

REDSARA: Urban Landscape Painter and Political Activist

Interviewed by
Guinevere Pencarrick



Red Sara, emerging Urban Landscape painter, political activist, and portrait artist can also make a mean cup of green tea. I am sitting in her window gallery sipping a cup as she buzzes around the room, telling me a bit about herself. Unremitting traffic noise from outside her studio window sounds like the scolding whirr of thousands of angry worker bees. We battle to hear each other, Red Sara clutching her mug as a shield to my probing. Our conversation ranges from discussing Picasso's blue period; her thoughts on being labeled an "outsider artist", to the changing installations in her window, a protest against the invasion of car sounds.

"Red Sara" is her art persona. She was actually born Sara Ross on September 17, 1971 in Toronto, Ontario, Canada. After graduating high school in Toronto in 1989 she studied architecture at Carleton for 2.5 years, later moving to Vancouver. Once here, she studied at the University of British Columbia, first enrolling in forestry, then graduating with a BA in Geography. Her focus was on human geography, the study of people in space. She has lived in Vancouver for 9 years and during my interview with her, I have come to realize that she has made much of her time in our city. Red Sara is an important contributor to the community, not just with her artwork, but also with the donation of her organizational skills.

Guinevere Pencarrick (GP):

I'll start with your landscapes. Your trademark appears to be a clean and directed dribbled line over dark urban scenes brought up in layers of washes. It is obvious that the wires that hum through the city have affected you; could you explain this better for me?

Sara Ross (SR):

I guess it has been a trademark of mine. Other people do make those marks, action painting, you know, like Pollock. I'm trying to use it in a representational way. I use it for it's expressive, passionate, explosive, quality. It's terrifying, yet liberating when I look at something and know I have to drip paint on it. It's like "this could be fabulous or it could really wreck it". After I have put all of this work into a painting and then to say here goes...

GP:

What other significance besides action and chance does this method of yours have? It shows up in most of your work.

SR:

The power lines remind me of the difference between the things we can change in our lives and the things you can't change. I mean you can't change the power lines. You can't change the four lanes of asphalt outside my window. You can't change your history or the school you went to, but there are things you can change. A lot of people in Vancouver are saying recycle, ride a bike, carry a coffee mug, and sure, you can change those things. But there's a lot of pressure on us as comparatively rich people in the world to make a difference, but really, there's a lot of things that we can't change. It's about both of these.

The work with the dominant power lines we have been discussing is from her 200-2002 shows. Pedestrian, acrylic on canvas, 14"x36" and quite reasonably priced at \$550, depicts a night time residential urban scene and Ross's top layer dribble in high gloss red/orange paint on gives the impression of text, almost like a signature¹. The scene under this top layer is brought about by her usual method of laying down several layers of matt colour with active brushstrokes. Billboard, oil and tar on canvas, 50"x 60", is \$1200.00. The storefront and billboard scene under tar drips is lit up and the contrast between light and dark is strong. Electricity seems to flow through the piece and the picture is confrontational like a billboard itself². Hit And Run, mixed media on Canvas, 76" x 96", is \$1500.00. Shards of colour rip through the night shadow in an explosive car crash scene. More dribble on the top layer indicates text. This brings a Japanese printmaker's stamp connotation to the piece³. These stand out most from a high charged and exciting collection, but all works are remarkable⁴.

GP:

I was going to ask you about Jackson Pollock. You have taken the dribble and made your own mark with it. Pollock was doing something entirely different. I want to know why you balked when I said the dribbled line is your trademark.

SR:

The reason why I hesitated about it being my trademark is that my most recent show incorporated a lot of other elements as well. Tighter lines. There's a couple of them that are expressive, using power line gestures, but I'm wondering if I may not be moving away from that a little bit.

My new work is a lot smaller and more controlled. Power lines aren't the main element anymore. I use them in backgrounds, they are gestural. I use a huge thick brush and paint now and it has altered the drip.

GP:

You have some works in progress, could you describe what you are doing for our reader?

SR:

Recently I have introduced mica-based paint into my work, going over top of my paintings. I used it all along, but I have been really getting into it lately. It's a mineral

¹ <http://saraross.com/gallery1.htm>

² <http://saraross.com/gallery3.htm>

³ <http://saraross.com/gallery4.htm>

⁴ <http://saraross.com/>

based paint and it replaces white. It is reflective and picks up light better than white paint does. It's got luminosity.

One of my favourite things I'm working on now is painting at night by candlelight, or by streetlight. The mica is just the most dazzling fabulous thing. And the painting transforms as you walk by it. When you are looking straight on at it, you can see the depth of it. And if you view it from the side, it just becomes...it just glows in the reflected streetlight, because of the mica.

