



LYLE CARBAJAL

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PRINTING + INSTALLATION + FILM

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For Immediate Release:

Celebrated Roving Artist Brings Installation to Nashville

Romancing Banality: A Mash-up of Anti-Artistry, Folk, and Contemporary Themes

Nashville TN - Romancing Banality, a visually arresting installation by multimedia artist Lyle Carbajal, opens to the public June 6th at Tinney Contemporary. The exhibition kicked off in Seattle, followed by New Orleans and after months of preparation and personal integration into Nashville life and culture by artist/creator Carbajal, will transform for its next phase at downtown's Tinney Contemporary.

Lyle Carbajal is a multimedia artist focusing on the social commentary of cultural and economic perception and their implications in contemporary art. Romancing Banality is his current traveling installation exploring these ideas, in which viewers are fully immersed into the environment of his subjects for a truly distinctive, engaging, multi-sensory experience that challenges perspective and social beliefs. By inhabiting the city of upcoming exhibitions in advance, Carbajal creates a unique audience experience- a manifestation of experiences, people, attitudes, and perception- which is in a constant state of transformation as it evolves with each location simultaneously serving as both subject and muse.

"It's a city's Zeitgeist that interests me," says Carbajal. "The sights, the sounds, the way its people either cherish or disregard artistic forms, the city's visual connection to the past and whether or not it recognizes its indigenous culture."

Art writer Adam Eisenstat observes, "It is perhaps his paintings' documentary verve that is most noteworthy; their function as individual dispatches from the artist's travels, which in concert form a consistent style and sensibility (if not any sort of coherent "message" or fixed position). As conduits through which certain elements of a time and place and distinct people are communicated, this work inhabits the precinct of folk art, which also reflects Carbajal's intentions and methodologies, and epitomizes the art peculiar to the heterogeneous mind."

Tinney Contemporary is a proud part of the local and international fine art scene in downtown Nashville.

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ROMANCING BANALITY

Romancing Banality: A New Installation By Lyle Carbajal

“Aside from the paintings and the occasional added panel construction, it’s exciting to see the next big step as represented by Romancing Banality, the entire environment for the paintings, the installation and multimedia components, the engagement with a variety of senses. It makes me realize that unless you’re standing in detritus, wading through garbage, then you’re not really seeing the work in its best light so to speak. You’re seeing it conventionally, passively, studying its collage aspects or its portraiture, its muscular effort to grasp the ineffable – but not engaging it on its own terms, not quite stepping into the world that the paintings create, the folk imagination, the oral tradition of tricksters.”

- David Francis. PhD

“The irrational anomaly, the loose thread, the pottery kill-hole... Painting at its root is not problem-solving but is an appositional creation.”

Forging artlessness and bad painting through line *and then* subject and composition weaving through a reverse-eponymous mythology, all the while employing the thematic of religion and taboo, children’s dreams and urban folk art, randomness and graffiti... I construct my playground.

Although some of the images are meant to be taken literally, their intent is to lurk rather than convene...simply let the environment descend upon you.

While not exclusively contemporary, my work does exist somewhere between the vernacular and the latter.

These are the truths I perceive through my eyes, my journeys, and my exploration as an artist.

-Lyle Carbajal





“LOCAL ARTIST’S EXHIBIT GAINS INTERNATIONAL ATTENTION” - KOMO NEWS

SEATTLE - A local artist’s exhibit opened to rave reviews leading galleries worldwide to clamor for his art.

Lyle Carbajal spoke to a crowded room Saturday, discussing his inspiration for his ambitious show which combines painting, sculpture and video.

“Forging artlessness and bad painting through line and then subject and composition weaving through a reverse-eponymous mythology, all the while employing the thematic of religion and taboo, children’s dreams and neuroticism, totem-ism, randomness and graffiti... I construct my playground,” said the artist.

The exhibit, *Romancing Banality*, is a fascinating installation piece that forces onlookers to engage all senses. Each component plays carefully with each other, invoking emotion

through spatial awareness. Carbajal says the images are meant to be taken literally with an intention of letting the environment descend on the viewer.

“These are the truths I perceive through my eyes, my journeys, and my exploration as an artist,” Carbajal said.

The exhibit has been picked up by galleries in Nashville, New Orleans, and Copenhagen, and will stay in Seattle through December. Visit the exhibit at Currency Art, located in the old Dome Stadium Tavern on 214 4th Ave. South, Seattle from 12 p.m. - 5 p.m. Friday through Saturday.

source: KOMO NEWS Seattle -

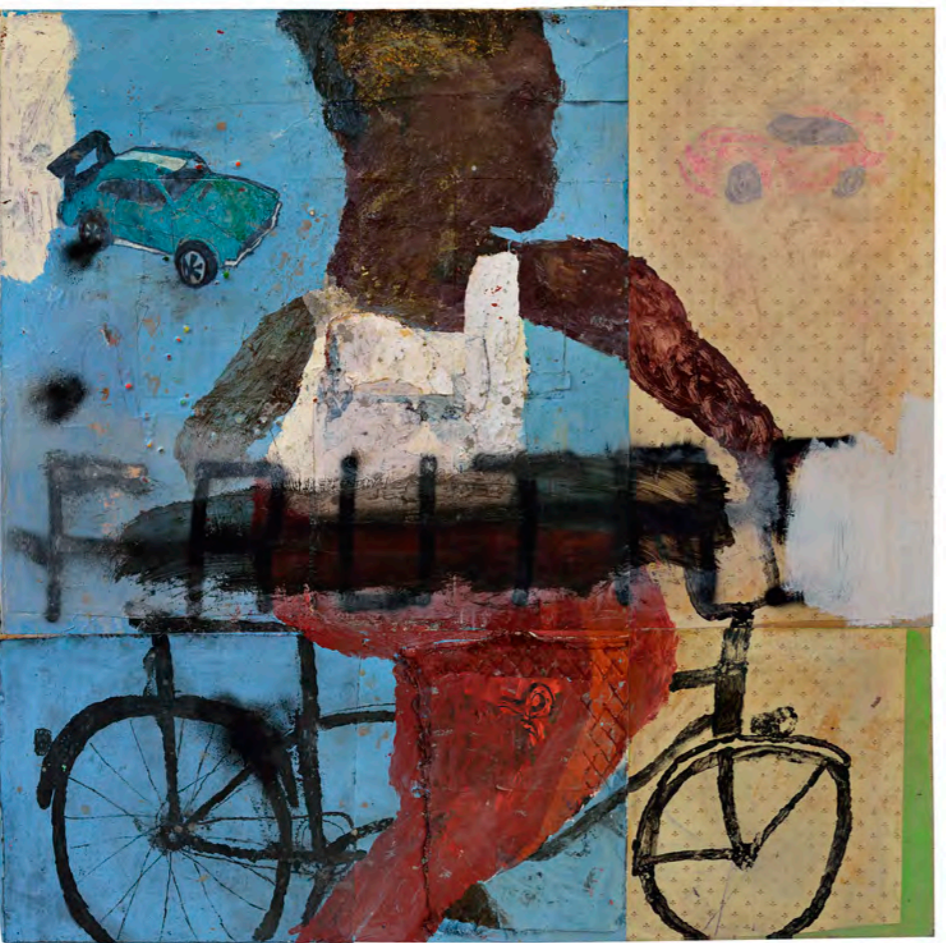
<http://www.komonews.com/news/local/Local-artists-exhibit-gains-international-attention-234979941.html#comments>



