



'17

**LYLE CARBAJAL**

**HOUSTON JANUARY, 27<sup>TH</sup>**

**ROMANCING BANALITY**

**PAINTING + INSTALLATION + FILM + MUSIC**



1. Press Release
2. Statement
3. Work / Installation photos / Press

**Press +**

4. Interview with Venison Magazine - *by Nazish Chunara*
5. Romancing Banality: A Rap Opera
6. The Semiotics of Feelings: Lyle Carbajal at Tinney, Nashville - *by Elaine Slayton Akin for Burnaway.com*
7. Tinney Contemporary gives roving artist room to explore - *by Sara Estes for The Tennessean*

**Exhibition Essays**

8. Romancing Banality-Houston: Lyle Carbajal's Authentic World - *Sara Lee Burd*
9. Lyle Carbajal: Art Without Artifice - *John Seed*
10. The End of Art and the Heterogeneous Mind: Lyle Carbajal's "Romancing Banality"- *Adam Eisenstat*
11. Layered Perspectives, Lyle Carbajal's Multi-media Installation Broaches the Profound through the Mundane – *Sara Lee Burd' for The Afro-Hispanic Review* - A multi-lingual peer-reviewed journal of Afro-Hispanic literature and culture. Printed by Vanderbilt University Press - Nashville TN.
12. Curators Notes - *Joseph Roberts, Center on Contemporary Art, Seattle*
13. Biography
14. Contact



*For Immediate Release:*

**Celebrated Roving Artist Brings Installation to Houston**  
**Romancing Banality: A Mash-up of Anti-Artistry, Folk, and Contemporary Themes**

Art League Houston (ALH) is excited to present Romancing Banality, an installation-based exhibition by nomadic artist Lyle Carbajal. The exhibition features a mash-up of anti-artistry, folk, and contemporary themes, which pull from art history, cultural, economic, geographic and personal references, creating an immersive installation of densely layered mixed-media paintings, and sculptural compositions that combines everyday materials and aesthetic traditions. Carbajal, who was born in Los Angeles, and has lived in Mexico City and Buenos Aires, draws on imagery and narratives from his nomadic perspective, creating work that acknowledges the deep-rooted anthropological connections and patterns that traverse across history and place.

Carbajal addresses race, disparity, and identity politics because he himself is of Hispanic descent living in a predominantly white culture. Many of his works feature unique human figures created by combining mass-produced materials such as paint, wood, metal, balloons, and printed paper to make intricate surfaces that elicit connotations of the commodification of culture and of individuals. His art is not overtly confrontational, rather the artist simply invites the viewer to see what he sees, which in and of itself can be quite a stretch depending on the viewer's experience with the artist's cultural references. Using free form and primitive style allows the artist to evoke the immediacy of everyday life while also presenting the complex perspective of an "other." (Burd, 2015)

When talking about his work, Carbajal states:

Childhood memories and my Latin American background helped me search for a primitive expression of the world. There's nothing quite as beautiful as the unintentional. For this reason I've attempted through the use of color, reference, placement and most importantly line, to capture, if just a fraction of the naiveté I see in my daily surroundings. My bright colors and dark, brisk lines reflect moods of small children, brush-in-hand, being told to concentrate and stay within the lines, by those well intentioned grade school teachers who encouraged us all to produce masterpieces. Tucked into my own pictures are images associated with childhood: comics, monsters, machines, animals and faces. My interest in the face is evident in each painting, where the primary visages are wild-eyed and gripped with anger, terror, confusion or pain. Both the innocent associations of youth and the horror of maturation are bluntly juxtaposed and seek not so much to find unity in the passage of life, but to expose its division.

**ABOUT THE ARTIST**

Lyle Carbajal is a nomadic artist, born and raised in Los Angeles, California, whose work exists somewhere between the vernacular and contemporary avant-garde. His work has been featured in numerous solo and group shows at national and international venues including Tinney Contemporary, Nashville TN (2015, 2012, 2010, 2009, 2004, 2002), Art Chicago; Center on Contemporary Art (CoCA), Seattle WA (2013); Cartwheel Street & Outsider Art Show, Hollywood CA (2013), The London Art Fair; Mark Rothko museum, Dünaburg, Latvia (2012), The National Museum of Mexican Art, Chicago IL (2007), Museu de Estremoz, Portugal (2007), The Raw Arts Festival, London (2004), La Luz de Jesus Gallery, Los Angeles and The Mark Rothko Museum in Latvia (2012) while participating in an artist residency in Daugavpils, the country's second largest city. Romancing Banality began in Seattle in 2013, and has

since traveled to New Orleans (2014), Tennessee (2015), and is currently in its fourth iteration at Art League Houston.

In 2010, Carbajal published his first book, *Urban+Primitive: The Art of Lyle Carbajal*.

Lyle is currently represented by CG2 Gallery in Nashville TN; The Frederick Holmes Gallery in Seattle, WA; Gallery Orange in New Orleans LA; Edgar Modern in The United Kingdom; Galerie du Temple and Galerie Gabel in France.

He currently lives and works in Houston and New Orleans.

Houston Art League  
Houston, TX

###

## ROMANCING BANALITY

“The irrational anomaly, the loose thread, the pottery kill-hole... Painting at its root is not problem-solving but is an oppositional creation.”

Forging artlessness and bad painting through line *and then* subject and composition weaving through a reverse-eponymous mythology, all the while employing the thematic of religion and taboo, children’s dreams and urban folk art, randomness and graffiti... I construct my playground.

Although some of the images are meant to be taken literally, their intent is to lurk rather than convene...simply let the environment descend upon you.

While not exclusively contemporary, my work does exist somewhere between the vernacular and the latter.

These are the truths I perceive through my eyes, my journeys, and my exploration as an artist.

*-Lyle Carbajal*

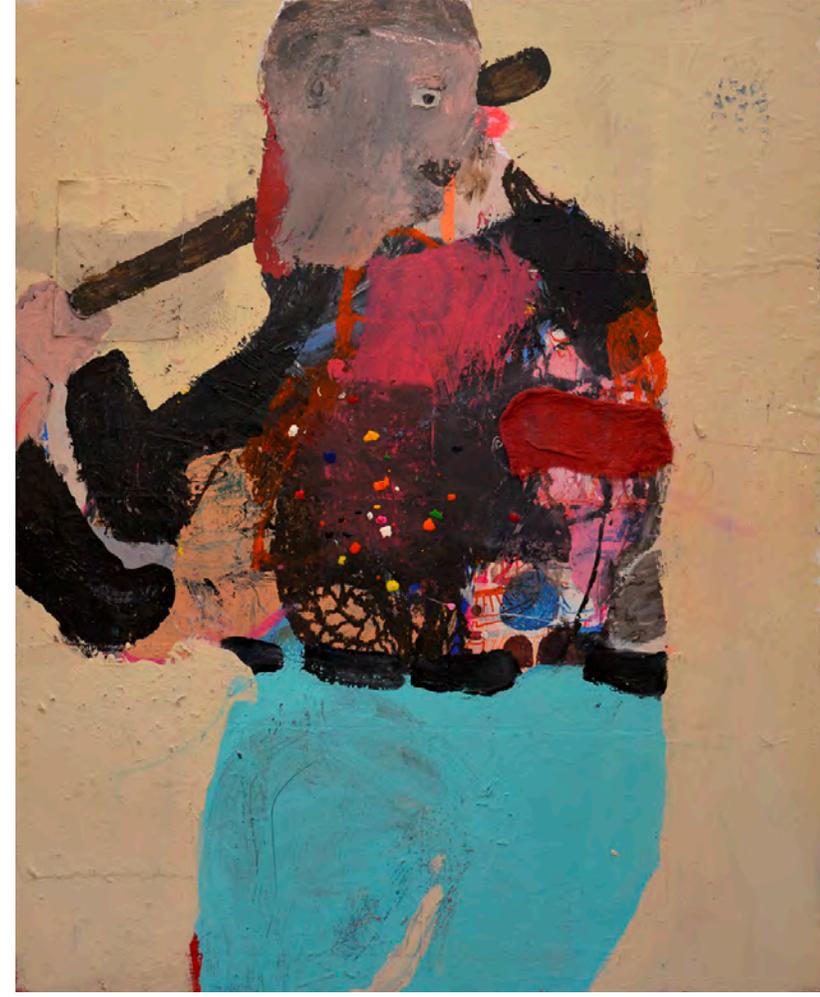


SIA  
OMPELAS  
ENAS

ROMANING BANALITY  
Lyle Cabajal



"It ain't the heat, it's the humility"  
40"x 48" mixed medium on wood panel with resin - 2017



“There ain’t much to being a ball player, if you’re a ball player”  
40”x 48” mixed medium on wood panel with resin - 2017



"Untitled"  
40"x 48" mixed medium on wood panel with resin - 2017



## “LOCAL ARTIST’S EXHIBIT GAINS INTERNATIONAL ATTENTION” - KOMO NEWS

**SEATTLE** - A local artist’s exhibit opened to rave reviews leading galleries worldwide to clamor for his art.

Lyle Carbajal spoke to a crowded room Saturday, discussing his inspiration for his ambitious show which combines painting, sculpture and video.

“Forging artlessness and bad painting through line and then subject and composition weaving through a reverse-eponymous mythology, all the while employing the thematic of religion and taboo, children’s dreams and neuroticism, totem-ism, randomness and graffiti... I construct my playground,” said the artist.

The exhibit, *Romancing Banality*, is a fascinating installation piece that forces onlookers to engage all senses. Each component plays carefully with each other, invoking emotion

through spatial awareness. Carbajal says the images are meant to be taken literally with an intention of letting the environment descend on the viewer.

“These are the truths I perceive through my eyes, my journeys, and my exploration as an artist,” Carbajal said.

The exhibit has been picked up by galleries in Nashville, New Orleans, and Copenhagen, and will stay in Seattle through December. Visit the exhibit at Currency Art, located in the old Dome Stadium Tavern on 214 4th Ave. South, Seattle from 12 p.m. - 5 p.m. Friday through Saturday.

