

SHANE CAMPBELL GALLERY

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MG: LA is becoming famous for its concentration of artistic talents. Was it a conscious choice or a coincidence that you are living and working here?

AB: What's so nice about LA that it is so spread apart. On the westside where I'm living now I can be a kind of recluse and don't need to deal with anyone except my dog and my work. I got my undergraduate here in Otis in 2011 so I've been on this part of town since 2008.

MG: Did you move to LA to study?

AB: Yes. I grew in this very little farming town Piru just outside LA County, where the majority of the population are Mexican immigrants. I was born in the US but all my family is from Mexico.

MG: What is your first language?

AB: Spanish. I was in school speaking Spanish until I was about 7 years old. The town I grew up in was maybe a thousand people; most of the kids were Latinos. Their parents were mainly farmers and pickers; my father was a picker as well before he became a truck driver.

MG: How did you go into art?

AB: Probably through the local liquor store. It had these magazines, teen angel or something, which published drawings and letters from prison inmates; drawings of women, which the prisoners were trying to draw from photos of their girlfriends. They were really ugly in a good way you know.

MG: What did they mean to you?

AB: They were honest. At the same time it struck me already as a kid that the shading was really bad, the pencil was wrongly used and that was what really was nice about all the works in these magazines.

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MG: Was the painting your medium from the very beginning?

AB: Initially I was making a ton of drawings all the time and slowly got into painting. I went to school for painting but ended doing performance and sculpture because there was no faculty that I was really into as a painter. Right out of school I didn't know what to paint, I was torn between sculpture and performance. But the drawing was always there, it was immediate, I could throw it away if I wanted, I could leave it, and I could pick it up later. I stored all of my old drawings in pizza boxes. A couple of years ago I was invited to the Venice Beach Biennale by the curator Ali Subotnik from the Hammer museum. I showed hundreds of drawings and paint-skin objects and then I thought that the paintings should be my drawings. Some of these images had something really

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interesting that I couldn't figure out as a drawing so I decided that this was worth investing as a painting.

MG: How did you develop your technique?

AB: Right out of school I was thinking: 'People who do real oil paintings spend tons of money on it. I'll get the exact the same effect with cheap construction materials'. In a way I was mimicking these people that I was interested in. At some point I worked and got enough money so I could just waste it on paint. My paintings are now primarily oil with other materials thrown in .

MG: How did you solve the problem of high costs of oil paint?

AB: I was often running out of money. Sometimes I was using so much paint that painting ideas were gone before I could buy the material to realize them. I would work for galleries installing works for two weeks, scrap a bit of money together for my rent and then waste the rest on paint, and paint until it was all gone! The beauty of oil and the beauty of painting is that you can always go over it. That's what I have learned and that's the pleasure I get from it. There is never really a mistake, you just have to get in and fix it. It's not about creating masterpieces but about a continuous process of painting.

MG: Your paintings look very intuitive and immediate.

AB: I try and keep the same energy of the drawings in the larger paintings and my paint mixing skills are horrible so it's a good situation for painting I think. I tried once to get a skin tone but I couldn't. Still, trying to achieve a real skin tone turned out being a lot better in terms of the painting because I ended up making more colors than I needed . For many people the important part of a work is to achieve the right colors and shit, for me it is trying to get that color wrong and try to fix it.

MG: Do you know when a painting is finished?

AB: I do for the most part but sometimes the longer it sits around the better it becomes, this painting for example took 2 years to make (Rex Goliath). This is also the beautiful thing about painting: you are not waiting for the product that is outsourced but you are spending time living with it, letting it evolve. I do everything myself. There is another element in it though that seems really nice that Philip Guston talks about, he said that you paint, but you always wait for the third person to come in and finish your painting. It is almost like a very spiritual thing. You never finish the painting in this sense, hopefully you'll leave and somebody else finishes it, letting it speak for itself.

MG: You mentioned that the reservoir of drawings was the base for your paintings. How do you choose what to paint?

AB: I play records and dj sometimes: you go to a record shop and look at a thousand records and you pick two of them. The same applies to drawings, I have a thousand and five hundred drawings, and I get three good images that totally confuse me. I don't even know where I was when I draw them.

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MG: What about the subjects? I have seen that women in all their aspects intrigue you a lot.

AB: This subject is one of the easiest ways to get into figurative painting.

MG: Because women were always present in the history of art?

