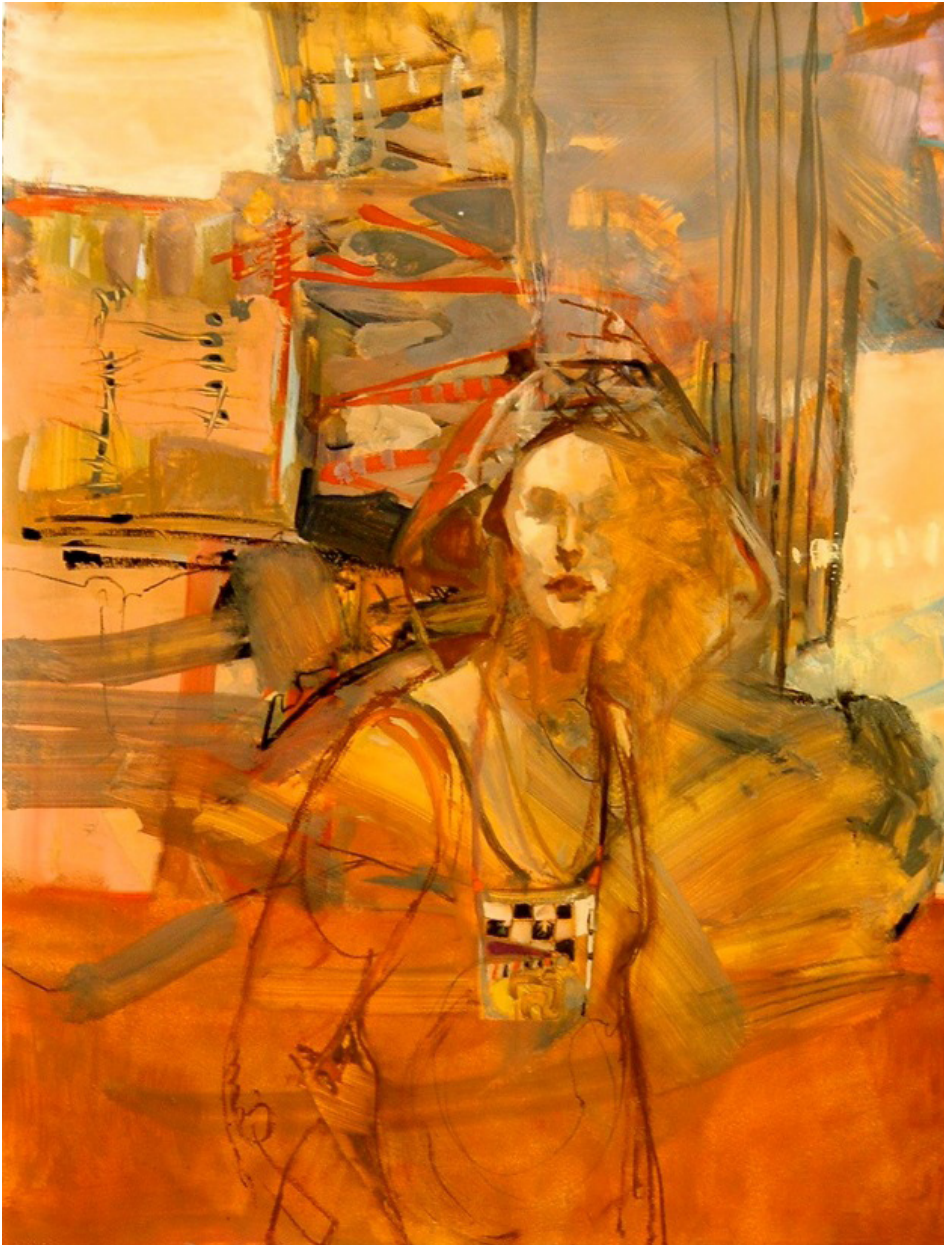


Interview with an Artist

Carla O'Connor



Spirit Pouch
30 x 22

Carla O'Connor's unique and expressive works caught my eye from the first time I saw them. Her process includes applying and then washing off layers of gouache repeatedly. Refreshingly, she doesn't feel compelled to be more deliberate, explaining that this process is an essential part of how she expresses herself. And expression is what it's all about! Her seemingly aimless process allows Carla to create masterful paintings of representational figures set in abstract pictorial spaces. I hope you enjoy this interview and find inspiration with Carla O'Connor.

To introduce you to our readers, please tell me a little bit about your background, where you studied, and about some of your favorite art accomplishments.

I was born in Chicago, Illinois and received my BFA from Kent State University, in Kent, Ohio. I continued my studies at the University of Wisconsin, Milwaukee, at the University of Ohio, Dayton, Ohio, and at the University of the Americas, Mexico City, Mexico.

I am a signature member of the American Watercolor Society (Dolphin Fellow), the National Watercolor Society, and the Northwest Watercolor Society.

More recently, it was my privilege to have a feature article included in publications from France, England, China and the United States. The world is truly shrinking! I was also featured for the 3rd time in China's International Art Exhibition.

Why did you start painting?

Like most children, I loved to draw and "color". My mother, who was also an artist, provided me with professional quality materials from the very beginning and there was never any question about what I would do with my life. My mother was also an avid traveler and I was fortunate to see some of the world's major art museums and galleries at an early age. At nine years old, I painted plein air in oils on canvas on the streets of Paris, France and in watercolor on the canals of Venice, Italy. My love of art is as natural, constant, and necessary to me as breathing.

Tell us a little bit about your works in progress, your working style, and subject-matter preferences.

