

Mona Caron

An interview with San Francisco artist Mona Caron conducted by Med-o. Mona Caron hails from a village called Intragna in the southern Swiss canton of Ticino. She came to San Francisco in 1991 and after earning a degree at the Academy of Art in Illustration has made her living as an illustrator and muralist ever since.

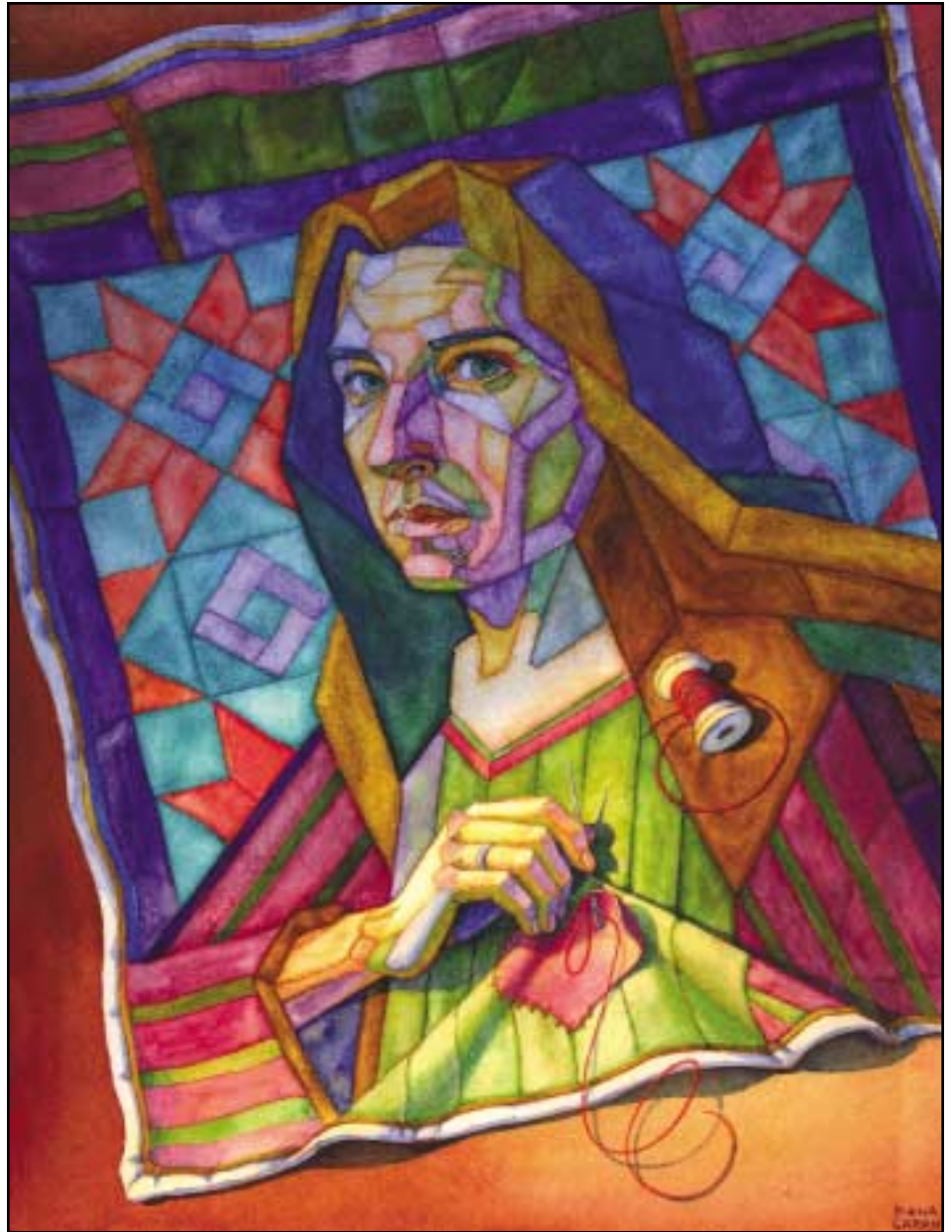
You are well known in the Bay Area for your large public murals (e.g. the Duboce Bikeway mural near Church St. and the Mint). What is your interest in doing public murals? What are the good/bad/surprising things in doing art in which public input has a direct impact on what you create?

