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Lola Gil Through Her Looking Glass

Interview by Gwynned Vitello



Portrait by Paul Gannon

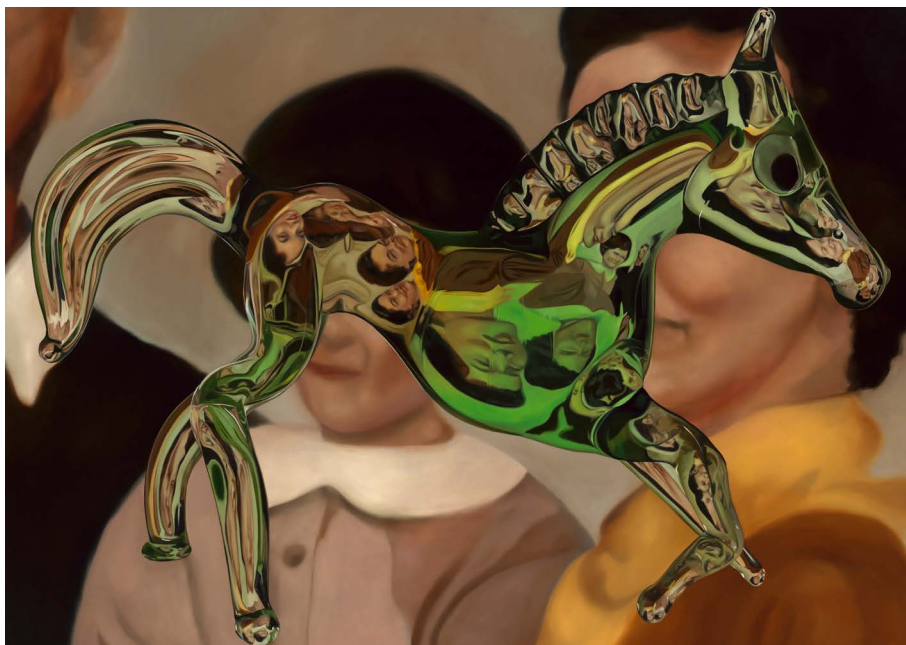
It's not surprising that a very young Lola Gil spent unhurried hours among her grandmother's collection of small, humble figures and objects. Unfettered by preconceived judgments or the proverbial clock, she became acquainted and found an affectionate space for them in her universe. Remember those days? In her latest solo show, *Who Are (You) Are Who*, on view at Nino Mier Gallery in Los Angeles this past fall, stereotypical, almost frozen faces form the backdrop for her paintings, each featuring delicate, translucent glass animals in the foreground as glowing giants of light shine through, refracting myriad colors and angles, asking us to see the nuance, beseeching us to do the same with a stranger, or even someone familiar we haven't taken the time to understand. "As I work on these portraits, I feel the sensation of patience, curiosity, and forgiveness. The glass figure invites the viewer to see depth, feel empathy, and connect with the stranger on a human level." Shed your cynicism and meet Lola Gil.

Gwynned Vitello: I don't normally start at the literal beginning, but I did read that you wanted to become an artist at a very, very young age—single digit? Reach back and tell me about the first thing you delighted in making.

Lola Gil: I have loved painting since I can remember. My relationship with painting became a need around the time I became a teenager. I had sadness growing up as a kid and wanted a creative outlet to help me cope with some hard home years. It wasn't until I was 18 and moved out on my own for the first time that I actually found delight in painting and became ready to escape with my art. I was obsessed with Bukowski, crime films, and Feng Shui. I painted various scenes of Italian mob figures in various situations and learned the importance of good composition.

Your grandparents' home comes up a lot in your recollections. I remember that mine seemed to have a lot more fascinating things to examine than my own home, or maybe it just seemed more special. How did you spend time with their objects, and do you recall them in your work?

I spent a lot of time with my grandparents who were vintage toy collectors and hoarrrrrrders. It was a place where I escaped and fed my wild imagination. My grandma decorated her walls with Norman Rockwell prints and thrift store paintings, but also so many knick-knacks... little toys everywhere! I have incredibly fond memories and often go back there in my mind like it was yesterday. I discovered new things every day—for decades! It's insane how large their collection grew, every room with shelves they made into pathways like a library, and it was incredible stuff very old, rare, fun, and random. It influenced my style, for sure. They've both since passed, grandma—my dearest soul mate, just last year. As she had longer and longer episodes of dementia, she let the family collect what they wanted. I curated my "Best Of's" from these trips and also used many objects from their home in my work. My biggest gift in life was having the opportunity to explore their home.



Who Are (You) Are Who / Starring Smarty Jones, 2023, acrylic and oil on linen, 51 1/8 x 70 7/8 in 130 x 180 cm, (LG23.011)

Why did you start with tattooing instead of the typical route of art school? How did you learn and, after mastering the craft, did you come up with your own ideas?

I was actually only a tattoo artist for about a year. I had just moved home from Santa Rosa, and married at 23! I worked at a shop in Moreno Valley and got the job through a friend because I loved to draw and paint. It was the scariest job I ever had! I have so much respect for tattoo artists. It's a difficult medium, and I hate even thinking about who I worked on. I'm cringing! I never really mastered the craft, though I did paint a lot at the shop. I gave paintings away to friends who came in to hang out with me. It was a fun time in my life.

