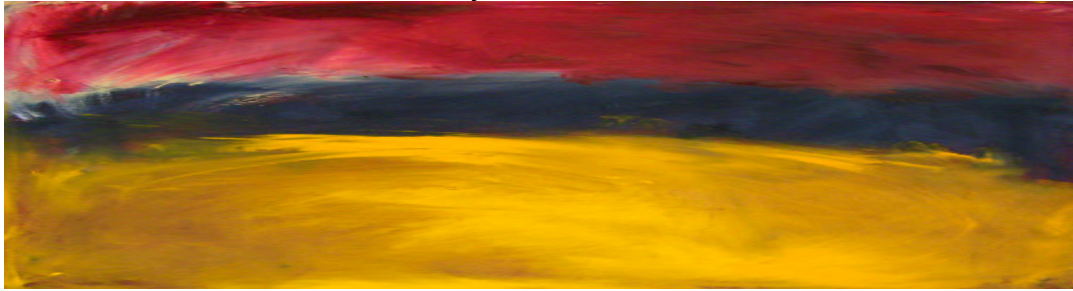


Sublime Time: In the Studio with Crystal Cardenas

*Profile of a Painter*

by M.L. Crider



“Smell that?” she asked impishly, after having placed her dark sepia-stained fingernails *directly* under my nose. Her steely blue eyes were searing into me like lucid lasers, so what *else* was I going to do? I obliged and curiously sniffed her fingers.

“What is it?” I asked, eyes at full bulge. A slow stealthy smile stretched out across her porcelain cheeks. She whispered back, “It’s... *p a i n t!*” Her abrupt southern drawl mimicked Holly Hunter’s piercing Texan intonations. She savored this magic word as if her teeth had just sunk into a salacious bite of steak.

“Really?” I blurted. I felt daft. No “hello” or any other customary greeting, she just *arrested* me. A simple “hi” would have done the trick, but Crystal Cardenas chose for my nose to meet her *fingers*, instead?

This girl was contagious.

Cardenas had agreed to be interviewed by me during a personal tour of her painting studio. I followed her worn black Converse shoes as they stepped us into the front door of her two-story work haven in the heart of Tulsa, Oklahoma.

The First Floor: 1970’s orange shag carpet covered the vast room like a funny blanket. Tall stacks of books, films, and a shelf stuffed with rare vinyl records lined the busy walls. A faux black raven clung to a naked high-wattage light bulb hanging casually in mid-air. An Old World spin-globe collected dust in a dark corner next to three massive lamp bases that wore no shades. Retro radios, strange clocks, and a chunky decorative bureau that housed a 1960’s record player, hinted that she must be a collector of sorts.

Had I just walked into a forgotten antique store?

I clearly sensed that *the world’s time* is not what makes this thirty-three year old enigmatic painter tick. Accordingly, I noticed that her clocks did not tell *the actual* time. My watch read 2 o’clock in the afternoon and there was absolutely no indication of this fact on any of the counted eight faces that should have been ticking in unison.

I had to ask, “Crystal, do *any* of these clocks tell the *actual* time?” “No,” she said. “Time feels too imposing on me when I work. I name my timeless clocks, though,” she laughed. “I call this big oval black one, *Mr. Transcendental.*”

*His* sleepy golden hands were stuck at 8 hours, 35 minutes.

“What about that one?” I pointed up to a modern red clock, stopped at 6:48. “Oh, I call him *Dali Time*--as in Salvador Dali, the surrealist painter? I think he liked to appear as “crazy” to others, but in actuality was incredibly brilliant. I find his pieces highly evocative and brave,” she shared.

I spotted a huge painting above a sofa. It looked as edible as a dessert one might enjoy with fine espresso at a four-star hotel. When asked to describe its majestic colors, she thought

about it for a beat and then said, “Dark indigo, subtle grays, deep crimson, and cadmium yellows. That piece was inspired by a Nina Simone song that I heard called, *Nomasitapah*.” One night, Cardenas heard the song and “could see its canvas.”

“How do you usually go about naming your art?” I asked. She shocked me with, “I name my paintings for the viewer only. If it were up to me, I would never name a single piece of my art.”

She names her dead clocks, but not her lively paintings. C’est la vie.

A tattoo of a delicate Latin scroll rolled out above her wrist when she pushed her sleeves up asking, “Would you like to go upstairs to see my workroom now?” Speckles of cobalt-blue paint flecked her exposed neck and comfy sweat suit. An ordinary ugly rubber band choked back her long baby-blond ponytail at the bottom of her neck. Angelina Jolie’s lost-at-birth white witch twin sister had just spun some kind of magnetic web around me. Entranced, I trailed her footsteps up the fuzzy stairs.

The Second Floor: “This room is where it all goes down,” she said. Beside a blood red “fainting couch,” she called it, several boxed-out canvases were smothered in drying rich pigment. Black drips looked fresh on a dreamy red, black, and mustard one. Her stained right hand softly smudged the glistening drips into nonexistence. She made it look so easy. Like her books, films, and frozen clocks, an equally mesmerizing collection of her paintings were stacked, strewn, and hung all over this magnificent color-drenched workroom.

