

## **Painter Gloria Muriel: Pop Surrealism on a Spiritual Quest**

Painter Gloria Muriel's work conveys a glowing immediacy, yet evokes timeless, remote worlds of mystery and allure. Her paintings, primarily acrylics, are characterized by their dazzling color and enigmatic, symbol-rich iconography. The work is predominated by images of big-eyed girls, often playing musical instruments; birds, and anthropomorphized nature, like trees and flowers with faces. Most of these compositions have a dense, murky background that suggests tangled vegetation or water.

Gloria says the prevalence of young girls in her work probably refers to her inner child and hearkens back to the time in her life that was most idyllic. Though she had a happy childhood, she was also something of a loner and cultivated a rich inner world. This might explain the melancholy look of the girls in the pictures, alone with their thoughts and absorbed in their music, even as they commune with nature.

This mingling of dark and precious iconography, in otherworldly settings, is largely responsible for the paradoxical moods her work evokes—an intertwining of sadness and joy; of lightness and gravity that intrigues more than it comforts. Perhaps the uneasiness threaded all through Gloria's work, from the most seemingly innocuous pictures to the freakiest, serve to express her belief in a larger, cosmic sadness, which envelops the variable moods of every individual. "In the end you're alone," she says. "No matter what, you have to cope with life on your own."

The spiritual/mystical dimension of Gloria's paintings is salient, with recurring elements that suggest pantheism or animism—the belief that a divine presence inhabits everything around us. Nature is truly alive in her paintings, and the girls depicted, with their meditative expressions, seem utterly responsive to their animated landscape and supremely calm as the chaos of nature surrounds them.

Some of the spiritual iconography in Gloria's work is overt and draws on her research into dreams and symbols. One piece shows the goddess Lakshmi—another young girl, this one with three eyes. In Hinduism, the third eye, also called the "eye of the heart," represents spiritual perception. Many other religions revere the eye as a symbol of magical, visionary power.

Gloria, a native of Mexico, lives in San Diego and is a graphic designer by trade. She has two daughters ages 11 and 12, which is the same general age as the girls in her pictures ("a coincidence," she says, slyly).

Much of Gloria's work shows the influence of illustration and is reminiscent of the pop surrealism championed by the influential magazine *Juxtapoz*. She cites Dali as a major influence, which is evident in her vivid palette and fantastical images. Her personal vision, though, comes through powerfully in each picture and anchors the work soundly within the realm of fine arts.

Gloria's Muriel's work reveals a distinct personal style that is consistent but never static. Overall, the work has an aura that might be called *immersive*, where subject and periphery, foreground and background merge in a way that is all-encompassing. Such art naturally affects the viewer in a similar way, for this is work—this is a world—to get lost in. This reflects Gloria's essential approach: "Art is a state of being and I lose myself in the beautiful chaos that I depict in my paintings. Those feelings develop at the precise moment when my brush hits the canvas." Ultimately, though, her "aesthetic philosophy" can be summarized even more directly: "I paint what I feel."



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## Thane Gorek: Deviant Still Lives, Thrift Shop Whimsy

Thane Gorek's deviant still lifes are conceived in his mind and studio, where his thrift shop whimsy is given free reign. The Colorado based artist surrounds himself with salvaged toys and tchotchkes, to allow the strange poetry of chance to work its magic on his paintings. Such random beginnings, though, belie the formal rigor of his work. This is one more fundamental tension at the heart of his aesthetic. The result is a stream of work that, despite some of its overtly morbid elements, is actually quite lighthearted.

Thane's work has a distinctive look and feel, no doubt owing to the consistency of his creative process. He begins with a unifying theme, which of late have been based on the repetition of like objects. (His self-evident titles underscore this approach: "A Proliferation of Rabbits," "Eleven Wasps," et al.) When he settles on a theme, he gathers some relevant, visually compelling objects—thrift shops and flea markets are often his point of departure—and simply tosses them into a box.

"Throwing the objects together introduces an element of randomness and subverts the conventional idea of the sober, ordered still life painting," Thane says. "Also, forcing a pile of similar, well defined objects into a tight space makes them overlap, which creates an image that's abstract."

For Thane, exploring the apparent blurring between abstraction and figuration is crucial at this early stage of a painting. He does this by shuffling the items in the box ("I spend hours rearranging them until I'm satisfied," he says). Then, using photographs and the objects per se for reference, he makes a detailed drawing. This he transfers onto a wooden panel and begins a black and white underpainting, with casein paint (which is quick-drying and considered ideal for underpainting). Then he does color glazes over the top with oil paints, and finally he varnishes it.

Oppositional tension is a signature element of Thane's art. Every dimension of his work exhibits some degree of aesthetic conflict, whether form (abstract vs. figurative), tone (creepy vs. kooky), or methodology (spontaneous vs. disciplined). In this, it is consistent with the most vital, significant work through the ages—at least since the Renaissance, when chiaroscuro (which literally means "light-dark") was developed.

"Without tension, art is banal—just something that's comfortable, something to please the masses," says Thane. "Tension is what draws you into an artwork and taps into your deeper emotions. It makes you think, or it makes you uncomfortable—trying to reconcile the opposites and figure out what a piece is trying to say."

Thane, a graduate of New York's School of Visual Arts, insists that he doesn't take himself too seriously. Yet, based on his work habits and the scale of his ambitions, there's little doubt that he is a serious artist. Perhaps this is another example of the tension that courses through his work.