"EVRLST"

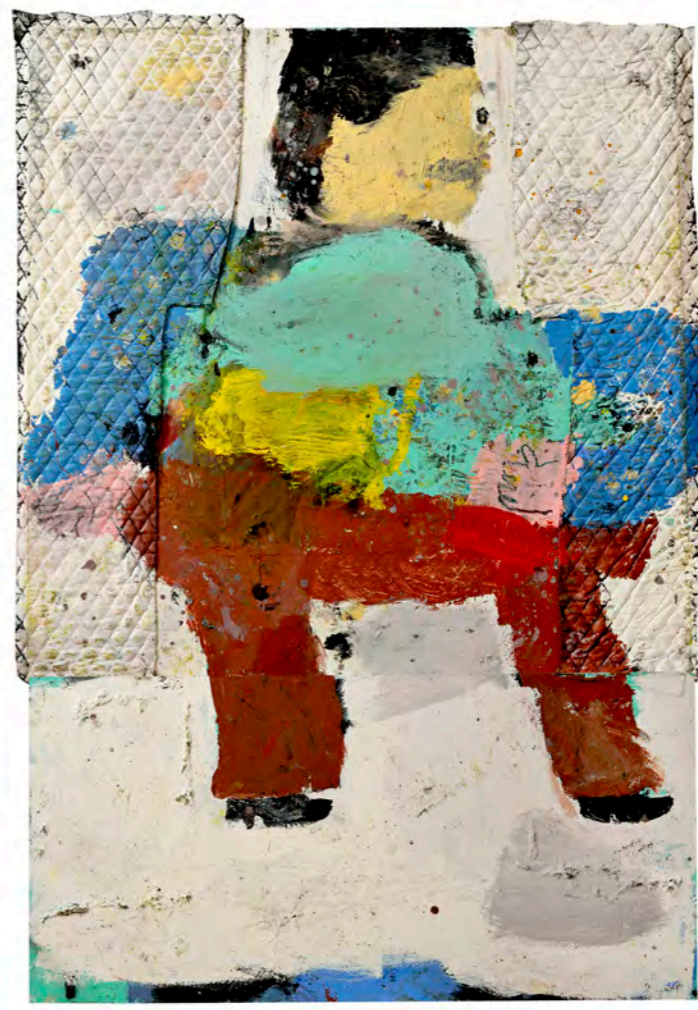
48" x 48" mixed medium on wood panel - 2013





"FRUTAS"

48" x 48" mixed medium on wood panel - 2014



“Untitled (Man with Red Pants)”
32”x 48” mixed medium on wood panel - 2015

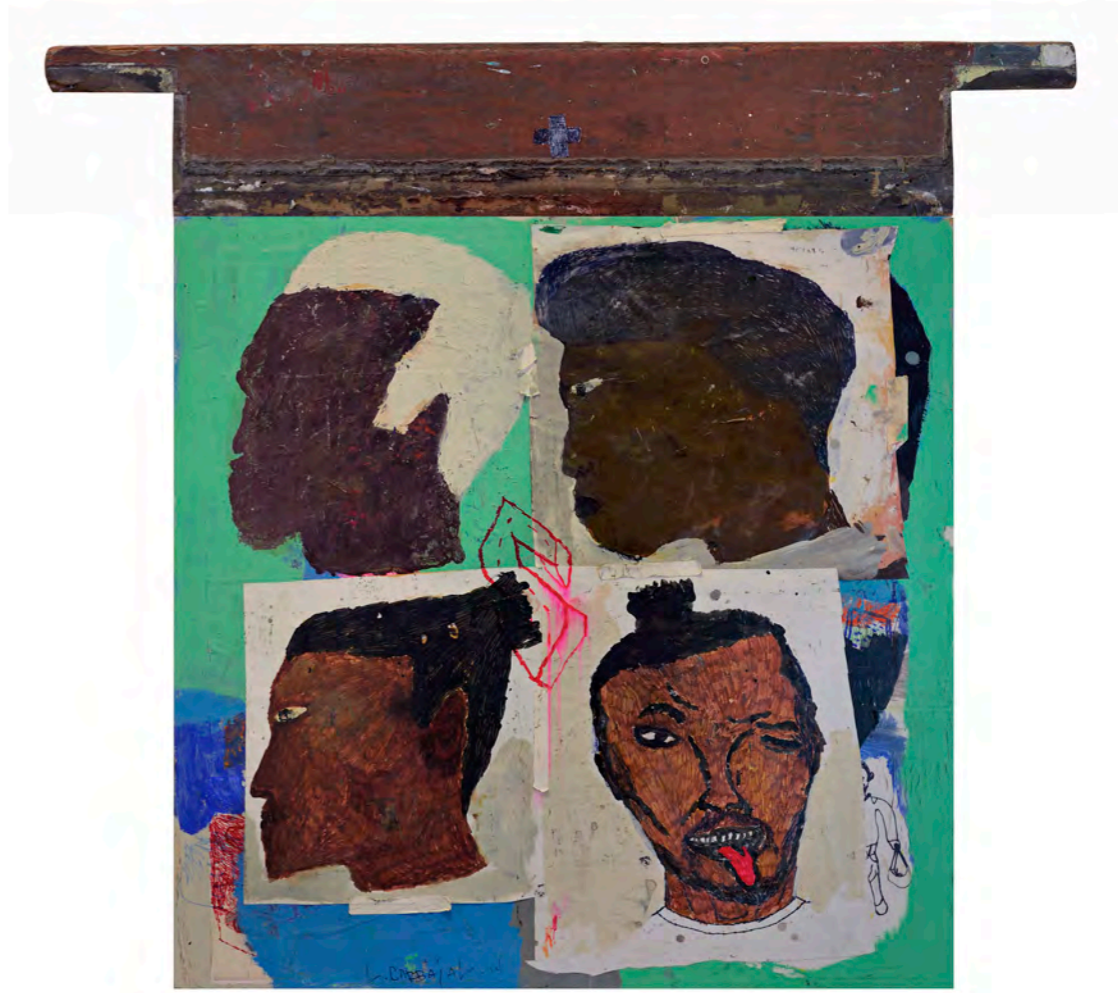


"Untitled"

49.5"x 49.5" mixed medium on wood panel - 2012

32" x 32" mixed medium on wood panel with resin - 2013

"Untitled" (Arroz)



"Self Portrait as Narcissist"

32" x 40" mixed medium on wood panel with resin - 2014



"Balloon Face"
32"x 32" mixed medium on wood panel - 2015





Lyle Carbajal

Seattle Weekly, Dec 2013

Carbajal calls his particular style of painting “Urban+Primitive,” an appropriate moniker for the rough, childlike scrawlings and cut-and-paste collages that inhabit his strange dreamworlds. His newest installation, *Romancing Banality*, is meant to be crude—challenging your notions of art by arranging his work in a sort of garbage-inspired, haphazard mess. Canvases hanging from the ceiling block your path through the gallery (formerly the Dome Stadium Tavern), while others jut out at you from the wall, threatening to poke you in the eye. There’s even stuff scattered on the floor that you have to step around. “Painting at its root is not problem-solving, but is an appositional creation,” Carbajal says of the show, which he claims is a “forging [of] artlessness and bad painting” intended to question traditional conceptions of successful art. Basquiat’s street art is an obvious influence on Carbajal’s spatially playful, almost chaotic approach to the usually controlled gallery environment.

