

Art Writer

Laura Ball for David B. Smith Gallery



“A hero ventures forth from the world of common day into a region of supernatural wonder: fabulous forces are there encountered and a decisive victory is won: the hero comes back from this mysterious adventure with the power to bestow boons on his fellow man.” Joseph Campbell. *The Hero With a Thousand Faces*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1968, p. 30 / Novato, California: New World Library, 2008, p. 23.

“Growing Pains” by Laura Ball



Fabulous forces are encountered in the paintings of Laura Ball. Her heroines have entered the region of supernatural wonder. For Ball, as for Joseph Campbell, a hero is a person in the world who encounters another person, a god or a guide, or has a traumatic experience, and thus begins a journey. Her watercolor paintings of girls on the hero’s journey are inspired by Joseph Campbell and Greek

Mythology. Throw in a little Karl Jung, her undergrad studies in architecture, mix with art history and you have the complex, highly detailed, and labor-intensive narrative paintings of girls and women as they journey into the psyche to battle their own demons and monsters.

“The girls have fought battles that have moved them to a new stage in life or enabled them to cross a threshold, they keep traveling deeper into the psyche,” Ball said. “I didn’t plan this, it just happened. About eight months ago they entered this inner psychic realm and there was this beast a combination creature. When I take a step back and look at how the work has changed as the girls have moved farther into the subconscious, it all makes sense.” For Ball, that creature is either the Self, or it’s a demon the person must fight. At the moment she doesn’t know which one it is, but believes the characters in her paintings have reached the core. However, she admits that the narrative is her own working process: “I never expect anyone to get this out of seeing my work.”

Like many contemporary artists working today, Ball is bombarded with imagery, not only from art history, but film, television, and the Internet. Taped to her studio wall the day we talked were images of animals and images of artworks by Josh Keyes, Ryan McLennan, Janine Antoni, Felix Gonzalez-Torres, Fred Sandback, Hernan Bas, Ashley Macomber, Julie Mehretu, and Rachell Sumpter. “I see world history as art history,” Ball said. “Knowing how ideas have changed over time, like when Bruce Nauman walked around his studio, will have affected the way I treat the objects I make in my space. My generation of artists grew up surrounded with so many images, and in an art world where anything goes, we’re all responding to this excess. Even as a society, we’re overwhelmed by images constantly. Mine just happen to be other paintings or drawings.”

She begins a new painting with a loose idea and then, with two monitors at her painting table, she scans through her collection of thousands of digital images looking for appropriate ones from which to work. In her sketchbook, she quickly outlines a rhino twisting upwards, knowing he will be puzzled together from a collection of different animal images, a process she leaves open as to what type of animal will become each piece of the puzzle. Often her initial idea is very sketchy and loose—a rhino coming out of the water for example—then she begins scouring images for what will become part of the head or body. “When I get burnt out finding parts, I’ll work on something that’s in process.” And if she needs an image of an animal in a certain position, she can walk

from her studio to the San Diego Zoo and take photographs. Moving from computer to paper, the rhino begins as a wash of wet-in-wet watercolor, a painting technique learned through architectural rendering years before when Ball was an undergraduate. Though she painted with oils in graduate school, Ball admits they are exponentially more difficult for her to manipulate. “The images I’m making now need some sort of spontaneous element, the water moves,” she said. “It’s more like sketching. It’s fluid. It happens so easily. I need to be using this medium for this work. I love it. It feels natural.” She also intentionally uses a very soft pencil that erases easily as she draws in the different animal components of the larger image. When she knows a toucan is going to be the rhino’s horn, she will sketch him onto the painting, then erase the pencil and paint him in with watercolor, watercolor pencil, neon acrylic, or iridescent paints, spending most of her studio time working on something that is in mid-stream production, ending the day focused on the fine detailing of another painting. The animals and figures in her work represent part of the psyche without a clear sense of place, represented by the intentionally empty white spaces in her paintings.

Historically, what initially propelled Ball to make figurative work was a Japanese ukiyo-e print of women wrestling in a bathhouse. Her early figurative works were of girls wrestling and fighting; she was exploring how to represent bodies moving through space, trying to get at the threat and physical force of competition. The figures in Ball’s paintings are not objectified. For her, they have to look like the real people (herself and her family) they represent. Yet, her favorite painters are Peter Doig and Walton Ford. Ford also paints with watercolor in the style of Audubon naturalist illustrations, but each of his paintings are filled with symbols, jokes, folktales, and texts from colonial literature and travel guides. His work critiques the history of colonialism and industrialization. Doig’s work, on the other hand, is often, simply put, abstracted landscapes.

“They are so loose and messy and beautiful and there is so much information without there being so much information,” Ball said of his work. And while her style and technique are not at all like Doig’s and more like Ford’s, one can see her desire to include much information in her paintings without including it all: the white backgrounds, the stripped-down imagery of dreams, the watery color, the fluid detail.

Joseph Campbell said, “Artists are magical helpers. Evoking symbols and motifs that connect us to our deeper selves, they can help us along the heroic journey of our own lives.”¹ Ball is doing just that; by painting the heroic journey of women, she is

challenging the mono-myth as male-centric. And while more of a humanist than a feminist, Ball's initial inspiration, that ukiyoe print, has more to do with the spiritual than the physical. Ukiyo or "floating world" was "a Buddhist concept referring to the transitory, illusory quality of secular life, through which one could discover the essence, or spiritual reality, of existence." 2 Something to consider when viewing the illusory works of Laura Ball.

1) Joseph Campbell, *Pathways to Bliss: Mythology and Personal Transformation*, Edited by David Kudler. Novato, California: New World Library, 2004, pp. 132, 133.

2) Carma C. Fauntleroy, *Japanese Woodblock Prints Exhibition Catalog*, February 15-April 14, 1989, Art Gallery, Sweet Briar College.
<http://www.artgallery.sbc.edu/ukiyoe/historyofwoodblockprints.html>

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