

SHERYL LUXENBURG: 'I AM AN EXTREMELY ORGANIZED AND SYSTEMATIC PERSON'

The Internet allowed us to discover Sheryl Luxenburg, a great painter who lives and works in Canada and who owns an excellent trade. She is dedicated to hyperrealism, and over time has managed to develop a curious technique that emerged from the mixture of acrylic and watercolour. The result is impressive and the artist, without keeping any secret, tells what her method of work is in this exclusive interview.

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"Rain erases evil and washes away all the wounds of your soul"

Luis Alberto Spinetta

Canadian acrylic artist Sheryl Luxenburg (Quebec, 1954) has really impressive work. Through her female portraits she has developed a proposal where she manages, effectively, to explore the understanding of the emotional construct. It shows us expressions of women that are modelled by emotions; there is anguish, sadness or loneliness, and water is present as another character, who arrives to alleviate the pain, to bring a bit of calm.

Developing a topic (and knowing how to do it) is fundamental. And I highlight it because it is common among hyper-realists who focus only on copying literally, in sharp focus, leaving aside this aspect. Obviously always surprised the technical deployment of the one they hold, but often do not know what is the meaning of the copy / imitation if there is no interpretation on the part of the artist about something, if there is no interest in expressing something more personal, if there is no inventiveness ... That is why the result ends up being, often, cold and lacking in imagination.

It's not the case with Sheryl. In it is present the technical domain, the impeccable invoice; but her interest in the study of emotions and the inner world of human beings is also evident. She knows very well what she wants to represent, she plans very meticulously each work. Nothing is left to chance or improvisation in her painting. This Canadian is pure planning, and it is a valid way of working that accounts for the demands that hyperrealism is, undoubtedly, a place for few, which concentrate on the most obsessive painters.

It is also striking how generous the artist is when sharing technical secrets; those that only the practice and experience of more than forty years have allowed her to discover. On her website and in this interview she openly tells her methods. It is unusual for this gesture by painters, who are often secretive when sharing knowledge or experiences.

'While there is little hyperrealistic activity in Canada; Jason de Graaf, Alvin Richard, Anne-Marie Kornachuk and Paul Beliveau are some of the hyper-realists who are among my favourites ', says the artist in an exclusive interview, adding: " Also, I can mention Ken Danby and Alex Colville ... But in Canada is, above all, we have excellent artists in the field of landscape and abstract art.

-Realism, photo realism and hyperrealism, always generate confusion between the public terms. How do you differentiate them?

To my knowledge, realism is a movement that emerged in 1850 as a reaction against romanticism, and represents the issues in an authentic way, as they appear in reality, without imaginative idealizations, to favour a careful observation of external appearances, Photorealism, however, I understand as an artistic movement that evolved from Pop art as a reaction against abstract expressionism. A term by Louis K. Meisel from the year 1969, and in this genre, the artist uses photography and a flat representation of space as the main reference material. The artist reproduces the image - in the most realistic way possible - using acrylic, watercolour, etc.

- And hyperrealism?

Hyperrealism, although photographic in essence, implies a softer work on the figure that is represented, because it is exhibited as a living and tangible object. The figures are meticulously worked to create an illusion of reality that does not exist in the original photograph. Textures, lighting effects and shading are emphasized more than in the reference material. Hyperrealism is not a strict representation of photography, but implies the use of visual elements to create an illusion of a reality where it never existed.

- What is the relationship between hyperrealism and pop art, considering that both arose at the same time and evoke the contemporary?

Pop art used commercial methods such as printing, screen printing and reproduction of works; there was a down play of the artist's ability to subvert reality. Instead, hyperrealism uses the camera to obtain the reference material. Although in both movements the theme is represented in the work, which reflects life at that specific time and place.

- You are considered hyper-realistic ...

Yes. I choose each theme specifically to represent my emotional psyche. Those thematic elements are an extension of the visual illusion that is represented; and this characteristic differentiates the genre from the school of photorealism, which is considered much more literal.

-What attracted you especially to this technique?

I am an extremely organized and systematic person. I am very focused on my goals and I always know exactly what I want to express with my work. I need to know how the final result will look even before I start. I work in a series that includes from six to ten paintings; I select the theme in advance, design each image and then paint until everything is completed. Each series takes many years.

- You never had any conflict between your stylistic preferences and the training you got at the university?