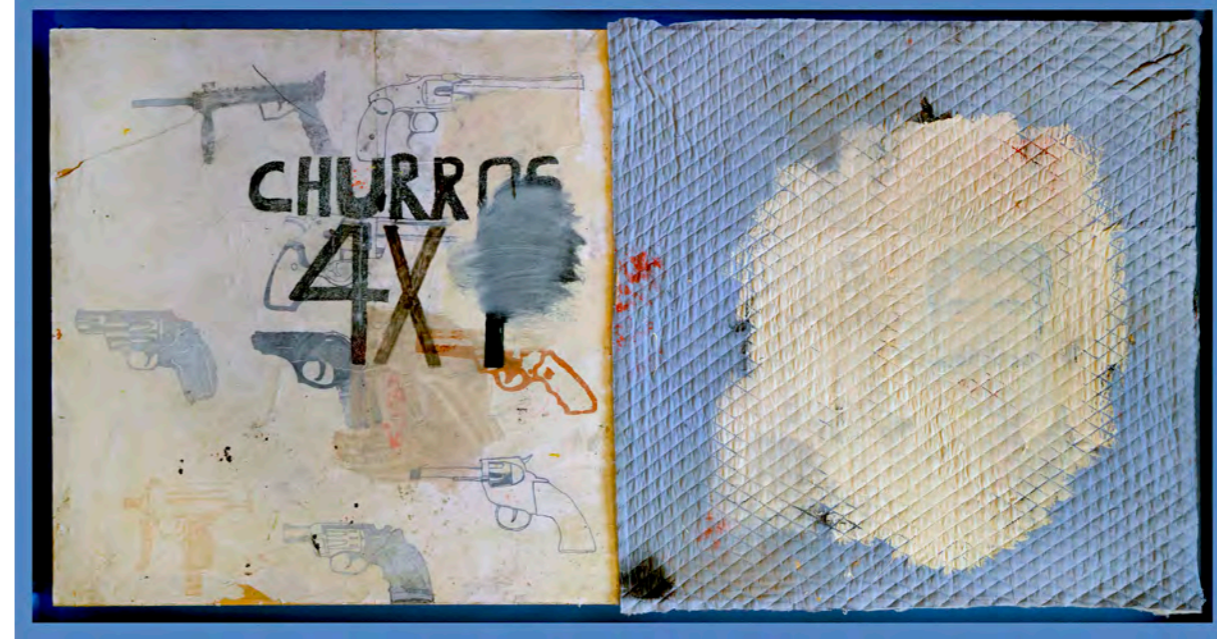
KELTON SEAR

Source: <http://www.seattleweekly.com/home/950029-129/the-pick-list-the-weeks-recommended>



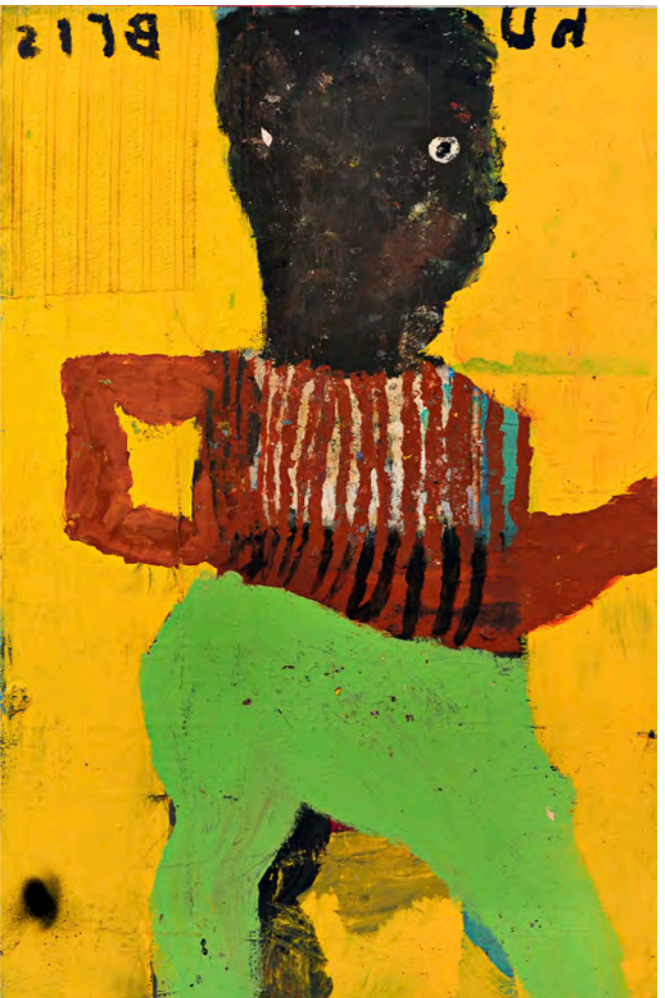
64" x 32" mixed medium on wood panel with resin - 2015

"Untitled"



"Untitled"

70" x 37" mixed medium on wood panel - 2015



"Hubris"

32" x 48" mixed medium on wood panel with resin - 2015



"Kings in Converse"

48" x 64" mixed medium on wood panel - 2015



Lyle Carbajal

Observers will be unable to detect whether Lyle Carbajal's work is a sophisticated measure of an artist's intelligence or a simple act of making. We invite you to consider the latter.

Carbajal says he is interested in "bad painting, the way most people awkwardly draw their objects" and he "draws upon accident, urban graffiti and old traditions. Not black, one might ask whether Carbajal ever gets away painting badly by trying to make bad paintings. But he is smarter than that."

Carbajal seeks to create imagery that is conceived through intuition. He creates images solely for the crude expression of an idea, to pass along a thought or emotion, much as one might jot something on a cafe napkin as an impromptu conversation and visual aid and a lubricated conversation to a friend. An engaging goal.

Carbajal's work is often unintentional and sometimes beautiful. Carbajal's work may be intended or even sound like it is intended to be clear, predictable environments. Taken individually, his paintings are foreign correspondents' notes, one of the many places that are sometimes happy, sometimes squaring. Surrounded by his work as one is in the exhibit, a viewer is embedded in that "for always" place, which may be as near as the bar's next door—perhaps even our mind.

Carbajal's work should also be reassuring to "common people": it does not require great sophistication to be accessible. Its simplicity and raw emotion are palpable. His movement gestures evince a sense of immediacy, often a sense of urgency. Whether it is intentional or not, it just happened. (C) an eye witness.

Carbajal believes there is nothing quite as beautiful as the unintentional. Whether calculating or quick, he seeks unintentional results, and he takes credit for all the accidents you witness here. Intentional or not, he gestures toward the immediacy of life as we live it as we plan it. It is a provoking because Carbajal's images are those that they are believable. After all, the unintentional is inherently honest and often wonderfully surprising.

J. Roberts
Center for Contemporary Art Seattle

Lyle Carbajal: Art Without Artifice

By John Seed

In Lyle Carbajal's *Self-Portrait on the Blue*, the artist appears as a flat, scribble-faced man with a panda-bear torso, reaching upward to grasp the safety bar while riding a Chicago Blue Line commuter train. With its roughly applied zones of paint and ragged-edged collage elements, *Self-Portrait on the Blue* is a disarming work of art that bears almost no literal resemblance to the man who painted it. This readily apparent lack of likeness is just fine with Lyle Carbajal, whose art has little to do with representing things or people as they actually appear. His interests have more to do with communicating forms, ideas and emotions in an unschooled, unaffected style.

