

An Interview with Lois Silver

Topsy Turvy, October 2020



Lois Silver, *House Party*, oil on board, 16 x 20 in.

HHG: The title of your current exhibition is “Topsy Turvy.” Is that a reflection of our current climate or sense of uncertainty in 2020? Has your work shifted at all this year in preparing for your show or has it been a time to embrace familiar ways of working?

Lois Silver: I am very interested in unusual perspectives, so I looked through all of my videotapes of old movies and PBS programs and found a few overhead shots that inspired me. When I reviewed my group of paintings including "Scotch on the Rocks" and "Salmon Dinner" and “ 23 and me.com” it seemed hmmm...what’s the word, not distorted but unbalanced, but not in a bad way. The title “Topsy Turvy” came to mind and seemed to stick. Then I had some paintings such as "Me So Lonely 2020" and “House Party” and I realized that Covid-19 was affecting me in some ways, however, I don't feel I have been suffering through this pandemic. I've enjoyed being sequestered while I've been painting. I feel badly for other people though, and have been listening to their stories on NPR and the news. I do tend to revisit many of my favorite themes, perhaps as a blanket of comfort. In many of these works, I started the paintings with oil paint from tubes and applied with brushes, instead of starting directly with oil bars, then I applied oil bar to the top layer.



Lois Silver, *23 and Me.com*, oil on board, 18 x 18 in.

How does your love of cinema play out in your creative process? Do you draw inspiration from cinematic narrative and set design?

There are geniuses in cinematography, so why not embrace what they've done? I've discovered overhead shots, and well designed shots, plus backgrounds that I wouldn't have imagined, that have greatly influenced me. I never copy a video scene—I add my own people, or take out people, or change the clothing, gender, etc. And probably add a dog or two. I love dogs...I've always been extraordinarily drawn to them.

Your work often feels that it could be set in the 1950's or 60's. Is there a certain charm from those eras that you enjoy portraying?

I enjoy the style of clothing of the 50's...women wore modest dresses. Critic Gary Faigan wrote a nice review of my work in 2006...he called them "Betty Crocker ladies," which is fitting I think. Plus dresses swirl and bend and have their own personality. Men were typically in suits. And, I love polka dots...I

don't know why...I know that if I want to make sure a person in the painting will be the focal point, red will capture the eye, plus a pattern in the clothing...like polka dots.

Some of your titles have a humorous flair that often hint at a particular moment or situation. Do some of your cheeky ideas develop while you're painting – and change the direction of the work? Or are most pre-visualized?

Yes, you are spot on! I will start painting something and it will remind me of a situation that a friend has gone through, or maybe me at one time, and the story will start telling me what to add or remove and what to title it. Most of the paintings are intuitive. They lead me along a path. Some aren't, like the jazz scenes...I know people enjoy them and like to collect them. I love restaurant scenes too...Lyle (my husband) and I never went out to eat, we were too frugal. We would go out for coffee and split the coffee...two people, one large cup. I would have cookies in my purse and we'd sneakily eat them. So restaurant scenes are my way of living vicariously through the paintings, like the nice interior furnishings and matching carpet and curtains.



Lois Silver, *A Grand Celebration*, oil on board, 20 x 24 in.

You have created several paintings depicting different characters in a rowboat. Do these journeys represent soul searching, exploration, escapism, solitude? What is the significance of the red rivers that appear in a few of your works?

Rowboats represent journeys...and life...I call them the rowboat of life...some of my past rowboats have depicted a couple, with the man lazing and the woman rowing...or the woman rowing and she comes upon a large fish - a hazardous journey, but she can do it. I had two ladies in a rowboat called Thelma and Louise...ladies on an adventure. The two smaller rowboats were influenced by a photo in the newspaper of floodwaters...I liked the design and wanted the backgrounds to look like a John Cole painting, as with my painting "I'll Row My Own Darn Boat," just for fun. Additionally, I knew I would end up alone, [Lyle Silver passed away in 2015], so sometimes the woman in the boat is me, with a companion dog, on my solo journey—making my own decisions, unwilling to be capsized. I often use red in a painting to draw attention to a focal point or make a dramatic statement.



Lois Silver, *I'll Row My Own Darn Boat*, oil on board, 24 x 30 in.

Another favorite subject of yours is the recently demolished Alaskan Way Viaduct. What is your connection to this stretch of roadway?

Lyle and I would enjoy flying along the viaduct from West Seattle to downtown. Great view, very little traffic. But we also noticed the gorgeous curves of the on and off ramps...trees and buildings on either side of the sunlit ramp. Leaving town, heading up the Columbia Street ramp, especially at sunset was like being in Greek ruins, the beauty of the light hitting the structure would cast lovely shadows and

colors. Of course I mourn the loss of it, and the memories, so I want to commemorate some of the "old Seattle." But I think it's out of my system and I'm not going to paint any more of them.

Often your paintings seem to set a narrative in motion, but the story is often open-ended. Each viewer brings their own experiences to the work and the interpretations of the story can vary a lot from person to person. Do you enjoy all the different stories that are built from your paintings?

I have lots of stories that people have told me about what they believe my paintings represent and I remember them very well, some funny and some sad. I don't try to spell out too many of my own stories...but some are pleasant, like the big red rowboat painting, "Mother Daughter Excursion." I had visited the Denver Art Museum with a dear friend and was inspired by a beautiful painting by Claude Monet of two women in a red canoe entitled "The Canoe on the Epte." I decided to recreate the painting and I got an inflatable boat and enticed my friend and her daughter to go on an outing together. I enjoy how the figures and red boat contrast against the dark water and background. Underwater plants are hidden just below the surface. In a nod to the artist, I painted the name "Monet" on the rear of the boat. The main objectives of my paintings are: good design, followed by the narrative, and then the color, although color is really important to me.



Lois Silver, *Mother Daughter Excursion*, oil on board, 24 x 28 in.