The 4’11” firecracker nonchalantly mentioned that she built every single canvas that is in her studio. “I like to build my own canvases because I like them to box-out four inches from the wall. Pre-made canvases don’t box out far enough and feel too confining to me,” she confessed. The fact that time and space seem to contribute to Cardenas feeling confined and imposed upon was stressed often during our afternoon spent together.

Enormous canvases lined the plastic-protected walls, dwarfing her already tiny physical frame. This elfin angel *built* these brawny structures? Everything about Cardenas struck me as mesmerizing polarity. Paradox never begged to be defined this much: a walking, talking, childlike, smoking, surreptitious, giggling, focused, tough, Tinker Bell maestro... who lived and breathed to paint? If I had glanced at her hands at a cafe, I would have guessed that she churns out repaired motorcycle engines, not emotionally poignant paintings. My enamored senses were drinking in deep reds, exquisite golds, and luxuriant blues that overwhelmed her canvases. She inhaled a short deep drag of her Camel light cigarette and let the smoke seep out with,

“The largest canvas I’ve ever built was a five-by-five. I buy plenty of plywood and prefer to buy my canvas material from a fabric store instead of a paint supply store because I can buy it by the yard.” She smiled warmly with, “There’s nothing better than to have a big blank canvas stretched out in front of Canvases don’t sit around for very long without paint on them in this studio.”

I didn’t want her to ever stop talking. Add rough-edged ice to this gal’s spiked-cinnamon accent, and simply stir. Cardenas pours straight up and tight when unassumingly rendering herself as one dizzying concoction. Doubly addicting is her charming oblivion about the exact intoxicating toll that her stir of charisma and drawl might innocently take out upon the average Joe... or Jane. Slam it, then forget it. Now breathe. Lucky you, having some notice. I was hardly able to digest the breathing part.

I spotted a gorgeous finished piece propped up against a wall. “I titled that one, *Vesuvius Rising*,” she said. “I worked on it in Italy. This piece was part of my Italian series that The Tulsa Artists’ Coalition (TAC) showcased downtown last month.”

Cardenas had spent a month in Italy devoted to painting when she taught as an assistant at Oklahoma State University. “We painted through the weeks and I explored other parts of Italy on weekends by train. The Tuscan region completely won my heart. The Italian lifestyle made me feel at home. I’d go back to Sienna in a heartbeat.”

Cardenas is a long-standing member of TAC and this year the group opened their fall art season with “Many Voyages: Paintings by Crystal Cardenas.” She explained, “I created poetic landscapes that represent geographical and architectural forms from a subjective point of view. The feelings these illustrate are equivalent to my conception of *the sublime*.” She added, “This was my personal romantic survey of the Italian cities. My landscapes and their color represent deep emotions in me.”

Cardenas began painting when in college studying art history and modern art. She identifies her work as fitting into a genre she calls *the sublime*. Painters J.M.W. Turner and Mark Rothco crown her short list of *sublime* heroes. To this day, her mentors remain to be two art professors who inspired her greatly when she attended the University of Louisiana in Monroe. Bob Ward and Cliff Tresner are the two that she “will not forget” from those intense training days. Tresner was especially instrumental in Cardenas’ springing to life as a painter. She appreciated “...his use of movement, color, and the emotions I felt when seeing his paintings.”

Born in Cushing, Oklahoma and raised in Tulsa, Cardenas graduated from Hale High School and received her B.F.A. in studio art painting at the University of Louisiana in Monroe. Later, she attended graduate school at The University of Mississippi in Oxford. Her artwork is currently shown at The Pearl Gallery in downtown Tulsa. “These days I like to try to do with my painting what Nina Simone did with her singing: to work evocatively with passion and power.”

When asked what advice she would offer a novice painter, without hesitation she offered, “Try anything. Anything is possible. It’s all about trying things out and seeing what works.” Cardenas believes that, “A spark of talent and a whole lot of learned skill can take one to unexpected, undreamed of places... but you really have to want it.”

“What is on the horizon regarding your future aspirations?” I asked. “I never know when inspiration may hit,” she said. “I may read, see, or feel something that makes a fire strike in me. My work tends to come from some experience I have had of a person, place, or thing that has affected me in some deep or passionate way.”

Cardenas invites us to keep an eye out for her artwork if taking a future stroll through downtown Eureka Springs, Arkansas, New Orleans, Louisiana, or if jet-setting to Italy, Spain, or London. One of these authentic and lucky locales is where she envisions opening her very own gallery. For now, she continues to produce her one-of-a-kind *sublime* pieces in the quirky nurturing ambience of her enchanted studio in Tulsa.

Cardenas’ studio clocks aside, conventional time *is* on her side and ticks to tell.