

Lyle Carbajal: Art Without Artifice

By John Seed



Lyle Carbajal, *Self-Portrait on the Blue*, 32 x 48 inches, mixed media on panel, 2015

In Lyle Carbajal's *Self-Portrait on the Blue*, the artist appears as a flat, scribble-faced man with a panda-bear torso, reaching upward to grasp the safety bar while riding a Chicago Blue Line commuter train. With its roughly applied zones of paint and ragged-edged collage elements, *Self-Portrait on the Blue* is a disarming work of art that bears almost no literal resemblance to the man who painted it. This readily

apparent lack of likeness is just fine with Lyle Carbajal, whose art has little to do with representing things or people as they actually appear. His interests have more to do with communicating forms, ideas and emotions in an unschooled, unaffected style.

Seattle-based curator Joseph Roberts explains Carbajal's aesthetic this way: "Carbajal seeks to create imagery that is conceived through its function. He creates images solely for the crude expression of an idea, to pass along a thought or emotion, much as one might jot something on a café napkin as an impromptu gesticulation and visual aid amid a lubricated conversation with a friend."

The wellsprings of Carbajal's aesthetic—which include folk art, naïve art, tribal art, and the art of the mentally ill—are all characteristically honest in their intent, and visual forthrightness is Carbajal's favorite mode of connection. Illusionism, the product of European "high" culture, is something that Carbajal associates with colonialism. Carbajal's art, which eschews academic technique, has been deeply affected by his engagement with pre-colonial visual styles and culture. In fact, Carbajal should really be thought of as an artist/scholar whose interests include cultural anthropology.

Carbajal is also a socially conscious artist who uses his art to bring people closer. As it turns out, he has been using art as a form of connection since he was a child. When I recently spoke to Carbajal about his background, he offered this anecdote:

When I was ten, I began selling my peers and teachers elaborate drawings of their names. These drawings incorporated some of the same intuitive and even visionary forms of doodling that I use in my current work. In these drawings, names such as Tony, Mike or Michelle became associated with trading cards, images pasted on blackboards, Mad Magazine's cartoon faces, cool dinosaurs, and other sorts of random decorative elements.

These drawings made me the most popular boy in school, yet all I did to earn this status was to take things present in my everyday existence and draw them—or rather associate them—with my classmates' names. These drawings became a sort of visual diary of our school experience, helping us navigate our lives between 8:00 am until 3:00 pm.

What stayed with Carbajal from this experience were two invaluable realizations: that art could be used to connect with others and also that art was a way of making sense of the world. "To this day," he comments, "my art remains accessible."

Carbajal's artistic and social skills have served him well, both in childhood and adulthood, as he has constantly thrived while adapting to new places, cultures and situations. The son of Latin American immigrants who grew up in both the United States and Mexico, Carbajal has lived "all around" the United States, including stints in the Pacific Northwest, Illinois, Tennessee, Louisiana and California. He has also

spent a significant amount of time in Latin America and Europe, most notably in France and Italy and Argentina. As Carbajal explains: "I'm peripatetic, largely because of the nature of my recent installations, which always reflect where I am living and working at any given moment. I find that six months is the length of time it takes to absorb a local culture and let its influence become apparent in my work."

Although hesitant to be pinned down as identifying with any single culture, Carbajal says his art most often contains cultural references and images of people of color. The artist puts it this way: "I tend to paint brown and black people as I am really interested in the immigrant's struggle, and I'm also very interested in how colonialism has influenced culture, especially in Latin America after Catholicism stepped in." Additionally, Carbajal has closely studied the Asafo culture of Ghana, a warrior culture with elaborate visual arts traditions that developed in response to contact with Europeans.



Lyle Carbajal, *Untitled*, 50 x 50 inches, mixed media on panel, 2012

Of particular interest to Carbajal are the flags of the Asafo, which include images of heroism, warnings, taboos and other symbols all sewn and embroidered in bold colors. His fascination with these banners led Carbajal to experiment with various

kinds of stylizations, including powerful and ominous silhouettes. “I am fascinated by what a silhouette can convey,” he notes, “not just in terms of what one sees, but also in terms of that which is left to the imagination to fill in.” In an untitled mixed media work of 2012, a figure that Carbajal has described as a golem appears as a dark figure with a distinctive hairstyle that is pulled into a high ratted bun atop an elongated skull. The curling form of a white serpent—a demonic symbol taken from Afro-Caribbean Santería—spreads across the figure’s neck and torso, hinting at temptation. The image is just one example of how diverse artistic influences can come together in a single Carbajal work.

The breadth of Carbajal’s cultural and aesthetic interests first became fully apparent in 2011 when he published his book, *Urban + Primitive: The Art of Lyle Carbajal*. The book is a kind of compendium, not only of Carbajal’s own art but also of the places, perceptions and influences that have helped shape him. Along with presenting chapters on some of his major themes and interests—animals, the sacred, regional art, totems and illustration—the book lays out Carbajal’s all-inclusive relationship with the world, its culture and its peoples. He writes: “Everywhere I’ve lived, these are all my people.”

Writing the book also allowed Carbajal to clarify, both for himself and for his readers, the profound power of pre-colonial art. In a chapter titled “Religion and Magic,” Carbajal writes:

By stripping away the written dogma of religion, and focusing on the visual components that are imbedded in everyday activities such as working, playing, eating and dying, one begins to understand how images of fear, devotion and reverence, the aesthetics of art and symbols take on a physical power.