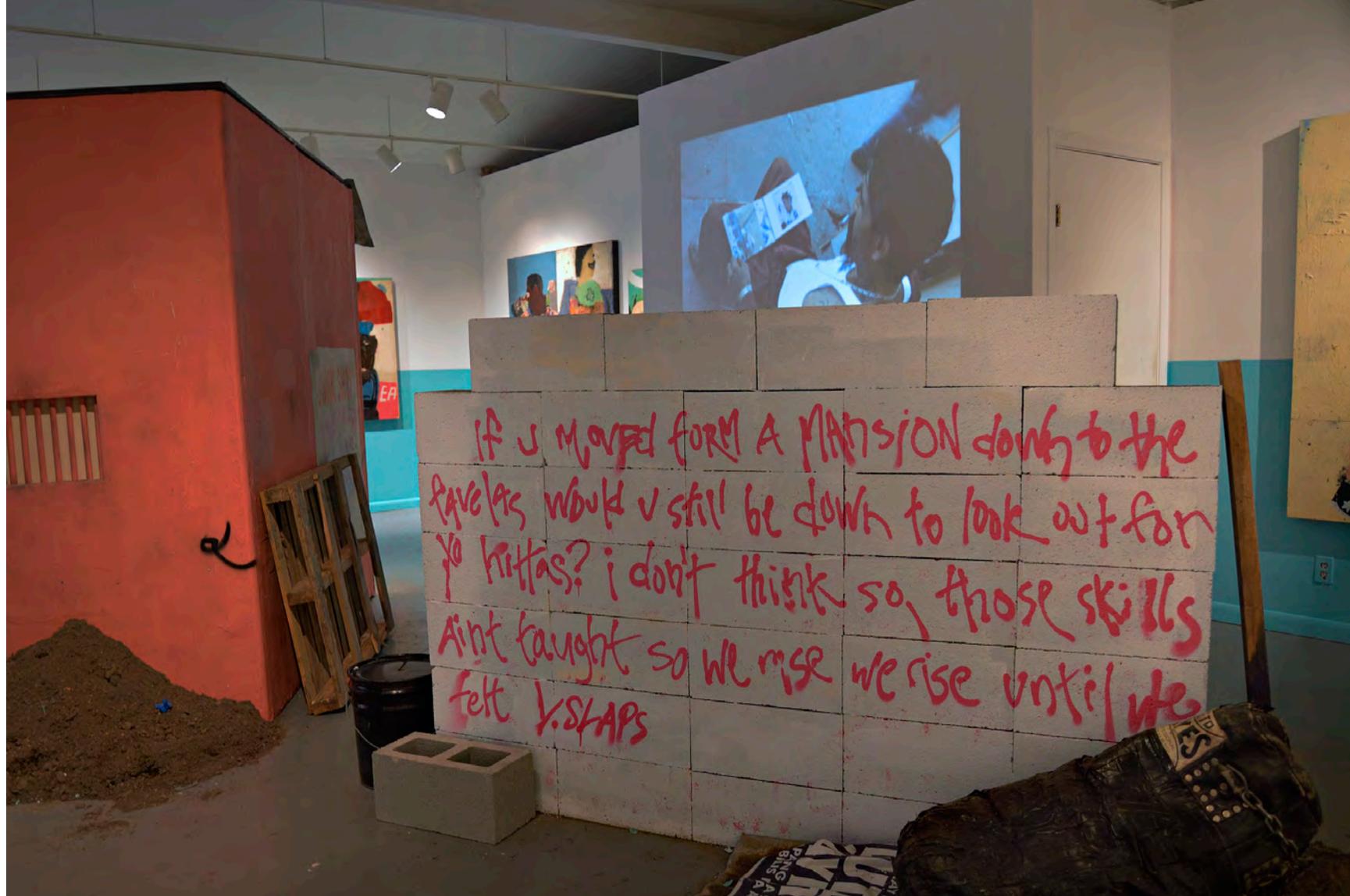
source: KOMO NEWS Seattle -

<http://www.komonews.com/news/local/Local-artists-exhibit-gains-international-attention-234979941.html#comments>



38" x 40" mixed medium on wood panel - 2016

"Reach for It"









"LIBERTAD" THIRD ROOT ALBUM COVER IMAGE - 2016



## Romancing Banality Lyle Carbajal

Graffiti covered walls, commodity centered living, obesity, bravado, spirituality, sexuality, poverty, and adversity all have a place in Lyle Carbajal's art just as they do in the everyday world. *Romancing Banality* is an extrapolation of what he has found and processed as authentic and meaningful during travels around the world. The visual references he makes in his art may not be recognizable to all, but creating encounters with the inaccessible or the unnoticed is what he strives to achieve with his art. The artist takes inspiration from the functional often commercial visual culture that shapes daily life to uncover universal elements that connect contemporary societies. Solitary structures, mixed media works, and collaborations with musicians and filmmakers provide genuine expressions of Carbajal's anthropological and artistic observations.

- Sara Lee Burd



"EVRLST"

48" x 48" mixed medium on wood panel - 2013





"FRUTAS"

48" x 48" mixed medium on wood panel - 2014

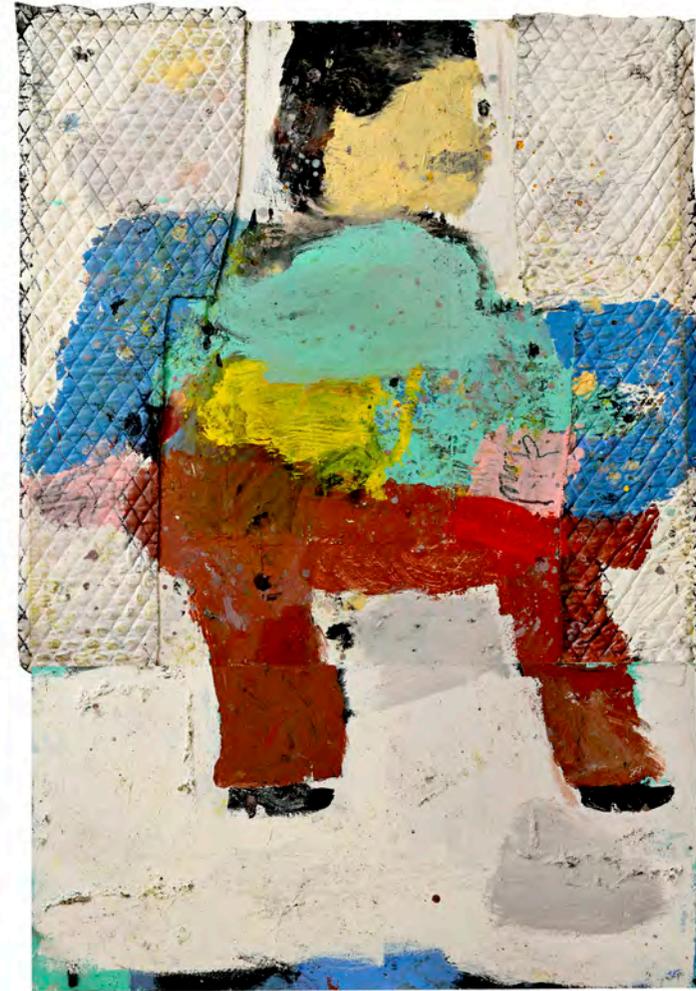
38"x 38" mixed medium on wood panel with resin - 2016

"Untitled"



"Boxeador"

48"x 40" mixed medium on wood panel with resin - 2016



“Untitled (Man with Red Pants)”  
32”x 48” mixed medium on wood panel - 2015

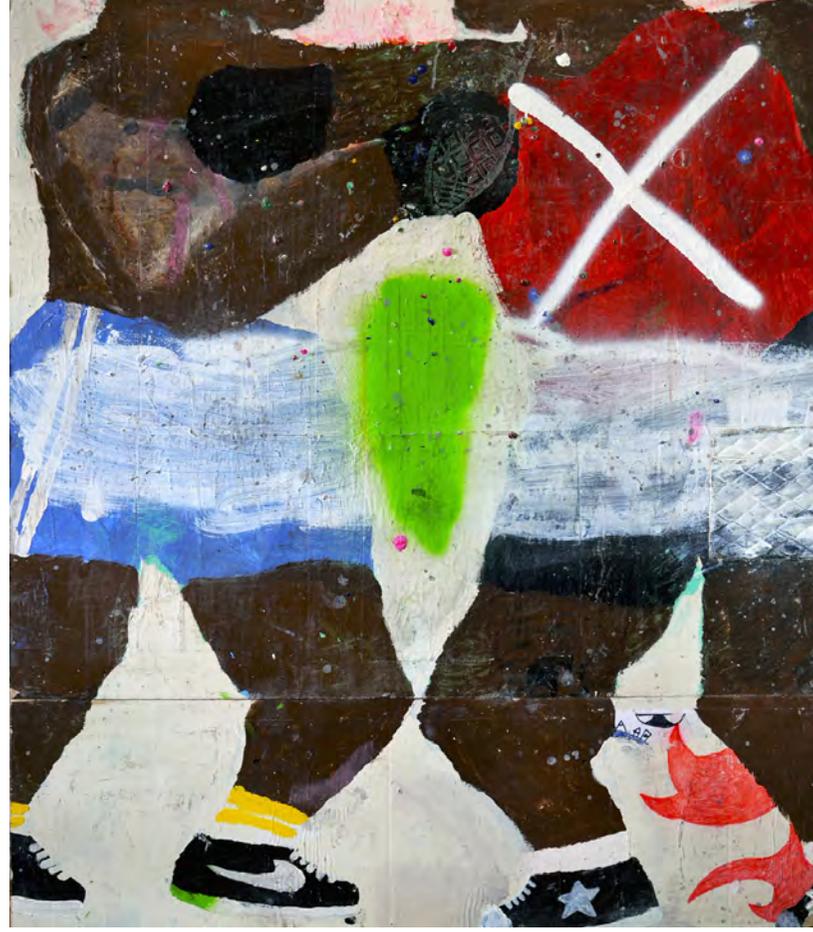


"Untitled"

49.5" x 49.5" mixed medium on wood panel - 2012

46" x 48" mixed medium on wood panel - 2013

"Cristo Redentor"