AB: It was either a landscape or women and I chose the latter. At some point I was looking at my drawings and I asked myself, why am I so interested in the figure? Where I grew up the closest museum was in Santa Barbara, and my parents didn't take me there, for what? So like probably every kid I learned at school some names like Van Gogh and Picasso.

MG: Because they were so prominent?

AB: Because they taught us that they are so important. There's something so ugly about some of the European and American schools of painting, but they are really experimental and that's interesting to me. Some of the biggest influences of mine are European artists like Rene Daniels, Werner Buttner and many others.

MG: What position does the painting claim in your generation that is very much involved in other new media?

AB: Painting is completely different then living through the Internet and thinking I am all over the place. No, you're not, get yourself a studio and do it or just log off for a second . When I was in New York someone said to me: I have seen your works, you are a painter-painter. What does that mean? I use paint and I use a brush. I think for my generation a painter-painter is someone who really uses paint

MG: Did the people in your town think that you were crazy to become an artist?

AB: I approach the painting with a blue-collar attitude. This is work. I come in my studio, I stretch my canvas. My dad said to me: you can do what ever you want but you have to move your ass.

MG: You treat a painting as a real labor not as conceptual activity in the first place.

AB: It depends on what I'm working on for sure, I went to school with a few people who had money and were there because they could pay for it and wanted to waste time or at least that's what I thought at the time. I was there because I wanted to be there and I couldn't pay for it.

MG: How did you survive?

AB: I was commuting an hour to school and an hour back home. I ended up living in my car and that is where initially the drawing started. I would just sit on in my car at night at a parking lot and draw and the next morning go to class. I never asked my parents for money because I didn't want them to worry about me too much.

MG: Did they come to the opening of your exhibition?

AB: They did. For them all is weird but now they feel why I like it out here and maybe the reason that I left Piru.

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MG: Are you aware of your origin when it comes to your artistic identity?

AB: Totally, I'm an artist and that's how I think about it.

MG: Do you think that art school was necessary for you?

AB: I hated it as an institution, but if it weren't for going to an art school, I wouldn't have known any of the European and American artists. I could look at older painters and could revisit Picasso – there is really something there, the more I look the more I'm intrigued by just the quality of an investment in something. I'm interested in a discourse.

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MG: How would you put yourself in the discourse of painting with such a huge tradition? Do you believe in the progress of painting?

AB: I do. I consciously don't look at a lot art, because I can get depressed really fast and that's not good for me. I am into these older people that really dealt with figuration and painting as painting, that's more powerful to me. I recently saw the show of James Ensor at the Getty where realism and abstractions were mixed up; he was doing all simultaneously and was just a mind blowing exhibition.

MG: Lets go back to your subjects. In your last show you presented women as voluptuous, ugly and a bit horrifying lust objects. Not to mention the title: 'Las Putas Problematicas'.

AB: That title was really tongue in cheek. It didn't say something negative about women; it was an attempt to figure out 'the woman' in terms of painting. The Spanish I was taught is more like literal translations from English. The title: Las Putas Problematicas was for me addressing the problem of women in the figurative painting, which was expressed by the confusing sounds of the title when you pronounce it. There was a lot genitals, pussies and tits in the show, but why not?

MG: Were they women inspired by your surroundings?

