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 AMERICAN
art
COLLECTOR





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MICHAEL CARSON

The dangerous warmth

Michael Carson is known for plucking his figures from bustling parties, quiet household settings, fashion shoots and dressing rooms, and depositing them into empty fields of color that hold them in place, a purgatory of paint where they wait under our watchful eye. They are relaxed, but also slightly concerned, which causes them to gaze out at the viewer, as if to acknowledge our act of voyeurism—and then accept it.

In the Phoenix painter's new exhibition—*Not Just a Pretty Face* now open at Bonner David Galleries in Scottsdale, Arizona—he again places male and female figures, all of them beautiful, amid hazy one- and two-color backgrounds and allows their evocative expressions to linger within the shadows sweeping

across their faces and pooling in their eye sockets. In many of the new works, the backgrounds are beige washes, neutral foundations for his characters to build their stories onto. In *Cracked Foundation* olive paint drips from a hard edge; in *Mist* the background seems to embrace the nearly nude figure in an enveloping shroud. Then in others he bypasses neutral altogether and brings deep reds to the background and foreground. In all of them, Carson plays with color to achieve the mood he's searching out.

"I feel like I've been very muted lately. The more I manipulate the contrast, the less colorful it appears. So I've been throwing in hits of bright colors to fill my need for it. I love the red. It already comes with all sorts

1
Michael Carson in his
Phoenix studio.

2
Spot On, oil on resin
panel, 24 x 18"





3
Red Dot, oil on resin panel, 48 x 48"

4
The After Party, oil on resin panel, 40 x 30"

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Mist, oil on resin panel, 30 x 20"

6
Vice, oil on resin panel, 24 x 18"

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of meanings: warning, stop, danger...and it's so warm that it stands out against my muted palette and gets all the attention," he says, adding that viewers can interpret what they will from his colors and figures. "Even though I'm probably having conversations with these people as I'm painting them, I'm really trying to not attach a narrative to the paintings. I'd rather that the person viewing it bring whatever mood or bias they have to determine who the subject is and what they are thinking about. It's really none of my business."

But regardless of Carson's hands-off approach to dictating narrative, his figures all share several common attributes, among them strength and vulnerability. "I would hope that you could see both. I spend a great deal of time dealing with the subtleties of the face. And even when it could be considered finished, if the expression isn't there, I have to keep working it," he says. "I think there is a strength in the single-figure paintings. Usually with a centrally located, balanced composition the subject can look almost iconic with a very simple background that usually won't compete and sometimes integrates directly into the figure. It's all about creating really cool moments within the painting. Many times it's the face. It's where our eyes go."

The eyes also tend to go to Carson's use of patterns, which he uses in a number of new works, including *Bring Them to My Heels*, which uses a floral print in a dress; *The After Party*, with its light blue floral pattern on a couch occupied by a stylishly dressed male and female pair; and *Spot On*, a head-and-shoulders portrait of a woman wearing a spotted blouse that is pulled open to reveal her soft skin. "The print transfer that I use has multiple effects in the work. For one it floats. Your eyes want to see the pattern on the sofa but the pattern doesn't follow the contours or depth and has a 'floating' effect," he says. "You can decide to look into the painting because it has depth and perspective, but the pattern has the effect of bringing you back to the surface. And all my techniques tend to try to do that—in and out. Lately I've been painting on top of epoxy resin, which has its own unexpected texture and effects. Just the fact that I'm painting $\frac{1}{8}$ of an inch above the surface on a clear 'bar top' allows light to get in behind the paint and illuminate the skin tones like I've never seen. That's when I'm most happy. When I'm experimenting on a technique or material and run into something that I didn't intend and yet it transforms the piece."

It could be said about any artist that their works should be seen in person, as opposed to online or in a magazine, but with Carson that certainly is a relevant point to bring



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up. His pieces are often large and his colors have a way to swallow viewers whole as they stand in front of them. And as the figures get closer to life-size the more their eyes tend to gently follow guests around the room. It can be profoundly moving to stand in front of one and gaze into the faces Carson has created. They seem to hold their poses just for you. And you half expect them to exhale softly when you walk away.

For Carson, he achieves his figures by opening himself up in the studio and to his processes. "More and more lately I've been trying to be open for changes and diversions any time during a painting. I will sometimes do a rough composition sketch and usually follow up with a light sketch on the panel. Most of the 'drawing' I do is with a brush with whatever dark that I'm using

that day. I mainly work off of photographs and have an extensive collection of images from throughout the years," he says. "I'll piecemeal compositions together using all kinds of different reference photos. I may have three pieces of reference for one figure. You can tell when I'm doing this by the multiple light sources that make no sense in reality but work for purposes of creating the pose I wanted."

He continues, "The process only feels effortless when I lose track of time or zone out on a daydream. But I always want my pieces to look like they are effortless. Like there is movement in the paint and it was done quickly and haphazardly but still worked almost by accident. In fact, many times it is. I just keep redoing something until it happens for me." ●