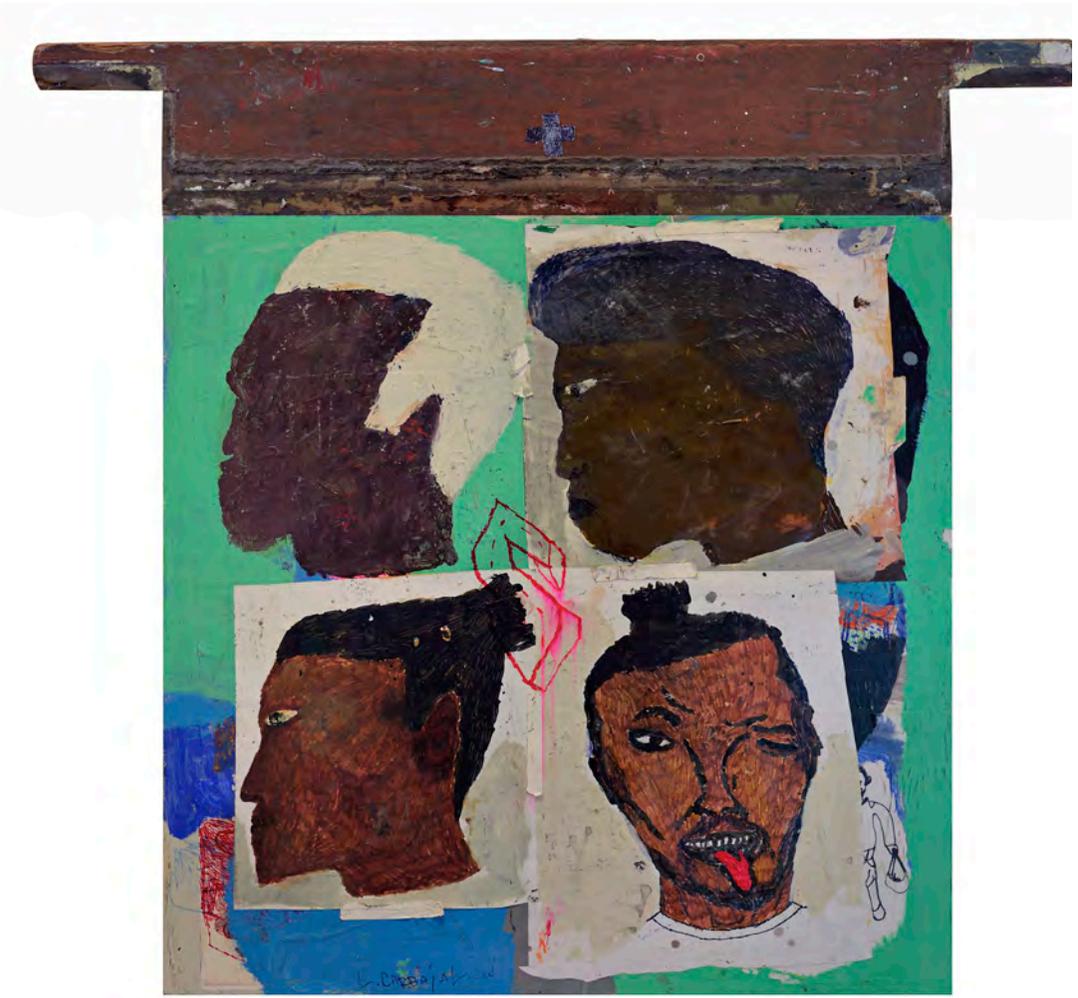


"Boxeo"

46" x 44" mixed medium on wood panel with resin - 2016



"Three Continents, Four Cultures"  
32" x 32" mixed medium on wood panel - 2016



"Self Portrait as Narcissist"

32"x 40" mixed medium on wood panel with resin - 2014



"Balloon Face"  
32" x 32" mixed medium on wood panel - 2015

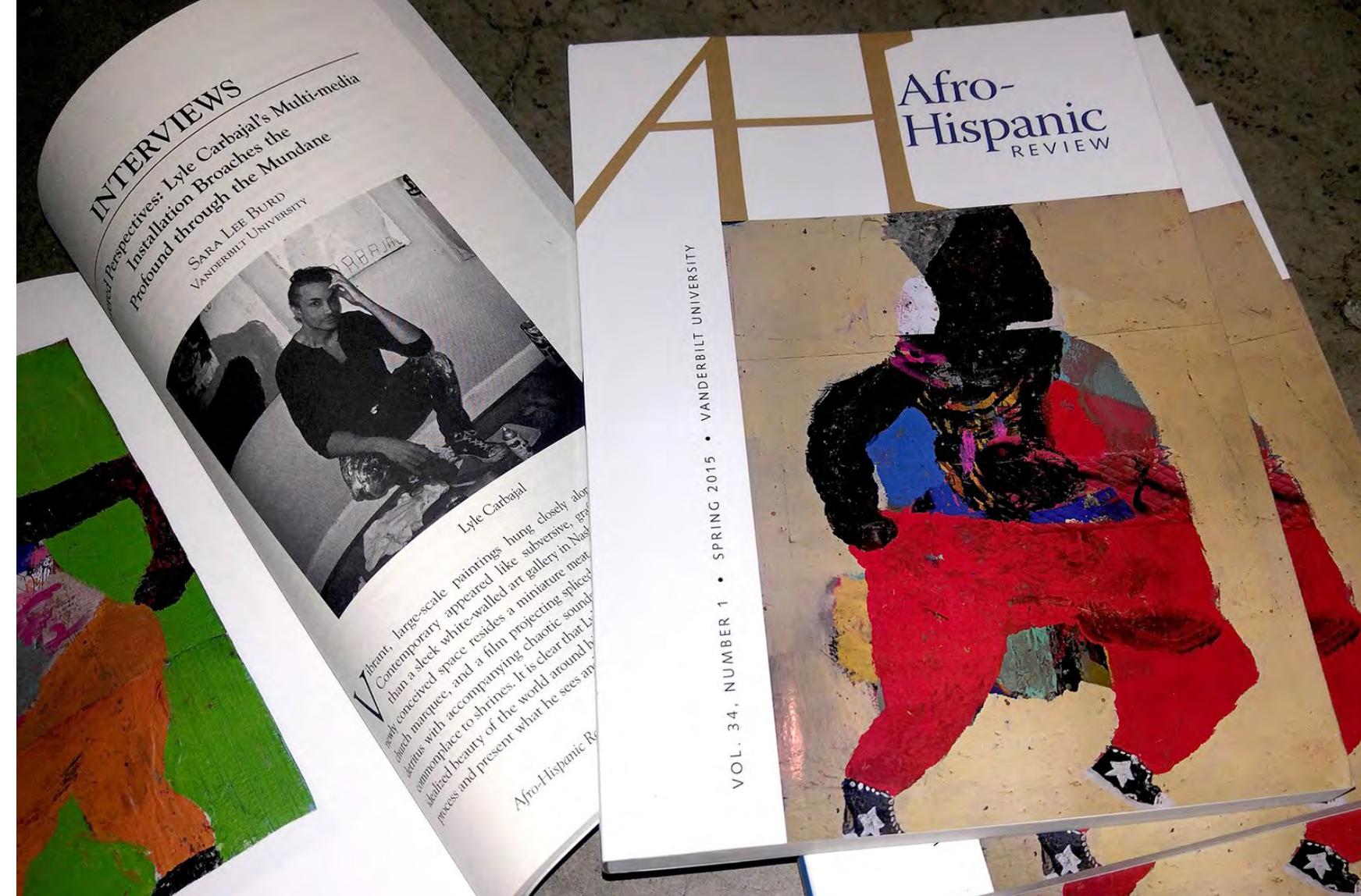
## Layered Perspectives, Lyle Carbajal's Multi-Media Installation Broaches the Profound through the Mundane

Carbajal addresses race, disparity, and identity politics because he himself is of Hispanic descent living in a predominantly white culture. His art is not overtly confrontational, rather the artist simply invites the viewer to see what he sees, which in and of itself can be quite a stretch depending on the viewer's experience with Carbajal's cultural references. Using free form and primitive style allows the artist to evoke the immediacy of everyday life while also presenting the complex perspective of an "other."

—Sara Lee Burd

**Afro-Hispanic Review**

*A multi-lingual peer-reviewed journal of Afro-Hispanic literature and culture  
Vanderbilt University Press*







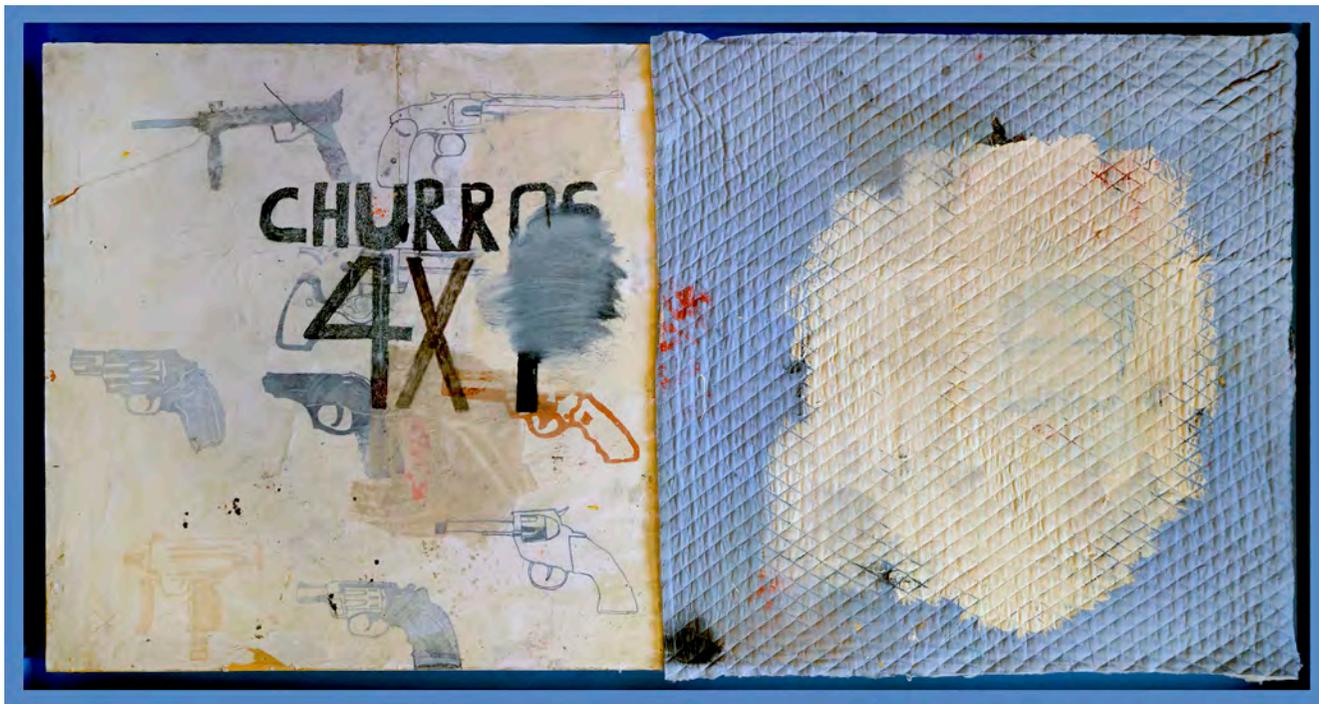
"A Progression of Nows"