After the publication of his book, there was a sudden surge of interest in Carbajal’s work and, as he puts it, “everything changed.” Given more opportunities to do more of what he wanted to do, and more help to do it, Carbajal began to experiment with installations that included architectural elements alongside his paintings. As he did so, he found himself animated by a realization: that he was reaching into both his memories and his artistic imagination to create “reverse epynoms.”

An epynom is the person for whom something (i.e. a town) is named, and Carbajal saw himself moving in reverse in the sense that his creation-in-progress would ultimately be so broad that it would in some sense bear everyone’s imprint and could never be named after a single individual. Carbajal likes to break down visual images and follow them back to their social and cultural roots:

If we were to take some of the visual culture from a border town—like El Paso, for example—and begin breaking down the ideas behind the local images and begin asking the questions, why and how did this imagery emerge and at what point it began to take shape, I suppose we would have to back into some of the realities of life in these places. I think these realities would include life in association with

thoughts of heroism, labor, religion and distinct forms of worship, identity and family and perhaps even the idea of authority and class structure. These are some of the ideas, themes and associations I'm bringing into my installations where I hope viewers will be able to see, acknowledge and identify them.

As his installation-based exhibitions have evolved, Carbajal has continued to introduce new constructions that literally *can* be bumped into. He has been including architectural elements to emphasize the idea of an environment, and then surrounding them with paintings that suggest cultural themes, a local population, products and activities. His exhibits tend to look different in every town, since visitors see his work through the prism of their local cultures.

A fall 2014 New Orleans exhibition, emblazoned with Carbajal's working title *Romancing Banality*, made this developing world of artlessness more tangible than ever. "Let's take these things," he told an interviewer, "banality, artlessness, an eyesore, a visual shock to the system, and let's not overlook them."

The key architectural element in New Orleans was the model of a *carniceria* (small butcher shop) that Carbajal had once seen in Mexico City. A one-third scale model of the *carneceria*, complete with awnings and hand-painted signage, gave the show a dose of urban decay that helped disrupt what Carbajal characterizes as the inherent "sterility" of the gallery space. Suspending works from the ceiling and scattering the floor with images printed on copy paper are some of the artist's other ways of making the space work on his terms.



The Carniceria

Carbajal is also beginning to work with film, and for his Nashville exhibition he will be collaborating with artist Jaime Fernández from Juarez, Mexico, to develop a film that will deal with some of the exhibition's themes. Sound will also be present in the installation, as Carbajal wants to connect with onlookers through as many of their senses as possible. "I want the space to feel alive! I want motion, emotion, sound, light and color to connect visitors to the show with its iconography, culture and mythos."

Everything that makes its way into Carbajal's work is something that he has been enamored by at some point or another, and the affectionate, all-embracing range of Carbajal's visual references is the key to the vitality of his ongoing projects. One of the qualities of Carbajal's paintings is their striking sense of cultural omnipresence. "When we find a painting or image that seems like it's always been there, like an idiom; that quality really is something important and it is exactly what I am seeking when I paint."



Lyle Carbajal, *Super Quality*, 32 x 32 inches, mixed media on wood panel, 2015

Some of Carbajal's mixed media works, such as *Super Quality*, have an aspect of pop culture about them. It should be noted that Carbajal was an award-winning

advertising designer for more than 20 years, and this aspect of his career continues to inform his knowledge of mass imagery.

The Tiger Head battery presented in *Super Quality* is based on an ad that Carbajal saw on the exterior of a small business in Latin America. "I loved the immediacy of the image," he recalls, "and the feeling of hand-painted logos. It's the very derivative nature and clumsiness that I feel gives the reproduced images like this one their soul." Like most of his mixed media paintings on wood, *Super Quality* gets its rough integrity from the variety of media it includes: house paint, oil stick, acrylic and spray paints, charcoal and a bit of dirt. "I will use just about anything, really," Carbajal says.



Lyle Carbajal, *Balloon Face*, 32 x 32 inches, mixed media on wood panel, 2015

One "anything" that Carbajal recently included in a mixed-media work was a cluster of crumpled party balloons. "The balloons are dirty, with shoe marks," Carbajal notes, "as if they simply fell onto the painting with little notice." They are affixed to the nose and forehead of a googly-eyed man named *Balloon Face*, whose cheeks seem to form a pair of black ravens in a field of graffiti-like collage drawings. Carbajal regularly fills the entire surface of his works-in-progress, taking hours and sometimes days before finally "discovering" the dominant image.

With its urban energy and offhandedness, Carbajal's work is sometimes compared to that of Jean-Michel Basquiat (1961-88). To a degree, the comparison works, as Basquiat has been an influence, but there is at least one major respect in which the two artists are remarkably different. Basquiat was an angry artist who was driven to make searing social and political statements. Carbajal, in contrast, is rarely angry or sarcastic. His choices and images reflect his affection for world culture, not his need

to reform it. In terms of influences, Carbajal says that he “lost interest” in Basquiat years ago and has been more recently drawn to the works of Julian Schnabel and Georg Baselitz.

Ultimately, Carbajal is interested in looking at the products and artifacts of everyday culture with an honest eye, attempting to portray life’s mysteries and events in modest, relatable images. “I have the ability to look at things very objectively,” Carbajal philosophizes. “I guess that is my superpower. I’m able to feel what people were thinking when they did something. I can just feel it. *That* goes into everything that I am doing.”

The overarching goal of Carbajal’s work is to share his experience of the small mysteries that he has discovered in his travels and studies through his imagery. By insisting that his art refer to fundamental human experiences and emotions and by creating art without artifice, he has created a compelling body of work that engages its viewers with surprising candor and force.