I like doing public art. It forces me to get out of my snail-shell, and face a situation in which the whole artistic process, not only the final product, is public and visible to all. This used to be somewhat scary, but by now I like the challenge, it keeps me on my toes.

What I like best about doing public murals is the opportunity to engage in a direct dialogue with the “end-users” of the mural, the public. And in my experience this works the other way around, too: people appreciate being able to comment on or question an image as it’s being created, an opportunity that is rarely given in this society where we are force-fed images at every turn, and can do nothing about it except culture-jamming. In my recent mural about the social and natural history of Brisbane, CA, I had the amazing experience of witnessing people respond to the mural with moving intensity. People stopped and thought about the history of their town, their own role in building their community. Some had bouts of nostalgia mitigated by a critical evaluation of history. This is all I hope for. These experiences give meaning to my work. To me, the greatest accomplishment of the public mural is a dialogue being created among viewers, discussing not the painting per se but the subject matter that I’m illustrating. I love it when this happens while I’m still painting, because I get to witness and participate in that discussion.

How do you compare doing murals with doing illustration or other visual art forms?

There is more continuity than contrast between my work as an illustrator and as a muralist. I do all sorts of art, including personal art, but I consider myself primarily an illustrator, that is, a visual artist who likes to tell stories with images, and who enjoys working with verbal communication media. I almost always work with a text in mind, whether it be an actual written text or an implied one (such as my political position, or a piece of history, or a narration that’s in my mind). Both as an illustrator and as a public muralist, my goal is to communicate this text or message, to enhance its emotional con-



Self-portrait; to see more of Mona’s art, check her website at www.monacaron.com

tent, and to make it aesthetically appealing.

I work more rationally than intuitively, and the expression of my own subconscious in my mural work is an accidental byproduct, not a goal in itself. I’m more concerned with clarity of communication and outreach than with formal edginess or deeply personal self-expression. I do representational paintings rather than abstract ones, using a combination of literal and symbolic imagery to convey the message. In a sense, I use the visual equivalent of rhetorical figures, to tell a layered story that is accessible to anyone. At the same time, I still use the subliminal effects of color and design to add an emotional underscore to the image.

My concern with clarity of communication and outreach is precisely what keeps me (and many other artists like me) from being accepted in the realm of “fine art” or “high art.” By such

standards my priorities would relegate me to the lowly category of “propagandist,” and my concern with beauty and craftsmanship would reduce me to a mere decorative craftsman.

Most other artists that I admire in our city are also great communicators. For example, I think artists like those in the Mission Print Collective are absolutely vital to this city, adorning public spaces with necessary political commentary AND beautiful poster art that reaches people in their everyday lives. Many street artists, graffiti or mural artists, also achieve this beautifully, unless they get too wrapped up in doing repetitive, self-branding images, placing recognition above communication. Sometimes the opposite happens, where message and democratic process are prioritized to such an extent that craftsmanship and sophistication are left behind altogether, which makes for less nuanced communication that reaches a narrower audience.

I like your art for both its aesthetic and political sensibilities. Do you acknowledge these categories as separate realms? Integrated spheres of personal expression? Or would you collapse the distinctions and look for inspiration and expression in a completely different way?