48"x 32" mixed medium on wood panel with resin - 2015

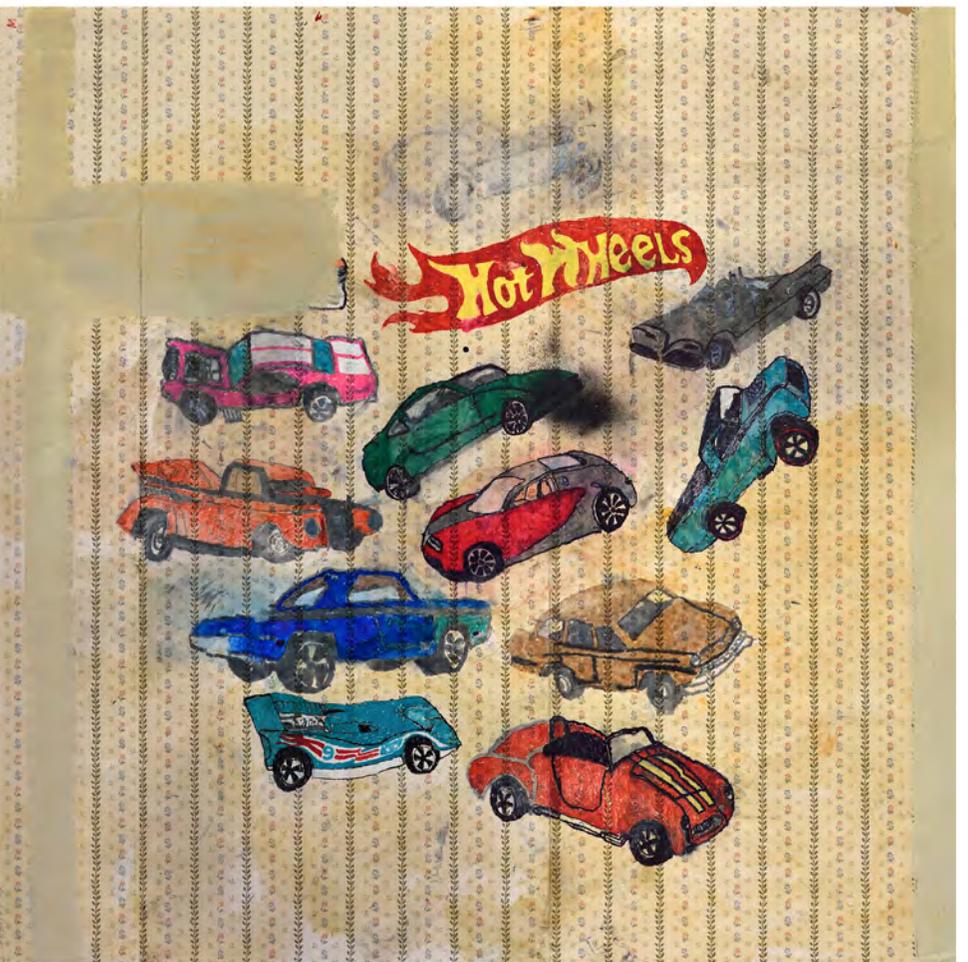


70"x 37" mixed medium on wood panel - 2015

"Untitled"



Lyle Carbajal



“Adolescent Lexicon” (Hotwheels)

48” x 48” mixed medium on wood panel - 2015

48"x 64" mixed medium on wood panel - 2015

"Kings in Converse"



"Assemblage #3"

64"x 64" mixed medium on wood panel with resin & - 2016



www.venisonmagazine.com

Interview with Venison Magazine by Nazish Chunara

***Tell me a bit about your traveling body of work, Romancing Banality, and what the process of its conception was.***

In 2013, I found myself in Seattle shortly after being invited to exhibit at the Center on Contemporary Art. That winter, a new friend and colleague asked if I'd be interested in taking over a newly acquired exhibition space to do "whatever I wanted." I quickly realized the potential of an all-out project, and, being that I would have a small host of creatives to help, the grueling task of building a multimedia installation (like Romancing Banality) wouldn't be so challenging. So that's how it started. The idea, although roughly hashed out at the time, has turned into this roving project now in its fourth iteration in Houston. But if it had to be about just one thing, it would be about culture, specifically culture as I see it from my perspective, a roving perspective.

***How much of your own personal narrative informs your work?***

Quite a bit. Coupled with the subject of culture, class, identity and economics are also addressed by a shifting perspective and personal history. A history not so clearly defining one particular culture but rather a personal display of curretted selections I see as the universal connections among urban environments. Romancing Banality is my place. It is an extrapolation of what I find and process as authentic and meaningful in the world.

***How has it evolved through its travels, and how has it been received?***

It's a funny thing because what I feel I'm most up to is often overlooked. An idea that the elements or themes in Romancing Banality may or may not be embraced is paramount here. So, by that admission, it's the journey that I pay closest attention to. The Houston project was just one of those things. I gave myself a year from when I first set foot in Texas, beginning the process of gaining interest for the project and aligning myself with individuals that I might move to work with. Houston tends to serve its own very well, but due to my temporary status there was greeted with more than a few roadblocks and some confusion by those involved in the project, colleagues and the exhibition's intended audience and supporters. Being brushed off by a Houston Opera insider whose name was passed to me by a mutual friend was one example, while another saw the entire topic of the rap music component thrown out by an interviewer. So these types of things went on but in all honesty, it was somewhat predictable. But in the end, feel like I was successful in creating the project I more or less envisioned from the start.

***Has the current political climate affected the way you work? Has your productivity or intentionality been affected?***

For the most part, I would say neither I nor my work has been affected. Romancing Banality has been developing and maturing in ideas much like I have since it started, and I suppose as we enter into 2017 with the political climate as divisive as always and right in lockstep with the issue of immigration, RB can't help but connote political ideas. The opening in

Houston was only a week after this administration's inauguration, and while those topics were fresh in people's minds, I'm certain that with it being so close to the Mexican border, the installation couldn't help but rattle a few emotions. With that said, my style, rather than a direct one, is to step away from any one poignant message and lay an idea that might then grow at the visitor's feet. The essay, which I take tremendous care in procuring, then acts as a glossary of sorts--laying out the project from inception through the week-long build-up and then carefully describing what the viewer is looking at during the opening. So in my mind this process affords the viewer not only a takeaway but also the need to fill with something of themselves--political or otherwise.

***Is there a city you have not been to yet, that you'd really like to investigate and interact with?***

Bogata has been described to me at length by a colleague I highly respect and admire. His frequent travels to Columbia are always full of creativity and enormous passion. At one point he created a full body of work I briefly curreted in a project, out of bags and bags of collected posted bills he ripped from most anywhere he could get his hands on and then attempting to explain to confused airport security that it was all for art.

***Now that the new administration is beginning to be established, what issues are you interested in integrating into your work? Do you have any new series or shows coming up that are inspired by the developing political dialogue?***

I began working with subversive imagery about a year ago, and around the time I was looking for a space to host. I suppose this will be showing up more in the future. Also RB Houston saw me interact with hip-hop for the first time. It

was incredibly rewarding, and I've made very good friends from that. I suppose that will be something that I'll come back to again at some point. For now I will be concentrating on something different and moving to the Midwest in a couple of months to begin that. Although I have no plans for RB in the near future, I do have a heavy calendar year in 2017 that includes Tel Aviv, London and Miami.

***What do you think the impact and role of art and artists is during these highly charged political times? And how does that relate specifically to you and your work?***

My role as an artist is to address the immediacy of everyday life while also presenting the complex perspective of another -- political or otherwise. The role of the artist is to create a physical manifestation of the internal creative impulse, whether political, personal or spiritual, but originating from culture that might then move it along or change it.

Romancing Banality: A Rap Opera - from Romancing Banality Houston - Jan. 2017

FIRST ACT:  
**Strife + Conflict**

by Yarrow Slaps  
No Goodbyes

SECOND ACT:  
**Introspection**

by Yung Turk  
"Roles Changed"

THIRD ACT:  
**Concession + Acquiescence + Accession**

by Third Root  
"Dig"



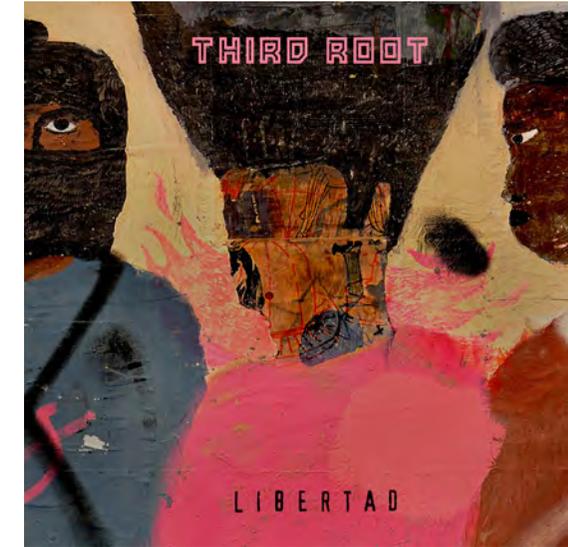
Third Root



Third Root "Dig" Recording Session / Austin TX, Dec. 2016

Third Root (Act III)

<https://thirdroot.bandcamp.com/>



"Dig" was written and recorded by Third Root and Adrian Quesada in collaboration with visual artist Lyle Carbajal. It series as Act III in the 3-part Rap Opera that supports his nomadic master work - *Venison Magazine*

The album, *Libertad*, reflects today's current mobilization among Black and Brown communities in the face of debilitating cycles of police brutality, flawed educational systems, privately owned prisons and detainment centers, corporately owned politicians, and racist judicial systems. In this climate, Third Root, a group born out of Black and Brown cultural dialogue, offers *Libertad* as a talking piece surrounding such issues as anti-Black, anti-Mexican, anti-immigrant, anti-poor and anti-working class sentiment. Through Easy Lee and MexStep's back and forth Black Chicano intellectual flow, DJCG's dynamic turntablism, and Adrian Quesada's AfroLatino psychedelic funk-infused beats, the album delivers a mix of social justice and jam session with each song designed to raise questions, incite discussion, and promote healing, growth, and liberation.

## Yarrow Slaps (Act I)

<http://www.yarrowslapsart.com/>

FIRST ACT:

***Strife + Conflict*** by Yarrow Slaps

*No Goodbyes*

Born and I'm ready for storms  
stood in line a few times but i never set in form  
creative child, a young leader of champions  
just learned today, y'all rappers can't challenge him  
coming from the underworld, where u can't hear  
sounds  
its too deep down here to make yo rounds  
good morning and thank u for the strength  
lil mama send me love when she cant send me bank  
top rank nigga at whatever i choose  
i learned how to win, but theres nothing 2 prove  
go head check my tweets, my ig and Facebook  
every word i said ill back up but just look  
and see nigga change for the better,  
but lifers a roller coaster, stay strong if u a getta  
if u moved form a mansion down to the favelas

would u still be down to look out for yo hittas?  
i don't think so, those skills aint taught  
so we rise we rise until we felt  
started from the sea bottom jus like kelp  
but now that we rollin better fasting ya belts  
(Hook and KE verse)  
I don't want a goodbye  
I don't want a nice try  
I just wanna live twice  
I just wanna get high  
Let's celebrate  
Its a Celebration  
This is for those that always stay  
Just as I wud do me  
I wud do you  
(Verse)  
The biggest rocks  
Become the smallest sand  
Infinite wisdom is a kingdom  
Funny how blocks determine

The Territory of a man  
I guess they forgot that it was all a setup  
See we commit crimes  
But understand its just to get up  
We don't look broke  
Don't wanna guilt trip  
Don't wanna kill folk  
Don't wanna get hit  
Don't want a Lil doe  
Plotting on a big grip  
But then I gotta think  
How come every time I look at a plant  
I'm thinkin bout the roots  
And feel my most high  
When I hippin and I'm hoppin  
And I'm ripping in the booth  
And everything that I'm talking  
I'm spittin with my tooth  
and the truth  
I don't another fuckin use  
For a mothafuckin fool  
And Who ain't tryina hear the proof

The Pudding  
Yea dats where it's at  
Don't pass him the bullets  
When he ask for the gat  
the last is the past  
Don't worry bout the place  
We all come first  
Gotta set ya own pace  
Life is what you make it  
Give before you take it  
Don't get 2 close to fake shit  
And rearrange the basic



Third Root "Dig" Recording Session / Austin TX, Dec. 2016



The logo for BURNAWAY.com, featuring the word "BURNAWAY" in white, uppercase, sans-serif font on a red rectangular background. The red background is layered over a yellow background, which is layered over a blue background. The layers are slightly offset, creating a 3D effect.

