

All Tomorrow's Parties: Leah Tinari Sets the Scene

NYAB talks with painter Leah Tinari, whose current show, "Sneak a Peek," is on view at Mixed Greens in Chelsea.

In Interviews by Laura Meli 2009-02-14



Photo: chris sanders

Leah Tinari, whose caricature-like paintings depict scenes she has photographed, views her work as an ongoing celebration of life with friends and family. Sometimes using multiple photographs, she cuts, moves, and adds elements, collaging the final image that she will paint in highly saturated colors. The photos Tinari uses are the ones she suspects most people would rip up or erase - she is drawn to those with awkward cropping, unbalanced compositions, and at times unflattering images. "Sneak a Peek" gives us a glimpse into little snippets of time in Tinari's world.

Tell me about the show and this series.

The work is based on different events or nights, on photographs I take of friends and family. The black and white pieces... I wanted the show to feel like you are peeking into little stills, little snapshots, from a little moment in time. This work [pointing to a series of colorful paintings depicting her husband and friend goofing around] feels like an animation, like a flip book. We wanted the show to unfold like that. In the front room there's a few pieces from one evening, then a wall over there from another event. I wanted it to read like these little snippets of time, almost like when you are in a photo booth. That's why we put the photo booth there.

Do you take all the pictures yourself?

I mostly do. Sometimes my husband takes them or maybe someone grabs my camera. It's not necessarily that I am always the one behind the camera. I don't feel like I have to be in control. The photos I use are the ones that someone else would maybe, like, erase from their camera, because maybe they're not the most flattering, or the composition is really weird, or the cropping is awkward. I like what that does for the composition of the painting, so it's less about the preciousness of the photograph, and it's more about just literally snapping pictures of your friends out having a good time. And then I get to look through... and I have always used a 35 mm because I really like the surprise element of getting the film. I go and get the film developed and I would have no idea what was really there. And that was great, that element of surprise, without editing. With a digital

camera people look at a picture and say “Oh that sucks and then erase it,” and everyone wants to see the pictures. But recently I have been using a digital camera just because it was getting expensive to develop all that film. I just went on vacation and I had twelve rolls of film and it was like \$200, and that’s so crazy, so I decided I would have to try a digital camera but what I would force myself to do is take the picture and just not look at them, and not erase and just hope that I can keep doing that.

So we can expect a series from you from the digital camera?

Yes, and some of these [works in the show] are from the digital camera. It’s a mix. It’s great, it’s really easy, and I can just print them out on my computer, and then I have a lot to work from.

Sometimes my paintings aren’t just of one photograph, they’re a collage from a few different ones. The negative space is me dropping out a lot of elements, and sometimes I move things around, to create a stronger composition, something that’s more dynamic. So I’ll make the drawing then make the painting, and I’ll be working from a few different photos.

Is there anyone that you photograph regularly - someone you find inspiring, someone you tend to be drawn to?

Yeah, my husband is in a lot of this body of work. My friend Kelly is in a lot of the work, she is just really hilarious and wild and she’s always doing something over the top. So she makes it into a lot of paintings, she’s my little muse. We tend to go on vacations with her and her husband. So, yeah, you will see repeat characters. I did a show based on my wedding and all the rituals of a wedding, like the bachelorette and all the events surrounding, so that was more family based, and weirdly my husband wasn’t in a lot of those, which just shows that the wedding is not about the guy.

Can you tell me how you began as an artist, and when you realized you wanted to make art for a living?

I graduated from RISD, the Rhode Island School of Design; I studied painting there. I came immediately back to NY, and I lived in Williamsburg. When I came here, I started working at a set company, building props, I was a scenic painter there. And actually that’s where I met Marty, my husband. He was a carpenter. I knew if I stayed in that job, and I liked it a lot, maybe I could have had a career as a scenic painter for movies and stuff, but I just knew if I went ahead and had a career in that it wouldn’t leave me any time to make artwork and become a painter, and that’s really what I wanted to do. So I quit that job, and you know, was bartending and really making money so that I could afford a studio. And I had a studio, down in Tribeca on White Street, and I really just started painting every day. At that time I was taking slides of my work, and then would get on my bike and ride around Williamsburg and drop them off, when that was still something you could do, in... 1999.