That’s an interesting distinction. Ever since German Expressionism, there has been a tradition in radical art which consists of using a rough style, and preferably a medium that requires physical strength, to express the feeling of suffering, injustice, or strength and effort of political engagement. Also in the progressive era, which included movements such as the Bauhaus and great changes in architecture styles (Corbusier, etc), any concern with ornamentation seemed reactionary, symbolic of bourgeois excess and decadence, while beauty was to be found in functionality, simplicity. That feeling has trickled down to our days in the US through the filter of anticommunism: ornate or otherwise “pretty” things look reassuring and “safe” to non-radical people, i.e. the majority of the American population, while at the same time they still look reactionary and unsophisticated to intellectuals and people in the art establishment. I mostly share the latter feeling, but I’ve also thought about the possibility of using the opposite approach: using a soft, decorative, cheerfully colorful style for outreach purposes. That is, entice the viewer first, and when I have their attention and positive state of mind, deliver a radical message, as if by means of a Trojan horse.

The Critical Mass poster I did was one such experiment. I hoped that by using an ornamental style in the poster I might reach out to people who may not be already “converted,” and seduce them into looking at the poster a few seconds longer than if they’d been able to tell from afar that it advertises a semi-legal anarchistic event. It may have looked a bit commercial to some intellectuals, too “soft” to the hard-core, but judging from the response this poster created, it accomplished its outreach mission quite well.

After all, why not try to reclaim pleasure, craftsmanship and the appreciation of the beauty of natural forms for the world of left-wing political art? Why not separate the perception of softness or decoration from that of luxury? “We want bread and roses, too,” right? A revolution where we’re allowed to dance? William Morris used to design wallpaper

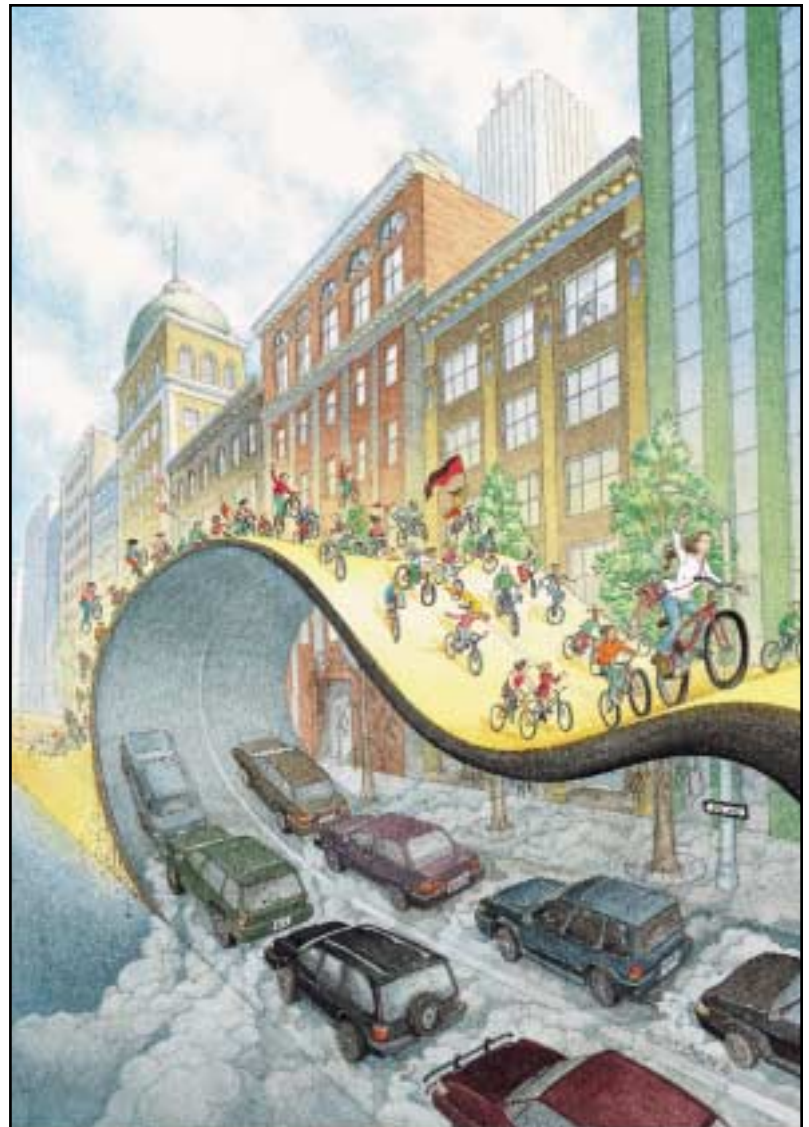
and furniture, and had some good ideas about making lovingly crafted objects available to all. Beauty and pleasure counterbalance the guilt-driven logic and the emphasis on sacrifice of so much of the left.