I am taking this year on sabbatical from my full workshop schedule to complete a large group of paintings for exhibition. The focus is my own family history - several generations under one roof and various time sequences. I am using letters, photos, memories, traditions, legends, and my legacy for inspiration. It is my own corner of the world with hints of the 'worlds family'. This concept has been rolling around in my head for some time and I have finally carved out some time to concentrate, uninterrupted, in my own studio.

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Rivers Edge
20 x 30

It has taken three years and much soul searching to clear my teaching schedule for this endeavor.

In contrast to the studio figurative work, I will continue to do a number of travel art workshop trips. Nothing compares to being on the spot - the sights, sounds, smells - capturing the magic and emotion of the moment. It is excellent practice and very beneficial to get out of the studio into the fresh air and work on site. With the light quickly changing and battles with the elements, there is little time to ponder, fuss, or "niggle" the painting.

When I first moved to the Pacific Northwest, I fell in love with the rocky shore of Puget Sound. For a number of years I set aside the figures and concentrated on these landscapes, gaining a reputation and recognition in this area. These abstract landscapes are the only true series I have done and all the works fell under the umbrella title, "Rock Rhythms Series". After five or six years and a solid foundation under me, I returned to my first love the human form.



Hourglass Series
30 x 40

Which artists or art movements inspire/influence you?

Throughout my career there have been many influences and I have come to believe that the masters will come and whisper in your ear as you need them. Each element of design will be represented by one of them—color, value, texture, pattern, line, shape, size, and direction—and then the circle will start over again. Although the list of giants is different for each artist, my partial list includes: Milton Avery, Richard Diebenkorn, Gustav Klimt, Egon Schiele, Cy Twombly, and Nicholai Fechin.

In addition, as I was preparing for a travel workshop to Japan, I discovered amazing correlations between my current work's focus and the Japanese, Chinese, and Korean woodblock prints. What a revelation - a gold ground, flat stylized figures, multiple patterns and outlining of shapes. Each of these influences, past and present, add a little piece to the 'you' of the future. As you grow and evolve, so the list expands.

What is your process? When do you paint/how do you structure your time?

After years of practice to render objects accurately and realistically, my work did not truly mature until I began to flatten and simplify the subject. I strive to combine the three-dimensional human form with the two-dimensional abstract surround. I apply paint freely, wipe it off, scratch it, smooth it, add more paint, change colors and directions, busy up, then quiet down, constantly working back and forth.

In the beginning the aim is to get plenty of pigment on the paper in order to have something to play with. We live in such a product oriented society where the end result is paramount. I feel that many artists are missing the best part—the actual making of art.

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The Courtesans
30 x 22



Asian Robe
22 x 30

I am totally invested in the process and I'm always sorry when the painting is finished because then I have to stop. I just put something down and respond to that first mark. I do not want to know how it is supposed to look in the end and I strive to stay in the moment. I have learned not to rush the process.

When I start a painting with the figure as the focus, the initial inspiration may come from her movement, a gesture, the emotion on her face or in her voice, or be as simple as the shape of her T-shirt or the elegant extension of her arm. Other times, I pursue a more intuitive abstract approach and let the figure emerge from inside the painting and then play a secondary role rather than the focal point. In both works, shallow space and scale are major considerations.

I try to keep every painting "finished" at every stage of the process.

What makes a painting successful?

I suppose one could say that any painting that connects with another human being on some emotional level is successful.



Of Kimonos and Kubuki
30 x 40

Art is, after all, communication. That would be a very broad position and a good question for a lively debate.

However, when I jury works for inclusion in a major international exhibition, I am more specific.

My criteria are: originality of concept, a through knowledge of the principles and elements of design, a thoughtful and deliberate composition, technical expertise and, always, that special work that takes my breath away each time I view it.

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Black Gown
22 x 30



Rock Rhythms Series
22 x 30

Tell us about a peak moment in your artistic career.

There have been many remarkable moments as I look back. I set high goals for myself and was amazed when I reached some of them. One highlight came when one of my workshop lessons was adopted into the Los Angeles, California high school curriculum to explain abstract art to teenagers.

I worked for many years to gain signature status in the American Watercolor Society. I never dreamed that one day I would be awarded the Silver Medal and become a Dolphin Fellow.

My artist mother and I are, to this date, still the only mother/ daughter to ever have been included in an AWS exhibit together (1996).

How do you define success?

Success for me is measured in respect, from my peers and colleagues, and with recognition of the work worldwide. I strive for recognition as the creator and owner of my style.

*Interview with Carla O'Connor
by Charlene Collins Freeman
Editor, Hot Press*

www.carlaconnor.com

Carla has a DVD titled "Figure Design in Gouache - The Process" by Creative Catalyst Productions. She conducts painting workshops across the US, Canada, and Europe. Her Gig Harbor Studio is open by Appointment at 253-851-8882.

Carla O'Connor's recent awards include: Mary Bryan Memorial Medal, 2013 American Watercolor Society, 2011 AWS, Dale Meyer/ Mario Cooper Award National Watercolor Society—Milford Zornes Memorial Award, 2011 Rocky Mountain National, 2012 Painted Toe Society Award

Magazine articles in 2012 came from France, England, China and the USA in three languages. Excerpts from these articles are on her website.

*The Art of Watercolour, London
L'Art de Aquarelle, France
Practique Des Arts, France
Watercolor Artist, USA*

Carla was a contributor to the Chinese language book, "Inspirations and Technical Breakthroughs - Secrets from the Contemporary International Watercolor Masters" 2012, by Zhou Tianya and Ruan Hoe.

In addition to the above exhibitions, she was an invited artist to four shows in China - Shanghai World Expo 2010 and Nanjing, China Invitational Exhibition of Watermedia Masters, 2008, 2010, and 2012.