How did you make the transition to painting as a profession? Was there a moment when you decided that you could actually sell your work?

Strange to say, but the profession found me. I was always home alone with my little one while her dad was working hard to become a Michelin-star chef (his destiny). Shortly after my second child, I was painting like a maniac. It was as cathartic as it was in my younger years, taking me on a path of discovery which was also speaking to others. I had a few friends/advocates who opened this new direction simply by crossing paths, liking one another, and existing in each other's lives. A small coffee shop exhibit where I displayed a carefully curated group of 10 paintings during a huge spoken word event got people talking. Then my first art show held in Riverside sold out. The silliest but most crucial part of what I call my path to destiny was when one of my dearest friends told me about Myspace, and suddenly art was the center of my universe. I hadn't even realized this world of artists existed. A path quickly began to emerge and galleries in LA invited me to participate. The

timing felt serendipitous because I was transitioning into a young single mom. It's beyond incredibly lucky. It can't feel any less than the stars aligning.

Even though it seemed to be therapeutic, how did you make time and focus on painting when you were a young mother?

Somehow I managed well. I had passion and dedication fueling me and I worked every second I wasn't parenting. The ideas were flowing like a waterfall in Yellowstone. I was channeling the extremely hard reality of our family splitting four to three, and going through the motions of being a young solitary parent. The road was very rocky for the first few years, but my lifeline was painting. It saved me just as the patrons who collected and purchased the works did, making it possible to take care of my kids.

Are your inspirations random, emerging from the day-to-day, or do you find certain routines motivating?

I'd say my works are always grounded in personal undertones. I'm very interested in human beings and how we interact. Random imagery finds its way into my mind, things I've observed without consciously noticing. Layers begin to emerge, like coming through fog. I try to jot down a little thumbnail of what I see and this will inform the overall aesthetic. The paintings change as I go. Every now and then I'll see one with total clarity, like "A Fork In It" from 2020. I had recently closed a heartbreaking path to someone toxic from my life. I ached, but for my sanity, had to call it done and over. Many paintings were created with this undertone, this painting broke ground for me, sharing awareness and standing up for oneself. Closing a chapter... pruning a dying leaf to stimulate new growth. "A Fork In It" is one of my absolute favorite paintings. It lifted a lot of weight from me internally.

Having lived on both coasts, as well as in Bristol, England, have you found that different locations create different moods or social interactions?

Oh, yes! I don't think one can move and not expect to be changed in some way! Something inside of me likes to be reminded of how fragile and small we are. Moving and traveling gives me a great perspective on the vastness of the earth, as well as other points of view, upbringings, lifestyles, morals, and culture. Seasons! I can definitely tell you while living in England I was always depressed during the dark winter months. But I welcomed all the feelings I experienced, the new surroundings. Discovering is key to growth. This all contributes to the subjects in the paintings as they develop. My latest move was in 2020 to Philly. I can't say enough good things about my neighborhood, and the people we've grown to call friends. The move gave us a chance to become first-time homeowners, and this was the subject of my last exhibition with AishoNanzuka Gallery in Hong Kong. Because we moved during the Covid lockdown, interiors became very central to my interest. And the homes here are so old with so much character. Nothing like '80s Los Angeles apartments! I suddenly felt very adult, living in a 1900 Victorian colonial inside a city with such a rich history. I'm still very interested in exploring this narrative as the unveiling of this city continues.

I'm always fascinated by the relationship between creative output and dreams, especially since I don't ever remember mine. I'm guessing you have an active dream life. Does it come into play with your work?

Not at all! Haha! I do have wild dreams, but they are always, always dreams where I am trying to find a place to pee—always creative spots as there is never a working bathroom. I can't even share them because they are so embarrassing. I will share one of the most lucid dreams I've ever had. I'm convinced today that I was there witnessing something. I was hovering above a big city up high in the sky. I looked to my left and a man was floating up. He stopped just short above me and opened up a hole in the sky to turn a knob on what looked like an old clock. Just as he finished he realized I was looking at him. He quickly closed the hole and took a hard sideways fall straight down. I woke with a jolt. I don't think I could ever paint that scene because I actually saw it with what felt like real eyes. It would never be right.

What is your painting routine, as in time of day, duration, and where does it all take place? Do you work on one at a time or many at once?

I wake up to have a cup of tea with my husband, then drive down into Philly, Old Kensington, to my studio. I work until about 8pm every night, this year, seven days a week. I've been working at home on the weekends in a little home studio space just to break up the week. I always have quite a few things going at once.

Does each subject have a head start, like a specific idea, or does it spring forth on the canvas? Some writers know the fate of their characters, and some "learn" the plot as they write. Where do you fall in?