The Semiotics of Feelings: Lyle Carbajal at Tinney, Nashville  
*by Elaine Slayton Akin for Burnaway.com / July 7, 2015*

Viewing multimedia artist Lyle Carbajal’s “Romancing Banality,” on view at Tinney Contemporary in Nashville through July 18, is like taking a lesson in semiotics. Everyday shapes and symbols repeat across panels in bright, often primary colors—a blue star here, a yellow cross there. The red, sometimes black, outline of a pistol appears over and over again, as reliable as the rows of SUV-lined driveways in a suburban neighborhood. Many figures don black-and-white Converse sneakers on their tiny, bopping feet (who knew Chuck Taylor would hit the jackpot in adolescent universality? Me, I still have my pair from middle school). These instantly identifiable objects certainly conjure memories and trigger emotions in most visitors, although varied and nuanced in each case. Urban versus suburban; American versus un-American; refined versus unrefined; and traditional versus nontraditional, among others, are all interesting juxtapositions that surface in Carbajal’s work, influenced by his upbringing in Latin America and in a primarily Hispanic home in Los Angeles—“a cultural cornucopia of sorts,” explains the artist, but relatable still to even the most mono-cultured viewer.

Carbajal’s use of shape and color relays a deep connection to traditional folk art, a modern interpretation contributing to today’s ever-evolving definition of visual culture and standards of craftsmanship. “Romancing Banality,” or, more casually interpreted, flirting with unoriginality—perhaps a more fitting title does not exist for Carbajal’s landmark exhibition, as its breadth and depth are quite subtle, a tease even, to use the artist’s own dually amorous and psychological wordplay.

Carbajal’s finessed distinctions, however, keep him just on the non-banal side of the line—“the qualities of these images that transcend beauty; or more radically, form another type of beauty that depends on what a thing—whether an artwork or something wholly mundane—makes you feel rather than how it looks,” as described by art writer Adam Eisenstat in his essay “The End of Art and the Heterogeneous Mind: Lyle Carbajal’s ‘Romancing Banality.’”

Carbajal’s compositions are rife with geometric shapes, hard lines, and dark profiles—all characteristics of the Brut style with which he’s so readily identified. His distinct style emerges in the deliberate manipulation and repetition of cultural signifiers, or those objects we see and respond to multiple times a day, yet that fly under the radar of our consciousness; American equivalents include the octagon of a stop sign or the golden arches of McDonald’s. The simplicity of technique and everyday (even crass) subject matter are reminiscent of African-American folk art in the vein of Bill Traylor, Thornton Dial, Minnie Evans, and, a more contemporary comparison, Kara Walker.

The resemblance is really not so uncanny, though, considering the common goal among these artists to represent feeling as much as, or more so than, realistic perfection. As the artist told me in an email: “I never really spent much time looking at Traylor or Dial until people began asking me the question. I think folk artists like the ones you list are about capturing imagery from their daily lives in a simple almost graphic style; I do this.” Carbajal’s Portrait as Narcissist, for example, stands up well to Traylor and Walker’s black-and-white silhouettes. How the few strokes of a single colored pencil create the profile of a man, yet simultaneously produce a simplified picture of the human face we’ve all subconsciously absorbed a million times, not to mention the accompanying memories, is proof that it’s not always about the technical details.

Have I mentioned the margarita bar and the almost life-size “Carniceria y Tocineria” hut? In addition to the representational, two-dimensional works, Carbajal offers a bang-on immersion experience. “Romancing Banality” previously appeared in Seattle (2013) and New Orleans (2014), and prior to each opening the artist spent time in in each city to adequately capture its zeitgeist and incorporate it in some small way into the exhibition. The principal organizer and funder of his own projects, Carbajal explains, “Most of what goes into the installation by way of the cities I inhabit doesn’t normally manifest itself in that city, but rather moves along onto the next.” The order-of-services marquee he documented in Nashville, however, can be seen at Tinney Contemporary now. “Nashville schooled me in a rigid and sincerely ingrained culture with precise cues, mores, and a strong visual language similar in some ways but also very different to other cities I’ve exhibited, like New Orleans, for example,” the artist recalls.

As a first-time viewer of “Romancing Banality,” I can honestly say that, inside the walls of Tinney Contemporary, I felt like I was in Nashville or a comfortable and familiar place, but at the same time not in Nashville—definitely transported in some way. Considering this dual perspective, Carbajal’s comprehensive remarks certainly ring true and perhaps precisely define the uncommon nature of his work despite the common objects and themes: “A term I especially like to pass along and also identify with is ‘reverse eponym.’ This term captures the breadth of what I am trying to do with Romancing Banality.” Rather than a people defining a place, people are defined by the place—natives in every sense of the word.

<http://burnaway.org/review/the-semiotics-of-feelings-lyle-carbajal-at-tinney-contemporary-nashville/>



# THE TENNESSEAN

Tinney Contemporary gives roving artist room to explore

*by Sara Estes for The Tennessean / June 21, 2015*

Roving artist Lyle Carbajal’s new exhibition at Tinney Contemporary, “Romancing Banality,” explores the cultural aesthetics of Latin America, Africa and the American South through a uniquely immersive installation. Carbajal, who considers himself both an artist and a cultural anthropologist, utilizes a visual language inspired by folk art, tribal art, the art of children and of the mentally ill.

A self-taught artist, Carbajal, 48, has been exhibiting work for over 20 years. Prior to fine art, he had a successful career in advertising as a designer and illustrator, working for clients like Google, MTV, The Cartoon Network and Gibson Guitars.

“Romancing Banality” is his second solo show at Tinney Contemporary.

*6 months in the making*

For Carbajal’s peripatetic project, which includes large-scale installations, video and mixed-media paintings, he has traveled from Seattle to New Orleans to Nashville exhibiting and transforming the work along the way. The exhibitions take six months to create. He spends those months living in the new city, studying the surroundings and documenting various aspects of the local culture that may eventually be absorbed into the project.

Using a bold palette of colors like turquoise, canary yellow and bright pink, Carbajal transformed Tinney’s white-walled space into what feels like a slice of Mexico City. The paintings that line the walls bear reference to Lucha Libre wrestlers,

Mexican food staples like churros and illustrations of machine guns and pistols that seem to whisper threats of gang violence.

The focal point of the show is a massive installation in the middle of the gallery. The structure is based on a *carniceria*, a small meat shop, that he saw in the center of Mexico City. It’s approximately one-third the size of the original. Its textured walls are painted jade — his favorite color — and the lettering on the building is weathered and worn.

A Mexican punching bag is propped against the façade; a hand-painted sign that reads POLLO AL CARBON in red block letters is casually leaned against its back wall. Next to the faux-building, a Spanish church sign Carbajal found near Nashville is suspended from the ceiling.

The paintings that line the walls bear reference to Lucha Libre wrestlers, Mexican food staples like churros and illustrations of machine guns and pistols that seem to whisper threats of gang violence.

*Permission to experiment*

The installation was a unique and major undertaking. “We like to take risks,” said gallery director Sarah Wilson. “Watching him put together this show and take over the gallery last week was great. He got down to every last detail, stuff that most people probably wouldn’t recognize. Yet at the same time, I think subconsciously, they get the sense that it all works together.”

Carbajal said he was allowed to experiment with the project more at Tinney than in previous exhibitions, pushing the installation element of the show further than ever before.

“I want people to question whether or not it’s even art,” he said. “I have no doubts. I know that it is. When someone asks ‘Is it art?’ I know they don’t know what they’re talking about, because that’s not a question to be asking. It’s something to be contemplating: Why does someone feel this is art? Maybe it’s something you never thought about.”

The paintings in the exhibition are on panel and coated with high-gloss resin or left bare and textured. His style — heavy-handed and highly expressive — calls to mind the figurative work of Jean-Michel Basquiat and the lesser known 20th century artist Sam Doyle, a self-taught painter from South Carolina who died in 1985. Paintings like “Untitled” and the “Kings of Converse” series seem to reference some of Doyle’s iconic paintings of the 1970s.

### *Art + psychology*

Through making his own art and looking at the art of others, Carbajal is on an outspoken search for something real and honest — something authentic — that he usually finds in the overlooked realms of art. He carefully studies how children, social misfits and untrained painters treat line, color and form.

“The psychology behind it really fascinating. It’s really all about the line. If you don’t have that, it seems contrived.”

Now a full-time artist, Carbajal maintains he left the world of advertising for an important reason: Art was his calling.

“I know this is the one thing I’m meant to do,” he said. “And once you figure that out, everything became somewhat easier. Everything else I used to do outside of art was always a struggle, but with art I can nail it every time. It’s easy for me. Everything opens up.”

<http://www.tennessean.com/story/life/arts/2015/06/21/tinney-contemporary-gives-roving-artist-room-explore/28825815/>

## Romancing Banality-Houston: Lyle Carbajal's Authentic World

By Sara Lee Burd

Graffiti covered walls, commodity centered living, obesity, bravado, spirituality, sexuality, poverty, and adversity all have a place in Lyle Carbajal's art just as they do in the everyday world. For Carbajal, public spaces are the foundations of a culture; they anchor communities and provide democratic experiences for all who pass. The Romancing Banality exhibitions are all encompassing installations that act as public spaces for viewers to entangle their imaginations with disparate yet cohesive elements he incorporates within the show. Solitary structures, mixed media works, and collaborations with musicians and filmmakers provide genuine expressions of Carbajal's anthropological and artistic observations.

The artwork in Romancing Banality belongs within the artist's self-described Urban Vernacular artistic style. Together the words encompass Carbajal's thoughts, lessons, and perceptions of the world. The first part relates to visual and societal intersections he's encountered living in urban centers and traveling the globe. Vernacular is where the artist finds his inspiration. It's not the glitz and glamor that strikes Carbajal as authentic. His focus is on the ordinary world conceived, constructed, and populated by the majority of people, those with working class means or less. The concept of Urban Vernacular is visually defined by how he renders his subjects and presents his structures, which entails investigating the expressive quality of line in paint and the weightiness of juxtapositions.

