

**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, Evel 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.

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