

Avoiding Signal Prohibited: The Work of Lyle Carbajal in Context

“The ugly may be good; the beautiful will never be.” --- Picasso

1.

As we approach the 100th anniversary since the first Duchamp readymade (1915), it's clear that contemporary art has come to a sort of crossroads. The overarching concern of many emerging artists nowadays seems to be making it as a *professional*, as someone who, over the period of a few decades, compiles an inventory of successful endeavors that collectively add up to what is variously accepted in popular parlance as a *career*, which in the U.S. is often construed to equate with one's very identity. The dream of BFA, MFA, and independent artists alike seems to be *making a living* off of one's art, even a modest existence capable of, say, sustaining a mortgage. And what, you may well be asking, is wrong with that?

Nothing: art is clearly part of the green economy, a social force that revitalizes depressed industrial sectors (Detroit as paradigm), lifts youth out of poverty, and brings beauty to a world challenged at times to find it. The cliché of the “broke artist” – a destitute and lonely individual whose extreme passion and soul-wrenching devotion to his art reaches such Parnassian heights that in the end it is simply not sustainable over the long term – is disparaged and rejected as old-fashioned, romantic, and banal by many artists today, who see little harm in selling work at a gallery, donating to auctions, “getting themselves out there” on the internet, website, social media and so on. More on this phenomenon in a bit – but first, a little advocacy from the radical fringe to balance the argument:

It's been quite a while since avant-garde forms of visual art were robust and active in the U.S., considering that 40 years ago, there was an entire array of experimentation, including radical painting (minimalism, abstract expressionism and antecedents earlier in 20th c.) and drawing (Monster Roster / Hairy Who in Chicago), Happenings (Fluxus), conceptual art, installations, LA 50s art, land art, and so forth. It's during this historic moment that Allan Kaprow, for instance, writes “Education of the Un-artist,” specifically warning us about the very situation that has become so pervasive now:

To escape from the traps of art, it is not enough to be against museums or to stop producing marketable objects; the artist of the future must learn how to evade his profession. (Written 1969, published in early 70s)

What happened between the time that this period ended (at some point in the 1970s; or the last time a legitimate avant-garde was operational and widespread in the U.S.) and the last 30-40 years, when by and large the edgiest, most experimental thinking has declined precipitously in favor of an artist's commercial success? Never mind the broke artist – where has the artistic interest in experimentation gone?¹

¹ One of the exceptions is the glass pipe movement, although it too is nakedly commercial and only beginning to explore alternatives. See CoCA's 2013 *Ceci N'est Pas Une Pipe* catalog. Others would lump in urban and street art but this genre has become so pervasive and commercially oriented it seems pointless to call it avant-garde. For

Wherever it has fled (indeed it may be closer than we think), rest assured that if the endeavor involves the production of an object, it will almost certainly find its way to market. Because that too, has changed: we have scoured the countryside in search of outsiders and championed them more than ever before during the same time span. In our curated culture of unprecedented content richness, we are now able to convert the most indie, *cri-de-coeur*, art-making effort into a fairly mainstream commodity. Consider a recent field trip that Seattle art critic Jen Graves took out in the sticks, to a remote horse farm where she hoped to pursue a story about a talented naïf, an emerging artist whose lack of jargon and seeming candor conveyed a refreshing authenticity:

The people in [her] paintings seemed to have all gone crazy, like they had been irradiated or poisoned or drugged. The works looked like classic vernacular art: obsessively patterned, highly irregular, and patently handmade. [...]

This year's Venice Biennale, coincidentally enough, is deliberately outsiderish. There are several artists included who are complete unknowns, and some who never thought of themselves as artists at all. There are even a bunch of rocks on display. (Jen Graves, "The Lies of the Artists: The Unbelievable Pressure Artists Are Under to Just Completely Make Some Stuff Up," *The Stranger*, Sep. 11, 2013)

Later of course, the lies that the fake outsider artist tells are slowly revealed as the critic begins to view the same paintings very differently. In hindsight, the work is exposed as a fashion trend, echoed even by the current Venice Biennale. What had seemed potentially good is now tainted and bad. The artist was less interested in exploring new territory than in exploring new ways to market herself.

It's an appetite, a yearning for authenticity that writer David Shields has recently called "reality hunger." In noting the soaring popularity of reality shows and a thousand other symptomatic conditions, he claims that

An artistic movement, albeit an organic and as-yet unstated one, is forming. What are its key components? A deliberate unartiness: "raw" material, seemingly unprocessed, unfiltered, uncensored, and unprofessional. (...) Randomness, openness to accident and serendipity, spontaneity; artistic risk, emotional urgency and intensity, reader/viewer participation; an overly literal tone, as if a reporter were viewing a strange culture....(*Reality Hunger*, 2010, 5.)

