

BravinLee programs

Working Artist's Journal

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San Francisco Artist

September 11, 2006

Marcia Kure & the artist in the world

All this 9/11 reminiscing has me poking at that nagging question, "Does artmaking serve any purpose in the world"? I know a lot of artists who are true believers. Some of them go at it directly, making in-your-face statements of their art or taking direct action as an art performance. Others use their art skills for making banners and fliers. Some make art that promotes peace and healing. I responded to 9/11 in my own art, but it's unlikely that anyone else would see the connection (of course, making it obvious wasn't my intent.)

A few days ago I saw some work that encompasses the personal, spiritual and political, and I got a chance to talk to the artist...

Marcia Kure was unequivocal when I asked her if she felt that art could change the world. Born in Nigeria, presently living in Pennsylvania, her imagery is influenced by the ancient cave and rock art in southern Africa, as well as the traditional Uli murals of Nigeria, with a heavy dose of current global events and personal history. Which, when you think about it (and her art makes me think about it) is all related.

Her current show is a series of watercolor, ink and kolanut drawings on paper. Kolanut is used in traditional African fabric dyeing. It's lightfast – actually, the color tends to darken over time. Marcia said that she likes the richness of the color she gets with the kolanut – deep, reddish browns, laced with yellow. She mixes a little gum Arabic with the pigments, especially when glazing and lifting.

Her images are isolated figures on flat ground, usually portraits of herself, people she knows, or personifications of human behavior. I asked her about her use of the isolated figure, thinking that it reminded me of ancient Egyptian images and far eastern paintings. But Marcia surprised me by saying that she was drawn first to the play of the positive/ negative space. Then we sat down at her computer and she showed me photos of ancient African rock paintings, pointing out the silhouetted figures, the colors, the animal imagery, and weapon imagery that echo in her work.

Compared to her earlier work, Marcia said the pieces in the show have "more going on inside the image – they're not as stark (as before)." They are a little more complex. This new series references her recent pregnancy and postpartum period. Her son, Arinze, played at our feet as she explained that the bird-headed woman image was made "during the bombing of Beirut." Lyrical lines represent the swirl of hormones (emotion) as she was thinking of what it would be to lose someone...she said, "Someone gives birth while someone else is being killed; someone is being married while someone else is being raped."

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Another image, with tiny dark beads adhered to the surface was about the phenomenon of “baby cells.” (Research has shown that mothers carry cells from their babies for decades after pregnancies no matter if the pregnancies ended with delivery, miscarriage or abortion. The baby, although no longer present in the mother’s body, continues to be present – mother and child continue to be connected at the cellular level long after they have separated otherwise.)

A montage drawing, called “Bridal Ensemble” looks like a nest, and Marcia said “it’s about hope.” I asked her if she looked back at this work 20 years from now, would she see her life in them and she said, “Oh yes – my drawings are like journals.” She said she thinks in pictures.

Not all of the images are female. Some of the male figures are African leaders in the areas of conflict. Many of the figures wear boots, which represent war to her. Last year Marcia did a series of drawings focused on genocide and war all over the world.

Returning to the question of the artist’s role in the world, she emphasized the power of images – images get into a person and can stay there, having subliminal residual effects for a long, long time. She said that there’s no doubt in her mind that art can make a difference. The goal she hopes to reach with her work is to make it so beautiful and gently that you approach it open-heartedly, with defenses down...and then the images gets into you, and does its work.

Marcia Kure’s work is up through September 29th and Lisa Dent Gallery, 660 Mission (next to Annie Alley) in SF.