



Mixing things up through art

Carl Gopalkrisnan

I knew a long time ago that I mix things up. I collapse time and space with the stroke of a brush. I mix colour, thought, energy and dream-like processes, and they all come out at once. It's not logical to others, but to me, well, it makes perfect sense. Despite the mythology, artists do real work. Over the years you delve deeper to focus on quality, on resolved pieces, and on completed thoughts.

All this makes perfect sense because this mixing began with my life. I'm a middle aged gay male, and a lapsed Catholic. I'm also of Indian and Chinese heritage, was born in the UK, and grew up in Sweden before coming to Australia. I began working as a typographer and designer after studying

graphic design in Perth, Western Australia. At the same time, I completed a BA in History and later a First Class Honours in Sociology. I worked in many worlds. So I mixed the worlds of academia, art, politics, music and the company of strangers. I didn't take the traditional road in my art practice and my painting technique is influenced by Outsider traditions. My Indian and Chinese heritages instilled in me a respect for art that is inspired by a Spirituality of Ages rather than religious doctrine. That's the easy mix.

As a queer-identifying man of colour with multiple geopolitical and sexual identities, I found myself directly affected by the political climate of the last two decades. After 2001, and for the first time, I started looking *outside* myself to use what is *inside* me to create an alternative to the narrative of the *War on Terror*. *That narrative* always insists that I use my cultural heritage to position my loyalties in a dangerous time. I also questioned my queer identity. As I aged, the queer community failed to diversify and grow. It tacitly accepted deceptions like pink-washing as a form of queer internationalism. Mixing mediums, ideas and ideologies on the canvas has been my way of challenging these false victories.

This intermixing has renewed my passion for excavating stories from a blank canvas. For three decades I've been exploring the small gestures we select to define ourselves and the historical turning points that shape us. If anything else, I'm happy if my life leaves a paper/paint trail for someone else to make sense of, because I learn so much from practising my art. I learn that living life itself is also about putting down the paint – good or bad – having to work with it and make it work, and accepting the temporal nature of that time and place in your life. Painting art or the art of life requires little acts of commitment to complete the story. It also needs research and contemplation. I paint even when I'm not painting.

I like to reach across dividing dogmas. I've presented my art at international intervention workshops in the UK, painted portraits of leading quantum physicists, developed my ideas on how cultural politics and technology are changing the human story, and the power of creativity to affect social change. Cultural relevance and cultural safety still don't get mixed into mainstream ideas of same-sex identities. LGBTI culture and politics still promotes ethnic assimilation into an established visual gay identity. Yet the opportunities to form unique identities, or fusions and collaborations through being LGBTI and also multicultural, exist. A genuine queer internationalism is not about being told, 'This is *you* because that's how being gay is defined by *us*.' I see that paternalism today as quite nationalistic. I want to see a queer culture rich

in the historical sexualities of Muslims, Indians, Pakistani, Jewish, Thai, English and different parts of Asia. At the moment, the language is preferencing LGBTI communities over multicultural communities. But we want to see both there because we live in both. Until we understand the diversity of sexuality in those cultures, it's hard to talk about other cultures positively in terms of sexuality. We need to hear it so we can be the bridge between communities. That's our role. We're a bridge.

Between 2008–2012, I created an exhibition with the Western, 'old school', queer culture of vintage Broadway and Hollywood musicals. I called it *The Assassination of Judy Garland*. I used Judy's life as an internal narrative arc, a reflective tool, as part of my personal response to the 9/11 consciousness we inhabit today. To me, she is more than a gay icon. She represents the best and worst of America – and their inevitable interoperability. I also had no difficulty with being sympathetic because I can't *not be* sympathetic to one side of Judy without acknowledging the damage on the other side. That damage is now in full view under President Trump.

I also used French medieval epic poetry – *chansons de geste* – roughly translated as 'songs of heroic deeds' because they were used at that time to support the political narratives of the Crusades in ways that reminded me of how many Hollywood products support the War on Terror. So the queer lens I created for these paintings is a prescription lens made for a specific time and place. And this lens acts as a screen to both hide and reveal motivations and desires, as much as the screen icons I reference.

People seem to forget that queer theory breathes within a time of terror that smashes lenses and burns books. But I could not find a queer framework that helped me to paint what I saw. I no longer understood what I call the new normative queer, and so I returned to what I knew was 'naïf' and 'old school'. I allowed myself to visually languor in the Hollywood of the 1930s and 1950s. I felt quite alienated from the new normative queer climate influenced by a hyper-masculinised LGBTI culture that was becoming increasingly nationalistic in its desire to go beyond its backroom history into the light of mainstream acceptance.

Screen culture has a power equal to that of the *chansons de geste*, which could inspire entire populations to lay down their lives through songs orally memorised and sung from village to village in the time of the Crusades. I took away from these paintings a deeper appreciation for how our intermixed queer histories have become silent pictures that sit patiently and move slowly

behind the interactive and hyperactive edges of this new normative queer. So while I reference moving pictures, the surreality in my paintings is happening on the silent screen inside us. Applied to the bigger stage, this queer screen can affect the small gestures that lead to momentous global change. We should respect that power.

The painting here is an example of my 'mixed up' art:

Four Horses Running Wild (2012)

This painting is a 100% subconsciously created self-portrait. The energy of the Four Horses of the Apocalypse is how I experience the stories playing out in our phase of history. The biblical narratives of the Book of Revelations collapses time with Hollywood of the 1940s and the present into a continuous experience. History is not tone deaf and, like a DJ mixing songs, the mix up of perspective anatomy with folk art, expressionism, pop art screenprints and Byzantine biblical frescos on the canvas is the soundtrack of my generation.s

Biography

(aka Gopal) has been a practicing independent visual artist for over 30 years. Born in the UK in 1967 and based in Melbourne, Australia, Carl explores society's unconscious narratives using metaphors through a queer cultural lens. A self-taught painter with a background in design, he mixes academic study and research to create works on canvas works, photography, drawing and printmaking. Published in literary journals, he crosses between his day-job in policy with his painting and social commentary. He has held five solo exhibitions in Australia, participated in group shows internationally and presented his art at conference workshops on international intervention. See Carl's work online at www.carlgopal.com