Although he's lived most of his life in the United States, Carbajal's ethnic roots are tied to Latin America. As a man of Hispanic descent, his perspective is that of an "other" living within a whitecentered culture. His travels through Mexico and Argentina profoundly affected his worldview as he found that he identified with the diversity of people, flourished in the colorful visual



culture, and enjoyed learning about magico-religious spirituality spiritually. The visual references he makes in his art may not be recognizable to all, but creating encounters with the inaccessible or the unnoticed is what he strives to achieve with his art. The artist takes inspiration from the functional often commercial visual culture that shapes daily life to uncover universal elements that connect contemporary societies.

Carbajal's exhibitions feature three-dimensional structures that transform the gallery floor into an urban streetscape. *Romancing Banality - Houston* features four installations: Servicio Electrico store from Mexico City, a recycling junk shop from Manila, a commonly found church marquee, and a cinder block wall under construction. These scaled-down structures are equal parts biography and anthropology: a memory in Carbajal's visual journal and a document of the functional spaces. The commercial stops from Latin America and Asia provide numerous means for understanding the life and culture of the people who shop there. The eye catching color combinations used on the walls and signs of the storefronts are made to attract the attention of consumers. By including details such as dirty walls, missing lettering, and patched awnings, Carbajal indicates the lengthy time the stores have provided services and goods to the community, and also the lack of funds dedicated to upkeep. The barred shop windows reveal the store owners' primitive security systems and signifies a general lack of safety impoverished communities suffer when economic disparity leads to crime. This interpretation is not fixed, however. The artist expects viewers to make their own associations and come to their own understanding of his artworks.

An essential element of Carbajal's exhibitions is his mixed media wall hangings, which he arranges in groups like advertorial paste up posters or as stand-alone works. As he compiles emblematic imagery and ideas, he processes his musings into multi-layered, multi-media works that eschew classical artistic beauty for authentic visceral honesty. Connoting the commodification of culture, Carbajal combines mass-produced materials such as paint, toys, and printed paper packaging into multi-layered representations





of people, animals, places, and objects. For example, in *Boxeador*, the artist draws from the style of promotional posters for boxers to create this iconic, yet crudely rendered boxer. Identified with the word “Julisco” above his image, the man’s power is expressed through his aggressive stance and muscled body, which emphasizes the cultural value of masculine strength. The fighter appears heroic and is venerated despite the fact this debilitating sport disproportionately negatively affects the lives and finances of those with low economic means.

Through his audio journeys into rap and Latin music, he noticed lyrics and sounds that mirrored what he was also contemplating in his visual art. For his *Romancing Banality - Houston* installation, Carbajal has arranged a rap opera to play while viewers examine the physical structures, film, and art on the walls. In doing so, Carbajal immerses visitors into a multi-sensory experience of the perspectives he’s gained. To accomplish a musical component for his exhibition, Carbajal invited artists to write and produce rap songs around fundamental themes. The first act focuses on strife and struggle. San Francisco-based rapper Yarrow Slaps posits his perspective on living in the trap where drugs are sold and the odds are stacked against you in “No Goodbye’s”:

“Funny how blocks determine The Territory of a man  
I guess they forgot that it was all a setup  
See we commit crimes  
But understand it’s just to get up”

The second act features Houston’s Yung Turk’s ruminations on introspection, particularly as a way to cope and rise up. San Antonio trio Third Root featuring Easy Lee, dj chicken George, and University of Texas Professor of bilingual-bicultural studies MexStep. Their song combine

lyrics that resolve the third act with themes of concession, acquiescence, and accession. Easy Lee praises Carbajal in his call out to the visual artist: “abstract primitive canvas of a nomad / between the margins of this notepad / one glove crotch grab who’s bad.” His closing lyrics offer advice toward making a brighter future: “this world breeds the shallow / don’t ever stop the digging / don’t ever stop the digging.” As a composition the opera reports on and responds to economic disparity, social segregation, and individual responsibility.

Romancing Banality also features a film produced by Mexican filmmakers Perrosconsueter, which features spliced images of documentary footage taken on the streets of Mexico. Graffiti tags on walls, trash in the streets, people walking, sunsets, people praying, and spectators looking, the content is mundane, but the presentation in film lends a spiritual quality to the rituals of life. The boundary blurs between the sacred and the profane in the film in the same way that cultures across the globe practice religions and build societies around the intermingling of sacrifice, suffering, redemption, justice, and salvation.

Taking up residency in areas where he is going to present his work provides a fresh context for Carbajal to create art that documents his ongoing explorations. Romancing Banality debuted in Seattle in 2013 and has been reconceived for New Orleans, Nashville, and Houston. Living in the Southern United States has allowed Carbajal to explore the roots-inspired artwork of the region, which captures his imagination and stimulates his own ability to depict strife, humor, and empathy. Admiring the honest expressions of Jean Dubuffet’s “Corps de dame” series, Bill Traylor, Mary T. Smith’s portrait of the South and in musical traditions of Rap, Blues, Country, and Jazz, Carbajal strives for the direct simplicity he finds in folk art and regional cultures. Place is significant and pluralistic to Carbajal because of the connections amongst the ideas, sounds, colors, words, and values that pervade the roving artist’s perception. Taking reference

photographs as he goes, he returns to the studio to make art with imagery that is so common it is easily overlooked by passersby, but that is immensely important to his understanding of the world. With his exhibitions, Carbajal invites viewers into his world to see what he finds evocative and meaningful in mundane life and urban detritus. He is not defining a particular culture as much as sharing himself by displaying curated selections of what he sees as the universal connections among urban environments. Romancing Banality is Carbajal’s place. It is an extrapolation of what he has found and processed as authentic and meaningful in the world.

Lyle Carbajal: Art Without Artifice

*By John Seed*

In Lyle Carbajal's *Self-Portrait on the Blue*, the artist appears as a flat, scribble-faced man with a panda-bear torso, reaching upward to grasp the safety bar while riding a Chicago Blue Line commuter train. With its roughly applied zones of paint and ragged-edged collage elements, *Self-Portrait on the Blue* is a disarming work of art that bears almost no literal resemblance to the man who painted it. This readily apparent lack of likeness is just fine with Lyle Carbajal, whose art has little to do with representing things or people as they actually appear. His interests have more to do with communicating forms, ideas and emotions in an unschooled, unaffected style.

Seattle-based curator Joseph Roberts explains Carbajal's aesthetic this way: "Carbajal seeks to create imagery that is conceived through its function. He creates images solely for the crude expression of an idea, to pass along a thought or emotion, much as one might jot something on a café napkin as an impromptu gesticulation and visual aid amid a lubricated conversation with a friend."

The wellsprings of Carbajal's aesthetic—which include folk art, naïve art, tribal art, and the art of the mentally ill—are all characteristically honest in their intent, and visual forthrightness is Carbajal's favorite mode of connection. Illusionism, the product of European "high" culture, is something that Carbajal associates with colonialism. Carbajal's art, which eschews academic technique, has been deeply affected by his engagement with pre-colonial visual styles and culture. In fact, Carbajal should really be thought of as an artist/scholar whose interests include cultural anthropology.



Carbajal is also a socially conscious artist who uses his art to bring people closer. As it turns out, he has been using art as a form of connection since he was a child. When I recently spoke to Carbajal about his background, he offered this anecdote:

When I was ten, I began selling my peers and teachers elaborate drawings of their names. These drawings incorporated some of the same intuitive and even visionary forms of doodling that I use in my current work. In these drawings, names such as Tony, Mike or Michelle became associated with trading cards, images pasted on blackboards, Mad Magazine’s cartoon faces, cool dinosaurs, and other sorts of random decorative elements.

These drawings made me the most popular boy in school, yet all I did to earn this status was to take things present in my everyday existence and draw them—or rather associate them—with my classmates’ names. These drawings became a sort of visual diary of our school experience, helping us navigate our lives between 8:00 am until 3:00 pm.

What stayed with Carbajal from this experience were two invaluable realizations: that art could be used to connect with others and also that art was a way of making sense of the world. “To this day,” he comments, “my art remains accessible.”

Carbajal’s artistic and social skills have served him well, both in childhood and adulthood, as he has constantly thrived while adapting to new places, cultures and situations. The son of Latin American immigrants who grew up in both the United States and Mexico, Carbajal has lived “all around” the United States, including stints in the Pacific Northwest, Illinois, Tennessee, Louisiana and California. He has also spent a significant amount of time in Latin America and Europe, most

notably in France and Italy and Argentina. As Carbajal explains: “I’m peripatetic, largely because of the nature of my recent installations, which always reflect where I am living and working at any given moment. I find that six months is the length of time it takes to absorb a local culture and let its influence become apparent in my work.”

Although hesitant to be pinned down as identifying with any single culture, Carbajal says his art most often contains cultural references and images of people of color. The artist puts it this way: “I tend to paint brown and black people as I am really interested in the immigrant’s struggle, and I’m also very interested in how colonialism has influenced culture, especially in Latin America after Catholicism stepped in.” Additionally, Carbajal has closely studied the Asafo culture of Ghana, a warrior culture with elaborate visual arts traditions that developed in response to contact with Europeans.

Of particular interest to Carbajal are the flags of the Asafo, which include images of heroism, warnings, taboos and other symbols all sewn and embroidered in bold colors. His fascination with these banners led Carbajal to experiment with various kinds of stylizations, including powerful and ominous silhouettes. “I am fascinated by what a silhouette can convey,” he notes, “not just in terms of what one sees, but also in terms of that which is left to the imagination to fill in.” In an untitled mixed media work of 2012, a figure that Carbajal has described as a golem appears as a dark figure with a distinctive hairstyle that is pulled into a high ratted bun atop an elongated skull. The curling form of a white serpent—a demonic symbol taken from Afro-Caribbean Santería—spreads across the figure’s neck and torso, hinting at temptation. The image is just one example of how diverse artistic influences can come together in a single Carbajal work.

The breadth of Carbajal’s cultural and aesthetic interests first became fully apparent in 2011 when he published his book, *Urban + Primitive: The Art of Lyle Carbajal*. The book is a kind of compendium, not only of Carbajal’s own art but also of the

places, perceptions and influences that have helped shape him. Along with presenting chapters on some of his major themes and interests—animals, the sacred, regional art, totems and illustration—the book lays out Carbajal’s all-inclusive relationship with the world, its culture and its peoples. He writes: “Everywhere I’ve lived, these are all my people.”

Writing the book also allowed Carbajal to clarify, both for himself and for his readers, the profound power of pre-colonial art. In a chapter titled “Religion and Magic,” Carbajal writes:

By stripping away the written dogma of religion, and focusing on the visual components that are imbedded in everyday activities such as working, playing, eating and dying, one begins to understand how images of fear, devotion and reverence, the aesthetics of art and symbols take on a physical power.

After the publication of his book, there was a sudden surge of interest in Carbajal’s work and, as he puts it, “everything changed.” Given more opportunities to do more of what he wanted to do, and more help to do it, Carbajal began to experiment with installations that included architectural elements alongside his paintings. As he did so, he found himself animated by a realization: that he was reaching into both his memories and his artistic imagination to create “reverse epynoms.”