You grew up in Switzerland where your family still resides. Why did you choose to make your home, at least for now, in SF? Would you live anywhere else in the US than SF?

I don’t think I would live anywhere else in the US than here in San Francisco. Despite its recent changes, it still is a city of great diversity and tolerance, having a relatively progressive mainstream population that tolerates a fairly sizeable radical community. I find San Francisco very beautiful with its hills, its views, the Bay, its unique layout, and a dense urban population.

Most other Europeans I meet here repeat the cosmopolitan cliché: “In the States, I could only live either in NY or in SF.” I actually appreciate the existence of many other hubs of alternative culture in the US, ranging from large cities to tiny communities (to randomly cite some: Austin TX, Yellow Springs OH, Madison WI, Arcata, CA, Black Rock City NV, etc.). I still would rather live here in SF though, or go back to Europe.

I get shit from friends and family in Europe all the time these days for continuing to live in the US. I get emails inciting me to get the hell out of here (as if my moral standing depended on it, or as if America or George Bush would be impressed and humbled if Mona Caron decided to leave! Wouldn’t that be nice!) When that happens,



cover art for
*Critical Mass:
Bicycling's Defiant
Celebration*
(AK Press: 2002)

I often find myself defending SF as an exception to the image Europeans have of the US.

Do your European sensibilities have a place in the current American climate?

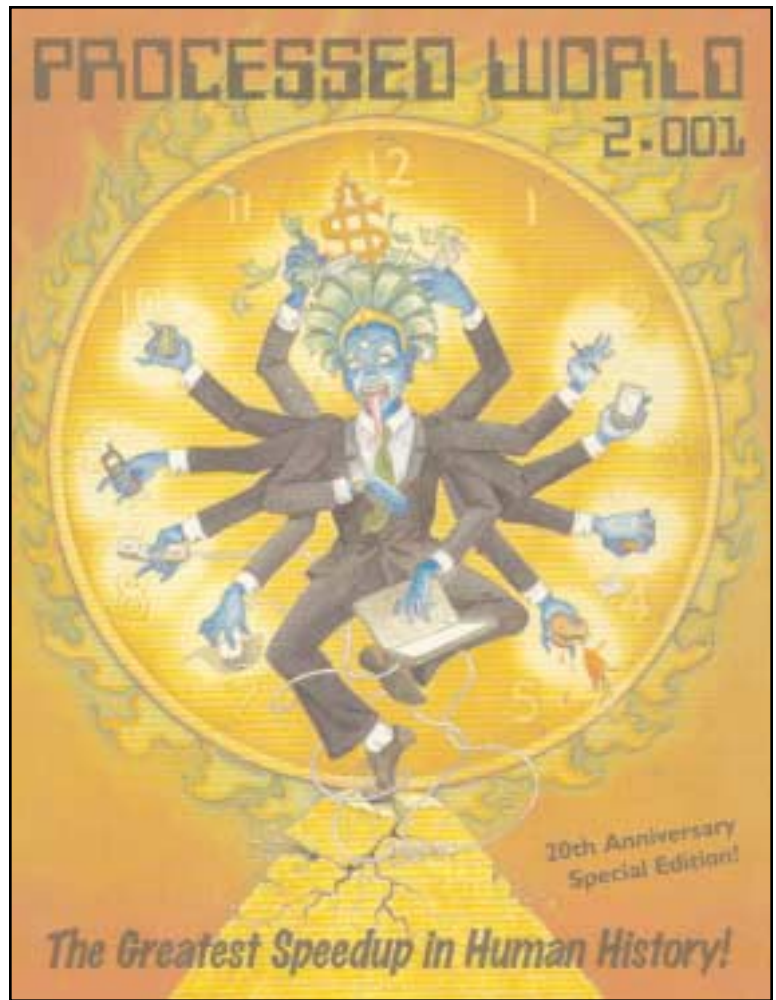
Sure. It would be lengthy and predictable to describe how I differ culturally from the “average American.” Besides, many American San Franciscans would feel the same, I’m sure, at least in some respects. In the current extreme climate, the difference from mainstream America of my “European sensibilities” is overshadowed by the difference of my political sensibilities (although, granted, the two overlap).

