



MEL MELCON / For The Times

Barbara Romain is having a painting party Saturday titled "Whose Myth Are Youse With?"

CITY CULTURE

Don't Myth It!

Painter and performer Barbara Romain believes people have a common cultural ground that frequently goes unexplored: mythology.

"A lot of symbols and mythological figures in one culture correspond to some in another," said Romain. "Marking on walls, expressing things symbolically, is a universal impulse. It goes back to cave paintings."

To bring together people of various backgrounds, Romain is staging a daylong mural-painting party Saturday called "Whose Myth Are Youse With?" at the Watts Towers Arts Center Gallery. The opening installation of the project on Sunday will be accompanied by musical and spoken-word performances led by Romain's brother, saxophonist and poet Elliot Levin.

The title of the event is taken from a jazz lyric by Levin that Romain said inspired her. Students from Art Options, an art program for inner-city teen-agers that Romain directs with artist Mira-Lani, will read from texts written for the project.

Romain is encouraging people of all artistic abilities to help paint, as well as bring instruments to the Sunday performance and play-along.

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"Whose Myth Are Youse With?" at the Watts Towers Art Center Gallery, 1727 E. 107th St.; mural painting Saturday 10 a.m. to 4 p.m.; performance and opening reception Sunday 2 to 5 p.m.; admission free; (213) 483-6311.

—ERIN J. AUBRY



Photos by JULIE MARKES / For The Times

Artspace Gallery staffer Norma Squires looks at Barbara Romain's cacophonous "When the Music's Over" at "Words and Symbols" exhibit.

Where and When

What: "Words and Symbols."

Location: Artspace Gallery, 21800 Oxnard St., Woodland Hills.

Hours: Noon to 5 p.m. Tuesdays through Saturdays. Ends April 16. Also,

"Conversations With the Artists" begin at 1:30 p.m. March 12.

Call: (818) 716-2786.

Mixing Media

■ 'Words and Symbols' spotlights age-old art elements—and the varied language of their combination.

By NANCY KAPITANOFF
SPECIAL TO THE TIMES

WOODLAND HILLS—Within the visual language of art, words and symbols have established a secure place. Symbols have been an important element since cave-dwellers left their marks on cave walls. The inclusion of words in art was not so prevalent until the early 20th Century, when collage began to flourish.

In the exhibit "Words and Symbols," at Artspace Gallery in Woodland Hills, curator Scott Canty brings together the work of nine contemporary artists who use these elements to convey a broad range of ideas and emotions.

"I've always been fascinated with artists who use symbols in their work," Canty said. Some of the symbols "are very personal, others universal."

In his curator's statement, he reflects on the progress of words and symbols in art from prehistoric times to present day, and writes: "In this exhibit we see how words become symbols and symbols become words. . . . Individuals have continued to develop a symbolic language in order to communicate their innermost feelings, thoughts and desires."

One can try to pick out individual words in Barbara Romain's large mixed-media work, "Herstory and History," and succeed, but that would only suggest part of the story. The cacophony of words in these life-size images—"History" done in blue, "Herstory" in pink, he somewhat bigger than she—creates a frenzied aura that communicates the larger picture here.

Viewing her work, Canty said: "I feel like I'm in the midst of the busiest city with lights and neon, and everyone wants your attention. You are being so oversensitized with all of this coming at you."

Nancy Kapitanoff writes regularly about art for *The Times*.

Newsletter on the Arts by Diana Zlotnick artgal333@earthlink.net

Editor Rachael Steele
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Barbara Romain *Depth Perception*

- Rachael Steele

I first encountered the work of Barbara Romain in 1991 when she was performing in *Nigger Lovers*, an autobiographical two woman play. The title is certainly audacious and provoking while curiously funny. Her paintings are equally rebellious in spirit. The in your face quality of her writing style is more subtly expressed in the visual language of her canvases. Romain's paintings are outstanding and memorable, perhaps in part due to their great accessibility and the skill of the artist to communicate.

The employment of language is prominent in her work. As a tool, it serves to activate the canvas, demarcate abstracted landscape elements, and reveal subject matter. The written word, as a visual element in modern art, has a long tradition beginning with the Dada and Cubist movements, resurfacing mid century in the works of Stuart Davies, and in the contemporary art of Wallace Berman, Ed Rucha, and Mark Tansey.

The role and use of text as a pictorial component and the artist's gradual loss of vision are intrinsically bound. Romain began her career as a figurative artist. In 1984 she was diagnosed with retinal degeneration and over the next 14 years had a slow but progressive deterioration of sight that has left her legally blind. Romain's painting was profoundly affected led her to discover a new visual vocabulary in which to express herself. The reduction of her ability to render detail ultimately resulted in an exciting activation of the pictorial space as she started to incorporate text along the borders of her paintings, as seen in the mid 1980's *The Big Apple* (in the Zlotnick collection).

By the early 1990's, the scraps of language expanded and, combined with an expressionistic use of color, resulted in a transformation of the entire painting surface into high energy, text based landscapes and portraits. This is evidenced in several paintings that speak to various concepts of female consciousness (a repeated theme in Romain's work). This includes

the witty and rather tongue and cheek *I Dreamed I Arrived At My Opening At The Whitney In My Maidenform Bra* and the more pensive and later canvas *Herstory* (both in the Zlotnick collection).

There is an epic quality to Romain's work. This is emphasized by the large scale of her canvases and further underscored by the use of repetition of phrase and grand subject matter/sources of her poetic text. Many of her references are mythological in nature - from the ancient deities of Mesopotamia to Biblical and Greek tragedy characters, from the American Pop icons of Rock-n-Roll to the symbol of Jackie Kennedy, from children's fairy tales to modern advertising slogans. From literal myth to the fantasies of pop culture, Romain's work is imbued with a mysterious narrative lore that paints evocative images without the aid of figuration.

There is a vibrant energy to Romain's work. The text is either stenciled or scrawled around the canvas in an unruly, often upside-down, fashion reminiscent of Jean-Michel Basquiat and the NY graffiti artists of the 1980's. Underneath and at times overlapping her words are thick splashes of bright color laid across the fabric. Pictographs appear and reappear from one piece to another. A lovely visual cacophony of (un)spoken word. These are the images of an urban painter - the clamorous sounds and dazzling lights of the big city (first Philly then LA) have been imprinted on the artist and resonate through her work.

Many different elements - color, humor, language, music, poetic convention, symbolism - cohere and are expressed so simply. This work is immensely approachable, each canvas unfurls multiple levels on which to experience it.

Barbara Romain is significant. Her canvases belong in the company of contemporary greats (see articles on Ed Rucha and Bill Viola on the reverse). Romain's work stays with you. Its brilliance is in making the viewer feel the immediacy of being right there in the moment with the painting. It is this very offerance of vitality that makes one want to see more. Much more.