An epynom is the person for whom something (i.e. a town) is named, and Carbajal saw himself moving in reverse in the sense that his creation-in-progress would ultimately be so broad that it would in some sense bear everyone’s imprint and could never be named after a single individual. Carbajal likes to break down visual images and follow them back to their social and cultural roots:

If we were to take some of the visual culture from a border town—like El Paso, for example—and begin breaking down the ideas behind the local images and begin asking the questions, why and how did this imagery emerge and at what point it began to take shape, I suppose we would have to back into some of the realities of life in these places. I think these realities would include life in association with thoughts of heroism, labor, religion and distinct forms of worship, identity and family and perhaps even the idea of authority and class structure. These are some of the ideas, themes and associations I’m bringing into my installations where I hope viewers will be able to see, acknowledge and identify them.

As his installation-based exhibitions have evolved, Carbajal has continued to introduce new constructions that literally can be bumped into. He has been including architectural elements to emphasize the idea of an environment, and then surrounding them with paintings that suggest cultural themes, a local population, products and activities. His exhibits tend to look different in every town, since visitors see his work through the prism of their local cultures.

A fall 2014 New Orleans exhibition, emblazoned with Carbajal’s working title *Romancing Banality*, made this developing world of artlessness more tangible than ever. “Let’s take these things,” he told an interviewer, “banality, artlessness, an eyesore, a visual shock to the system, and let’s not overlook them.”

The key architectural element in New Orleans was the model of a *carniceria* (small butcher shop) that Carbajal had once seen in Mexico City. A one-third scale model of the *carneceria*, complete with awnings and hand-painted signage, gave the show a dose of urban decay that helped disrupt what Carbajal characterizes as the inherent “sterility” of the gallery space. Suspending works from the ceiling and scattering the floor with images printed on copy paper are some of the artist’s other ways of making the space work on his terms.

Carbajal is also beginning to work with film, and for his Nashville exhibition he will be collaborating with artist Jaime Fernández from Juarez, Mexico, to develop a film that will deal with some of the exhibition's themes. Sound will also be present in the installation, as Carbajal wants to connect with onlookers through as many of their senses as possible. "I want the space to feel alive! I want motion, emotion, sound, light and color to connect visitors to the show with its iconography, culture and myths."

Everything that makes its way into Carbajal's work is something that he has been enamored by at some point or another, and the affectionate, all-embracing range of Carbajal's visual references is the key to the vitality of his ongoing projects. One of the qualities of Carbajal's paintings is their striking sense of cultural omnipresence. "When we find a painting or image that seems like it's always been there, like an idiom; that quality really is something important and it is exactly what I am seeking when I paint."

Some of Carbajal's mixed media works, such as Super Quality, have an aspect of pop culture about them. It should be noted that Carbajal was an award-winning advertising designer for more than 20 years, and this aspect of his career continues to inform his knowledge of mass imagery.

The Tiger Head battery presented in Super Quality is based on an ad that Carbajal saw on the exterior of a small business in Latin America. "I loved the immediacy of the image," he recalls, "and the feeling of hand-painted logos. It's the very derivative nature and clumsiness that I feel gives the reproduced images like this one their soul." Like most of his mixed media paintings on wood, Super Quality gets its rough integrity from the variety of media it includes: house paint, oil stick, acrylic and spray paints, charcoal and a bit of dirt. "I will use just about anything, really," Carbajal says.

One "anything" that Carbajal recently included in a mixed-media work was a cluster of crumpled party balloons.



“The balloons are dirty, with shoe marks,” Carbajal notes, “as if they simply fell onto the painting with little notice.” They are affixed to the nose and forehead of a googly-eyed man named Balloon Face, whose cheeks seem to form a pair of black ravens in a field of graffiti-like collage drawings. Carbajal regularly fills the entire surface of his works-in-progress, taking hours and sometimes days before finally “discovering” the dominant image.

With its urban energy and offhandedness, Carbajal’s work is sometimes compared to that of Jean-Michel Basquiat (1961-88). To a degree, the comparison works, as Basquiat has been an influence, but there is at least one major respect in which the two artists are remarkably different. Basquiat was an angry artist who was driven to make searing social and political statements. Carbajal, in contrast, is rarely angry or sarcastic. His choices and images reflect his affection for world culture, not his need to reform it. In terms of influences, Carbajal says that he “lost interest” in Basquiat years ago and has been more recently drawn to the works of Julian Schnabel and Georg Baselitz.

Ultimately, Carbajal is interested in looking at the products and artifacts of everyday culture with an honest eye, attempting to portray life’s mysteries and events in modest, relatable images. “I have the ability to look at things very objectively,” Carbajal philosophizes. “I guess that is my superpower. I’m able to feel what people were thinking when they did something. I can just feel it. That goes into everything that I am doing.”

The overarching goal of Carbajal’s work is to share his experience of the small mysteries that he has discovered in his travels and studies through his imagery. By insisting that his art refer to fundamental human experiences and emotions and by creating art without artifice, he has created a compelling body of work that engages its viewers with surprising candor and force.



## **The End of Art and the Heterogeneous Mind:**

### **Lyle Carbajal's "Romancing Banality"**

In Arthur Danto's formulation, the "end of art" refers to the end of art's historical development, the end of formal innovation. Consequently, the post-historical era has seen artists liberated from all stylistic and philosophical constraints—"anything goes." Depending on how one sees this development, the "end of art" is either a dead end or a new beginning. Undeniably, though, artists have shown—and will continue to show—relentless creativity in subsuming the limitations of form within the infinite combinations available to them.

The impulse to eschew conventional aesthetics is characteristic of what might be called the heterogeneous mind—a worldview/aesthetic, really a consciousness that is native to the post-historical era. This impulse is most evident in artists who reject (or are indifferent to) the idea of beauty as something that's pleasing to the eye, with its implied values of symmetry, imitation, refinement, etc.

Lyle Carbajal's work, for all its intriguing ideas and associations—qualities which, among others, make it consistently engaging—may be fundamentally (if inadvertently) concerned with the status of beauty in contemporary art. Indeed, his type of art—visually raw, polymorphous, drenched in ideas and information, especially autobiographical minutiae—seems to question the need for beauty, even its validity as an element of art.

"Romancing Banality," his new installation—composed of 25 paintings, a scale model (8' x 6' x 8') of an actual *carniceria* (butcher shop) in Mexico City, and various multimedia elements—offers a test case of sorts for the expendability of beauty in art. The paintings in particular—the installation's core—are not easy on the eye; they resemble so-called outsider art or children's art, reveling in the types of imagery/gestures common to art made by marginal and/or decidedly untrained individuals (i.e., those outside the "artworld").

Carbajal cites outsider art (including Jean DuBuffet's *art brut*) and primitive art as influences, though his work does not necessarily fall on this continuum of non-institutional art; he could not accurately be described as a primitive. As he put it: "My work exists somewhere between the vernacular and the contemporary *avant garde*." Yet, he is far closer than other artists for whom primitive/outsider art represents just another riff, another notch on the palette. Really, he is too invested in primitivism—or more accurately, folk art—and his work evinces too many of its essential properties to say that he has merely appropriated the style and is engaging in some kind of aesthetic gamesmanship.

The jagged textures and apparent artlessness of Carbajal's paintings are manifestations of his work's underlying origins, and the considerably more refined textures of his larger artistic aims and ongoing explorations. The artlessness is part of his strategy to strip away any superfluous aspect of the image, to focus on the line, which he believes is the *sine qua non* of visual communication in the everyday world, the essential element or default of visual grammar.

"A line is far and away the most important aspect of a picture," says Carbajal. "It speaks of experience, wisdom, thoughtfulness, and most importantly, it says whether or not a picture is sincere and the artist's intent admirable."

Carbajal's "bad painting" mirrors the way real people (i.e., non-artists) awkwardly draw everyday objects, just to convey an idea—which, again, returns to the line. It is also related to his embrace of children's art and the vital qualities it represents: spontaneity, honesty, and earnestness. Even the most wretched juvenile art (which is probably a redundancy, mean as it may sound) expresses deep-felt emotions and is the product of a serious effort to accurately depict the real world; the fruits of a child's struggle to focus on a specific task and "get it right."

To amass a large quantity of functional/commercial imagery in the immersive environment of an installation like *Romancing Banality*; to place such unlovely artifacts in the context of art is to elevate—or at least emphasize—the qualities of these images that transcend beauty; or more radically, form another type of beauty that depends on what a thing—whether an artwork or something wholly mundane—makes you feel rather than how it looks. The installation setting serves to intensify the qualities most commonly associated with primitive art, and which Carbajal finds most appealing: immediacy, accessibility, and authenticity.

Proximate to beauty, though, is meaning, and Carbajal's work signifies relentlessly. It is perhaps his paintings' documentary verve that is most noteworthy; their function as individual dispatches from the artist's travels, which in concert form a consistent style and sensibility (if not any sort of coherent "message" or fixed position). As conduits through which certain elements of a time and place and distinct people are communicated, this work inhabits the precinct of folk art, which also reflects Carbajal's intentions and methodologies, and epitomizes the art peculiar to the heterogeneous mind.

Carbajal, a Los Angeles native, regularly moves to different locations, which become the source of his work and ultimately serve as the "host" of its presentation. Upon arrival in each new location, he begins mining the abundant visual stimuli for material, while integrating himself into the community.

And of course it is the functional imagery—signs, decorative regionalisms, etc.—and other examples of na(t)ive picture making that most catch his eye; not just for their visual appeal, but for what they communicate about a place and its inhabitants.

"It's a city's Zeitgeist that interests me," says Carbajal. "The sights and sounds, the way its people either cherish or disregard artistic forms, the city's visual connection to the past and whether or not it recognizes its indigenous culture." This nomadic, uninhibited process ensures, at the very least, that however consistent his style might be, the work will never be static.

The use of freestanding structures based on homespun businesses Carbajal has encountered in his travels, like the *carniceria* in "Romancing Banality," is a linchpin in all of Carbajal's work. Other versions of this device include scale models of LA's M&M Auto Garage (from his Seattle show) and New Orleans' Snow Ball Shack (which will appear in an upcoming show). These models, with their outsized, three-dimensional presence, incarnate the visual language of a specific city in which Carbajal has lived, epitomizing what he sees as its most vivid elements. Also, more generally, they

suggest important associations relevant to his travels, biographical details, and larger concerns. The *carniceria*, for example, evokes his kinship with Latin America and its native art, as well as his travels throughout the region (including a memorable residency in Buenos Aires). *M&M Auto Garage*, built as much from memory as any kind of documentation, figured prominently in his visual landscape when he lived in LA; a childhood totem that no doubt contributed heavily (if subliminally) to his decision to pursue a creative life. The entire façade, with its bad illustrations, candied colors, and child-like lettering, bears many of the ideas and obsessions so integral to Carbajal's work as a whole.