The subtler cultural difference comes out more distinctly when I compare myself with Americans who are politically like-minded, whom I get along with and even love. That’s when I sometimes notice that, politics aside, I’m still an alien here. Things that I could mention on that level are, for example, that people here tend to mix spirituality into arguments that, where I’m from, would be made rationally. The boundaries between rational and irrational (or spiritual) thought are thinner here. Other examples of cultural differences would be: compared to Europe, mainstream people here put more emphasis on what you do for a living for self-definition. People here have a different attitude towards food. The American, more easy-going radical circles put more emphasis on self-expression and individualism, less on ideology and history than in Europe. Opposition groups tend to be more vocal and street-active in Europe.

Politically speaking, instead of comparing US and Europe governments, I’d say that the ruling class of the US, together with all American, European and world-wide pushers of neo-liberalism and Empire are harming all the peoples, including Americans. Americans just notice less, because of the media problem.

As we speak, Switzerland is in the process of undergoing, in some areas, the same kinds of structural adjustments that IMF-dependent third world countries are forcibly subjected to: the (famously efficient!) Swiss social infrastructure is being chopped up and privatized. The new private companies cut back vital services, then skirt bankruptcy while CEOs become millionaires and thousands of employees are laid off “to maintain competitiveness.” In short, Europe is catching up with the US in terms of ruthless economic policies and corporate crime, even in the famously social democratic states.

The difference between here and there is that in Europe there seems to be a more vocal and visible mobilization against all this. The recent spread of so many opposition movements in Europe is facilitated, in practical terms, by the existence of numerous alternative public spaces, such as the huge urban squats which exist all over Europe. Some of them got eventually legalized, others are still illegal but tolerated, but all have become dynamic cultural and social centers. The existence of an institutional left in Europe, however disappointing its policies, has nevertheless in the past provided the on-again, off-again tolerance that enabled social centers to both survive and maintain their edge. I can’t say enough about the difference that such open, public, non-commercial forum-like spaces make in terms of bringing both culture and social



cover art for *Processed World 2.001* (Sept. 2001)

awareness to a whole population. We need more of that here in SF. There are so many fantastic artists, performers, creative people here; if only there were more such venues, with all the pent up creativity in this town, there would be a cultural explosion!

In addition to those ubiquitous indoor public venues, in Europe there still is of course the living function of the “piazza,” the town plaza, especially in Italy, where vast, often beautiful urban space is reserved for people to gather (rather than for cars to transit or park in), not just to shop, but to freely associate with no sponsor’s benediction. This facilitates interaction and makes people less completely reliant on television to form their opinions, and promotes a sense of shared experience, rather than the me-against-everyone-else attitude of gun-toting, agoraphobic suburban Americans. Here at least we have Critical Mass performing that function. But in general it seems like everything is being engineered to keep people apart and isolated in America, and not just in urban planning. Get your own home-theater system, get the food delivered, you’ll never have to mingle again. Stay indoors-while-outdoors by driving, and if you get an SUV it’s as if you bring your monster home along, so you’ll feel protected and safely detached from the outside world. That’s all that matters. From consumer choices to foreign policy, the best way to protect yourself is by endangering others—that’s the American way.

