

INTERVIEW

Patty Carroll: Anonymous Women

Interviewed by Stephanie Dean



"Ecrushade"



"Royal"

From July 14th through September 23rd the Chicago Cultural Center hosted Patty Carroll's works "Anonymous Women." I had the enormous pleasure of sitting down in the Cultural Center's gallery and interviewing Patty Carroll myself. I got to the gallery about 25 minutes early, signed and read a few pages of the guest book, and eavesdropped on 3 teen's conversations. Eavesdropping was quite easy and comfortable, because in the middle of the gallery Carroll had placed to heavily upholstered benches beckoning the viewers to sit down. I sat down and began to listen and look. The teens didn't read the artist statement, they just walked in through the luxuriously draped doorway (Carroll's touch). Their conversation went like this, except with long pauses between each statement:

"Is it people covered?" (young girl)

"That's what I thought" (young boy with backpack)

"That's creepy." (second young boy, he walked out first, the others followed).

As an artist, I'm not really appreciative or eager to read or write artist statements, but I do out of obligation. (For this interview I read Carroll's artist statement after looking at the work, while waiting for Carroll). I find them to be burdensome for viewers who are coming to view the work for the first time. The quotes above are real, unprompted and genuine. It is clear that they didn't realize the photos were all women. By not reading the artist statement (nor, apparently the title!), the artist's words didn't "cloud their judgment" nor did it "explain" the creepiness of the work. As an artist and eavesdropping author, I love hearing the words of young people, art students and elderly people. They are all so blunt, for better or for worse.

In the guest book, there was quite a bit of understanding praise, but one scrawling (screaming in pen!) message reminded me that for ultra-feminists, this kind of work could be hard to digest. "NO MORE ANONYMOUS WOMEN!!!!" is what the written comment said. Perhaps the woman didn't understand the work? Perhaps she's referencing works where women were really the authors,

however men received credit? Or perhaps she comes from a strict Muslim community and she felt uneasy wearing (or being told to wear) the burqa or perhaps she's an American and regards Muslim communities to be strict because of the burqa. Not to be hypocritical, but had the commentator read even the first paragraph of Carroll's statement?

"Chicago Photographer Patty Carroll is well known for infusing her work with an entertaining sense of humor, but this can belie the serious intent embedded within it. This current body of work also entices us with lush treatments of female forms draped in patterned and textured fabrics in lavishly appointed studio setting, but the work itself is a comment on surface vs. inner content. The premise allows for a rich statement on concealment, identity and so many provocative issues regarding women and domesticity. Various works reference a whole history of culturally loaded iconography including the Virgin Mary, judicial robes, and Muslim women in burqas, to name a few."

Regardless, Carroll feels the sentiment is wonderful, and she can't wait to read the comments in her two guest books. She perused the books as she walked in and commented that she needs to replace this book since there was virtually nowhere left to write.

"Anonymous Women" is a series of "Un-portraits" as Carroll calls them, of women draped - *entirely covered* - in various fabrics, with minimum props. Lush fabrics, an unlimited color palette and an at times subtle to overt sense of humor infuses the work with a fresh, lingering impact on the viewer. Even though viewers "gaze" at these portraits of women (portraits are politically loaded art objects, which when spoken of become terms, with much historical and gender based baggage) these Anonymous Women don't participate in the gaze. They don't give you anything back, and they are not giving you back what you expect, and even less of what you want. The woman is not performing for the camera, she gestures, beneath the burden of the sheet, but she doesn't show off her body. There might be an anonymous woman in posed in an obvious pose in the cannon of our unspoken body language (look at her piece "Mad "), which if uncovered that you would see clearly, "clearly " meaning with her face — however, these Anonymous Women will never be uncovered, they remain frozen and some even permanently camouflaged into their backgrounds.

Carroll's work is varied, and it's depth is amazing. Since 1973, Carroll has been an artist and educator in Greece, England and throughout residencies across the globe, and of course in the United States. Her work has been shown even more extensively - in Japan and China. Her upcoming book features Hot dog stands and is titled "Man bites Dog: Hot Dog Culture in America." Her photographs will feature hot dog stands from around Chicago.



"Mad"



"Stripes"

INTERVIEW WITH PATTY CARROLL

Stephanie Dean: So my main question, and you can go on and on, is do you consider this work portraiture?