So I got my first solo gallery show at Bingo Hall. It doesn’t exist anymore, it was a gallery in Williamsburg. And that was kind of the beginning of it. I was like, “Alright, I can do this.” I also do some illustration work, so I was published in the New Yorker. I did some illustrations in the “Goings On About Town” section, of rock bands and stuff, and

once that happened I started being asked to be in a group show...and then someone from Mixed Greens approached me. I sent them my portfolio, then we did a few studio visits, and then they decided to represent me! And that was really when I said, "Ok, I have representation, I'm going to be able to have a show," and then things kind of started to roll that way...and that just felt really good, because I think as an artist, at least for me, having goals set to keep you working and making a body of work is good. Because I knew I was going to have a show with them, and we put the date together and it was like I had something to work towards and had a goal in mind. I think it would be really difficult to be out of college, to not fall into another career just to pay the bills and then all of a sudden 5 years later you realize you're not making artwork anymore. I always wanted to be a painter, and I am going to do whatever it takes. Luckily it worked out really well, and I've been painting ever since. I've never really stopped painting.

I just had a baby a month ago and that was probably the longest I went, I mean, I worked up until the ninth month, so when I made this whole show I was pregnant. He's a month and a half now, so that's probably the longest I went without making artwork, and it felt really weird. I had to go back, I had to make a painting for a show in Paris, and it felt really good to be in the studio and to be working again. If I get cranky at any time and I think about it and ask myself why, it's usually because I haven't been in the studio for a few days. It's really just a part of my life. I try to treat it like a 9-5 job. I work in my studio every day. I try to take the weekends off unless I have some major project or something, because I find if I do that then I make a good substantial body of work every year.

What is your working style? Do you have music playing?

It's kind of embarrassing, I listen to the channel 7 soaps. And Oprah. I don't watch. Since I have been home with Mars, my son, I am totally shocked to be watching it, it's the worst, it's so boring. But yeah, I've been listening to the soaps in my studio for 10 or 12 years. I used to watch them with my mom, in the summers, curled up on the couch...But I am there by myself all day long and I think it's like a sense of security and I can gauge the time because of what soap is on, and there's just something really nice about it. I really like eating my lunch and listening to it. It fits my day in a way.

Have you ever had the equivalent of writer's block?

Never, no, I have never had a lack of material. I think that's because the work is so much about what's happening in my life at the moment. The work really relates - I might work on images from something that happened a few week before. It's always been a documentation of my life, year to year. You can sort of see what was going on with me, so no, that hasn't happened yet.

Are the parties as fun as they look?

Yeah, I think so! I definitely surround myself with, you know, my friends are hilarious, and we have a really good time. Maybe the colors are heightened a little bit, yeah, everything is a little bit exaggerated.

So you don't really live in this saturated world?

No, but if you came to my apartment, well, there is a lot going on.

Can you tell me a little about artists who inspire you, or whose career you follow?

I've always been a fan of Alice Neel's portraits, and David Hockney, specifically his pencil drawings. Egon Schiele - I really, really have always loved his portraits. Eric Fischl, his compositions; Lucian Freud; Ralph Steadman's pencil drawings. And I really like Ben Shahn, Max Beckman and some of his triptych series. It's people I have always gone back to over the years. Gerhard Richter I like a lot. Oh, I really like Elizabeth Peyton. I like her use of color, and obviously, she uses portraits of her friends. Her small work is really inspiring. It's funny because everyone always asks me if I get out to see art and I really don't. Which is probably really sad but I'm mostly in the studio and I'm not out looking at stuff. Really my work is inspired by everyday things, kind of pop culture in a way. And also fabrics, not necessarily paintings but maybe, like, wrapping, and movies and television. Things like that inspire me.



"Hear No Evil, See No Evil" 2008. Gouache on paper. 11 x 15 inches. Courtesy of Mixed Greens.

<http://www.nyartbeat.com/nyablog/2009/02/all-tomorrows-parties-leah-tinari-sets-the-scene/>