Seattle-based curator Joseph Roberts explains Carbajal's aesthetic this way: "Carbajal seeks to create imagery that is conceived through its function. He creates images solely for the crude expression of an idea, to pass along a thought or emotion, much as one might jot something on a café napkin as an impromptu gesticulation and visual aid amid a lubricated conversation with a friend."

The wellsprings of Carbajal's aesthetic—which include folk art, naïve art, tribal art, and the art of the mentally ill—are all characteristically honest in their intent, and visual forthrightness is Carbajal's favorite mode of connection. Illusionism, the product of European "high" culture, is something that Carbajal associates with colonialism. Carbajal's art, which eschews academic technique, has been deeply affected by his engagement with pre-colonial visual styles and culture. In fact, Carbajal should really be thought of as an artist/scholar whose interests include cultural anthropology.



"Self-Portrait on the Blue"

32"x 48" mixed medium on wood panel with resin - 2015

Carbajal is also a socially conscious artist who uses his art to bring people closer. As it turns out, he has been using art as a form of connection since he was a child. When I recently spoke to Carbajal about his background, he offered this anecdote:

When I was ten, I began selling my peers and teachers elaborate drawings of their names. These drawings incorporated some of the same intuitive and even visionary forms of doodling that I use in my current work. In these drawings, names such as Tony, Mike or Michelle became associated with trading cards, images pasted on blackboards, Mad Magazine’s cartoon faces, cool dinosaurs, and other sorts of random decorative elements.

These drawings made me the most popular boy in school, yet all I did to earn this status was to take things present in my everyday existence and draw them—or rather associate them—with my classmates’ names. These drawings became a sort of visual diary of our school experience, helping us navigate our lives between 8:00 am until 3:00 pm.

What stayed with Carbajal from this experience were two invaluable realizations: that art could be used to connect with others and also that art was a way of making sense of the world. “To this day,” he comments, “my art remains accessible.”

Carbajal’s artistic and social skills have served him well, both in childhood and adulthood, as he has constantly thrived while adapting to new places, cultures and situations. The son of Latin American immigrants who grew up in both the United States and Mexico, Carbajal has lived “all around” the United States, including stints in the Pacific Northwest, Illinois, Tennessee, Louisiana and California. He has also spent a significant amount of time in Latin America and Europe, most

notably in France and Italy and Argentina. As Carbajal explains: “I’m peripatetic, largely because of the nature of my recent installations, which always reflect where I am living and working at any given moment. I find that six months is the length of time it takes to absorb a local culture and let its influence become apparent in my work.”

Although hesitant to be pinned down as identifying with any single culture, Carbajal says his art most often contains cultural references and images of people of color. The artist puts it this way: “I tend to paint brown and black people as I am really interested in the immigrant’s struggle, and I’m also very interested in how colonialism has influenced culture, especially in Latin America after Catholicism stepped in.” Additionally, Carbajal has closely studied the Asafo culture of Ghana, a warrior culture with elaborate visual arts traditions that developed in response to contact with Europeans.

Of particular interest to Carbajal are the flags of the Asafo, which include images of heroism, warnings, taboos and other symbols all sewn and embroidered in bold colors. His fascination with these banners led Carbajal to experiment with various kinds of stylizations, including powerful and ominous silhouettes. “I am fascinated by what a silhouette can convey,” he notes, “not just in terms of what one sees, but also in terms of that which is left to the imagination to fill in.” In an untitled mixed media work of 2012, a figure that Carbajal has described as a golem appears as a dark figure with a distinctive hairstyle that is pulled into a high ratted bun atop an elongated skull. The curling form of a white serpent—a demonic symbol taken from Afro-Caribbean Santería—spreads across the figure’s neck and torso, hinting at temptation. The image is just one example of how diverse artistic influences can come together in a single Carbajal work.

The breadth of Carbajal’s cultural and aesthetic interests first became fully apparent in 2011 when he published his book, *Urban + Primitive: The Art of Lyle Carbajal*. The book is a kind of compendium, not only of Carbajal’s own art but also of the

places, perceptions and influences that have helped shape him. Along with presenting chapters on some of his major themes and interests—animals, the sacred, regional art, totems and illustration—the book lays out Carbajal’s all-inclusive relationship with the world, its culture and its peoples. He writes: “Everywhere I’ve lived, these are all my people.”

Writing the book also allowed Carbajal to clarify, both for himself and for his readers, the profound power of pre-colonial art. In a chapter titled “Religion and Magic,” Carbajal writes:

By stripping away the written dogma of religion, and focusing on the visual components that are imbedded in everyday activities such as working, playing, eating and dying, one begins to understand how images of fear, devotion and reverence, the aesthetics of art and symbols take on a physical power.

After the publication of his book, there was a sudden surge of interest in Carbajal’s work and, as he puts it, “everything changed.” Given more opportunities to do more of what he wanted to do, and more help to do it, Carbajal began to experiment with installations that included architectural elements alongside his paintings. As he did so, he found himself animated by a realization: that he was reaching into both his memories and his artistic imagination to create “reverse epynoms.”

An epynom is the person for whom something (i.e. a town) is named, and Carbajal saw himself moving in reverse in the sense that his creation-in-progress would ultimately be so broad that it would in some sense bear everyone’s imprint and could never be named after a single individual. Carbajal likes to break down visual images and follow them back to their social and cultural roots:

If we were to take some of the visual culture from a border town—like El Paso, for example—and begin breaking down the ideas behind the local images and begin asking the questions, why and how did this imagery emerge and at what point it began to take shape, I suppose we would have to back into some of the realities of life in these places. I think these realities would include life in association with thoughts of heroism, labor, religion and distinct forms of worship, identity and family and perhaps even the idea of authority and class structure. These are some of the ideas, themes and associations I’m bringing into my installations where I hope viewers will be able to see, acknowledge and identify them.

As his installation-based exhibitions have evolved, Carbajal has continued to introduce new constructions that literally can be bumped into. He has been including architectural elements to emphasize the idea of an environment, and then surrounding them with paintings that suggest cultural themes, a local population, products and activities. His exhibits tend to look different in every town, since visitors see his work through the prism of their local cultures.

A fall 2014 New Orleans exhibition, emblazoned with Carbajal’s working title *Romancing Banality*, made this developing world of artlessness more tangible than ever. “Let’s take these things,” he told an interviewer, “banality, artlessness, an eyesore, a visual shock to the system, and let’s not overlook them.”

The key architectural element in New Orleans was the model of a *carniceria* (small butcher shop) that Carbajal had once seen in Mexico City. A one-third scale model of the *carneceria*, complete with awnings and hand-painted signage, gave the show a dose of urban decay that helped disrupt what Carbajal characterizes as the inherent “sterility” of the gallery space. Suspending works from the ceiling and scattering the floor with images printed on copy paper are some of the artist’s other ways of making the space work on his terms.

Carbajal is also beginning to work with film, and for his Nashville exhibition he will be collaborating with artist Jaime Fernández from Juarez, Mexico, to develop a film that will deal with some of the exhibition's themes. Sound will also be present in the installation, as Carbajal wants to connect with onlookers through as many of their senses as possible. "I want the space to feel alive! I want motion, emotion, sound, light and color to connect visitors to the show with its iconography, culture and mythos."