GP:

I hate to do this to you Sara, because I know you don't want to be pegged as a political artist, but I have to investigate your crazy window art installations and your style of dress. You have things sewn, taped, pinned and otherwise hanging from your clothing. You are even spray-painted in places. One of the logos pinned to your pants is your own design; is your life and your political activism a part of your work?

SR:

Yeah, that is a patch of a bicycle. I made a stencil of a bicycle and the wheels are peace symbols. It's on old tablecloth that was donated to me by a cleaning company down the street. I made a bunch of patches which I passed out to people in the cycling community who have been active in Bikes Not Bombs⁵. That is something that I have organized. People give me stuff to wear because I am a good advertisement. I use my body to advertise. I'm up against mainstream media, I gotta be loud.

Bikes Not Bombs, arising from within the critical mass community, seek to promote cycling as a celebration of freedom and positive change in the world.

Sara is the key contact person for this "evolution", and has acted as a spokesperson for the project on several occasions. She created a banner 4' x 15' reading "Vancouver Bikes Not Bombs" with bike graphics⁶.

GP:

You are loud, ha-ha. You mentioned Picasso, who are some of your favourite artists, and how might they pertain to your work?

SR:

Picasso is a big influence on my work. I've read a few books on him...I appreciate the star quality.

GP:

What do you mean by "star quality", just to be clear?

SR:

Well, the way he is presented in books shows his whole life as though everything he did was brilliant. And Yeah, so he probably wasn't like that, but he's presented that way and he built himself into that image.

But I also like his gestures and his success with gestures. One of my strengths is gesture. And he was an anarchist and I'm one.

⁵ Some of Ross's efforts with this project were documented here:
vancouverindymedia.org

⁶ Email interview with Ross

I don't think I am like Picasso, though, because he worked harder than I do. But I'm working on that. I'm developing that in my own practice

GP:

What about influences? Maybe someone contemporary to now?

SR:

Yeah, there's Jim Hoehnle. He's a Vancouver ceramicist and Graffiti artist...a politically engaged cyclist.

We just finished a collaborative painting. For a group show, Artists Against war⁷, which involved doing full body prints of us naked, which was lovely and quite fun to do.

GP:

Do you show together usually?

SR:

Uh, no...I guess we have been collaborating since July. When we first started, we worked together on some of his ceramics. We started doing graffiti together... political graffiti. ...Graffiti for love, not for destruction.

He had a ceramics show, called Ceramicycle, combining his interests. So I got to put some of my graffiti on his ceramics.

Jim Hoehnle is a Vancouver based artist like Ross said. The Show they did their collaboration for, Artist's against war, is a big project and Redsara has been a huge contributor to it. She is curating and coordinating an Art Party on April 24th, 2003 for 120 people at the Urban Oasis (A private home that Mark Donovan of Vancouver rents out as party space). Twelve artists will show new 2D, 3D and performance works. On April 20th, 2003, She was involved in a public art project involving 20 people. In her words, she and others "created a painting entitled 'Life Before Profit' using human blood. This event evoked a long history of blood and resistance actions". On April 04, 2003, she attended an Artist's against war party Involving 80 performers and artists at The Wise Hall. To that she contributed one new painting created collaboratively with Jim Hoehnle. There she was interviewed on local and national TV⁸. Lastly, to do with this project, Redsara was involved in Just Another Graveyard on Sunday, March 23. Seventy crosses were erected at the Vancouver Art Gallery, where the public was invited to write their messages of peace on the crosses⁹.

SR:

As for more influences, well, honestly, Jim Cummins (of I, Braineater) gave me the format of doing shows in my house. He does shows in his house.

I was totally influenced by that. I went to his show and saw how it was put together...and I thought Well, I can have a show in my studio as well. I have an amazing studio it becomes very gallery-like when it's emptied out.

My work has been compared to his, just in the sense that we are both considered to be outsider artists and we both paint on wood...and I learned a secret about

⁷ www.9monkeys.org/

⁸ The event was covered by local Radio (CBC), local TV (Global- redsara speaks on Bikes Not Bombs, City TV), local print (Vancouver Sun, Province), national print (photo of redsara in Globe and Mail), local web (vancouverindymedia.org)

⁹ Email interview with Ross.

Verethane and Urethane from him. How to make things shiny... everybody likes things that are shiny...

Jim Cummins, more directly influenced this past show and my most recent, at least in intent and materials. They're smaller works, and they don't have as much value individually as my larger pieces do.

