

True Stories: Inez Storer's art often reflects the real-life dramas of her family history

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Some wonderful mysteries. Startling disclosures. Strange secrets. The phrases are written in childlike script across a recent work by California artist Inez Storer. To the casual observer, they may seem like promotional pitches from the dust jacket of the latest page-turner. Spend time with Storer, though, and it's soon evident that the phrases directly relate to her life and art, which are influenced by everything from World War II to Hollywood's early film days to the Russian Revolution. At 73, Storer, more than many artists, has an intimate knowledge of the way history turns the world as well as individual lives upside down.

From her home, a sprawling historic hotel in Inverness, CA, north of San Francisco, which she shares with her husband, artist Andrew Romanoff, Storer strings together stories about her family and art, slipping seamlessly back and forth in time. Her art also is about telling tales. "I am a visual raconteur. I use paint to tell stories," she is fond of saying. And Storer is a prolific raconteur by all accounts. While this article was going to press, Grover/Thurston Gallery in Seattle, WA, was highlighting Storer's recent paintings in a solo show; last year her paintings, drawings, and prints were featured in three other solo gallery shows.

During her impressive career, her art has been compared to everything from Latin American *retablo* paintings (because her simple scribbles and whimsical fairy-tale figures belie darker, more puzzling themes) to paintings by Marc Chagall (because of Storer's complex compositions and narratives). As one essayist noted in a catalog accompanying a 2003 museum show, "Inez Storer delivers a heavy message with a light hand."

Ask Storer how she best describes her mixed-media works, and she replies without hesitation, "Magical realism." Her art, like novels by a favorite author, Gabriel Garcia Marquez, blurs the lines between fantasy and reality. Some critics have also dubbed Storer's style theatrical realism for the manner in which her multi-layered narratives explore the human condition. "My figures often float in precarious positions like tightrope walkers," Storer explains. "I find these metaphors can often reflect our own sometimes unsettled lives." Images of planes and pilots abound, and flowers sprout up everywhere, in vases and dotting the borders of her works in a fashion reminiscent of her extensive Mexican folk art collection.

Storer's studio is located in nearby Point Reyes, CA. The 700-square-foot creative oasis boasts objects that both inspire and become part of her assemblages - sheet music, book pages, small toys, letters, old postcards, and photographs scavenged from flea markets. But to understand her work on a deeper level, it's perhaps best to step back in time.

Storer was born in 1933 in Los Angeles to parents who had left Germany as Hitler was rising to power. Her father was a pilot and an architect, her mother an actress and dancer. When the couple arrived in Los Angeles in the late 1920's, her father soon became ensconced in the burgeoning film industry, working as an art director with renowned film directors such as Billy Wilder.

As a child Storer hung out on movie sets, learning early on that nothing in life was as it seemed.

Scenes from movie sets linger in her mind to this day, often finding their way into her art. "I remember that Bing Crosby and William Holden were so short that they stood on boxes so that they were not shorter than their leading actresses," she says. On another occasion, after a director yelled, "Cut," Storer remembers, "The actress Corinne Calvert stood up in her taffeta costume, pulled out her falsies, and threw them at the director."

Watching actors step back and forth between illusion and reality wasn't enough preparation for Storer, however, when she accidentally stumbled on a long-buried family secret and discovered she wasn't really who she thought she was. One night at the dinner table she was describing a man who had come into the store where she worked after her high-school classes. Storer mimicked the customer's Yiddish accent. Much to her surprise, her mother instantly fled from the table. Acting on intuition, Storer turned to her father and blurted out, "Am I Jewish?" Her father told her yes, but never to speak of it again.

And so she was raised Catholic in her father's religion, attending a Catholic high school. But it was hardly a good fit for the self-described rebel and anarchist. "I was constantly getting evicted," she recalls. "But Catholicism certainly had informed my work - all the rituals, mystery, and illusions." Indeed, images of Catholic clergy, angels, saints, and crosses spring up regularly in her works.

