fact, in fine art "more" can be dangerous, requiring a clearer conception from the onset, a serious rein over materials, and the intense discipline of knowing what goes into "more," and what should indeed be



"Dancing With Misfits: Eye-Dazzler: An Eastern Western-Cowboy Mummy," 2007, acrylic on found embroidery over canvas, 63 x 40 1/2".



"Dancing With Misfits: Eye-Dazzler: Damn Bull Had The Whole Milky Way In That Hoof," 2007 acrylic on found embroidery over canvas, 87 1/2 x 67".



"Dancing With Misfits: Eye-Dazzler: Watch Out For Those Pretty Little Feet, Dear", 2006, acrylic on found embroidery over canvas, 52 x 34".

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left out (it's harder than it looks--beginners should not try this at home). A veteran reader and thinker who pays dues with intense research and body-wracking hours in the studio, Caroompas pulls all this off. . .again.

All the works here are acrylic and found embroidery on canvas, and all the complex scenes are bound up perceptually within intricate geometries grabbed from American Indian weaving. This is the dizzying experience of mass culture visualized par excellence. Caroompas appropriates images from film stills painted here to look like black and white TV on the fritz; she appliqué's found needle work from junk stores, appropriates graphic looking references to fairy tales. Jack and Jill and the inevitable idea of water tumble, for example, into a complex composition that suggests the arid, macho deserts of the American West or Mid East; tiny stitched tea kettles dance and cavort out of nowhere in particular.

In "Dancing with Misfits: An Eastern Western Cowboy Mummy," a Hollywood style 1920s Sheik of Arabia (Rudolph Valentino?) with a mustache straight from the Props Department collides amicably with the image of a rodeo cowboy--two equally mediated and highly politicized versions of "manhood."

The attraction of Caroompas' work--in addition to formal diligence--is the way she can body forth that razor's edge between increasing dispersion and some tenacious psychological and narrative return to die-hard themes. These include our need for physical and existential mooring and the loss of same, captured here by a stitched Hansel and Gretel looking longingly at a wretched little cottage, or the funniest pink pigs painted to saunter under the rafters of an ambitious half-built suburban dwelling. Our seemingly endless reserve of sexual drive in all its untidy, deliciously dramatic, wet, wild, cheesy and poignant variations is suggested again and again: in embroidered vegetables who dance and couple; in a deftly painted macho cowboy rendered in the stencil style of ads as he tosses his lasso across the canvas to rope round the neck, as if from another realm, a super-butch skater from 1950s "Roller Derby" TV lore.

Caroompas is able to recreate this state of awareness which, on the one hand taps totally familiar popular/collective and personal/psychic memory, and on the other stages these icons so that they fragment out in unpredictable permutations so complex that viewers have to work to sort it all out. This active participation reminds us that Caroompas was a performance artist and a musician, modes of communication where passive museum seeing simply does not work.

Irving Sandler wrote that the "new" post modern art had to echo the way we look at/experience contemporary life. He called this vernacular or engaged seeing, and contrasted it with museum seeing, which we know can entail three disconnected minutes. Sandler could not have imagined current visual culture—a kind of looking on steroids. Awash as we are in visual stimulation, the flood of emotional, perceptual, cognitive, global info hitting us almost nonstop, it's safe to say that the old hopeful habit of linear thought, tidy narratives in life and art that conclude predictably, of ordered inner worlds, has given rise to a rhizome model of experience. According to this model our interior and exterior worlds emanate from vague yet deeply rooted starting points, only to ricochet mosaic-like in hundreds of splintered ideas, actions, associations, memories, desires, etc. The way Caroompas can recreate that rhizome of our mental and social life while still sticking to rigorous rules of making art is quite compelling.

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WELCOME TO THE JUNGLE
The Cosmology of Carole Caroompas
By Ezra Jean black

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Carole Caroompas' studio is situated in an industrial/warehouse neighborhood on the southern flanks of downtown LA that has experienced a resurgence over the last two decades. Yet, although a virtual crossroads of commerce, and despite the furious pace of development only a mile or so due north, it retains an air of isolation, aloof in its role as a conduit for so much that makes LA the place that it is. As I turn onto Carole's street, stormy skies are giving way to a clear gray-white light. It is turning into that rare thing – a perfect autumn day in LA.