Everything that makes its way into Carbajal's work is something that he has been enamored by at some point or another, and the affectionate, all-embracing range of Carbajal's visual references is the key to the vitality of his ongoing projects. One of the qualities of Carbajal's paintings is their striking sense of cultural omnipresence. "When we find a painting or image that seems like it's always been there, like an idiom; that quality really is something important and it is exactly what I am seeking when I paint."

Some of Carbajal's mixed media works, such as Super Quality, have an aspect of pop culture about them. It should be noted that Carbajal was an award-winning advertising designer for more than 20 years, and this aspect of his career continues to inform his knowledge of mass imagery.

The Tiger Head battery presented in Super Quality is based on an ad that Carbajal saw on the exterior of a small business in Latin America. "I loved the immediacy of the image," he recalls, "and the feeling of hand-painted logos. It's the very derivative nature and clumsiness that I feel gives the reproduced images like this one their soul." Like most of his mixed media paintings on wood, Super Quality gets its rough integrity from the variety of media it includes: house paint, oil stick, acrylic and spray paints, charcoal and a bit of dirt. "I will use just about anything, really," Carbajal says.

One "anything" that Carbajal recently included in a mixed-media work was a cluster of crumpled party balloons. "The



"Super Quality"
32" x 32" mixed medium on wood panel with resin - 2015

balloons are dirty, with shoe marks,” Carbajal notes, “as if they simply fell onto the painting with little notice.” They are affixed to the nose and forehead of a googly-eyed man named Balloon Face, whose cheeks seem to form a pair of black ravens in a field of graffiti-like collage drawings. Carbajal regularly fills the entire surface of his works-in-progress, taking hours and sometimes days before finally “discovering” the dominant image.

With its urban energy and offhandedness, Carbajal’s work is sometimes compared to that of Jean-Michel Basquiat (1961-88). To a degree, the comparison works, as Basquiat has been an influence, but there is at least one major respect in which the two artists are remarkably different. Basquiat was an angry artist who was driven to make searing social and political statements. Carbajal, in contrast, is rarely angry or sarcastic. His choices and images reflect his affection for world culture, not his need to reform it. In terms of influences, Carbajal says that he “lost interest” in Basquiat years ago and has been more recently drawn to the works of Julian Schnabel and Georg Baselitz.

Ultimately, Carbajal is interested in looking at the products and artifacts of everyday culture with an honest eye, attempting to portray life’s mysteries and events in modest, relatable images. “I have the ability to look at things very objectively,” Carbajal philosophizes. “I guess that is my superpower. I’m able to feel what people were thinking when they did something. I can just feel it. That goes into everything that I am doing.”

The overarching goal of Carbajal’s work is to share his experience of the small mysteries that he has discovered in his travels and studies through his imagery. By insisting that his art refer to fundamental human experiences and emotions and by creating art without artifice, he has created a compelling body of work that engages its viewers with surprising candor and force.





**The End of Art and the Heterogeneous Mind:
Lyle Carbajal's "Romancing Banality"**

In Arthur Danto's formulation, the "end of art" refers to the end of art's historical development, the end of formal innovation. Consequently, the post-historical era has seen artists liberated from all stylistic and philosophical constraints—"anything goes." Depending on how one sees this development, the "end of art" is either a dead end or a new beginning. Undeniably, though, artists have shown—and will continue to show—relentless creativity in subsuming the limitations of form within the infinite combinations available to them.

The impulse to eschew conventional aesthetics is characteristic of what might be called the heterogeneous mind—a worldview/aesthetic, really a consciousness that is native to the post-historical era. This impulse is most evident in artists who reject (or are indifferent to) the idea of beauty as something that's pleasing to the eye, with its implied values of symmetry, imitation, refinement, etc.

Lyle Carbajal's work, for all its intriguing ideas and associations—qualities which, among others, make it consistently engaging—may be fundamentally (if inadvertently) concerned with the status of beauty in contemporary art. Indeed, his type of art—visually raw, polymorphous, drenched in ideas and information, especially autobiographical minutiae—seems to question the need for beauty, even its validity as an element of art.

"Romancing Banality," his new installation—composed of 25 paintings, a scale model (8' x 6' x 8') of an actual *carniceria* (butcher shop) in Mexico City, and various multimedia elements—offers a test case of sorts for the expendability of beauty in art. The paintings in particular—the installation's core—are not easy on the eye; they resemble so-called outsider art or children's art, reveling in the types of imagery/gestures common to art made by marginal and/or decidedly untrained individuals (i.e., those outside the "artworld").

Carbajal cites outsider art (including Jean DuBuffet's *art brut*) and primitive art as influences, though his work does not necessarily fall on this continuum of non-institutional art; he could not accurately be described as a primitive. As he put it: "My work exists somewhere between the vernacular and the contemporary *avant garde*." Yet, he is far closer than other artists for whom primitive/outsider art represents just another riff, another notch on the palette. Really, he is too invested in primitivism—or more accurately, folk art—and his work evinces too many of its essential properties to say that he has merely appropriated the style and is engaging in some kind of aesthetic gamesmanship.

The jagged textures and apparent artlessness of Carbajal's paintings are manifestations of his work's underlying origins, and the considerably more refined textures of his larger artistic aims and ongoing explorations. The artlessness is part of his strategy to strip away any superfluous aspect of the image, to focus on the line, which he believes is the *sine qua non* of visual communication in the everyday world, the essential element or default of visual grammar.

"A line is far and away the most important aspect of a picture," says Carbajal. "It speaks of experience, wisdom, thoughtfulness, and most importantly, it says whether or not a picture is sincere and the artist's intent admirable."

Carbajal's "bad painting" mirrors the way real people (i.e., non-artists) awkwardly draw everyday objects, just to convey an idea—which, again, returns to the line. It is also related to his embrace of children's art and the vital qualities it represents: spontaneity, honesty, and earnestness. Even the most wretched juvenile art (which is probably a redundancy, mean as it may sound) expresses deep-felt emotions and is the product of a serious effort to accurately depict the real world; the fruits of a child's struggle to focus on a specific task and "get it right."

To amass a large quantity of functional/commercial imagery in the immersive environment of an installation like *Romancing Banality*; to place such unlovely artifacts in the context of art is to elevate—or at least emphasize—the qualities of these images that transcend beauty; or more radically, form another type of beauty that depends on what a thing—whether an artwork or something wholly mundane—makes you feel rather than how it looks. The installation setting serves to intensify the qualities most commonly associated with primitive art, and which Carbajal finds most appealing: immediacy, accessibility, and authenticity.

Proximate to beauty, though, is meaning, and Carbajal's work signifies relentlessly. It is perhaps his paintings' documentary verve that is most noteworthy; their function as individual dispatches from the artist's travels, which in concert form a consistent style and sensibility (if not any sort of coherent "message" or fixed position). As conduits through which certain elements of a time and place and distinct people are communicated, this work inhabits the precinct of folk art, which also reflects Carbajal's intentions and methodologies, and epitomizes the art peculiar to the heterogeneous mind.

Carbajal, a Los Angeles native, regularly moves to different locations, which become the source of his work and ultimately serve as the "host" of its presentation. Upon arrival in each new location, he begins mining the abundant visual stimuli for material, while integrating himself into the community.

And of course it is the functional imagery—signs, decorative regionalisms, etc.—and other examples of na(t)ive picture making that most catch his eye; not just for their visual appeal, but for what they communicate about a place and its inhabitants.

