

Exquisitely engaging, layered, intimate and erudite, Carlotta Hester's paintings and multi-media sculptural boxes address elements of exposure, allusion and interaction. Hester establishes an almost conversational connection between the viewer and the work. The connection's strength lies in her works' flow between the personal and the abstract.

Conversation with Carlotta Hester

by Ana Honigman

Shown at the Govinda Gallery

Combining layers of personal artifact, paint, illustration and borrowed images rendered as friezes, Hester's hand is evocatively evident thereby making the process a recognized part of the product. By culling influences from a wide range of sources, Hester creates an extended intellectual autobiography. She layers references documenting her intellectual, spiritual and sensual being with mundane activity, producing a visual diary of her scooping intelligence. Combining the physical process with highly personal meaning and allusions to academic material, Hester's work represents the balance among mind, body and personality.

Ana Honigman: *By combining divergent, cross-cultural references in your art, you are claiming a commonality of experience and highlighting subjectivity by placing yourself as a filter. What is it you perceive as tying the diverse references together?*

Carlotta Hester: In my sketchbook I have a Kandinsky quote; "Painting is a thundering collision of different worlds, intended to create a new world in, and from, the struggle with one another." Kandinsky's idea of combining different worlds, going through the gestation, then through the changes, to birth a newly defined realm is what I aim to do with my art.

We have too many influences in our lives - books, media, traveling- we become acquainted with images, concepts and ideas and we



First sight (outside box) 2001. Carlotta Hester. Courtesy Govinda Gallery

need to better digest them and decide what we claim as our own. I collect ideas that intrigue me. I am constantly looking; remaining aware. I save objects, remain open to new materials, including objects used in my life: medicine bottles, empty makeup containers, snips of clothing, broken pieces of jewelry, receipts, etc... My art is an effort to assimilate the influences in my life and combine them into a new unified whole.

Cross-cultural references emerge in places like my *Yantra* piece, where I unite Eastern and Western influences and personal "memorabilia." The Yantra represents the internal power of the individual. Yantras, like Mandalas, are a geometrically concentric design derived from Eastren religion. Through meditative practice, the individual can overcome the battle of opposing forces and reach a divine unity within. Although Yantras are not

typically combined with figurative imagery, in my work I merge it with a relief/sketch based on Tintoretto's *La Dama Que Descubre El Seno* ("The lady who uncovers her bosom"). I found the image on a postcard when visiting Italy in the tenth grade. When opened, the lid reveals a painted relief of the woman's torso, while only a sketch is on the outside lid.

AH: *So here, the Yantra leads to your personal recollection makes the intimate holy. Postcards have an odd dual symbolism since they are meant to be intimately shared, they are personally chosen*

and intended to have sentimental value, yet they are so exposed.

CH: Postcards leave things apparently exposed, but their significance remains hidden as an "inside joke" between sender and recipient.

AH: *What attracted you to the Tintoretto image?*

CH: I was fascinated by the subject's sexuality. She is disrobing and revealing her breasts but she is also looking away. She might be exposing herself but she is not relating to the viewer.

AH: *Like Manet's Olympia.*

CH: Right but this image combined with the box also relates to the concept of woman as

vessel. Women have always been perceived as containers of life. When the box is open the sculpted body is found inside, implying that sensuality is not easily exposed but has to be uncovered. It is a circular view of sensuality.

AH: Well, circles represent femininity, not only yonic symbols, they relate to the circularity of restricted female experience. When in Madame Bovary, Flaubert has Emma Bovary's husband Charles considering that for her the world doesn't "extend past the circumference of her petticoat" he is expressing the circular restrictions of female experience. Women have historically lived without self-imposed variation in a Sisyphus-like circle of experience.

CH: A circle signifies wholeness/completion. My work involves the circularity of repeated experience. I spend long periods of time engaged in wrapping, gluing, drilling, weaving, and placing lentils one at a time to create a textured effect under the layers of paint. Unfortunately for me, efficiency is not part of my process. The meditative act of engaging in devotional detailing infuses the piece with extra meaning and enables me to achieve the next step.

AH: Similarly, all religions contain a powerful element of ritualized routine.

CH: And to me the process, the repeated activity, is part of a spiritual quest. Like Hindus' use of Jappa beads while chanting, Catholics' use of rosary beads while repeating their Hail Marys and Tibetans' use of the prayer wheel.

AH: You often use religious imagery.

CH: Oddly, I don't subscribe to any particular religion. I am drawn to the religious images, symbols, or ideas but I am never referencing a faith's entire dogma.

AH: How do the nature images you use relate to the emotional and spiritual concepts in the work?

CH: I am fascinated by water as a symbol of the interconnectedness of things, purity and weightlessness. Water represents the interconnection of each living element: human, animal,



Grey woman red glow (inside box) 2001. Carlotta Hester. Courtesy Govinda Gallery



Carlotta Hester in her 17th Street studio

plant, and earth. The carrying systems — roots, veins, tributaries — are similar in all. Also, water strives to become a circle. A water drop is structured as it is because it wants to be contained within itself. With evaporation and rain, the whole process is cyclic.

The cycles of water, the cycles of life — these are laws of nature. Things form, break-down My process is similarly cyclical.

AH: Routine has been a major part of feminist art, from Eva Hess and Jackie Windsor's sculptures to Janine Antoni and Yoko Ono's performances. The common-place objects you use are not individualized yet are highly personal because they are part of a personal routine. Is there a political aspect like there was in the feminist validation of traditionally feminine crafts?

CH: I shy away from the word "political." Living in Washington, when I think of "political" I think "ineffectual." I strongly believe in issues and rights but I look at my work as creating a center of self not proclaiming my politics.

AH: How do the boxes differ from the paintings?

CH: Both the boxes and the paintings explore relationships between what is apparent and what is hidden. The boxes have a literal inner and outer space,

whereas the painting only have one surface. The boxes have to be read. They have to be opened and related to, like a book, where the reader might show the book's cover while entering a separate interior world transited to them and no one else.

It is different from the paintings, though they too contain a mysterious inner space. On some canvases relief images are veiled under the pictorial plane, such as in *Tide Rising* where a bird relief is hidden under an image of hands with a Hindu prayer scarf. Again, in *Bird*, a casual viewer would probably only notice the overt image printed on a textured surface, but careful observation would disclose the imprint of objects; keys, locks, pill boxes. These hints help the viewer read and question the image. The painting then becomes a sort of archeological dig complete with references to its history and evolution.

These works are intended as a means of discussion, with myself and with others. Viewing is so subjective. Just yesterday a woman looked at *Little Bird*, where a bird relief is covered by an acrylic transfer of my hands. She interpreted the image as the hands protecting the bird and trying to save it. Right after, another person reacted with horror, thinking that the hands were strangling the bird.