Caroompas' building is similarly a play in light and dark – relatively dark corridors broken by sunlit atria and airshafts pierced by almost baroquely towering cacti reaching through the roof and into the sky. As we enter her studio, we're greeted by one of her cats, a lion-sized marmalade named Arthur Lee, followed by a slightly smaller Asian blue named, Lux (after Lux Interior, of course – as I only put together after being reminded that the Cramps put out a record entitled, *Psychedelic Jungle* – the title of Caroompas' last show at Western Project). Things – from visual arts to post-punk bands to Gothic romance literature (or just Goths) to films to history – to cats – have a way of connecting in the Caroompas universe.

There's a cozy domesticity to the front part of the studio; it's easy to imagine curling up with a book from her shelves and a cup of tea for an afternoon. I'm intrigued by a glitter of what look like medallions or bright buckles in one corner – which Caroompas informs me are actually *tamata* – votive offerings carried into Greek Orthodox churches by worshipers as expressions of everything from mundane wishes to prayers for miracles – which she first discovered while travelling through the Greek islands. They're not unlike the Mexican devotionals, *Milagros* – and Caroompas has a small collection of these hanging right beside them. Interesting, I think, that the imagery for the *tamata* seem to have been drawn randomly, not only from traditional Greek sources, but any and everywhere. Some of the images organize itself not only along work and leisure functions, but as zones of contemplation and confrontation, and there are places here where they seem to fuse.

It's almost a shock to walk back into the working areas and view work in progress that is nearing completion. Although Caroompas has a readily identifiable style – strained to some extent from Pattern and Decoration tendencies, but distinctly her own – each of her series has a distinctive affect and impact. The three paintings she shows me have an intense, vibratile quality, not unlike much of the work in her "Psychedelic Jungle" series. But here,

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instead of the floating (or sunken) world quality of her *Night of the Iguana* imagery, there is a sense of careening, ricocheting action at odds with the emotional quality of some of the imagery. Icons for a pachinko parlor, I think. (As with "Psychedelic Jungle," some of the imagery is drawn from films and much of that, as in the previous series, from a John Huston film – this time, *The Misfits*.) The colors and patterns of the support reinforce that electric intensity and are directly influenced by Navajo rugs. Caroompas is not merely playing one inspiration off another; each is thematically integral to the painting. This is not unrelated to the nexus between literary and cinematic motives in her work.

Later we talked about cinematic imagery and Huston in particular. "The work is all really based on language. [But] they're fragmented stories; it's not a linear narrative...I always think of paintings as being stop-frames; that something came before them, and if you go out of the room, they can all become animate and something else is going on." It strikes me that this is the Caroompas read on 'existence precedes essence,' as she begins to speak about Huston: "He pretty much used the same themes in almost every movie he did; and in the later movies, I think...the existentialism becomes very strong." The male-female dynamic has its own expression in Caroompas' distillation, but also the theme or motif of the pilgrim's journey – not the first time the theme has been evoked in her work, and in an equally dual sense. Also an element of transcendence one step removed from Sartrean (and perhaps Hustonian) existentialism – the flip side of the absurd universe Maxine, Shannon, and others swim through, the Huston jungle absurdly destined to become the Puerta Vallarta of Burton and Taylor; what, for Caroompas anyway, appears to be the possibility, however fraught or contingent, of meaning.

"You're (a) alone; but (b) you've got to fight the battle yourself; and (c) there's something beyond that."

If Caroompas's existentialism seems to some extent a subspecies of her feminism, it might be argued in tandem that her feminism is another aspect of her linguistic and formal concerns, expressed with striking and characteristic pragmatism. "A lot of the early work did deal with identity and about being female, and also a lot about gender difference, the male-female thing – how do you make this work?" she admits. The tension between language and its cinematic (or simply pictorial) treatment, its uses (or abuses), transpositions and expressions, whether in various Huston collaborations, classic film noirs, or elsewhere, seems to be an inexhaustible source of material for Caroompas. The work in progress reminds me of the dual tensions conveyed in the *Misfits*, captured not only in the film but by the Magnum photographers who had access to the set.