Patty Carroll: Well, Yes in a way. Yes, it's like un-portraiture, this work actually started with a different series when I was living in England. That series was really like, sort of headshots, of this woman - you know it's a stand in for the artist no matter what you do, in a sense everything you do, it's always a self portrait, everything you do is a self portrait, right? BUT - I had this model and she would come every week and we would just go through this and it was like pictures from here up, and we made her skin very white like with kind of clown makeup, not so you could tell it was a clown, but softening it and whitening it up so she looked a little more like a statue. And then instead of seeing her eyes there was always something over her head and it was always something domestic. And it was usually, oh anything from a head of lettuce to cooking utensils or fringe or drape or something, you know, and I considered those like an un-portrait because you know it was more of a portrait style, you know kind of from here (bust) up but you couldn't see the eyes. And so when you can't see the eyes it's like one of those things where it's mysterious and kind of surreal but it also denies you access to the identity of that person. Right? So, it had all started because when we moved to England, instead of me being known as "Patty Carroll" which you know, I am, I was known as "Mrs. Jones"

SD: Oh Ouch.

PC: Yeah, so even though I was teaching and doing all the same kind of stuff, my husband was a big deal and so it was like "Well Mrs. Jones," you know, and it was much more formal society, you know, any, any kind of older society is more classic in a way and so there's all of that, and so that was kind of my response. So those were kind of un-portraits, and these became another kind of portrait. And I do think of each one of these figures as it's not the figure it's the figure with the stuff, right? Because the stuff is kind of making the figure, it does have a personality, and does have a statement about home life or about maybe living or not living in contemporary life, instead it's kind of denial about contemporary life. So do I consider.... I mean I don't think of them as portraits...I Do think of them as portraits, but I always want to put them in portrait shows.

SD: Do they get accepted readily?

PC: I don't usually enter them but...

SD: Oh, ok.

PC: But I do see them as personalities. Which is what a portrait is, right?

SD: Yeah, if you say so..

PC: Well it could be, but they are like formalized portraits, in the sense if you think about like, John Singer Sergeant, or like these women in these elaborate gowns and they get all dressed up for their picture, and you know they present their best side of themselves. You know which is usually those classic portraits, which is the woman usually in a space which is usually a somewhat grand domestic space. And they're wearing the flowing gowns, and their finest. So these are in a way a takeoff on that, except you don't see their face and the stuff has kind of taken over.

SD: What are your feelings on that in general, as far as the best face forward aspect? If you were going to make a portrait with the eyes and the face, first of all, would you do it?

PC: Well I do have another series that's not like this, it's not in the studio, its these girls in diners and places, not all in diners, but it's kind of like I'm photographing them kind of waiting for something to happen. And I'm photographing them in that space where something might have happened, or something's about to happen but nothing's happening right now, so there's this kind of anxiety moment, so I do show those faces, and their expressions in those pictures I think are pretty important, because some of them are pretty blank or they're kind of wondering...and I think that's kind of a mix between studio and being out in the world because I dress them up in retro clothes. Make it look like they are from a different time.

SD: So the anxiety is something you like? Or...?

PC: Yeah, I think that 2 themes that have always been in my work, one of them is loneliness, whether there's people in the picture or not, its' really about feeling alone or lonely. And I really think the diner girls are like that. But there's also this kind of moment when you don't know what to expect. And I don't know if that's anxiety or just, feeling lost.

SD: Ok

PC: Well, I have another idea for this work too. I really want to do a real installation. I have another series coming off of this which is just heads, covered. Like totally covered, and it's just heads, sometimes they have a hat on or some wig or some jewelry, and they're in ovals so they refer back to classic portraits. So anyway, in this imaginary idea I have, those would be on one wall you know, somewhere, a and as you get near them, then words would come out things like "wipe your boots" things like your mother would say to you "did you make your bed today" "wash your hands" all that kind of stuff that you don't ever want to be reminded about!

SD: Yeah! "Perfume's for sluts!" "You're too young for makeup."

PC: Yes! You got it! You got it! All of that.

SD: Tell me about your process. For me, I'll make a lot of art, an intense period of working of working making the art, showing and then...

PC: Taking a breather?

SD: Yes!

PC: Yeah I do do that, I do work in spurts. I had this other idea (you know I have a lot of ideas) and I thought you know, really the next phase to this would to be really to include more home stuff, and so I brought my model and my assistant and my lights and stuff, to my house, I figure if I can get

some more architectural details... But of course we covered everything, [the furniture] it's all draped, so it was like the idea of still hiding, but...

