



ALL THE PRETTY NESTS

Q&A With Gail Roberts

RESPONDING VISCERALLY TO HER SURROUNDINGS, painter Gail Roberts creates works of art that depict the world in detailed, unsentimental beauty. Often working in series — highlighting everything from landscapes to people in mid cell-phone conversation — her art has been exhibited around the country and internationally and is part of the permanent collection of, among others, the San Diego Museum of Art, Museum of Contemporary Art San Diego and the Oakland Museum of California. Her epic work *Tree Lines*, composed of 34 individual canvases portraying various regional trees, geographies and seasons, graces Lindbergh Field's Terminal 2. Roberts, 59, who has a show this month at the Luis De Jesus gallery in Santa Monica, is a professor of art at San Diego State University.

Q: YOUR MOST RECENT SERIES FEATURES PAPERBACK BOOKS AND BIRD'S NESTS. WHAT WAS THE IMPETUS FOR COMBINING THOSE TWO THINGS?

A: I just began contemplating the kinds of things we accumulate, whether it's those paperbacks over 25 years or the weekly trash that accumulates, and I did a painting of a pile of trash. I did a painting of a bouquet of flowers that I was tossing out and just made a pile of the flowers and the petals. At some point it was more intuitive. I had a pile of books and I put a nest on top of it and I thought, 'Oh, there are so many books that have references to birds and nests — *To Kill a Mockingbird*, *The Seagull*, *The Raven*, *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*.' The paintings are kind of examining this idea of the text in relationship to the nest, and maybe not making it as absolutely clear what the concept is but hopefully still provocative enough that the viewer wants to think a little bit more about the relationship between the two. I don't want it to be too ambiguous but at the same time I don't want to feel like I'm dictating.

Q: IS THAT A FINE LINE TO WALK?

A: It is a fine line and I can't help but reflect on my teaching right now because too often students will say, 'Oh it doesn't matter to me what the viewer interprets, it's whatever they want to see in the painting.' I think that's shirking your responsibility as an artist. I certainly have an intent and I'm trying to clarify as much as I can, but to not necessarily be judgmental or try to be didactic. It's really more of a kind of curios-

Gail Roberts in her Mount Helix studio with paintings from a recent series.



Blush, oil on canvas, 2002. Private collection of Rob Richards.



Gail Roberts with painting tools and palette. The studio has a pleasant connection to the natural landscape.



Lightness of Being, oil on canvas, 2009. Courtesy of Luis De Jesus, Los Angeles



Tree Lines, 34 panels, 2001. Commissioned by the Port of San Diego, a permanent installation at Terminal 2, San Diego International Airport

ity on my part and I'm trying to understand the same things that I think everybody else is trying to understand, and the vehicle for me is through the painting.

Q: SO ART SHOULD ALWAYS HAVE A POINT OF VIEW?

A: I think it's a sense of conviction, the sense that there is something driving you to make the paintings. But that doesn't necessarily mean that I have an idea beforehand, that I'm simply executing the idea. The painting is leading me sometimes more than I am leading the painting.

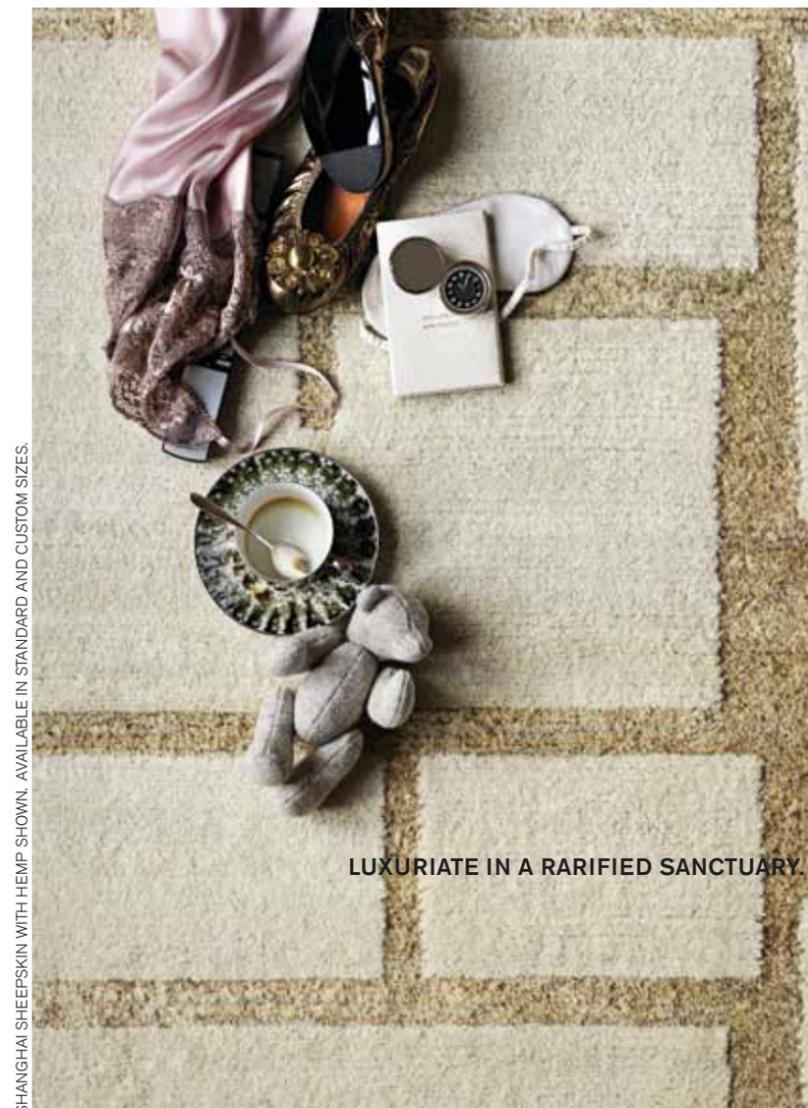
Q: DO YOU HAVE A SOURCE OF INSPIRATION THAT PEOPLE MIGHT FIND SURPRISING OR UNEXPECTED?

A: Literature's certainly played an important role. Cormac McCarthy and his writing, in terms of his language, I think a single word in his books sometimes conjures up things, visions that I think are just so expansive that sometimes I'll just read one sentence over and over again. It's so beautiful in terms of its sound and it's the way it plays upon my senses that I think that writing certainly has had an impact or influence on my work. *Blood Meridian*, that's one of the most violent books of brutality you could ever read, and I think it's a book I would even hesitate to suggest to some people to read, but it's that sense of intense beauty and his ability to write about beauty in such a way that it's incredibly powerful, and simultaneously to write about the most horrific violence. I find that to be very important in my own work and maybe that's overlooked in my work because, you know, even in painting these nests, they're a very beautiful form, but they're sometimes made up of materials that are about decay and about a sense of things deteriorating. There is the sense of the life cycle that's very urgent in those forms, and so I'd like to think that my work is not just something pretty and attractive but hopefully has those kinds of great extremes. ♦

Gail Roberts
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