Here, on one canvas, Marilyn Monroe. Roslyn on horseback in a more or less photographic transposition seems to obliquely contemplate an inset accordion player drawn from a similarly realistic reference, but here rendered as a line drawing – two elements in a constellation of vignettes and imagery swirling around a house seemingly lost in its isolated plot of land.

Characters fictional and factual, historical and contemporary, along with a host of imagery drawn from everything from kitsch to porn, from the cartoonish to the clinical are woven (sometimes literally) into Caroompas' iconography, sometimes making only glancing contact with each other, sometimes seeming submerged within the warp and woof of the overall structural scheme.

People don't take that much time standing in front of a painting, so they'll take in something from the first try; then all of a sudden they start discovering, seeing other things, how they're connected and why it's going one way instead of another. So much of the imagery comes from different sources – I can't expect everyone to know what those sources are...And the hybridization of techniques I use is part of that, too. They're not all painted alike. There are differences in terms of whether it's painted in a cartoon style, whether it's

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digital imagery, whether it's a trompe l'oeil...So people connect these images and start to form meanings because of how they can be connected or disconnected."

The sense of connection and disconnection – always an aspect of Caroompas' work – seems id anything more pronounced in these paintings; also the elemental: the sense of alienation from home/land, the betrayal of its stewardship and implied trust. Here again, background becomes foreground: there is nothing incidental about Caroompas' use of Navajo motifs. But Caroompas' "stop-frame" paradoxically allows for considerable movement – the viewer's, of course, physically, imaginatively; but also among the elements in the painting. Images from Brian De Palma's film of *Carrie* seem to specifically reference the potential for telekinesis.

There's also a sustain here – the 'chords' connecting this disparate imagery held open for maximum resonance (and dissonance) – and something that can be carried away with the viewer.

"Did you see that show at the Getty? The Orthodox icons...from St. Catherine's? Those icons were painted specifically to carry around, to aid in contemplation [of the depicted saints]. Some of those paintings are older than anything I've even seen. But there's something very contemporary about them, too. There's something very real to me about that."

Los Angeles Times

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Turning Surfaces Into Kaleidoscopes

By David Pagel

Carole Caroompas' paintings don't stop you in your tracks, like icons. Nor do they lure you into 3-D worlds, with deep space and sensible story lines.

Instead, the L.A. artist's four new paintings and one drawing at Western Project lay everything they've got on their densely interwoven surfaces, where they transform the image-glut of modern life into a hallucinatory stew that's impossible to digest and even harder to take your eyes off.

A typical painting by Carole Caroompas begins when she glues to the canvas' pristine surface, napkins or tablecloths embroidered with smiling sugar cups, dancing utensils or scantily clad babes wrapping themselves around cocktail glasses. She then paints over the fabrics and canvas, depicting in her signature style of DIY illustration, scenes from movies and TV shows, as well as imagery from nursery rhymes, rock videos, Gothic novels, Victorian dramas, German folk tales and American billboards, school books and newspapers.

Caroompas weaves together this polyglot mélange with patterns and palettes borrowed from Navajo Eye-Dazzler rugs. Their zig-zagged diagonals provide electrifying backgrounds.

The cast of characters in "Dancing With Misfits: Eye-Dazzler: An Eastern Western-Cowboy Mummy", includes Karen Carpenter, Jane Fonda (as Barbarella), Montgomery Clift, Marilyn Monroe and Clark Gable (from "The Misfits"), Sissy Spacek (from "Carrie"), Jack and Jill, a little teapot, and an ostrich dancing with a doll that resembles Louis XIV.

Lenny Bruce, Tiny Tim and his wife appear in other works, all of which tap into the scrappy punk impulse at that heard of 1970s Pattern-and-Decoration painting. Caroompas adds Sphinx-like enigma to its think-for-yourself ethos, creating a brand of home-brewed Realism that captures the tenor of our times.

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Pop was not supposed to be this complicated, but in Caroompas' hands the easy-to-read style pushes viewers into a realm in which logic falls short. Her fractured pictures insist that instantaneous gratifications is neither, and that art is not meant for everyone – certainly not folks with no taste for uncertainty or unsettling coincidences.

Think of Caroompas not simply as an American artist, but as an Americana artist – a salt-of-the-earth devotee of mass-cultural phenomena, who, in marching to her own beat, makes paintings filled with kaleidoscopic insights into the weirdness all around us.