Shields elaborates these kinds of details for 200 more pages, but for our purposes here it's worth stressing how close the description matches the artist whose work I've had in mind since the beginning of this essay: Lyle Carbajal.

I'm going to assume you know something about him and that I don't need to spend too much time reviewing details of the paintings (although I will get to some of that too, in the section below.) Before moving on, it's worth stressing that among Shields' litany is the word "unprofessional," an echo of Kaprow's statement from "Education of the Un-artist" that I opened with. This word has a pejorative connotation today but in *Reality Hunger* it's a badge of honor, a sign of the real. In "Lies of the Artist," Graves also perceives the trap:

more on the avant-garde, see Rosalind Krauss, *The Originality of the Avant-Garde and other Modernist Myths* (MIT, 1986).

The professionalization of art has meant that a ton of an artist's energy now has to be spent on marketing. Go to the Artist Trust homepage and you'll find a link to EDGE, a "professional development program" that boasts of having trained 512 literary, film, and visual artists in "the relevant and necessary entrepreneurial skills to achieve their personal career goals." There are links to articles with titles including "Does Your Message POP?" and "Sports and the Arts: Joined at the Marketing Hip.

Being lied to by the horse-farm artist felt gross. But so does this marketing advice. And why do we put so much emphasis on the stories artists tell about themselves? Doesn't that invite them to lie at least a little?

In the end, it may well be that the arts, broadly considered, necessarily must rescue us from our culture of corporate personhood, imperialism in the form of free market capitalism. But at the same time it will not diminish the concurrent, neglected need for experimentation, for *disinterested* work (as Kant defined it in 1790) capable of dissonance and resistance. Let there be a hundred artists competing to get into the commercial galleries, let another score come to our assistance in schools, where art education has diminished to a few hours a week for most K-8 students, so long as there are one or two who are restless, who have taught in the classroom, who remain more interested in contributing to a history of ideas than in reaching a state of blissful complacency and comfort. Truth and lie in the arts (i.e. language) often collide in an "extramoral sense," as Nietzsche wrote in 1873.

2.

"Every proper artist is more or less a realist according to his own eyes." – Emile Zola

With this space in the essay now cleared aside, with the stakes and consequences outlined and the context established implicitly, let's turn now to the main act, *Romancing Banality*, Lyle Carbajal, and why his artwork *matters* explicitly.

For approximately 20 years now, Carbajal's paintings have fleshed out a kind of anthropological structure: in seeking out the landmarks and sign posts, the imagery of the paintings 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. On the surface, we're ostensibly presented with a dog or cat (mostly domestic animals), or a portrait (people of color), but on closer inspection, it's clear that what we see is only partial and that a vast region on any given board has been overpainted or hidden (this is truer of the last few years than earlier, more densely cluttered work.) There's a distinctly functional quality although the paintings obviously serve no utilitarian purpose; yet in their version of the vernacular the decorative is controlled and minimized: interiors of subjects (animals, people) are often palimpsests of prior work, while outside the heavily-drawn outline or border, details are often subsumed under a wash of color (again, more recently rather than all along). There's an absence of the *horror vacui* so common in work by institutionalized artists: in Carbajal's vast color fields, it's common to detect a patch or trace of a previously applied element that has subsequently been covered, effaced, much like the manner in which graffiti is painted over in cities, leaving irregular, linear blocks of paint. Hence there's an archaeology to his work, a process of deposition as well as erosion, taking turns as it were, until the result is satisfactory. The slick surface gloss that Carbajal builds up with a heavy layer of resin also adds a key component to the overall effect

of the paintings: despite the crudity of the images, the presentation is paradoxically clean and controlled, almost fossilized in amber.

Other commentators have remarked on the raw emotion, asserting that in Carbajal's treatment of the face, we see anger or fear, anguish and pain. While we certainly see teeth and nostrils a lot ("Cabezon," "Magnificent Beast," "Chicken and Waffles," "Portrait of Diego and Lalo," "Fuma," "Self Portrait with Flash," "Bafo," "El Matador," "Untitled," etc.) we also see a substantial portion with closed lips and expressions of quiet contemplation, satisfaction, or acceptance ("El Boxeo," "Evrlist," "Self Portrait on the 'L'," etc.), objectively it's a stretch to assign so much suffering to the narratives in the paintings. Looking at forty or fifty together, they read a little like polaroid snapshots in an album of memories – boys and their dogs (often with feet backwards), portraits of daily life – a gritty kind of memory, to be sure, an affinity for salt-of-the-earth culture, but not nearly as nightmarish as some have implied. After all, it's a world of innocence and wonder at the same time that it bears the trace of experience and the passage of time, erosion, death.