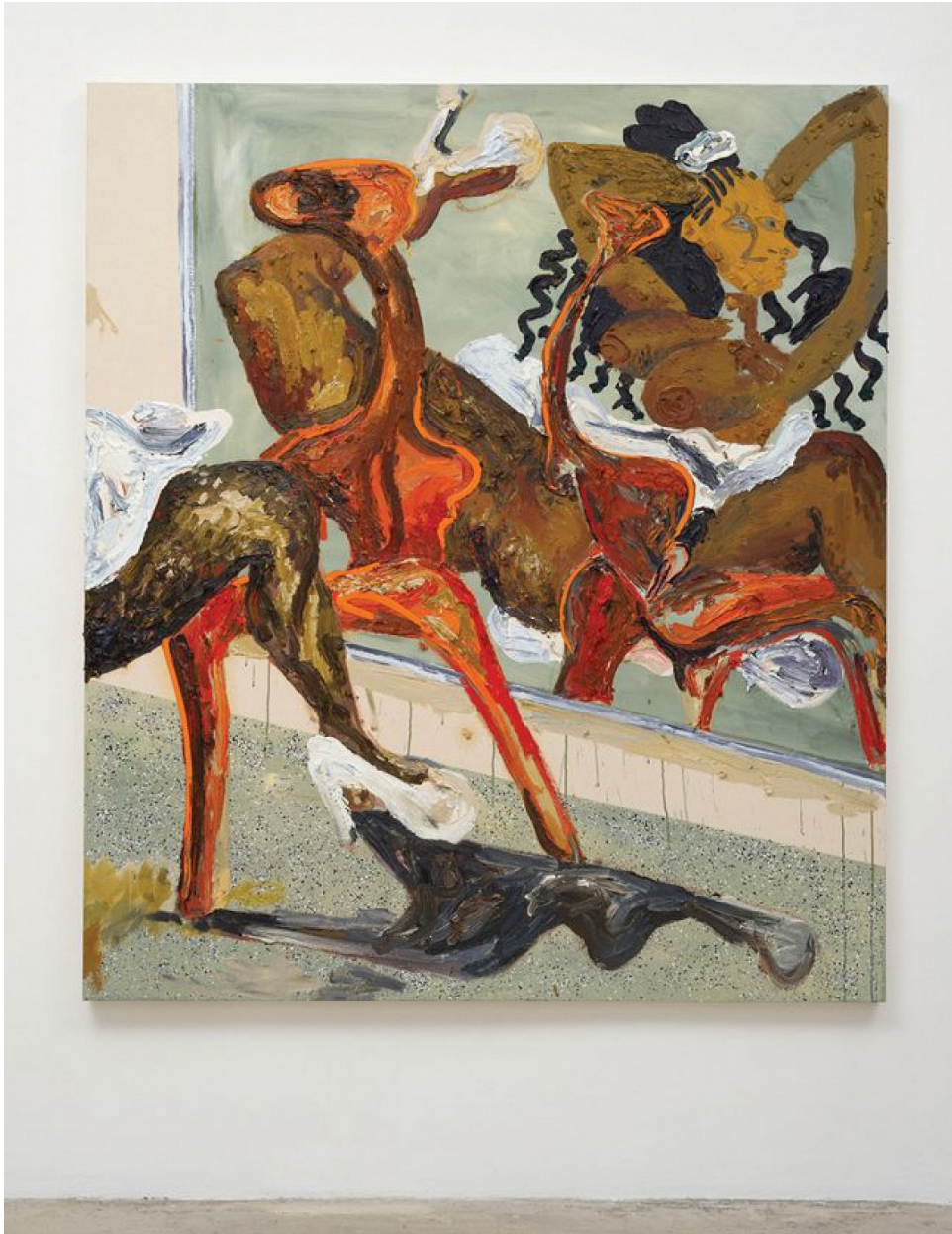
AB: The hairstyle came from my aunts and people I grew up with that would have a lot of volume in their hair. I started to draw this hair on top of the Picasso paintings. In most of the paintings you can't see their faces. In my opinion you can make a proper painting with a backside of a head, which then deals with something else. I was very happy with the book about de Kooning I have read. De Kooning is talking with his gallerist who asks him to make more black and white abstractions because he can sell them, 'don't do women'. And De Kooning said: I am too concerned with my work so I'll make the women.

MG: He was fighting with his Woman I for three years. Did you learn anything from him with regard to the formal aspects?

AB: The eyes, I enjoy looking at how some painters end up doing the eyes. De Kooning has his eyes, Butzer has his eyes. My eyes appear only a little bit spread out through the painting.