No, I did not. I have always aspired to do figurative work with a flat representation of space, that's why I looked for formal education in institutions that could offer me what I wanted. In recent decades, my work has become more precise, which I attribute to four decades of experience and my learning under the mentorship of the renowned Tom Blackwell (1938), an artist belonging to the first generation of photorealists.

- What did you learn from the American painter Tom Blackwell?

Tom taught me to be patient and not to be overwhelmed with the impressive amount of information that requires creating a painting. He also taught me a methodology to transcribe an image from a grid.

-What Latin Americans do you follow or admire? I ask you out of curiosity.

I admire Omar Ortiz, Bill Caro, Marcos Beccari, Harold Muñoz and Claudio Bravo.

-How did you achieve a mastery in watercolour?

My technique for painting acrylics is the same one I use to paint watercolour. My methods to design and draw the sketch are the same. I use a similar colour palette. In both, I make the impression with numerous layers of white gesso and apply Golden Absorbent Compound on the layer with gesso. Here I get a white toothlike surface. In addition, I use a granulating medium and glazing medium, both from Winsor & Newton, both for my acrylics and my watercolours, although the manufacturer does not recommend it for acrylics. However, during my years of experimentation I discovered that the combination works quite well and this combination has become my favourite technique. The granulation and the glazing remain firm (as long as a retarder for acrylics is applied). The only difference between the use of acrylics and watercolours is that I have to apply a lot more retarding medium for acrylic. Otherwise, I use common brushstroke techniques, airbrushes, and/or resort to glazing techniques that are applicable to both.

- That's how you get the acrylic to have a distinctive ... watercolour effect?

I use Winsor Newton Granulating Medium that creates a mottled or grainy effect, for watercolour and in acrylic.

-In what formats do you usually paint and why do you choose them?

In general, the canvas of my watercolours is 56 x 76 cm because I use Arches paper, cold-pressed, 300 to 640 gr / m<sup>2</sup> as it is sold in this size. The dimensions for acrylic in linen vary: 91 x 61 cm, 91 x 76 cm, 152 x 76 cm. I try not to paint canvases too much larger than 152 x 76 cm because they don't easily fit in my studio. I am currently working on a large scale project, larger in dimension than this.

- Sometimes it fluctuates between realism and hyperrealism, do you think? Your portraits are very photographic, while your urban painting shows the brushstroke.

The urban scenes are part of earlier and less formal work. I am quite relaxed with watercolour and it allows me to work more loosely. With acrylics, I paint in a more obsessive way due to the anxiety generated by the handling of the pigment, because it dries quickly. Both support different opportunities. Cold pressed watercolour paper has a certain texture and tends to be looser, while linen canvas can be purchased smooth and tends to look firmer. Usually, I paint a sketch with watercolour and then I make the formal painting in acrylics on linen.

-It draws my attention that in the series of your female portraits there is little variation in the position of the models, in the frames or planes that you choose. Why?

I specialize in painting the upper torso. I focus on the facial expressions of human emotions that go through some kind of turbulence. Many of my subjects are related to people who have suffered feelings of anguish, conflict or anger. My series "In the shower, condensation and wet surfaces" are about people interacting with transparent surfaces, glass and water, symbolizing emotional exhaustion and a feeling of confinement and indifference. The drama on their faces expresses a personal loss. The element of water represents tears and cleanliness; it shows how water is "cleansing" the pain caused by their sufferings.

- How do you perceive, in general, the artistic environment of Canada?

In my particular genre there are not many artists who are living in Canada. The action is concentrated in the United States, where the genre originated, as well as in Europe, the United Kingdom and South America. That's where I exhibit my work.

-Finally, is there any sexism in the artistic environment or is it a myth? How do you perceive it? I have many friend artists around the world with whom I have very valuable friendships. We are constantly supporting one other and I feel that this is very important considering that a large part of the hyperrealist and figurative painters are men. I do not necessarily think that there is a prejudice against women artists, simply that there are few of us. In many cases I am the only female artist in exhibitions.

Sheryl Luxenburg:

She was born on April 25, 1954 in Montreal, Quebec, Canada. She studied art at Concordia University, Montreal, Quebec, Canada; Residency Studio Art, Banff Centre for the Arts, Banff, Alberta, Canada; Residency Studio Art, Keene State College, New Hampshire, USA.