"It's a city's Zeitgeist that interests me," says Carbajal. "The sights and sounds, the way its people either cherish or disregard artistic forms, the city's visual connection to the past and whether or not it recognizes its indigenous culture." This nomadic, uninhibited process ensures, at the very least, that however consistent his style might be, the work will never be static.

The use of freestanding structures based on homespun businesses Carbajal has encountered in his travels, like the *carniceria* in "Romancing Banality," is a linchpin in all of Carbajal's work. Other versions of this device include scale models of LA's M&M Auto Garage (from his Seattle show) and New Orleans' Snow Ball Shack (which will appear in an upcoming show). These models, with their outsized, three-dimensional presence, incarnate the visual language of a specific city in which Carbajal has lived, epitomizing what he sees as its most vivid elements. Also, more generally, they

suggest important associations relevant to his travels, biographical details, and larger concerns. The *carniceria*, for example, evokes his kinship with Latin America and its native art, as well as his travels throughout the region (including a memorable residency in Buenos Aires). *M&M Auto Garage*, built as much from memory as any kind of documentation, figured prominently in his visual landscape when he lived in LA; a childhood totem that no doubt contributed heavily (if subliminally) to his decision to pursue a creative life. The entire façade, with its bad illustrations, candied colors, and child-like lettering, bears many of the ideas and obsessions so integral to Carbajal's work as a whole.

David Francis, an art critic who has written about Carbajal, describes his painting as having “a kind of anthropological structure” whose imagery “shuffles and sorts, restlessly investigating all manner of marks such as icons, logos, type fonts, graphics, comics, doodles, diagrams, charts, in an almost documentary, ethnographic mode of recording.” This is apt, but it's important to add that visually/stylistically, despite the cultural work they are doing, the paintings don't simply refer to folk art but embody the form. This approach is intended, in part, to sensitize the viewer to a whole visual layer of the mundane world that, when explored—when truly seen—is found to be not so mundane but amazing. (An artistic coup of this type was suggested by the renowned critic Rene Ricard when he said: “The greatest thing is to come up with something so good it seems as if it's always been there, like a proverb.”)

This is deeply humanistic art, intoxicated with the world at large and obsessed with that world as manifested in mundane commerce/human congress; revealing a restless, roving, voracious spirit, and in turn an artist more attentive to the feelings and associations provoked by his work than the way its surfaces meet the eyes (read: sensibilities) of the more

aesthetically refined. This begs the question: Does the immediacy and accessibility so essential to Carbajal's work by necessity crowd out conventional beauty? Further, is the negation of one quality typically implied by the other? Fortunately—for artist and essayist alike—no single space exists to contain the answer.

Without reservation, Carbajal's work puts forth a personal vision of the world, and the many ways that vision has been shaped by his own life—including his development as an artist and the many influences he has soaked up over the years—are integral to the work. The autobiographical elements of his work are subtle but dense; to the point that any deep engagement with the work is akin to stepping into another consciousness.

For many years he worked as a designer and illustrator, which, among other benefits, gave him a serious appreciation of functional art, especially the discipline/limitations it imposed on the creator of such art and how that process defined—or was obscured by—the finished artifact.

His most formative influences, though, can be traced back to his Los Angeles childhood in the mid-70s, when he was imbibing the visual cornucopia all around him, including many of the pop culture tropes readily available at the time: skateboards, bubblegum cards, comic book superheroes, Hotwheels, Evil Knievel, *Mad* magazine, et al. An American childhood is, by definition, a life surrounded by folk art; but far more so for a visually acute child in the pre-Internet days living in a huge, culturally diverse city like LA.

As an adult, Carbajal was drawn to a variety of folk art, from Latin America, Haiti, West Africa, and the American south; all characterized by the use of bright colors, idealized scenes of everyday life, child-like perspective, and idiosyncratic scale. This work, Carbajal says, inspired him to “pay less attention to critical and formal rules in order to capture the intuitive glint of a moment”; which suggests a fundamental truth: every artist must find his own voice or perspective, yet no voice/perspective is free of multiple others; moreover, developing a personal style within the oceanic body of existing styles, art history, etc. means finding a method of synthesis . . . style is synthesis.

Lyle Carbajal’s oeuvre is the product of a collision of influences that has, over time, been harmonized/united within his mind . . . Subjectivity is synthesis; in other words, individuality is a unique combination of exposure and influences; one’s cultural DNA is like a fingerprint—singular and utterly specific, based on a multitude of vectors: nature, nurture, time, place, etc. Which explains everything, but clarifies nothing; for the artist however—for Carbajal—the pictures are what tells the real story—the whole truth and nothing but the truth.

-Adam Eisenstat





Avoiding Signal Prohibited: The Work of Lyle Carbajal in Context

“The ugly may be good; the beautiful will never be.” --- Picasso

1.

As we approach the 100th anniversary since the first Duchamp readymade (1915), it’s clear that contemporary art has come to a sort of crossroads. The overarching concern of many emerging artists nowadays seems to be making it as a professional, as someone who, over the period of a few decades, compiles an inventory of successful endeavors that collectively add up to what is variously accepted in popular parlance as a career, which in the U.S. is often construed to equate with one’s very identity. The dream of BFA, MFA, and independent artists alike seems to be making a living off of one’s art, even a modest existence capable of, say, sustaining a mortgage. And what, you may well be asking, is wrong with that?

Nothing: art is clearly part of the green economy, a social force that revitalizes depressed industrial sectors (Detroit as paradigm), lifts youth out of poverty, and brings beauty to a world challenged at times to find it. The cliché of the “broke artist” – a destitute and lonely individual whose extreme passion and soul-wrenching devotion to his art reaches such Parnassian heights that in the end it is simply not sustainable over the long term – is disparaged and rejected as old-fashioned, romantic, and banal by many artists today, who see little harm in selling work at a gallery, donating to auctions, “getting themselves out there” on the internet, website, social media and so on. More on this phenomenon in a bit – but first, a little advocacy from the radical fringe to balance the argument:

It’s been quite a while since avant-garde forms of visual art were robust and active in the U.S., considering that 40 years ago, there was an entire array of experimentation, including radical painting (minimalism, abstract expressionism and antecedents earlier in 20th c.) and drawing (Monster Roster / Hairy Who in Chicago), Happenings (Fluxus), conceptual art, installations, LA 50s art, land art, and so forth. It’s during this historic moment that Allan Kaprow, for instance, writes “Education of the Un-artist,” specifically warning us about the very situation that has become so pervasive now:

To escape from the traps of art, it is not enough to be against museums or to stop producing marketable objects; the artist of the future must learn how to evade his profession. (Written 1969, published in early 70s)

What happened between the time that this period ended (at some point in the 1970s; or the last time a legitimate avant-garde was operational and widespread in the U.S.) and the last 30-40 years, when by and large the edgiest, most experimental thinking has declined precipitously in favor of an artist’s commercial success? Never mind the broke artist – where has the artistic interest in experimentation gone?¹

¹One of the exceptions is the glass pipe movement, although it too is nakedly commercial and only beginning to explore alternatives . See CoCA’s 2013Ceci N’est Pas Une Pipe catalog. Others would lump in urban and street art but this genre has become so pervasive and commercially oriented it seems pointless to call it avant-garde. For more on the avant-garde, see Rosalind Krauss, *The Originality of the Avant-Garde and other Modernist Myths* (MIT, 1986).

