

A little luck, a lot of career: Claremont artist finds her path

Lisa Adams, an alumna of Claremont High School, Scripps College and Claremont Graduate University, knew beyond a shadow of a doubt at age 10 that she was going to be an artist. It was 3 years later (and more than 4 decades ago now), that an epiphany illuminated her path and helped shape her artistic voice. The life-changing moment happened while peering inside the window display of what is now Raku in the Claremont Village, marveling at a painting by Claremont's own abstract painter, Karl Benjamin.

"I thought 'Oh man, that's a painting. You mean you can make paintings that don't have any representational things in them?' That was a huge idea for me," recalled Ms. Adams who, until then, was painting only landscapes and still lifes. "This experience took my mind to another level."

Since then, she has enjoyed a successful career as a visual artist, exhibiting and curating shows around the world; serving as an international artist-in-residence at places such as the Nordic Institute for Contemporary Art in Finland and the World Design City in Japan; teaching at numerous institutions such as the University of Southern California and the Otis College of Art and Design; serving as a Fulbright scholar in Slovenia; blogging on Los Angeles art for the Huffington Post and much more. Tomorrow, her next solo exhibition, "Paradise Notwithstanding," will open at the CB1 Gallery in Los Angeles.

"For me, being an artist was not a choice," she said. "It was not a take it or leave it thing, I didn't want to do anything else."

Although passion and talent were raging from an early age, Ms. Adams firmly believes that nothing would have happened without luck, and without Claremont.

"I was so naïve and knew nothing, I could not have engineered it if I tried, but I had luck and somebody looking after me," she said. "Having been in Claremont and not Butte, Montana or on the great plains of Nebraska was an incredible stroke of luck. I was in a place of unbelievable educational institutions, and just being in that environment enabled the gods, the spirits, the circumstances, whatever you want to say, to play in my favor. I'm telling you, otherwise, nothing would have happened. Nothing."

Raised by parents who "didn't know anything about college or why you would go, and why in the hell would you spend that kind of money," Ms. Adams did not have guidance or encouragement toward advanced education. But she learned of the Claremont Colleges, and one day rode her bike to Scripps and told the admissions staff: "I want to go to school here." Once she found out what a portfolio was and, with mega-help, made one (sort of: she mailed Scripps loose slides in an envelope), she was in.



Photo by Joerg Metzner

Los Angeles based artist Lisa Adams is a graduate of Claremont High School and Scripps College who has been working in the arts for more than 30 years. Tomorrow, Sunday, December 11, Ms. Adams will open a solo show a CB1 Gallery in downtown Los Angeles.

"Seems that they were impressed with my work, but definitely not with my application," Ms. Adams said.

The "somebody" looking after Ms. Adams was artist, art professor and COURIER cartoonist Paul Darrow who orchestrated a full scholarship to CGU for Ms. Adams after she graduated from Scripps.

"He said, 'Look, Lisa, I found a scholarship for you and I'm going to tell them they have to give it to you'," she recalled. "He was the most influential person. He was wonderful."

With luck and support and an unwavering commitment to art—"It is the centerpiece of my life," she said—Ms. Adams has now displayed her work in more than 20 solo exhibitions and over 150 group exhibitions and public art projects, is prolifically published, and has received many unique commissions, such as painting an art car for BMW of North America.

Despite the fun of experimenting with different media, Ms. Adams always returned to painting.

"All those other things were minimal forays," she said. "The great thing about doing other adjunct sorts of creativity is that when I came back to painting, it was renewed. Not different. Refreshed."

Thematically, Ms. Adams embraces dichotomous concepts and images in her paintings, receiving ideas from an internal vision that she does not summon: it just comes.

"My process is very mysterious, even to me," she said. "I'll have a spontaneous flash of something, not a full hallucination (though some have said I'm a natural hallucinator). And then one flash begets the next step, which begets the next step. There's no grand scheme, the paintings tell me what they want. I don't impose or say 'that's stupid, let's try this.' It's intuitive. It's about listening very closely and letting the paintings guide me."

A mysterious process results in mysterious artwork, which often puzzles observers.

"It's not as widely accessible as something like pop art where people can easily recognize a figure or an environment. It's very hermetic," Ms. Adams said. "The best way I can put it is that I live in 'Lisa Land'."

In "Paradise Notwithstanding," opening tomorrow, Ms. Adams' paintings continue her exploration of dichotomy, juxtaposing the real and the ideal, the melancholic and the beautiful, "all the undesirable stuff and all the great stuff," she said. The paintings also represent the juxtaposition of technique, equal in their attention to abstraction and representation.

"Everything happily coexisting in the same art," she remarked.

Bringing her paintings from her small studio into the larger space of the CB1 Gallery offers Ms. Adams the pleasure of understanding her own work better.

"There's a much bigger conversation going on when you can see a bunch of them at one time. They're talking to each other," she said. "I'm curious to see what that conversation is about. What are they going to say, going to say to me?" And what are they going to say to you, readers? Listen in at Ms. Adams' exhibition, "Paradise Notwithstanding," opening tomorrow, December 11 and running through January 15, 2012. An artist's reception will be held tomorrow from 5 to 7 p.m.; and an artist's talk and book signing will take place from 3 to 5 p.m. on Sunday, December 18. CB1 Gallery is located at 207 W. 5th St., Los Angeles.

To view a selection of Ms. Adams' paintings, visit www.lisamakesart.com.

—Brenda Bolinger