David Francis, an art critic who has written about Carbajal, describes his painting as having “a kind of anthropological structure” whose imagery “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.” This is apt, but it's important to add that visually/stylistically, despite the cultural work they are doing, the paintings don't simply refer to folk art but embody the form. This approach is intended, in part, to sensitize the viewer to a whole visual layer of the mundane world that, when explored—when truly seen—is found to be not so mundane but amazing. (An artistic coup of this type was suggested by the renowned critic Rene Ricard when he said: “The greatest thing is to come up with something so good it seems as if it's always been there, like a proverb.”)

This is deeply humanistic art, intoxicated with the world at large and obsessed with that world as manifested in mundane commerce/human congress; revealing a restless, roving, voracious spirit, and in turn an artist more attentive to the feelings and associations provoked by his work than the way its surfaces meet the eyes (read: sensibilities) of the more

aesthetically refined. This begs the question: Does the immediacy and accessibility so essential to Carbajal's work by necessity crowd out conventional beauty? Further, is the negation of one quality typically implied by the other? Fortunately—for artist and essayist alike—no single space exists to contain the answer.

Without reservation, Carbajal's work puts forth a personal vision of the world, and the many ways that vision has been shaped by his own life—including his development as an artist and the many influences he has soaked up over the years—are integral to the work. The autobiographical elements of his work are subtle but dense; to the point that any deep engagement with the work is akin to stepping into another consciousness.

For many years he worked as a designer and illustrator, which, among other benefits, gave him a serious appreciation of functional art, especially the discipline/limitations it imposed on the creator of such art and how that process defined—or was obscured by—the finished artifact.

His most formative influences, though, can be traced back to his Los Angeles childhood in the mid-70s, when he was imbibing the visual cornucopia all around him, including many of the pop culture tropes readily available at the time: skateboards, bubblegum cards, comic book superheroes, Hotwheels, Evil Knievel, Mad magazine, et al. An American childhood is, by definition, a life surrounded by folk art; but far more so for a visually acute child in the pre-Internet days living in a huge, culturally diverse city like LA.

As an adult, Carbajal was drawn to a variety of folk art, from Latin America, Haiti, West Africa, and the American south; all characterized by the use of bright colors, idealized scenes of everyday life, child-like perspective, and idiosyncratic scale. This work, Carbajal says, inspired him to “pay less attention to critical and formal rules in order to capture the intuitive glint of a moment”; which suggests a fundamental truth: every artist must find his own voice or perspective, yet no voice/perspective is free of multiple others; moreover, developing a personal style within the oceanic body of existing styles, art history, etc. means finding a method of synthesis . . . style is synthesis.

Lyle Carbajal’s oeuvre is the product of a collision of influences that has, over time, been harmonized/united within his mind . . . Subjectivity is synthesis; in other words, individuality is a unique combination of exposure and influences; one’s cultural DNA is like a fingerprint—singular and utterly specific, based on a multitude of vectors: nature, nurture, time, place, etc. Which explains everything, but clarifies nothing; for the artist however—for Carbajal—the pictures are what tells the real story—the whole truth and nothing but the truth.

*-Adam Eisenstat*





"Self Portrait with Moose and Susan"  
48"x 48" mixed medium on wood panel - 2013

## **Layered Perspectives, Lyle Carbajal's Multi-media Installation Broaches the Profound through the Mundane**

**By Sara Lee Burd' for *The Afro-Hispanic Review* -**

***A multi-lingual peer-reviewed journal of Afro-Hispanic literature and culture.***

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Vibrant, large-scale paintings hung closely along the walls of Tinney Contemporary appeared like subversive, graffiti covered streets rather than a sleek white-walled art gallery in Nashville, Tennessee. Within this newly conceived space resides a miniature meat market, Mexican boxing bags, a church marquee, and a film projecting spliced scenes of meat carving and urban detritus with accompanying chaotic sounds of the city all serving to elevate the commonplace to shrines. It's clear that Lyle Carbajal is not interested in presenting idealized beauty of the world around him as much as creating an authentic way to process and present what he sees and experiences.

Romancing Banality showed in Nashville during July 2015, and is the latest installment of a progressive exhibit: first in Seattle in 2013 and then New Orleans in 2014. Entering the exhibition space is also entering the life and reality of the artist. Carbajal embeds himself in the city where he plans to exhibit, meaning each show inspires a new lifestyle and new art is made from fresh encounters.

The artist collects and extracts images and ideas from everyday life to create art that acknowledges the ever-present anthropological patterns that traverse history and place, while also playing with the post-modern lesson that signs and signifiers have fluid meanings. Many of his works feature unique human figures created by combining mass-produced

materials such as paint, balloons, and printed paper that elicit connotations of the commodification of culture and of individuals.

Carbajal addresses race, disparity, and identity politics because he himself is of Hispanic descent living in a predominantly white culture. His art is not overtly confrontational, rather the artist simply invites the viewer to see what he sees, which in and of itself can be quite a stretch depending on the viewer's experience with Carbajal's cultural references. Using free form and primitive style allows the artist to evoke the immediacy of everyday life while also presenting the complex perspective of an "other."

While tightly tied to biography, Carbajal clearly communicates universal concepts and inspires the viewer's mind and eye. I interviewed Carbajal shortly after his show at Tinney Contemporary in Nashville to find out more about the man behind the worldview.

***1. You were born in Los Angeles, lived in both Mexico City and Buenos Aires and have been a man of the world ever since. Your Hispanic heritage is evident in your art but you do not hesitate to combine imagery, mix cultures, and break political, social, and religious boundaries. What role does biography play in your art?***

An exhibition in Seattle a few seasons back billed me as "peripatetic"--a roving artist if you will. As I think back, the moniker made sense and now trails the question. My lifestyle and biography coupled with travel has and will always play a role in what I'm doing.

A kid of the 70's; Los Angeles in my earliest recollections mashed bits and pieces of everything from van-murals

to skateboards; Alvarado street and dim sums to film-lots, disco and hard-rock. The mass-media cacophony that will always be Hollywood was among my earliest of experiences.

It's about "what I remember" and "what I now bump into". So much of what I see, (considered mundane or banal by some) I set aside and label a sign. In my installation, which acts as a kind of criticism –street markets in Juarez and New Orleans snowball shacks–marry. This is what I was thinking about while developing "romancing banality"—'a mash-up of things I've seen' and cities I've visited. The cultural and religious signifiers I borrow are from my recollections and travels while I continue asking myself sharp questions regarding integration and segregation and their social economic consequences.

But to some critics--some "art" critics when discussing Materialism and Pop Art, note that art coupled with popular culture collapses onto each other canceling out any real societal criticism.<sup>1</sup>

Perhaps, this is why I attempt to 'connect' through biography. Personal documentation imparts 'meanings' and 'stories' that exist behind the installations. Instead of relying on parody or pastiche, I attempt to construct something palpable, comprised of personal accounts with structures, people, and everyday culture from around the world. Bringing it to a city like Nashville with it's predominantly "lily-white" culture, becomes as much an anthropological experiment as an art exhibition. I wonder if my perspective and experiences I represent will affect the world-view of visitors who approach my installations. These are some of the questions I'm attempting to pose by integrating biography.

*For the full interview please visit:*

<https://www.questia.com/read/1P3-4018666221/layered-perspectives-lyle-carbajal-s-multi-media>

(Endnotes)

<sup>1</sup> Jonathan E. Schroeder (1992), "Materialism and Modern Art", in SV - Meaning, Measure, and Morality of Materialism, eds. Floyd W. Rudmin and Marsha Richins, Provo, UT : Association for Consumer Research, Pages: 10-13.



## Lyle Carbajal

Lyle Carbajal is a nomadic artist, born and raised in Los Angeles, California, whose work exists somewhere between the vernacular and contemporary avant-garde. His work has been featured in numerous solo and group shows at national and international venues including Tinney Contemporary, Nashville TN (2015, 2012, 2010, 2009, 2004, 2002), Art Chicago; Center on Contemporary Art (CoCA), Seattle WA (2013); Cartwheel Street & Outsider Art Show, Hollywood CA (2013), The London Art Fair; Mark Rothko museum, Dünaburg, Latvia (2012), The National Museum of Mexican Art, Chicago IL (2007), cont. Museu de Estremoz, Portugal (2007), The Raw Arts Festival, London (2004), La Luz de Jesus Gallery, Los Angeles and The Mark Rothko Museum in Latvia (2012) while participating in an artist residency in Daugavpils, the country's second largest city. Romancing Banality began in Seattle in 2013, and has since traveled to New Orleans (2014), Tennessee (2015), and is currently in its fourth iteration at Art League Houston. In 2010, Carbajal published his first book, Urban+Primitive: The Art of Lyle Carbajal.

Lyle is currently represented by CG2 Gallery in Nashville TN; The Frederick Holmes Gallery in Seattle, WA; Gallery Orange in New Orleans LA; Sardac Gallery in The United Kingdom; Galerie du Temple and Galerie Gabel in France.

He currently lives and works in New Orleans.

### Curator's Notes

Some observers will be unable to detect whether Lyle Carbajal's work is a sophomoric mess or evidence of a maestro in the making. We invite you to consider the latter.

Carbajal says he is interested in "bad painting, the way common people awkwardly draw everyday objects" and his work draws upon outsider, urban graffiti and naïve traditions. At first blush, one might ask whether Carbajal just gets away with painting badly by trying to make bad paintings. But his work is smarter than that.

Carbajal seeks to create imagery that is conceived through its function. He creates images solely for the crude expression of an idea, to pass along a thought or emotion, much as one might jot something on a café napkin as an impromptu gesticulation and visual aid amid a lubricated conversation with a friend. An engaging goal.

The results are always crude, often unintentional and sometimes beautiful. Carbajal's work may intimidate or even assault those accustomed to safe, clean, predictable environments. Taken individually, his paintings are foreign correspondent's notes, tales of far-away places that are sometimes happy, sometimes disquieting. Surrounded by his work as one is in this exhibit, the viewer is embedded in that "far-away" place, which may be as near as the barrio next door –perhaps even our mind.

So Carbajal's work should also be reassuring to "common people". It does not require great sophistication to be accessible. Its simplicity and raw emotion are palpable. His irreverent gestures evince a sense of immediacy –often a sense of urgency. Whatever it is, intentional or not, it just happened. YOU are an eye witness.

Carbajal believes there is nothing quite as beautiful as the unintentional. Whether rationalizing or quixotic, he seeks unintentional results, and he takes credit for all the accidents you witness here. Intentional or not his gestures evidence the immediacy of life as we live not as we plan it. It is precisely because Carbajal's images are crude that they are believable. After all, the unintentional is inherently honest and often wonderfully surprising.

- from *Watching the Snakes Volute* - CoCA, 2013  
Joseph Roberts - *Center on Contemporary Art, Seattle*



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*for media-kit, video, artist interview & information,*

*please visit:*

**www.romancingbanality.com**