

CAROLA PENN

Who Am I, Anyway?



Who am I, anyway? asks the prolific Portland painter Carola Penn (1945–2019) in her *Second Childhood* series (2002–2017), a selection of which comprises her forthcoming solo exhibition at Nationale. A departure from her large-scale urban and forested landscapes, these small, intimate paintings are inspired by Penn's childhood memories, both real and imagined, growing up in the 1950s as the granddaughter of Russian and Hungarian Jewish immigrants. The *Second Childhood* paintings reflect a search for identity as a second generation American, and perhaps most importantly, as a woman. Penn conceived of the series as containing three motifs: *Working Women*, depictions of mothers schlepping children or working in the limited careers available; *Girl Dreams*, bedazzled and glittery storybook characters, the stuff of girlhood fantasies; and *Who Am I, Anyway?* featuring Penn's spunky alter ego, Lulu, from the comic series, *Little Lulu* (1935–1944) by Marjorie Henderson Buell.

CAROLA PENN

Who Am I, Anyway?

With black curls atop her head like mouse ears and wiry ringlets down her neck, Lulu peppers Penn's series in humorous and poignant scenes: Lulu carrying a blonde bride like a lifesize doll; Lulu running away from home with her mother's purse and a bindle slung over her shoulder; and in the painting *Shop Around*, Lulu contentedly pushing an overflowing cart of men's heads. A series of black and white photographs of Penn as a young girl with dark curls painting at a small easel hang on her studio wall. These early photographs of the artist deep in concentration illuminate two Lulu paintings in particular: *Van Gogh's Bedroom* and *Van Gogh's Chair*. In the latter, Penn recreates the famous Van Gogh painting, but instead of an empty twin bed, she places a sleeping Lulu underneath the red bedspread—perhaps dreaming of the great artist she will strive to become. In Penn's *Van Gogh's Chair*, a work that is based on Van Gogh's painting, *Gauguin's Chair* (1888), a miniature Lulu attempts to climb into the master artist's chair, determined to take her seat at the proverbial table in the history of white male dominated western art. Penn's large triptych, *Losing Paradise* (2006), the only work on view from the series *Compartments*, is also in conversation with artists of the past. Hints of Gauguin, Cezanne, Matisse, and others, are juxtaposed by unexpected elements like a vacuum cleaner in this contemporary reimagining of the expulsion from the garden of eden.

The paintings selected for *Who Am I, Anyway?*—most of which have never been shown before—connect not only through narrative themes, but also through an underlying visual thread. In each work, acrylic paint is thickly layered, rich in texture and color. Penn often scrapes into the paint, revealing vibrant colors beneath the surface. The sculptural quality of the paintings contrast the flattened perspective that Penn employs. In an unfinished statement Penn writes: *My intent is to capture a dual consciousness in the work; to paint images I was drawn to as a child while incorporating the experience and jaded awareness of an adult. I create a visual language of geometric shapes, symmetry and positive/negative space to express the drama of this life symbolically. I use simple compositions with flattened color and perspective to express distance in time and problems of memory in patchwork patterns.*

Carola Penn (1945–2019) was a leading NW artist whose paintings were rooted in landscapes both personal and political. Educated in the 1960s at UC Berkeley, Penn was involved in the Free Speech and Civil Rights Movements and studied art under leading mid-century artist Elmer Bischoff. She was influenced by German Expressionism, Paul Klee, Van Gogh, and Bay Area Figurative Movement artists David Park, Richard Diebenkorn, and Joan Brown. In 1969, Penn and her husband, Dennis Anderson, decided to move to Canada. En route, they stopped in Portland and never left. Penn graduated from Pacific Northwest College of Art (PNCA) in 1986 and spent the rest of her life dedicating her days to painting. Her vibrant work is being honored in three different venues this spring: *Woodlands*, as part of the PDX Rotating Art Program at PDX Airport; *Fragments*, as part of the Stumptown Artist Fellowship Program at Stumptown Downtown; and *Who Am I, Anyway?* at Nationale.

On view: February 28–March 31, 2020

Opening reception: Sunday, March 1 (1–3pm)

Gallery hours: 11am–6pm | 11am–5pm Sundays | Closed Wednesdays

Contact: info@nationale.us