SD: Yes I love those

PC: Yes I just love them too and there's something so mysterious and creepy and yet there's something so comforting about not having color, or not "speaking" to you. Do you know what I mean? I mean people don't do this anymore but, you know, the summer house is covered in the winter.... the summer house is closed up for the winter, and it's kind of comforting, about everything not having color, in that nothing is kind of speaking to you, everything has a sheet over it and everything is covered. And that's how I kind of think of them [her anonymous women] That's how I think of it, they have personalities, some are more out there, that others, again they have personalities, some are really hiding, some are worried, are afraid, some are more defiant, some are like she's got a cake plate on her head. She's kind of offering.... Maybe I could give it to you for your series, then when you're done with it for your pictures then maybe you can pass it along.

SD: Yes, the summerhouses with the draped furniture, it's kind of monochromatic, it's safe, but it's also haunted. No one's there, the furniture's being protected... I'd love to use the cake plate!

SD: It'd be kind of a discussion, kind of like the men like in the roaring 20's in Paris, they used all the same models, USED Them in different ways...we'll use that cake plate. If you need anything from my collection I have a lot of silver.....If I was to buy one [Anonymous Woman piece] I'd buy the chandelier or the one titled "Mad" I love it So um

PC: I also see humor in them, do you see it?

SD: I do! (laughs)

PC: The guys that curated the show, I mean it's two guys, and I was like, (whispers) straight guys too, you know this is really odd because most of the time just women really relate to this. I was really surprised that and they were like "no, we're totally into it!"

SD: I was really surprised because the kids [who walked into the gallery] were really creeped out, because they're young. Because I mean, you know we've been at war with Muslim countries since they've been alive basically.

PC: We were in London about a month ago, I don't know, some weeks ago, and it was really interesting because the area were in where we just happened to have this hotel, had a high Muslim population. It was kind of normal to see a woman in a burqa or a hijab, or any of the different garbs, so from completely hidden, to the scarves...It's really interesting because these (Anonymous Women) might be more exotic in Chicago, than in London. And every place in Britain has beautiful drapes!

SD: That's how I feel!

PC: Most people in America just put up blinds. [For window treatments]

SD: I love the one called dotty too! Isn't that a derogatory term, "oh she's gone dotty," oh I love it...

PC: Yes,yes it is....

(Interrupted by admirers 4 older ladies)

Strangers: Are you the artist?

PC: I am.

Strangers: I like what you photographed!

PC: Thank you!

SD: Which one is your favorite?

Strangers: ok...(thinking)

SD: Uh oh, it's hard

Stranger: This one...

PC: Yeah, it is hard, there's so many different personalities! [strangers point] Oh you like the black flower one?

Strangers: Yes I like that one. Did you give you presentation already?

PC: No it's on Wednesday, come back, we can talk! Or we can talk after I'm done with this (interview)

[strangers leave]

SD: I wanted to talk about your other portraiture work, and we did that....I'm wondering what else I had to ask...

PC: There are these really obvious relations with Muslim women, but I grew up with nuns! And nuns, in habits it's like this great evener-out, right? In spite of the fact that they wore the same thing, every single one of them, they all had very distinct personalities, you know I can remember, and when I when I went to school the nuns still wore habits. I guess I'm getting old now.

SD: I've seen some nuns around, but I went to public school...

PC: Yeah, I know, but when you go to catholic school for like 12 years...

SD: Wow. Was it only girls?

PC: Well, high school was only girls. Which is another issue.

SD: So were you born and raised here?

PC: Yup, in fact everything I do is related to growing up in Park Ridge!

SD: Oh, I live right there!

PC: Yup I know, I went to your house!

SD: Oh that's right! (embarrassed)

PC: I was like yup, I remember this neighborhood!

SD: Ok..yes that's true, the equalizing that happens with the habit. I wonder, I mean, is it just the time that you spent with the nuns, or is it the fact that you're a woman, or is it the fact that you paid attention...do you think men would see it the same way? Is it..?

PC: I don't know, I think there's a fear factor more for men like of nuns with habits, do you know what I mean?

SD: Yeah

PC: And it's true of this [Anonymous Women] in a way it's like she's an imposing force, you know, the nun in a habit is scary, because you don't see her as a person, you see her as this kind of symbol of discipline and teaching, and you know, something; and so I think men were more afraid of that, whereas.....I don't.....I'm making that up, but it's just kind of a gut feeling.

SD: Well if you felt it, it's probably true to some extent. When I hear guys talking about their catholic school upbringing here in Chicago, it's.... they definitely were afraid of nuns, or there was always a sister you had to fear.

