

There's No "I" in Lowbrow - Emilie Trice

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Cannibal Flower was started in 2000 by Leonard Croskey, aka L.C., as a means of exhibiting unknown, unrepresented artists, affording them respectable exposure to a large group of their cultural peers in a non-elitist venue. These events are not profit motivated, strengthening the loyalty between artist and curator, as well as artist and audience. The majority of Cannibal Flower events now occur at The Hangar and Infusion Gallery, both located on Gallery Row in downtown Los Angeles. Gallery Row symbolizes the sneaking gentrification of Skid Row, an inevitable development of what has been referred to as the largest service-dependent (read: welfare) area in the nation. Two streets, Main St. and Spring St., were pegged as gallery turf and in two years the number of legitimate exhibition spaces has grown from two to more than twenty. Although this exponential cultural development is positive for the neighborhood, bringing in restaurants, bars, boutiques and wealthy collectors, the negative effects are definitely felt in the Lowbrow community with artists being slowly but decisively pushed to the area's periphery (or other cities entirely) as living costs rise. A few years back, before the influx of more upscale galleries to the "row," vacant buildings provided adequate space for underground artistic events. These events were more or less a reflection of Cannibal Flower's mission, catering to the artistic community as opposed to art collectors and allowing for one-night only events, which weren't limited by narrow aesthetic criteria or monetary incentive.

An artist that has actively participated in these events through both Cannibal Flower and the Skid Row art raves is Shervin Iranshahr, known simply as Shervin. He and a group of Art Center alums actively curated, promoted and provided their musical stylings to events on old skid row and he now exhibits regularly with Cannibal Flower, supporting the cause of LA's Lowbrow community. For Shervin's "East Coast debut" last summer at the Ashley Gallery in Philadelphia, he brought along his niche of that community, the same alums of the skid row years; Tim Meehan, Sean Cheetham, John Paul Altamira and Kevin Llewellyn, as well as their former professor Michael Hussar, each of whom contributed a painting to the exhibit. The group of work speaks of the years at Pasadena's Art Center; however not in the classroom, but rather the garage behind Shervin and Tim Meehan's house where their group would converge for portrait painting sessions without the limitations and restrictions imposed by academia.

Each artist's work informs the other, from color to texture to straight-up subject matter. The palettes are all similar if not identical, all derived from Hussar's work (www.michaelhussar.biz). Shervin, Tim, JP, Sean and Kevin had all taken Hussar's classes and eventually assisted him, resulting in their group's initial bond and, ultimately, the extracurricular portrait sessions that they would argue were more educational than painting some model in the same tired costume ten times in class. Portrait subjects included each other, their girlfriends and, when those options were exhausted, total strangers with unconventional appearances approached in bars and convinced that they would be participating in a legitimate effort and weren't being hit on (granted there were obviously some exceptions).

What resulted from these sessions was an undeniable elevation of each artist's work, as well as a shared sensibility concerning color and style. So it would make sense that when Shervin made his debut on the opposite side of the country, he would bring his portrait posse with him and give a little back to the boys that had aided his aesthetic development. This action reeks of not only his loyalty to those painting sessions and the artists that pushed him creatively, but also to the inherent Lowbrow principle of community and support, both personal and professional.

Under the umbrella of the Lowbrow label, Shervin's work is definable as pop surrealism. His paintings portray bizarre characters and dissect those circumstances that have become synonymous with postmodern culture: morally debatable (if not apprehensible) war, artificial and depraved beauty, secular iconography and unabashed sexuality. Many of the paintings exhibited this past summer were completed on the brink of America's invasion of Iraq. His piece 6:11 9:12 depicts a creature impaling itself through the forehead by its own nose, implying self-mutilation and pain by

way of excessive lying. On December 14th, 2005 President Bush confessed that the decision to invade Iraq and begin a lengthy and brutal liberation was based on misleading, faulty information and that "much of the intelligence turned out to be wrong". The painting Gunbird further explores this topic, with heavy-laden symbolism and a figure breaking the canvas's edge, encroaching on the viewer's personal space.

Despite the obvious connection to the war in Iraq, this imagery also relates to Shervin's native country of Iran, which was engulfed by war (incidentally also with Iraq) shortly after his birth. The military draft included boys as young as 12, prompting Shervin's family to migrate to Vienna, Austria, where he was first exposed to the nouveau aesthetic that would later inspire much of his art. A Philadelphia critic referred to his work as "grotesque nouveau" or "high Goth," both of which are immaculate descriptions of Shervin's organic, yet geometric painting The Death of Venus, a blatant parody of Botticelli's infamous masterpiece. The Death of Venus features a Venus exposed and shaved bare, indicating the degradation of a sacred, albeit secular, icon and the perversion of innocence. The illuminated gothic rose backdrop alludes to institutional religion, yet another epitome of modern perversion. This painting's requiem is not only intended for natural, modest beauty, but also for the sanctimony of religious arenas and their tainted reassurance of morality and hope.

Shervin's family eventually left Austria for America, settling in California, where Shervin continues to live and work. The Los Angeles influence on his art is most obvious in the faces of his characters; cheeks are pulled taut, eyes have been reduced to slits and mouths are forced into painful smirks reminiscent of cosmetic surgery horror stories. His painting Trophy shows an armless seahorse creature whose face is sectioned and controlled by black straps. She floats, fixated on a shining light, dangerously close to a monster whose eye and mouth are visible in the background of the composition. Although Shervin interprets this painting as a commentary on co-dependence between victims and abusers, it seems as though the seahorse is too obsessed with the beautiful ornament to truly understand the reality of her vulnerability and her seemingly inevitable, tragic conclusion. And, for some reason, I think she kinda looks like Michael Jackson, but whatever, must just be the nose.

Shervin's paintings contribute to the pop surrealist painting movement within the Lowbrow phenomena and his commitment to his portrait gang resonates with the camaraderie inherent to the So Cal Lowbrow community. His work can be viewed at Cannibal Flower festivals occurring on the last Saturday of every month. Shervin is currently in a group show at Thinkspace Gallery in Los Angeles and he is preparing for an upcoming exhibition at Copro/Nason Gallery in Santa Monica to open in June 2006. For more information on Shervin, please visit www.artfiend.net or log onto www.cannibalflower.com and support the cause.