Vancouver based rock artist, Jim Cummins, among other practices, silk-screens images on board before and after painting them and sells his work comparatively cheaply this way. He is well known in the contemporary underground rock and roll scene in Vancouver and his shows attract a lot of young hip buyers. Cummins is a rock musician in addition to his work in sculpture and painting. "I, Breaineater" is the name of his band as well as being his nom de plume for art. His work has influenced a lot of Vancouver outsider art, and one can see glimpses of him in a lot of the pop art/pin up paintings that have been popular in bars and café's around town these past few years. He has shown at Moonbase Gallery a couple of times with 12 Midnite and other local musician/painters in this tightly knit rock art scene.

GP:

You are both quite playful about making your work salable, Sara; it is a part of it, isn't it, for you? Which might tie into you selling it out of the home.

RS:

I aspire to make more money from my work. And I'm currently at a stage in my career where I'm in dialogue with a couple of galleries about getting into and showing in more recognized institutional spaces in Vancouver.

I see the work I'm doing for this as separate from the stuff I do to express myself. One is focused on expression and the questions I'm exploring, and the other is a synthesis of my ideas, but it is still a little bit softer than someone looking at a car driver and saying "fatass". (One of the posters Ross has displayed in her window gallery mocked drivers with this invective) In the work I am preparing for commercial galleries, you take the message out, and you've got a car and you've got a conflict; it's a little bit softer. I'm definitely making compromises.

GP:

So, two portfolios?

SR:

Definitely. One's for commercial galleries and the other is for getting funding for political art projects, which is another side of my work. I get funded to amplify community messages with art. Recently there was a municipal election here that I was very involved with. I was particularly involved with articulating popular sentiment about it. I made a series of silk-screens that were displayed up Main ST in storefronts and windows. They were silk-screened on fabric, sort of drawing on the idea of a broadsheet, like JG Posada from Mexican turn of the century prints. He's a printmaker who did things around the day of the dead; he did depictions of suicide, patricide; these sensational public interest stories. They were done in very harsh contrast, skulls, and kind of thing. He really influenced Diego Rivera and all those other muralists, but he was a little bit earlier.

I was drawing on that imagery, that popular imagery, almost of revolution and drawing that into the political climate of Vancouver. People really responded and wanted to buy them. I gave the prints away, because I had been funded for the project.

GP:

You are into printmaking then?

SR:

I've done a fair bit of printmaking. I like woodcut and lino.

GP:

Wood grain is allowed to declare itself as an element in your painting, so I can see why you might like woodcut.

SR:

That too. But I would say I like it because woodcut and lino allow for big areas of light and dark, solid contrast. I've always drawn that way, reducing things tonally. I like that I can create a sense of solidity. I can create a real feeling with no sketching.

GP:

Speaking of drawing, you have done quite a lot of portraiture in a style that is completely different from your work with urban landscape. What about that work?

SR:

I did a series of portraits in kind of a self-imposed art school project. One every day for 101 days. I made a book out of them called discipline 101. It just got accepted into the "Book Mobile" project¹⁰. It was launched in New York City in March. It will visit the National Gallery of Canada, which is exciting.

GP:

You mentioned that this was kind of "an art school" project, but you don't have a formal art training. Plus you are laughing your head off. (I'm laughing too). Would you say that you are maybe an "outsider artist" as you mentioned earlier?

SR:

Yeah, well...I didn't go to art school. I went to the University of British Columbia and studied geography. I've always been studying art on my own. My family has been supportive and I've taken courses here and there, all my life.

GP:

How about theory? Have you had much of that?

SR:

I've got the tech stuff, but I'm totally lacking in art history. I don't have the prescribed discipline of art school. So for me to do this kind of project was a good thing. It helped me grasp my own practice.

GP:

What do you think of that term though? I was hoping to provoke a statement about that with my last question.

SR:

I think it serves to maintain the self-elevated status of the people who have gone through the art institution and the people who try to perpetuate that institution, through galleries, through exclusive ownership of paintings.

¹⁰ <http://www.mobilivre.org/tour.html>

So to call people “outsider artists”, to me, really points to the people who are “insiders”. It helps to define things a bit though. My goal is to walk between those two worlds.

Ross does walk between those two worlds. Her art is fresh, original and daring. Being that it is urban, modern and competent, however, it can also go with your couch. I have one (Towtruck, 2002, 48x48 inches) hanging in my dining room and while it also pulls the colours of the room together; she gave it to me because on first sight of it I burst into tears.

Bibliography

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