

Standing at the Crossroad: Ming C. Lowe 25 Year Retrospective

By Liz Gilbert, Anodyne Multimedia, January 10, 2000

This retrospective of Ming C. Lowe's painting is at the crossroad of time and place - it marks, along with several other noteworthy events of the past year, a cultural coming-of-age for the desert. Perhaps there is a slow resurgence of the same kind of creative synthesis seen in the desert architecture/design community of the late 30s and 40s.

While the Cathedral City Library does not quite have the portentous atmosphere of the library in the classic Wim Wenders' film *Wings of Desire*, it is nonetheless a repository of dreams: it is full of school children, whispers, history, and even ghosts. Lowe's paintings dominate the space and they ultimately transcend this earth-bound environment.

The library is a fitting place to contemplate Lowe's output over her long residence in the desert as well as the rapid changes occurring. Despite the frantic pace of development here, there is something deeply spiritual that always remains and is the backdrop for all this busy human activity. We are surrounded with the silence, the impenetrable stone, prehistoric plant life, petroglyphs, cracks in the earth... these are all strong elements hard-wired to Lowe's work, although she is hardly a desert landscape painter of the pastel lite school.

Through the years (and as she says, "When Palm Desert was a root beer stand in the middle of nowhere.") Lowe has owned a gallery; brought (along with like-minded people) rare film to the desert; has had more than a dozen one-woman shows; has been a friend to many internationally renowned artists and musicians; raised two children on her own; traveled the world; and most recently designed and built an exquisite house and studio. She has never stopped painting and has produced a truly impressive body of work.

Lowe's painting imbues all it touches with a kind of nobility. It carries the power as well as the quirky eccentricities found in well-made primitive objects. She might come from some tribe we've forgotten about and then, almost like the rediscovery of Australian aboriginal art mapping the Dreamtime, we see the work anew in a contemporary context.

Other works by Ming includes very large monochromatic canvases of her various animal pets. Just as primitive artists would paint the animals that surrounded them (who they both hunted and revered), Lowe's work mines the same vein and the result is one of rare, totemic substance.

Ming takes on the biggest universal themes in her paintings - death, war, sexuality, metaphysics, and faces these things with a direct, all-too-human eye.

It seems most interesting that Lowe views her painting as alchemy and there is this sense of ritual in her painting process that manifests something more than the sum of its parts. In another time and place, she would be the artist shaman, standing at the crossroad (as in the great song by legendary bluesman Robert Johnson), harnessing the power of supernatural forces.

There is a controlled palette and spare, uncluttered aesthetic that, in some ways, corresponds to old black and white films and photography. This is a constant through all of Lowe's work including one of the earliest pieces in the show; a portrait of musician Cleveland Chenier (1976). In the early to mid 90s, Lowe created an industrial series (several are in the show) and these are monolithic images of fire hydrants, mangled wires and cement, strange light and darkness. They are a further refinement of her work in the 80s, particularly related to her War series (which still seems timely in the face of events like the war in Kosovo).

After a while, all the paintings in the show begin to work their magic on you, and you begin to see the library transformed...You are seeing the world through Lowe's eyes. The telephone booth, the librarian, the lonely computer terminal...all are transmuted. A portrait of the late artist Joseph Beuys surveys the scene. This, after all, should be the experience we have with all great art; we see with new eyes. The artist is our guide.

Finally, we can also think about another crossroad or almost clear division between two threads that run through the American art world. One thread relates to the boom art of the 80s (the culmination of Warhol's artist as star mentality) and this is the world where pop art, cartoons, illustration, and all the detritus of mass commercial media was consumed and elevated to the status of high art. The 90s were watershed years and the aftermath to all this over inflation.

The other thread, however, that exists in American art is that of the lone wolf, highly individualist creator. We see this in artists such as Georgia O'Keeffe, Helen Frankenthaler, Richard Serra, Jim Dine and many others. Lowe's work is far more connected to this approach, even though there are thoughtful echoes of the pop art world felt in some of her pieces. Through a kind of innocence and persistence, however, Lowe has managed to continue as an artist with no party platform. What she shares with the aforementioned artists is their sense of spaciousness, the heightened perception of ordinary objects and materials, their monumentality, and very personal iconography. Lowe's work is wholly her own... unmistakable, distinct, and immediately recognizable. This is no small achievement.