"(T)he hand of the chimpanzee is quasi-human, the hand of Jackson Pollock is almost animal" – Salvador Dali (qtd in *Monkey Painting*, Reaktion, 1997, 117).

Aside from the paintings and the occasional added panel construction, it's exciting to see the next big step as represented by *Romancing Banality*, the entire environment for the paintings, the installation and multimedia components, the engagement with a variety of senses. It makes me realize that unless you're standing in detritus, wading through garbage, fully immersed, you're not really seeing the work in its best light so to speak. You're seeing it conventionally, passively, studying its collage aspects or its portraiture, its muscular effort to grasp the ineffable – but not engaging it on its own terms, not quite stepping into the world that the paintings create, the folk imagination, the oral tradition of tricksters.

Like the horse-farm artist, Carbajal's work seems fall within the category of outsider art, although that term has become less and less useful as more and more artists, many of them trained, are making work that in some ways pays homage to what Jean Dubuffet in 1948 called *Art Brut*,

Those works created from solitude and from pure and authentic creative impulses – where the worries of competition, acclaim and social promotion do not interfere – are, because of these very facts, more precious than the productions of professionals. After a certain familiarity with these flourishings of an exalted feverishness, lived so fully and so intensely by their authors, we cannot avoid the feeling that in relation to these works, cultural art in its entirety appears to be the game of a futile society, a fallacious parade.

These artists were not all inmates of insane asylums, as Adolf Wölfli, the patient of Dr. Walter Morgenthaler, had been in 1921. Dubuffet's call to arms also echoes Arthur Rimbaud's earlier insistence that the senses of the poet must be "deranged":

The Poet makes himself a seer by a long, gigantic and rational derangement of all the senses. All forms of love, suffering, and madness. He searches himself. He exhausts all poisons in himself and keeps only their quintessences. Unspeakable torture where he needs all his faith, all his superhuman strength, where he becomes among all men the great patient, the great criminal, the one accursed—and the supreme Scholar!—Because he reaches the unknown! Since he cultivated his soul, rich already, more than any man! He reaches the unknown, and when,

bewildered, he ends by losing the intelligence of his visions, he has seen them. Let him die as he leaps through unheard of and unnamable things. (1871)

With Rimbaud we get the tortured soul again, but lest we misinterpret rawness of delivery for emotional upheaval, let me emphasize instead the search for a remote reality. That is where you *cultivate* a spirit – that’s what an artist is supposed to do too, rather than conform to the taste of the marketplace –in this case doing both perhaps, as the work is reaching wider and wider audiences.

Whether it is fake outsider art or not isn’t the point really because that gets us into semantics (which is true banality, not the wonder of the commonplace.) It doesn’t change the art. So if it’s possible to focus on the work itself without relying too heavily on biographical detail, we can say this: the work is referencing (not so much imitating) conventions of outsider art (distant objects are smaller and less vibrant colored, etc.) because it seeks to enter into dialogue with this tradition. It accepts DeBuffet’s claims, agrees wholeheartedly with Rimbaud – and is thus *poetic*. And while the work of many artists is poetic, it is not in the same way, lyric, emotional, in the present tense. George Bataille’s *Visions of Excess*, with the notion of expenditure and potlatch-style sacrifice, is also a neighbor in this territory.

Carbajal’s been at it for a while and in all these years, despite all the exhibitions, he’s also found himself far afield, often in different landscapes, drifting in a kind of exile perhaps. It’s that restlessness, that act of will to work in different disciplines, that has allowed him, as Kaprow recommended so fervently in the twilight of the 20th century avant-garde, to “evade his profession.” Even with this latest giant leap, he’s once again found a way to balance the evasion with some fascinating experiments.

BIO: David Francis studied Poetry and Critical Theory, earning MFA and PhD degrees before working as a college professor for almost 20 years, teaching in Delaware, Washington, Kentucky, Poland, and Hungary (Fulbright lecturer) before landing at Cornish College of the Arts until 2006, when he began to focus on making visual art, joining CoCA in 2006 as an artist-curator. From the mid 1980s until 2005, he also pursued a parallel career in archaeology, surveying, testing, and excavating numerous sites in four states. He has curated some 20 shows for CoCA, written 15 curatorial essays for catalogs, published a book of award-winning poetry, and a volume of field notes for backpacking in Oaxaca. Currently he serves as curator at Museum of Glass, Tacoma.