My characters are always finding themselves through the work. It's a mystery in the beginning because the fog only shares a blurry composition. Palette and subject roll up at the same time as I start drawing out ideas, although the portraits in my current series evolved in a new way for me. I've been wanting to paint an entire show focusing on my fellow humans. Each person is a somewhat vague anyone who presents a moment in time

to show us their human side. As the group started growing, they began to reveal their fragility. Some of us got closer than others. I want to paint with an open mind if I can because I want them to find me.

Has your color palette evolved, and if so, what does that represent? Can you describe how particular color combinations or shades lend themselves to the mood you want?

In 1999, I took a color theory class at RCC and have used that palette ever since. It was the siennas and the umbers with alizarin crimson cad red and yellow ochre, french ultramarine, and hookers green. I get nervous about bringing in new pigments but I do try. After so many years I have been able to push my palette pretty far with the 10 or so colors I know well. They signify mood for me. I am looking for a feeling of comfort. They are subdued, creating relaxation—with a hint of pow sometimes. That's usually something to be seen first, from a distance, so you pay close attention.

I'm kind of circling back a bit, but as a self-taught artist, do you feel a need to work a little harder at expressing all the stories and scenarios swirling through your imagination? What comes easily and what is a constant stretch?

I've learned to edit. It's important because all paintings are not going to work. Sometimes they just need a lot of time in between to find their potential so it's important to edit something out, even if it doesn't go anywhere beyond your studio walls. Pulling from my own experiences makes the workflow easily. And sometimes that inspiration only has so much! One thing I really love about Philly is that whenever I feel blocked, I can take a nice long drive up in the countryside. My joy is always fulfilled in discovery. So taking an escape and seeing new sights is perfect medicine. Changing space gets the brain stimulated.

You've achieved so much success but have talked about the challenges of being an artist. What got you through the frustrating periods and do you talk to young (and I mean new) creatives about persevering in a field that is full of uncharted waters?

Categorize success as working hard, riding the waves, finding joy in your work, and I'll take it. Frustrating periods are lessons, so what helps me is to be open to all of it. I see life like sliding doors. One small change and a totally different path! With art or creating, you have to be open. Absorb, feel things, and create from there. And don't stop, ever, even if it's doodling or writing. I'm actually pretty shy and don't express myself much verbally, though I am always happy to answer questions from young artists who approach me.



Hurt People, Hurt People / Starring Chester Drawers, 2023, acrylic and oil on linen, 51 1/8 x 39 3/8 in, 130 x 100 cm, (LG23.010)

How did you come up with Narrative Escapism to describe your body of work? It carries a lot of meaning, but what did you have in mind?

I was always being asked about what kind of paintings I created and I wasn't sure how to categorize them. I was misdiagnosed as a surrealist in my early years, and though my first exposure and inspirations were surrealist-inspired, my work is grounded in storytelling, and escapist imagery, still photography, and is figuratively-motivated. I want the painting to say, "Come inside right now, and as you're looking at me (the painting) this is happening right now." Narrative Escapism comprises two beautiful words that can make you daydream just by saying them out loud. These works only live if someone is viewing them and going somewhere because of them.

The narrative nature of your work lets the viewer take part and maybe choose their own motivation or plot. More than making a bold pronouncement, it's as if each is a suggestion or maybe a springboard for more. Is that what you have in mind?

Yes! It's so fulfilling to reach people this way. The most memorable work I come across is the kind of work that sparks me! Gives me a sensation! It opens me up and makes me think or feel. I love that our varying experiences in life shape the way we interpret art. This is such a profound experience for me, so my hope is to give this same sensation to my own audience.

I love seeing you introduce glassware into your pieces. It brings in the element of fluidity that is integral to your Narrative Escapism, as well as the idea that we see life through different prisms. When did you introduce that element, and what have you discovered in exploring it?

It was a very serendipitous moment when I returned to LA from one of my grandma's toy gathering parties back in 2015. I brought home this set of clear glass Snow White and the Seven Dwarves. Sitting in front of my easel, I had an in-progress portrait in the background, but not realizing the portrait from my easel would show through, I took some pics of the glass and loved it! The faces coming through were intriguing. It felt strange painting something from a photo at first and it required a whole new set of rules regarding technique, which I was very curious about. The first glass painting was exhibited in the gallery of a very dear person who had passed away just prior to the opening, really adding weight to the piece and the process. It gave me meaning and purpose to paint these portraits. Suddenly they needed to be painted. They were people speaking, sharing, teaching, forgiving, loving, hurting, being noticed. They make me so emotional to work on.

Perceiving things through a different lens is like giving ourselves the gift of freedom, to validate our perceptions, and at the same time, widen them. I imagine that you view your artistry not only as self-expression, but as your gift to those of us who take the time to stop, look and enjoy.

This is my hope. That's a beautiful way of putting it, so thank you. At the time of creating I'm not thinking too much about how this painting will be perceived. But it does bear a responsibility to get the viewer to think. The power art holds is stimulation. My message has always lived within the realm of human connection and taking notice of how we affect one another. It's important for me to offer ways that help the viewer stop and see not only themselves but also see the other as someone. We need more empathy, togetherness, forward motion, and mutual support.

lolagilstudio.com // This interview was originally published in our Winter 2024 Quarterly edition