Wherever it has fled (indeed it may be closer than we think), rest assured that if the endeavor involves the production of an object, it will almost certainly find its way to market. Because that too, has changed: we have scoured the countryside in search of outsiders and championed them more than ever before during the same time span. In our curated culture of unprecedented content richness, we are now able to convert the most indie, cri-de-coeur, art-making effort into a fairly mainstream commodity. Consider a recent field trip that Seattle art critic Jen Graves took out in the sticks, to a remote horse farm where she hoped to pursue a story about a talented naïf, an emerging artist whose lack of jargon and seeming candor conveyed a refreshing authenticity:

The people in [her] paintings seemed to have all gone crazy, like they had been irradiated or poisoned or drugged. The works looked like classic vernacular art: obsessively patterned, highly irregular, and patently handmade. [...]

This year's Venice Biennale, coincidentally enough, is deliberately outsiderish. There are several artists included who are complete unknowns, and some who never thought of themselves as artists at all. There are even a bunch of rocks on display. (Jen Graves, "The Lies of the Artists: The Unbelievable Pressure Artists Are Under to Just Completely Make Some Stuff Up," *The Stranger*, Sep. 11, 2013)

Later of course, the lies that the fake outsider artist tells are slowly revealed as the critic begins to view the same paintings very differently. In hindsight, the work is exposed as a fashion trend, echoed even by the current Venice . What had seemed potentially good is now tainted and bad. The artist was less interested in exploring new territory than in exploring new ways to market herself.

It's an appetite, a yearning for authenticity that writer David Shields has recently called "reality hunger." In noting the soaring popularity of reality shows and a thousand other symptomatic conditions, he claims that

An artistic movement, albeit an organic and as-yet unstated one, is forming. What are its key components? A deliberate unartiness: "raw" material, seemingly unprocessed, unfiltered, uncensored, and unprofessional. (...) Randomness, openness to accident and serendipity, spontaneity; artistic risk, emotional urgency and intensity, reader/viewer participation; an overly literal tone, as if a reporter were viewing a strange culture....(Reality Hunger, 2010, 5.)

Shields elaborates these kinds of details for 200 more pages, but for our purposes here it's worth stressing how close the description matches the artist whose work I've had in mind since the beginning of this essay: Lyle Carbajal.

I'm going to assume you know something about him and that I don't need to spend too much time reviewing details of the paintings (although I will get to some of that too, in the section below.) Before moving on, it's worth stressing that among Shields' litany is the word "unprofessional," an echo of Kaprow's statement from "Education of the Un-artist" that I opened with. This word has a pejorative connotation today but in Reality Hunger it's a badge of honor, a sign of the real. In "Lies of the Artist," Graves also perceives the trap:

The professionalization of art has meant that a ton of an artist's energy now has to be spent on marketing. Go to the Artist Trust homepage and you'll find a link to EDGE, a "professional development program" that boasts of

having trained 512 literary, film, and visual artists in “the relevant and necessary entrepreneurial skills to achieve their personal career goals.” There are links to articles with titles including “Does Your Message POP?” and “Sports and the Arts: Joined at the Marketing Hip.

Being lied to by the horse-farm artist felt gross. But so does this marketing advice. And why do we put so much emphasis on the stories artists tell about themselves? Doesn't that invite them to lie at least a little?

In the end, it may well be that the arts, broadly considered, necessarily must rescue us from our culture of corporate personhood, imperialism in the form of free market capitalism. But at the same time it will not diminish the concurrent, neglected need for experimentation, for disinterested work (as Kant defined it in 1790) capable of dissonance and resistance. Let there be a hundred artists competing to get into the commercial galleries, let another score come to our assistance in schools, where art education has diminished to a few hours a week for most K-8 students, so long as there are one or two who are restless, who have taught in the classroom, who remain more interested in contributing to a history of ideas than in reaching a state of blissful complacency and comfort. Truth and lie in the arts (i.e. language) often collide in an “extramoral sense,” as Nietzsche wrote in 1873.

2.

“Every proper artist is more or less a realist according to his own eyes.” – Emile Zola

With this space in the essay now cleared aside, with the stakes and consequences outlined and the context established implicitly, let's turn now to the main act, Romancing Banality, Lyle Carbajal, and why his artwork matters explicitly.

For approximately 20 years now, Carbajal's paintings have fleshed out a kind of anthropological structure: in seeking out the landmarks and sign posts, the imagery of the paintings shuffles and sorts, restlessly investigating all manner of marks such as icons, logos, type fonts, graphics, comics, doodles, diagrams, charts, in an almost documentary, ethnographic mode of recording. On the surface, we're ostensibly presented with a dog or cat (mostly domestic animals), or a portrait (people of color), but on closer inspection, it's clear that what we see is only partial and that a vast region on any given board has been overpainted or hidden (this is truer of the last few years than earlier, more densely cluttered work.) There's a distinctly functional quality although the paintings obviously serve no utilitarian purpose; yet in their version of the vernacular the decorative is controlled and minimized: interiors of subjects (animals, people) are often palimpsests of prior work, while outside the heavily-drawn outline or border, details are often subsumed under a wash of color (again, more recently rather than all along). There's an absence of the horror vacui so common in work by institutionalized artists: in Carbajal's vast color fields, it's common to detect a patch or trace of a previously applied element that has subsequently been covered, effaced, much like the manner in which graffiti is painted over in cities, leaving irregular, linear blocks of paint. Hence there's an archaeology to his work, a process of deposition as well as erosion, taking turns as it were, until the result is satisfactory. The slick surface gloss that Carbajal builds up with a heavy layer of resin also adds a key component to the overall effect of the paintings: despite the crudity of the images, the presentation is paradoxically clean and controlled, almost fossilized in amber.

Other commentators have remarked on the raw emotion, asserting that in Carbajal's treatment of the face, we see anger or fear, anguish and pain. While we certainly see teeth and nostrils a lot (“Cabezon,” “Magnificent Beast,” “Chicken and Waffles,” “Portrait of Diego and Lalo,” “Fuma,” “Self Portrait with Flash,” “Bafo,” “El Matador,” “Untitled,” etc.) we also see a substantial portion with closed lips and expressions of quiet contemplation,

satisfaction, or acceptance (“El Boxeo,” “Evr1st,” “Self Portrait on the ‘L,’” etc.), objectively it’s a stretch to assign so much suffering to the narratives in the paintings. Looking at forty or fifty together, they read a little like polaroid snapshots in an album of memories – boys and their dogs (often with feet backwards), portraits of daily life – a gritty kind of memory, to be sure, an affinity for salt-of-the-earth culture, but not nearly as nightmarish as some have implied. After all, it’s a world of innocence and wonder at the same time that it bears the trace of experience and the passage of time, erosion, death.

“(T)he hand of the chimpanzee is quasi-human, the hand of Jackson Pollock is almost animal” – Salvador Dali (qtd in *Monkey Painting, Reaktion, 1997, 117*).

Aside from the paintings and the occasional added panel construction, it’s exciting to see the next big step as represented by *Romancing Banality*, the entire environment for the paintings, the installation and multimedia components, the engagement with a variety of senses. It makes me realize that unless you’re standing in detritus, wading through garbage, fully immersed, you’re not really seeing the work in its best light so to speak. You’re seeing it conventionally, passively, studying its collage aspects or its portraiture, its muscular effort to grasp the ineffable – but not engaging it on its own terms, not quite stepping into the world that the paintings create, the folk imagination, the oral tradition of tricksters.

