

Conversations

by Marilla Palmer and Angela Wyman

Part one: Marilla Palmer Interviews Angela Wyman, at Eyewash@Figureworks

Marilla: What strikes me first on viewing your show is the high level of fashion and style shown in the various shoes and the Capri pants. When you were making this work did you make decisions along those lines?

Angela: Yes, this body of work focuses on a woman who is a conspicuous consumer. She's based on a model from a Victoria's Secret catalog. There was something so ridiculous about her ... her confident strut on teetering heels, her Jackie O. flip, the wee little purse dangling from her wrist. She has to carry a heightened sense of style, as she is a symbol of a ridiculous ideal that few can achieve.

My personal take is "oooooh I would just love to wear nothing but Prada!" but then I am thoroughly repulsed by those desires. This ambivalent relationship to fashion leads to satirical commentary, I suppose.

M: You present the dichotomy of a woman with huge hideous feet, but she has taken care to paint her toenails and wear teeny high heels. It seems like a love/hate relationship. These women are certainly not beautiful; they're grotesque and deformed. And they're all a bilious green.

A: <laugh> Yeah, they are. My previous work used traditions of caricature, scale, and exaggeration to deal with issues of grotesqueness and the female body.

For this body of work, I scanned my drawings and fed them back into the computer to scale up and increase the exaggeration of various body parts. By optically distorting the drawings, I would start to get a lovely interchange between certain odd computer artifacts and the hand drawn elements.

The body is first distorted through drawing, and then; the drawing is distorted optically by the computer. This creates a disturbance between what is illusionistically present and what is literally constructed. I paint using either projected transparencies or simply by eyeballing ink jet prints. I go through many generations, back and forth between the computer and the drawing, before I settle on a final image.

M: It seems clear from some of the larger paintings that you used a computer to arrive at the distortion. While that's interesting technically, you then chose to go back to the more traditional media of acrylic on canvas.

A: I was cycling through a list: Big Feet, Big Breasts, Big Head ... I would choose some anatomy part and say: okay, now this is the element that is going to be big in this piece. That would allow me to open up my figurative work to a more abstract language, to dedicate some space to trying to lose the figure by blowing it out to the point of abstraction.

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I don't want to lose the figure, I am a figurative artist no matter what, but I want to give the overall painting an abstract and decorative weight.

M: To me the abstract quality doesn't figure much in my response to the work. I'm thinking about feminist issues like the ideal of female beauty represented by a Barbie doll. Those are bizarre distortions in what is considered beautiful. However, you've reversed these distortions, such as in this picture, "Super Deformed."

A: You're right. People don't think about the abstract weight of the work because figuration is so overpowering. It seems to be in the nature of the vocabulary that just one tiny speck of figuration will saturate the whole piece. It's amazingly powerful stuff.

I do look at a lot of toys, including Barbie. I am fascinated by Japanese kaiju, 'imaginary monsters,' such as Godzilla for their quality of Grotesqueness. The grotesque is cute because it is pitiable. "Super Deformed" kaiju have huge heads that make the subject look childlike or stunted. My *Super* paintings are based on those proportions. Cuteness already borders on the grotesque as it's linked to the deformed, such as stubby feet and potbelly stomachs.

The skin is, as you said, a bilious color. Well, Bart Simpson is the same color. I don't mind this cartoon quality.

M: In the painting "Super Deformed" the woman's feet are really small on the bottom, and her huge head takes up most of the painting. It doesn't seem a childlike thing to me. It looks like a really bad acid trip or some other frightening psychological condition. Another thing about your show that strikes me is the psychological issues behind the fragmented figures and their enormously distorted heads. Do you think about that?

A: No, the psychological condition is something that works through me, almost automatically. My starting processes are along the lines of: Now I'm going to paint Big Head. Much like novelists describe their work, the characters in my work seem to have their own trajectories independent of my conscious desire. Often when artists talk about the creative act, they talk about a force moving through them, outside them. You need to give up a certain amount of self control for creative acts to occur.

This loosening of control can place my work in the realm of the unconscious or the narcotic. There is a painting in my studio that has a mirror structure going on where the image of the woman is folding back on itself. It's totally trippy, very bizarre and totally narcotic psychedelia. What is curious is that through working with this image my brain starts firing and generating its own weird optical imagery, its own twisted variants, unaided.

