



an interview with

LYLE CARBAJAL

ART+DESIGN editor Ramona Gabel sits down with multidisciplinary, Los Angeles-born artist Lyle Carbajal to discuss *Romancing Banality*, an expressive, evolving exhibition opening October 2014 at Gallery Orange in the French Quarter. •

You have a one-man show opening at Gallery Orange with a full installation, Romancing Banality. That's a great name by the way.

It is a great title [laughs]. It's meant to be taken with a wink and a nod, naturally. But at the same time, it means to say, "Let's take these things—banality, artlessness, an eyesore, a visual shock to the system—and let's not overlook them." Instead, let's romance them a little, play around and make something beautiful. This confuses a lot of people at first but I'm glad it does. It makes them more interested.

So for this exhibit in New Orleans, I'm doing a stripped-down version [compared to the original Seattle show]. It will include a whole new structure, as well as more paintings than previous shows. Around 25 in total, I believe.





Your vision and approach are all consuming. For background, what's the core idea of Romancing Banality?

In a nutshell, it's about bringing what is essentially contemporary folk art—forms that we discard because they're everywhere—bringing those things to be reappropriated in a gallery setting. I look at [artwork] that comes from an extremely common background and also how work is created when it's trying to convey an idea.

Think of something as simple as jotting a sketch on a napkin at a bar, trying to illustrate a concept or tell a story. I look at what goes into that—mental processes and boredom and cultural references and all sorts of wonderful things—and I try to recreate some of it, along with elements of advertising and popular culture from my background in advertising and art directing. Somehow, I've tied it all together and come up with what I'm doing now.

You've been exploring these everyman themes through painting, but the newer element is the structural installation, correct? Almost like an incubator that houses both the paintings and the viewer.

Well. *Romancing Banality* is always evolving and I'm always introducing new elements, but yes, the structure as the environment to show the work is the key to the installation.

Wherever I go, I see things in my environment often times abandoned along the side of the road, that are truly high art—to my eyes, anyway. But no one else is looking at them. I used to drive by this run-down garage in Los Angeles every day on the way to the hardware store, and I was just enamored with it.

I'm interested in the practice of changing location, context, or presentation in contemporary and high art. Around the world, we see urban landscapes of modern-day folk art, particularly Latin America. It's constantly overlooked, and I want to say, "Look at this! There's something happening here that's so common and so real." *Romancing Banality* recreates these things in small form and brings them into a sterile environment where you can't help but look at the aesthetics.





“...AN ELEMENT OF TIME AND DECAY”

What’s the structure you’re building for the New Orleans iteration of the show?

What it’s based on is a *carniceria*—a small meat shop—that I saw in the center of Mexico City, of all places. All throughout Latin America, they have these little *carnicerias* where you can buy fresh cuts of meat.

My plan is to reproduce the entire exterior—even the sidewalk around it. It’s about one-third the size of the original. I’ve got a guy coming from Austin who specializes in lettering and then we’ll paint and antique the whole thing. It looks like a real structure, an incredible thing right on the corner of the street.

Someday, I’d like to include interiors, too. Maybe even film inside these places of business for an hour or so, and then project it at the opening. But I’m getting ahead of myself.



What about the process of creating the paintings themselves?

I've looked at a lot of work created by others who mimic the same styles I'm influenced by, but there was always something that didn't ring true. As far as my pieces go, if it looks like you stumbled across it in an alleyway, I know I've achieved something real and authentic. Maybe there's old imagery underneath that's not fully covered by whatever is on top, which brings in an element of time and decay. There's the thought that the work could cease to exist at any moment.

With those ideas in mind, I paint primarily on wood panels, working with dirts, charcoals, oils, house paint, acrylics...anything, really. But in order to get the work to look like it was stumbled upon, [the paintings] often turn out rather delicate. In the past year or so, I started playing with the idea of encapsulating a piece with a resin. It's almost like fossilizing something, or preserving it in amber.