Like the horse-farm artist, Carbajal’s work seems fall within the category of outsider art, although that term has become less and less useful as more and more artists, many of them trained, are making work that in some ways pays homage to what Jean Dubuffet in 1948 called *Art Brut*,

Those works created from solitude and from pure and authentic creative impulses – where the worries of competition, acclaim and social promotion do not interfere – are, because of these very facts, more precious than the productions of professionals. After a certain familiarity with these flourishings of an exalted feverishness, lived so fully and so intensely by their authors, we cannot avoid the feeling that in relation to these works, cultural art in its entirety appears to be the game of a futile society, a fallacious parade.

These artists were not all inmates of insane asylums, as Adolf Wölfli, the patient of Dr. Walter Morgenthaler, had been in 1921. Dubuffet’s call to arms also echoes Arthur Rimbaud’s earlier insistence that the senses of the poet must be “deranged”:

The Poet makes himself a seer by a long, gigantic and rational derangement of all the senses. All forms of love, suffering, and madness. He searches himself. He exhausts all poisons in himself and keeps only their quintessences. Unspeakable torture where he needs all his faith, all his superhuman strength, where he becomes among all men the great patient, the great criminal, the one accursed—and the supreme Scholar!—Because he reaches the unknown! Since he cultivated his soul, rich already, more than any man! He reaches the unknown, and when, bewildered, he ends by losing the intelligence of his visions, he has seen them. Let him die as he leaps through unheard of and unnamable things. (1871)

With Rimbaud we get the tortured soul again, but lest we misinterpret rawness of delivery for emotional upheaval, let me emphasize instead the search for a remote reality. That is where you cultivate a spirit – that’s what an artist is supposed to do too, rather than conform to the taste of the marketplace –in this case doing both perhaps, as the work

is reaching wider and wider audiences. Whether it is fake outsider art or not isn't the point really because that gets us into semantics (which is true banality, not the wonder of the commonplace.) It doesn't change the art. So if it's possible to focus on the work itself without relying too heavily on biographical detail, we can say this: the work is referencing (not so much imitating) conventions of outsider art (distant objects are smaller and less vibrant colored, etc.) because it seeks to enter into dialogue with this tradition. It accepts DeBuffet's claims, agrees wholeheartedly with Rimbaud – and is thus poetic. And while the work of many artists is poetic, it is not in the same way, lyric, emotional, in the present tense. George Bataille's Visions of Excess, with the notion of expenditure and potlatch-style sacrifice, is also a neighbor in this territory.

Carbajal's been at it for a while and in all these years, despite all the exhibitions, he's also found himself far afield, often in different landscapes, drifting in a kind of exile perhaps. It's that restlessness, that act of will to work in different disciplines, that has allowed him, as Kaprow recommended so fervently in the twilight of the 20th century avant-garde, to "evade his profession." Even with this latest giant leap, he's once again found a way to balance the evasion with some fascinating experiments.

- David Francis, PhD



Lyle Carbajal - Biography

Lyle Carbajal is an American born artist working in a style possessed of a primitive energy, as well as sophistication of detail that's incredibly diverse and unique. His work, which he calls Urban+Primitive, has been shown internationally, and associated with such organizations as *The British Consulate* in Los Angeles; *Nashville Arts Magazine*; *Tennessee Public Television for the Arts*; *Made in New Orleans Television Program*; *Center on Contemporary Art (CoCA)*-Seattle; *Gibson GuitarTown Project*—Nashville, and both a feature film and long running television drama.

Alternatively to fine art, Lyle has enjoyed an 20+ year career as an award winning art director, designer and illustrator, working primarily from Chicago, San Francisco, Nashville, Salt Lake City and Buenos Aires, for such names as Google; MTV Networks; The British Consulate; The Cartoon Network; Nickelodeon; The Utah Gallivan Center; Gibson Guitars; The Wyndham and Sofitel Hotels, and Claro' Mobile in Argentina. Concurrently to working in the corporate arena, his 'finer art' has also garnered international acclaim—exhibiting at Museu de Estremoz in Portugal; Art Chicago; The National Museum of Mexican Art in Chicago; Center on Contemporary Art (CoCA) Seattle; The Raw Arts Festival in London, La Luz de Jesus Gallery in Los Angeles and The Mark Rothko Museum in Latvia while participating in an artist residency in Daugavpils, the countries second largest city. *Romancing Banality*—Lyle's ambitious, traveling, multi-media installation is in it's third installment in Nashville Tennessee.

Lyle's mixed and colorful career, coupled with extensive travel, has seen him participating in a demestic PeaceCorp program working primarily in the southern United States while a professional member of the TennCare Saves Lives Coalition, solving issues relating to Tennessee healthcare. During this time, he coordinated seminars with The Legal Aid Society in Nashville to ensure free and accessible legal information to senior citizens and also working with Vanderbilt University as a Federation Specialist, helping to raise over \$800.000 for the Nashville community; The Tennessee Senior Games and the Martin Luther King Memorial in Memphis Tennessee.

In 2010, Lyle spent the better part of the year, living in Buenos Aires, while finishing work on his first book, *Urban+Primitive: The Art of Lyle Carbajal*, which garnered excellent reviews the following year.

Lyle is currently represented by Tinney Contemporary in Nashville TN; The Frederick Holmes Gallery in Seattle, WA; Gallery Orange in New Orleans, LA; Edgar Modern in The United Kingdom; Galerie du Temple and Galerie Gabel in France.

He currently lives and works in Nashville Tennessee.

Curator's Notes

Some observers will be unable to detect whether Lyle Carbajal's work is a sophomoric mess or evidence of a maestro in the making. We invite you to consider the latter.

Carbajal says he is interested in "bad painting, the way common people awkwardly draw everyday objects" and his work draws upon outsider, urban graffiti and naïve traditions. At first blush, one might ask whether Carbajal just gets away with painting badly by trying to make bad paintings. But his work is smarter than that.

Carbajal seeks to create imagery that is conceived through its function. He creates images solely for the crude expression of an idea, to pass along a thought or emotion, much as one might jot something on a café napkin as an impromptu gesticulation and visual aid amid a lubricated conversation with a friend. An engaging goal.

The results are always crude, often unintentional and sometimes beautiful. Carbajal's work may intimidate or even assault those accustomed to safe, clean, predictable environments. Taken individually, his paintings are foreign correspondent's notes, tales of far-away places that are sometimes happy, sometimes disquieting. Surrounded by his work as one is in this exhibit, the viewer is embedded in that "far-away" place, which may be as near as the barrio next door –perhaps even our mind.

So Carbajal's work should also be reassuring to "common people". It does not require great sophistication to be accessible. Its simplicity and raw emotion are palpable. His irreverent gestures evince a sense of immediacy –often a sense of urgency. Whatever it is, intentional or not, it just happened. YOU are an eye witness.

Carbajal believes there is nothing quite as beautiful as the unintentional. Whether rationalizing or quixotic, he seeks unintentional results, and he takes credit for all the accidents you witness here. Intentional or not his gestures evidence the immediacy of life as we live not as we plan it. It is precisely because Carbajal's images are crude that they are believable. After all, the unintentional is inherently honest and often wonderfully surprising.

- from *Watching the Snakes Volute* - CoCA, 2013
Joseph Roberts - *Center on Contemporary Art, Seattle*





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