M: The painting—because it's a woman's body disintegrating into simple abstract patterns—reminds me of Klimt a bit.

A: Yes, there's definitely an impulse to decorativeness that you and I share! The source material didn't have polka dots of course. I felt a need to obscure her features and the polka dots served to cancel out her identity. I also wanted to bring in a love of patterning and decorativeness.

M: Her head becomes another fashion accessory, in a few of the paintings, especially where the dots go over the head.

A: Yeah, it is like a word balloon: "I am thinking pink today!".

M: It depends on the perspective if I look at it as someone looking at her, her head has become a fashion accessory, if I look at it from the perspective that I am that woman I would think I am having a really rough day. <laugh>

Some of the distortions with the multiple heads remind me of non European traditions. Like, the multiple-headed figures in some Hindu art, and especially the focus on feet in Hindu and Buddhist art.

A: Definitely. Persian paintings have highly detailed decorative patterns mixed in with narrative. Posters of Indian gods and goddesses speak to a more hallucinogenic type of vision, with multiheads and blue skin.

At one time I had migraines with residual visual disturbances. I would be walking down a hallway and someone would pass me and boom! Their head would look like it was the size of a billboard. On a daily basis, my senses are overloaded; I can easily become overwhelmed and thoroughly distracted by say an itch on my knee. My work speaks to capturing these fractured zones of sensation.

M: She has the sensory overload that you are describing. Her lipstick matches her belt, and her Capri pants matches her toes and sandals. In some ways, she is extremely together, as grotesque as she is.

A: The awful thing is that she is wearing a midriff sweater. It's definitely dictated by fashion, since it makes no sense for warmth.

M: She is restricted, but it's something she does quite well.

A: That's true, she's moving. The bow pins her arms to her sides, which emphasizes her objectification. It amplifies her present-ness: "I am something to look at." I'm painting another conspicuous consumer; a woman who is burdened by many shopping packages, she's wearing a fur coat, leopard dress, big gold hoops, and she has long blonde hair.

M: I haven't seen the painting, but you refer to the shopping bags and the fashion as a burden, and as a feminist I might want to take issue. A feminist might want to make a negative interpretation of her fashion sense based on the fact that she is so extremely fashionable. This doesn't seem to be a negative; it's the thing she's pulled together. The work has a love/hate relationship to feminism in my opinion.

So do you have a love/hate relationship to feminism?

A: I want that modernist tension of paradox. I definitely allow for multiple readings: will this be offensive or is it complicit with current cultural practices?

I'm a feminist, probably about third wave: "First wave: Go have a career and don't be a mother, Second wave: wait, I want to be a mom and have a career, Third Wave: I

want to be a mother and have a career and wear a mini skirt b-b-but how am I supposed to do all this???"

M: ...and paint your toenails green!

A: <laugh.> Yes. I can't imagine!

There is a definite idealization going on. There are so many celebrities now that receive media attention based pretty much on how they look. A book by Cintra Wilson calls them Ornamental Personages: a woman noteworthy just for style. That's what I'm portraying. It's a good phrase.

Part Two: Angela Wyman Interviews Greenpoint artist Marilla Palmer at Pierogi

As a member of the Williamsburg community I've known Marilla and her work for over ten years. She was never (as she puts it) "Brooklyn phobic" and became involved with Four Walls and the Pierogi flat files early on. I am easily enchanted by her tributes to the canons of modernism by way of an unapologetic feminist stance. It is a gutsy, even transgressive act to embroider little sparkly butterflies all over your iridescent art. She plays an outrageous gambit of "My Little Pony" meets bad boy modernism. We met at her solo show at Pierogi in February.

Angela: How do you begin your work? What is your process?

Marilla: The piece is designed in my head, then I do working sketches on the computer that I bring to the fabricator. When I'm designing the stainless steel frames I'm working in a formalist mode making simple minimalist shapes. When I get them back, I start the process of turning them into what they are now, by trying to create different atmospheres and environments.

A: To what degree, can you make changes or are you locked into what you have already fabricated?

M: There are always some changes—how the fabricator decides to make an oval that day, where they put the welds—that I have a certain degree of control over. The steel shapes are somewhat collaborative in this sense.

A: The overriding vision is your own. Are they all built on steel frames?