It wasn't until near her mother's death that she admitted to Storer that she was Jewish. Soon after her mother passed away, Storer discovered that she had 29 cousins, many living in California. Her mother was afraid to admit she was Jewish and thus didn't want to maintain contact with them.

In Storer's HISTORIES, a blindfolded girl kneels before what appears to be an altar; a Jewish menorah is depicted near her bent knees. The painting suggests that not even identity is secure - a person can be blind to their past. Storer's art reflects an ongoing concern with secrets, tricksters, and disguise as subject matter.

Storer studied art at the San Francisco College for Women, the San Francisco Art Institute, and the University of California at Berkeley. In the 1950s, she lived in North Beat, painted, and frequented Six Gallery, the renowned San Francisco hangout for Beat poets like Allen Ginsberg. By 1960 Storer had married, and she and her first husband decided to move to Inverness, where she had four children but always made time to paint. "I was constantly interrupted, but I had to keep working. There wasn't much to do in Inverness, so that was a plus," she adds wryly.

The marriage ended, and Storer finished a bachelor's degree at Dominican College in San Rafael, CA, and later, in 1971, her graduate degree at California State University in San Francisco. To help support her family, she began teaching art at area colleges and, with the help of financial backers, opened Lester Gallery in Inverness. She continued to paint and began making small assemblages, which she could start and stop easily to attend to family duties. Collage has influenced her paintings, prints, and works on paper ever since then.

In 1974, she met and eventually married artist Andrew Romanoff, blending his two children with her four to create what Storer jokingly calls "The Brady Bunch." In marrying Romanoff, Storer became part of one of the legendary dynasties in Russian history, and, in at least two ways, his family was like her own: It was torn apart by world events and tinged with a history of mystery.

Andrew Romanoff is the grandnephew of the Czar Nicholas II, the last emperor of Russia. The

czar, his wife, Alexandra, and their five children were executed in 1918 during the Bolshevik Revolution. Romanoff's grandmother, sister of the czar, fled Russia to England prior to the murder of the royal family. For many years, the locations of the royal family's remains were a mystery. In 1991, however, remains of all but two of the Romanoff's children were discovered in Siberia, dug up, and eventually, in 1998, taken to St. Petersburg for internment. Storer accompanied her husband to Russia for the ceremonies.

As one observer has pointed out, Storer's is a private story while Romanoff's is a public one, played out not only in history books but in movies such as *Nicholas and Alexandra* and even in the more recent popular animated film *Anastasia*, very loosely based on the belief that one of the czar's daughter's survived.

Storer's work shifts regularly back and forth between the personal and the political and, at times, hints at the couple's combined family mysteries. For example, at first, SEVEN DAYS TO MAKE THE WORLD appears to be a whimsical scene referencing the Bible. But a litany of countries appears in the assemblage and, on close inspection, they are all places where genocide or massacres have occurred, including Germany, Russia, China, Croatia, and Angola, among others. As Storer points out, it may have taken seven days to make the world, but it could take only minutes to destroy it. "I don't want people to see despair in my work. But I want them to see that what happens globally, happens to them," Storer says. "Since I can't save the world, I can, as an artist, point some things out."

NOAH'S ARK, another seemingly fanciful evocation of the Bible, features depictions of birds, magicians, and elephants. At second glance, though, the viewer notices that the elephants are fighting, and a plane encircled in a black cloud lurks ominously above the ark. The diptych is Storer's response to September 11, 2001. While planes were once viewed as symbols of freedom, adventure, and escape, in the aftermath of the attacks they came to represent tragedy and fear. No symbol can be static. Meaning changes," she comments.

Storer is currently working on pieces for a show in December at Nathan Larramendy Gallery in Ojai, CA. The show is tentatively titled Road Trip and features images of postcards with the humorous scribbled messages people often send home from vacations. One is dated June 17, 1931, and says: "Dear Aunt Evelyn, Having a great time... car works, going to Los Angeles to visit Uncle Bert."

This example of new work suggests not only that Storer remains true to her roots in early Hollywood, but that the show may offer a lighthearted look at the popular method of communication. But then again, nothing is ever as it seems in Inez Storer's world.