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By [Tiffany Kelly](#) [Email the author](#) July 6, 2011

Arts

Lola Scarpitta Reveals Thoughts Behind Her 'Passing State of Mind'

The Toluca Lake artist talks about her solo show at the El Portal Theatre.

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Lola Scarpitta with her painting of Pablo Picasso holding an infant version of herself at the opening reception of her show, "A Passing State of Mind," at the El Portal Theatre. Credit: [Tiffany Kelly](#)

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While some artists shy away from revealing the inspiration behind their work, Lola Scarpitta leaves no detail unexplained, from a vintage Brillo box to a dishtowel.

We are standing in front of a piece at her solo show — a collection of visual commentaries on religion, the power of children, Hollywood, her relationship to Picasso (more on that later) — on June 26 and she is explaining how the 60s housewife in the painting is a modern rendition of Édouard Manet's *Dead Matador*.

Manet's piece showed the deceased holding a bull-fighting cape; Scarpitta's dead housewife is holding a dishtowel. A bottle of pills and a Brillo box lay in the background; the latter a homage to Andy Warhol, who created a series of painted wooden boxes inked with the famous Brillo logo.

"It's very reminiscent of the 1960s when women were fighting for their equality and they were the last of the really crucified bunch," says Scarpitta.

Manet's *Dead Matador* is "just so raw," she says. "He's dead and he's beautiful and he's on the ground and he's just freshly killed and I thought of her the same way."

The dead housewife alludes to the success of male artists as opposed to female artists, she says.

Looking around the gallery of her exhibit, "A Passing State of Mind," which is now showing at the [El Portal Theatre](#), it might appear that Scarpitta has a penchant for vocalizing the thoughts and feelings of women from various decades; one painting, a series of a woman dressing from underwear to a business suit, was conceived from postcards of 50s French models who posed "defiantly" for the camera. But the artist swears that she is not intentionally picking on men.

"It's not easy for women in the art world. It's not the man artists' fault, it's just a man's world," she says.

Scarpitta is familiar with that world; a third-generation artist who was raised in New York City, she grew up around emerging artists of the 60s and 70s. Her grandfather, Salvatore Cartaino Scarpitta, was a Los Angeles sculptor who created a life-size model of Marlene Dietrich; her father was represented by the same art dealer as Andy Warhol. The influences of her upbringing are evident here; even paintings that depict a time before the liberating 70s have a freshly modern, pop-art appeal.

Friends stop the longtime Toluca Lake resident throughout our conversation. She greets each one with the same unrestrained enthusiasm, and introductions are made all around. After a few minutes, she comes off as humble and personable, a rarity in the art world, even for a Valley show.

When asked about a piece called *Nuclear Ballerinas*, which depicts two young ballet dancers performing in front of an elderly couple outside of a trailer, she says it is a "typical Americana scene" that shows how "life and death is tissue-paper thin."

"That is a little bit of an overt environmental message, we all live our lives surrounded by all these things that can eat us up," she says, then stops.

"I sound like a Woody Allen impersonator, don't I?" she says. "I sound like a female Woody Allen."

If she shares any traits with Allen, it is his sharp wit and ability to keenly observe personalities. On a painting of a partly exposed woman in a bustier, she says she gave the woman a knife because she had a bruise on her leg. On a piece that re-imagines the Fall of Man, Eve is holding a hamburger, while the famous golden arches loom in the background.

Surrounded by women armed with magical objects and children set in playful situations, it would be hard to guess that the subject in Scarpitta's most coveted piece is a man. Well, not just any man: Pablo Picasso.

We stand by the painting of a very stoic-looking Picasso, clothed in a brightly-colored, detailed jacket and holding a laughing baby in his right hand, while she recounts the history of the Spanish artist's involvement with her family.

The man that Scarpitta's mother originally married was an artist, she says, but she had an affair with Picasso.

"He was totally crazy about my mother," she says.

Her mother was very closed off with details regarding the affair, but she found out about everything recently, when her mother divulged the story to her a year before she died, she says.

While Scarpitta was seeking inspiration to paint a piece of Picasso, she came across a surprise. Working with an old photograph of herself as an infant with her mother by her side, she found an almost exact replica of the image in one of Picasso's paintings.

She pulls up the two images, side by side, on her iPad. It is uncanny; Picasso's is an obvious derivative of the photograph.

Her mother didn't inform her of the painting; she found it while she was searching on an online database of Picasso works (she thinks it was eBay). A feature on the Web site asked her if she would be interested in another image based on the one she was viewing. That image was the painting of her as an infant with her mother.

Her own piece is a tribute to the artist, whom she says was "a good person in our lives" after her father left when she was very young.

"I was giving back a painting to him without even realizing it," she says. "It's magical."

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