M: Yes, I wanted the industrial to offset the feminine and decorative side of my work. Designing and fabricating them is one aspect. The more successful they are as formal steel shapes, beautiful and cold, the better they will function when I am done with them, even though by then they are almost completely altered.

A: The steel is your masculine impulse!

M: It always feels somewhat transgressive to start trashing it up.

A: There is a dedicated engagement with traditional feminine practices in your work, judging from the choice of embroidery, the pastel and iridescent colors, the use of textiles. Does this come from a personal history with fabrics and sewing or a family history?

M: There are a couple of issues there. I felt as a female artist it was really hard to work in the tradition of painting—I felt more connected to the tradition of craft and sewing. One of my first jobs in high school was at the Brooklyn Museum, I cataloged their lace collection and I researched 18th and 19th century women's underwear garments. I was 16 and it had a quite an effect on me!

A: Those early garments are heavily structured, they aren't just lace, but they also contain whaleboneing, which is quite steely in its own way! Your titles are "Little Patch of Land," "Sky," and "Backyard Paradise." Does this reference Nature?

M: All the pieces in the show are built around a similar concept, especially "Backyard Paradise." Working in steel, I was aware of the structure of trampolines, sails, box kites, garden furniture. I was thinking about leisure activities, fun in the backyard. The way I put the pieces together with grommets and lacing also refers to that.

A: Is there a sense of nature for you in this work?

M: It isn't nature in the wild, but the more controlled semi-artificial nature you might have in your own "backyard paradise".

A: It's more like a simulacrum of nature, I'm thinking of your choice of Astroturf for grass.

M: Right, we aren't living with a lot of nature here and raw nature's disappearing on the planet. There is a desire to recreate that natural beauty in our lives.

A: As a longtime urban dweller I start to crave nature but its so overwhelmingly complex and foreign to me that I deal better with an experience of a simpler, artificial nature, such as walking though a CD ROM game like MYST. I have a very distanced view.

M: I love nature, I like going to the rain forest, I have that yearning to be in a more primitive, pure, natural environment, there's so much more oxygen in those places you actually get high! But this work is more how I cope with that desire in my tiny Greenpoint garden.

A: You have been working with spider web imagery for years.

M: It's symbolic of fragility. Like the magical experience as a child when you see this incredible spider web on the lawn beaded with the dew and then, the sun comes out and it burns it and it's gone.

A: That is ephemeral. Spider webs are incredibly strong; spider silk is stronger even than steel. Scientists have been attempting to recreate silk proteins through transgenic goat milk in hopes of making a cheap recyclable source of material.

The panels that are solid colors refer to aspects of light—you can't literally interpret them like the spider web.

M: My work is always open to question... it's never a game where you can figure out where everything is...

A: ...because at that point you stop engaging.

M: I dislike work that is close ended, with specific meanings and no room for interpretation. But, having said that, to me the blue and aqua plastic ovals look like swimming pools. The beautiful thing about a swimming pool is the way the light looks reflected in water.

A: The trickling fountain piece ("Snowflake Constellation") embodies a sense of artifice. It is evocative of Chinese restaurant décor—often there is a token acknowledgment of nature on an artificial level, whether it be a photographic panorama of trees or a small fountain placed in a corner. The artifice borders on kitsch.

Do you feel part of any historical art movement? What artist have influenced you?

M: Kitsch is good, I get more excited by drag queens costumes and opera than paintings in museums.

I love Thomas Cole, the landscape painter, but he was more influential to me before. To be honest, I don't have much interest in Art History. I grew up in New York seeing so much art, especially with my mother and grandmother both artists. My process now is about freeing myself from the heavy baggage of art history.

A: Your prior work at Devon Golden engaged a playful formalism, employing fields and squares of color. Even your earlier work, which had poured waterfalls, dotted with little butterflies and flowers, seemed reminiscent of the traditions of Asian art. The huge negative landscape with a tiny figure I would place in an Asian tradition rather than The Hudson River School.

Do you feel your work is personal and subjective or more formalist?

M: When I am stitching and embroidering, all of that feels very personal to me.

A: Would you ever have this work done by a sweatshop?

M: No.

*Marilla Palmer is an artist living and working in Greenpoint.
Angela Wyman is an artist working and living in Williamsburg.*