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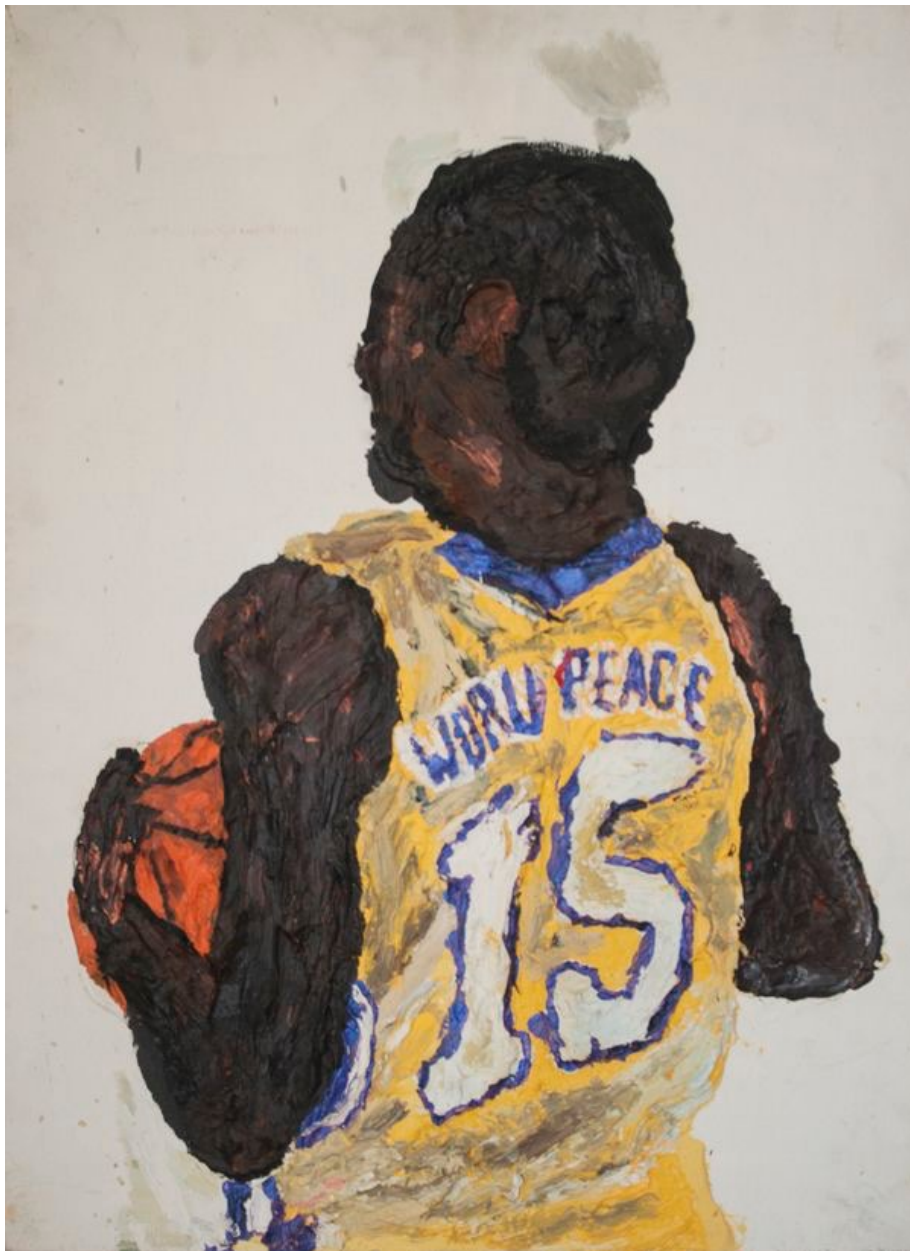


MG: Another subject of yours is sport, and basketball players.

AB: Until I went to art school I was really into sports. I grew up playing football and baseball all day long. Then I realized I would not grow any bigger or taller and that meant figure something else out. As much as I loved it, there was no future for me in sports. I was so into drawing and painting that the only schools I focused on to apply from out of high school were art schools. But to me the sport is still really relevant, because that's what I was brought up with; I haven't been brought up with art so those influences tend to show up in my art practice.

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MG: How quickly are you painting?

AB: Some paintings are done in a day, some others in months or years. The more I add the more problems come up. Something wouldn't happen if I would have stopped, but I didn't like it and I painted over it and it just worked out so much better than the original. The longer I paint, the more decisions I make.

MG: Do you prefer to paint on panel instead of on canvas?

AB: All the big paintings are panels, because I use so much paint that it needs support,

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but I have no preference as long as it's a surface I can paint on.

MG: This studio we are now in is really small; you hardly have any distance to your works.

AB: Three paintings for my show were painted here; the rest was painted in a garage. My garage is probably the size of this front and besides, my neighbors, who store their boxes there, use a half of it. I would be working on 5 paintings at a time. The only positive thing about that space was that I really put much more details in my works because I was so close on them. The light was horrible.

MG: Do you enjoy working in this studio?

AB: We actually just got a notice to leave this space because the neighborhood is really changing. This guy next door owns a couple of fancy restaurants around, also bought this building and sent us a letter saying 'hi you guys, December 31st you need to be out'. I just leased a studio in Inglewood.

MG: Would you expect that another studio would change the way of your painting?

AB: The size of my paintings was so far limited by the size of the door and since I don't have a truck I use a home-depot truck. So I am always conscious of the dimensions derived from my surroundings, literally the door and the bed size. I'm almost starting to feel that works could become bigger in the new studio. But I have really enjoyed the surreality of the canvas sizes.



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