



Artist on Artist: Jerry Gerber Interviews Lola Scarpitta



J: Do you see a relationship between your art and your spiritual life?

L: Art is about the spirit. It is the one thing that unites humanity as a whole. It has a universal language that we all can speak. So in that regard, I try to speak my voice in the work I make. The very personal facts that make me who I am, good or bad, I try to show in my paintings. I was brought up by painters. My mother and father were part of the post-war Italian art movement. They came out of fascist Italy bloody and bruised. There was not a lot of "You shall be this!" in my childhood. In a way that made me more spiritual, not in the sense of organized religion but in a childlike belief that we are all under a deeper more loving gaze than anything here on earth.

J: Can art be a kind of religion, where the artist brings passion, commitment, love, devotion and a sense of urgency and importance to their work, and can this be dangerous, in the sense that the artist derives so much meaning and value from their work that the moral and ethical dimensions of spirituality do not have a place in this passion?

L: You have to believe in what you do. And the ideal is to do your work with the knowledge that you have added something of yourself to a work which makes people realize a truth. As for ethics and morality, I leave that to the politicians and the clergy.

J: What is it about artistic taste which is so utterly subjective and do you think there is a kind of "objective" beauty, a universal beauty that can move nearly everyone, or are we humans so diverse in our intelligence, culture, education, experience and imagination that this is impossible?

L: Fortunately or unfortunately, there is nothing "objective" in taste. I love all the different art movements throughout the ages. I am not an abstract painter, as my parents were. But I adore Clyfford Still as much as I love Goya. They each bring to the table a wonderful dish. It's all a great big feast. I may not enjoy every dish at the table but there are others that will. And all will have a good time! Just don't sneak McDonalds onto the table.

J: In your work, you have several pieces with direct references to Che Guevara. Do you believe art is a threat to those in power if it suggests, either directly or indirectly that the metaphors, ideas and paradigms which allow people to hold onto power are lies and distortions? When does political expression dominate or detract from aesthetics and, conversely, when do the two qualities succeed together? Do you think that art causes social change or is it that people's consciousness is changed by art first?

L: The Che paintings were done as homage to the ideal man. Guevara was a man heroic in his dimensions. In a sense, the Che works are as close as I have ever come to religious painting. He is a Christ figure. There are those who would argue with that. But again, I am coming from my upbringing and my reality. Politically overt paintings rarely move the powers out or keep them in for very long. Napoleon had the best propaganda artists in history and even they couldn't do the job of keeping him in power very long. The establishment is threatened by artists because we can be a very sneaky bunch. We can do one thing and mean another. We can cause people to question and to ask questions.

J: Mass media and culture are about marketing, profits and celebrity. In the world of painting this is probably less conspicuous, but still present, than in the performing arts. Do you think there are both positive and negative aspects of mass media? Is seeking a mass-audience a sign that the artist has nothing unique to say? Is art that is true to itself without regard to commercial appeal the highest art?

L: My father was in Leo Castelli's troop of artists. They were the first to pioneer the idea of mass media and commercial appeal. Warhol was genius at it. Did he just reflect the times or was he the one to change the perception? Perhaps, it was a little of both. How do we judge it? Should we judge it? To quote Picasso, "If a work of art cannot live always in the present it must not be considered at all" Maybe that's the answer. Let time judge.

J: The artistic career can be difficult. We are expected to pour our souls into our work, and then conduct business as though we are selling widgets or shoes. What kind of personality attributes do you think help an artistic person to survive, prosper and create prolifically and what kinds of sacrifices, material and psychological, do you think necessary in order to devote one's life to making art?

L: Ah, you ask me about something I am woefully deficient in. I had no training in self promotion because my father never really had to do it. And, if he did he generally fucked it up by refusing to be anyone but who he was. He had Castelli for that part of his life. And thank goodness he did! I unfortunately don't have a Leo Castelli in my life. I began to paint in earnest only after my father threw in the towel and said "no mas". And even then I waited a bit to see if he was bullshitting us. It was too hard to grow under such a huge oak of a painter. I did it in my way, my voice and in my own time frame. I had great art professors who were always pushing me to overcome my fears, but in the end I had to go in the path that was suited for me. I think that's true for everyone in art. You make your own road and draw your own map.

J: Who are your favorite painters?

L: I go through "crushes"! I love the masterly hand of Manet. I can sit for hours in front of anything by him. My father, Sal Scarpitta's torn and wrapped canvases from the late 50's and early 60's are things of sheer greatness. The whole body of his work is wonderful but that period is really my favorite. I can remember in university being mesmerized by Delacroix and the Romantic Movement. Of course that was the 1980's and Expressionism in American art was taking root, so who knows? I could have been mirroring what was around me. But I still love Delacroix AND Basquiat.... I do seem to always come back to Picasso. There is a tie there. Perhaps because my mother knew him and therefore he became a part of my history bank. But Picasso is a force that all other 20th and 21st century painters have to contend with. He is the Minotaur that whispers in our ear while we try to listen to our own drum beat.