Now that I'm comfortable with the idea, it's added a new feeling to the work when I encapsulate it. On one hand, the painting still feels very immediate, like it was just created and could maybe cease to exist without warning. But on the other hand, the layer of resin is much like something you would dig up fossilized in an archaeological site. The experience of discovery is that much more enriching when you know that you can't really touch it.

“HIGH ART [...] ABANDONED ALONG THE SIDE OF THE ROAD.”



It must be a trip to see people moving through the installation, an entire sensory universe, when you've designed the entire presentation and environment. What's that like?

Well, in the past, the audience's first reaction has been confusion. But that might not be so everywhere. It's interesting to see the role regionalism plays in the interaction. In Seattle, for instance, these kinds of structures that inspire me aren't as much a part of the surroundings, so the exhibit is taken differently. It's regionally foreign. But here in the South—and certainly in New Orleans, with its history of art and rich culture—it may be received with a different significance.



You've worked and traveled rather nomadically for your art. How is New Orleans factoring into the creative process?

First of all, I'm going crazy here [laughs]. I've traveled all over the world, but I was just telling my girlfriend just the other day that I don't think I've ever been to a city that excites me visually more than New Orleans. I worry that I'm going to get in an accident because every time I'm driving, my eyes are all over the city. I see a building and it's like, "I have to document that!" And then I see another and think, "Oh, I have to come back to that one, too." It's so much to take in.

Like the garage in Los Angeles or the carniceria in Mexico City, I've been photographing structures here in New Orleans that I want to explore for the future. I don't want to jump the gun about future exhibits, but I see inspiration everywhere I go. Every city has its take on the form of folk art, and it makes me feel like New Orleans is a place I can come back to, in a way that I wouldn't most other places.

How did contemporary folk art first find you?

I grew up in L.A., but I've lived all over. I was in San Francisco for a while, and then Hollywood, where some of my work was a little more derivative. In the Bay Area, it was always Pop Art; L.A. was lowbrow and Pop Surrealism, but in 2003 or so, I got this exhibit in Nashville. One thing led to another and next thing I knew, I was there permanently and my work just changed. It started taking on richer themes, as I was working with senior citizens and finding a new understanding of regionalism.

I can see how somebody deeply embedded in outsider art might say, "Oh, well, you're not really an outsider artist..." And I'm the first to say, "You're right, I'm not an outsider artist."

There's an inherent question of legitimacy, but maybe simply raising the question is more important than finding an answer.

I want the viewer to question whether or not this is legitimate, by which I mean "worthy of a gallery setting." One thing I like [from critics] is when they don't spoon-feed you reassurances of legitimacy. For instance, David [Francis, who has written on *Romancing Banality*] doesn't come out and say "Hey, this guy's authentic." He floats a question mark in front of you and then builds a case for [the work] being important. I admire that kind of criticism.

When you mentioned outsider art earlier and this concept of policing legitimacy, how would you define a true outsider artist?

Well, it's funny that the appeal of outsider art has grown tremendously over the last 20 years. All the outsiders became insiders, or so the joke goes.

Really, though, [an outsider artist] is just somebody who's creating work without the intention of having that work shown or even acknowledged. Characters like, say, Henry Darger, who created work in his one-bedroom apartment in Chicago, with no intention of ever showing his



stuff. Then he fell ill, and his work was uncovered. There was even a film made about it.

That's the classic outsider artist; he created a whole universe of otherworldly themes but he wasn't looking for recognition, let alone a place in the gallery system.

I think there's a visceral appeal, in people's minds, to that kind of creativity. People relate to it because something about it feels very honest.

Well, that's just it. When you think about it, it's the only art that's honest. I might get hate mail for that, but seriously, it's so honest. It's so real.

And again, think of someone sitting at a cafe who's asked to jot something on a napkin. Think of outsider artists, labeled or unlabeled. Think of Grandma Moses, just conveying the idea of life. The honesty is what's so alluring

Honesty in art is rare.

Truly. I've got an entire discourse here and I don't want to offend anybody, but

honesty is rare. Like most artists, I have my own ideas about what's good and what isn't and I personally think there's no gray area. There's a sense of objectivity that says it's either good or it's not. But that's my belief, so I'll leave it at that. ▲

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