

GALLERY



Cara London

by Cathie Viksjo

Inside an artist's studio, you are privy to the trappings of creativity. You are privileged to get a peek into the artistic process. It is a wonderful place to hang out. The smell of turpentine, a jumble of paint-soaked rags, squeezed tubes of paint like toothpaste, empty coffee cans full of brushes, a sink that could use a good scrubbing and a work in progress on an A-frame easel. Some water, some fruit. But those apples are most likely destined for immortality in a still life painting, not an afternoon snack. These are the tools artists use to enter another dimension—the visual language of art.

Cara London, a strong, gifted artist full of promise and dedication, has captured the essence of the artist's lair. It is a place where she feels a belonging. "When I went to that studio, I just felt I was home," said Mrs. London, who is married to Eric Sirota, a physicist for Exxon/Mobil. The couple, who live in

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Readington Township, have two children—Julia, 10, who attends the Holland Brook School, and Craig, 9, a pupil at the Three Bridges School. Her children enjoy art too, besides the obligatory educational museum visits; they draw, sculpt and write. “They certainly have had a lot of exposure to things,” said Cara, who teaches both children and adults.

Her studio painting was created in the New York City studio of John Griefen where she painted with her colleagues from 1985–2001. “When I did the studio scenes, it was such a jumble of stuff. It created a challenge to make sense through paint and drawing. I didn’t want to make it easy. It was taking all these details and creating something else. Usually shapes and patterns and colors might be the thing.”

Her fellow artists, about four to six people, gave helpful critical advice. “This was the thing that changed me, most profoundly affected me,” she reflected. “They all had the same goal. It helped free me up. It was the most improvisational. Now I work on my own, but I really miss that input. It was not necessary to have the answers. It was a great way of being pushed,” said Cara, who earned her bachelor’s degree cum laude in art history from Brandeis University in 1983. She also earned a master’s degree in sculpture at the Parsons School of Design/New York Studio School in 1985. A sculptural quality to her paintings is clearly evident. “I rely on the structure, the drawing, the color, the light and the use of the materials to make the work sing. I’m working it in paint, but I’m thinking sculpturally. I try not to know how I’m going to get there when I start out, but I hope, in the end, I have attained this ideal some of the time,” she said.

The future is bright for this painter who is artistically as gifted as she is intellectually. With some 700 paintings in her inventory, Cara is prolific and productive, but regional art lovers may not be familiar with her signature style. She is a stay-at-home mom who has made raising her children her top priority, as well it should be. Her other painterly offspring, so to speak, wait for her loving hands when time permits. “The paintings just sit here

and pile up,” said the artist, who paints in her kitchen as well as in her basement studio.

“Painting for me is a sheer joy and I am awed by its transcendent possibilities,” said the artist, who works in oils and acrylics. “I am compelled to speak in a visual language—my need to communicate through line, form, texture and color is overwhelming and quite beyond words. I have dedicated my life to creating works of art that uplift through beauty. I strive for those moments when the paint and the structure take on a life of its own.”

Although she is a master sculptor, it’s physically easier to deal with the logistics of painting with two young children in tow. “Sculpture is always there, but I really enjoy working with color,” she said. Community service also occupies a significant portion of

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her time as a volunteer. For the past two years, Mrs. London has been co-president of the Flemington Jewish Community Center, as well as president of their nursery school. Cara has donated murals to the county’s Women’s Crisis Center, and the Hunterdon Youth Shelter. These efforts have led to a small and growing mural business, called Draw the Line that Cara created in collaboration with her friend and fellow artist Barbara Clarin.

Cara grew up in Woodmere, Long Island, New York, and was the artist of the class. In the seventh grade, she took a sculpture class every Tuesday and loved molding objects with clay. “I didn’t realize at that time that my life revolved around those Tuesdays,” said Mrs. London, who had the same feeling when she took Art History 101 as an undergraduate. “I cannot emphasize strongly enough how important my art history background

has been to my development as an artist,” said Cara. “I began by painting from Old Masters and looking, looking and looking.” Of late, she has been touched by the immediacy of brush and ink work of Asian artists. And pottery has had its magnetic pull as well.

“Seeing things from an historical perspective, going back to my ‘friends,’ and then trying to push forward and find my own voice has given me such deep pleasure,” said the artist. “This passion continues to guide my work.”

Mrs. London has also taught art history, life drawing, sculpture, art appreciation and the principles of design at various regional schools such as the Hunterdon Art Center, Raritan Valley Community College, and The Lawrenceville School, among others. Her strong foundation in the history of art has enriched her perspective about Western art, and also given her a facile knowledge of the Old Masters like Rembrandt and Bernini, as well as the 19th-century modernists Manet, Degas and Cezanne. “I find that I like things with the darks and the lights, anything that is structural,” she said. One of Rembrandt’s late self portraits hangs in her studio. Into the 20th century, she has studied the art of Picasso, Matisse, Hans Hoffman and Mark Rothko. (Cara shares a predilection for apples as did Cezanne.)

But still lifes are, of course, about more than a pound of grapes, a handful of onions or a vase of lavender lilacs. In 1968, Meyer Shapiro, the legendary art historian at Columbia University, wrote an essay on the meaning of still life, using a still life by Cezanne as a starting point of reference. “Still life engages the painter (and also the observer who can surmount the habit of casual perception) in a steady looking that discloses new and elusive aspects of the stable object. At first common-place in appearance, it may become in the course of that contemplation a mystery, a source of metaphysical wonder. Completely secular and stripped of all conventional symbolism, the still-life object, as the meeting point of boundless forces of atmosphere and light, may evoke a mystical mood.”

Depending on her painterly inclination, Cara will alternate between still lifes, landscapes, figurative work and abstract pieces. Priced from \$500 to \$2,500, her works are on view at GJ Cloninger in Morris Plains.

The one critical ingredient in an artwork, as I have learned in 20 years as an art critic, is the power of the innate faculty of intuition. It cannot be learned, but it must always be honored. Those hunches that strike at midnight are the guiding light for artists. And it should always be taken into consideration. It is not easy to describe verbally, but it is a sensation, an inner impulsion that directs the mind and wields the paintbrush. Yes, this is the place to go now. This is what to do next. As Cara put it, "When I paint, I assiduously avoid planning. You never study intuition, because it's hard to describe and analyze. It's like a fourth dimension."

The great thinker Benedetto Croce wrote about intuition in his 1953 book *Aesthetic*. "Now, the first point to be firmly fixed in mind is that intuitive knowledge has no need of a master, nor to lean upon any one; she does not need to borrow the eyes of others, for she has excellent eyes of her own."

As her children grow up and gain more independence, Cara will surely pursue her craft with great diligence. But already, her works are in the permanent collections of the Reader's Digest Association, Golden Artist-Colors, Inc., Sharecom, Projectavision, Inc., Switzer Group, Inc., Hunterdon Regional Cancer Center, Bnai Zion Medical Center, Haifa, Israel.

"I believe in my work," she said. "When a viewer looks at my work, I hope he or she feels something ineffable, hard to describe, but it feels right. I hope they will have a physical sensation that reflects the underlying passion and search for deep beauty."

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