PC: Yeah, well there always was [a sister you had to fear]. But I think because I went to an all girls

Catholic girl's high school, I went to Regina in Wilmette, and a couple of friends became nuns. So it wasn't like something to be feared. For a woman, it was something, if you were inclined that way, you might aspire to.

SD: Wow. Yeah...

PC: And another thing — when I was thinking about influence about what influenced this, I was thinking about you know, priests wear robes to say mass to perform the rites and rituals but they take the robes off. And the nuns don't.

SD: I didn't even know that.

PC: Well the priest just puts on the robes to say Mass, and after that he takes the robes off and he might be wearing a collar but he would be in pants and a jacket or a shirt or whatever. But nuns, when they wore the habit, that's what they wore, so this identity issue was constant. Which is very different than the men. There was much more freedom for the men.

SD: And they get to wear all those elaborate robes.

PC: Oh yeah, oh yeah, but the nuns just wore black and white.

SD: What are the blue and white ones.

PC: Well those are new.... I could call my friend, she was in a convent, she would know.

SD: I don't think it's pertinent to your work...[laughs]

PC: No, it's not... [laughs]But you know another thing I was thinking about because I think it's really fun.... Another thing is — I do think of all these women like the Wizard of Oz, you know this feared being, behind the green curtain, who's pulling all the strings and making all the noise and making stuff happen when in fact it's just this lonely little guy who's made up this whole thing, but at the same time, behind the curtain, he has all this power and he still is making all this stuff happen. And a lot of women actually have a huge amount of power by controlling their homes. So there's that kind of issue.

And then, and this is really a crazy influence... And....it just occurred to me the other day, when I was doing something. I was thinking about Gone with the Wind. She had this war, this war had been going on, {inaudible} was completely utterly devastated she had nothing to wear, she'd been warring with the north in general and then she'd been warring with herself, about the guy who married, oh, the guy, her love had married someone else, and then and so in order to beautify herself for the next guy she tears down the curtains and makes the dress out of them. And then I thought, if that is not what this work is about, nothing is, you know!

SD: These aren't a defiance of femininity, which at first I questioned...but do you think they are?

PC: No! Well — you don't know who they are. Oh my god, I had a show like this in Shanghai when I went to China, first of all have you ever been to China?

SD: No.

PC: Well, everything is very formal. They had a little ceremony, where it was like "This is the artist, welcome, and blah blah blah" And everything was through a translator, and then we opened it up to questions. And they must have had two or three people ask, "Who is behind the curtain" "Who is behind the drape?" And I tried to explain that it doesn't matter who is behind the drape, that she's a metaphor, that she could be any one of us, she might be you, she might be me, she might be any of

us, but we don't need to know, because the whole point is she's a part of this environment. And they were like "yeah yeah yeah - but who's behind the curtains?" They were like "Ok we get all that. We get all that theory" "But who's behind the curtain?"

SD: Well, that totally answers my question "Why did you chose the title "Anonymous" or any other descriptive title" you just answered that...

PC: It started with that previous series where she was anonymous and her identity wasn't known.

SD: Is there meaning in the fabric and props?

PC: This exhibit has less props, perhaps it's because there were curators that were two men they felt the props should be understated. I do like it when there is something that's not just fabric that's related to the home, that not just something domestic. And that one's just got a light behind it it's called "halo."

SD: Oh I love your titles too. So many people don't think about titles, and I think that's just sad.

PC: There's one, on the website, that's called "phony" and she's holding a pink phone.... I did an exhibit I of the original heads, and they were on three walls. The fourth wall was made up of thank you notes, I'm sorry notes, and I forgive you notes, so each note was displayed like this, so it'd say "I'm sorry." Some of them were my very sarcastic humor, some of them were true, some of them were fictional and some of them were just ridiculously funny. So that's also kind of related to this, and again it's back to "minding your P's Q's" and proper etiquette and blah blah blah, so yeah, there's "thank you" notes, but what about "I'm sorry" notes, or "you offended me" notes because you don't know how to say it any other way. I have to tell you I think because they were words, people read every single one. I mean every single one. And I can see this relating...so someday it'll all come together.

SD: I love all your ideas. I love your titles. They are just an added level, they're not some distraction or something you couldn't fit into the photo because it's a word, it's not like most photographers.

PC: I don't think like all photographers. I mean I do but I don't. I have a whole other outside body of work, this is the inside work.

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