

Portrait of an Artist

Charlise Tiew

by Kat Reneker Arvola

You wonder what the women are looking out at, what they are thinking in the moment they have been captured by Charlise Tiew's paintbrush. There is worry, sorrow, boldness reflected in their expressions, and behind the smiles of those who do smile there is a mystery. In person the artist - an aesthetically pleasing mix of Chinese and Turk - looks racially ambiguous and this in no small way informs some of her work.

(NOTE: This article makes reference to portraits that can be seen on Charlise Tiew's web site at <http://www.charlise.com/paintings/index.html>.)

Kat (K): Gazing at your portraits of women I am reminded of the diversity of women's histories, that we come from different places as hinted at by our racial genetic inheritance and personal stylistic choices. You have written that you are "fascinated by the drama of the human face and form." But why just women? Is it self-reflection? Will portraits of men eventually make it onto your web site?

Charlise (C): I don't paint or draw men well. Portraits of women simply come easier to me. I learned to draw from my mother, and she only draws women, why that is, I do not know. I appreciate art that represents men though I don't do it myself. I started painting women when I was 17 or so, when I first started using acrylics, but I've been drawing girls and women since I could hold a pencil. I'm not sure that my preoccupation with women is necessarily self-reflective, though I find it rather interesting that most representations of women in art are not by women themselves.



K: What is the nature of the relationship that exists between your dynamic cultural heritage and your paintings?

C: Painting is a way for me to make sense of the world and make sense of my place in it, a way of having at least a little power over how women, especially women of color, are portrayed. I've got a rather fragmented sense of identity which is in part due to my cultural heritage as an Asian American. Asian American women (and men for that matter) are hardly ever portrayed in the media as regular humans, and I hope that my paintings are about women from a different perspective than the usual, that they have more sensitivity.

K: How are you progressing on your next project - paintings of dancers?

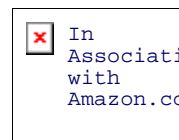
C: I've done a few nudes before, so it won't be totally foreign to me and I've danced for several years. Though my next project is really still in the planning stages right now.

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K: Do you do mostly oil paintings?

C: Mostly oil paintings right now, though I also do small paintings with acrylics on paper. I've got a side project of illustrating sayings in Spanish. I've also done watercolor, Chinese brush painting, and chalk drawing.

K: What will your upcoming art exhibits feature? Your portraits of women?

C: Yes. It's been my main focus for some small time now.

K: Is your artwork simply a hobby at this stage? Art has been a part of your life for a very long time, and your parents are artistic. Do you aspire to eventually become a full-time artist?

C: I consider dance and volunteering my main hobbies. Painting has been more than that, I feel that it is compulsory, something I must do. Being a full-time artist is certainly an option I've contemplated, but at this point I just want to paint as much as possible and learn from doing.

K: You display a strong sense of style in how you dress yourself. You described yourself in an e-mail as a "fashion-victim goth," which made me chuckle but I really admire your boldness. What does how you present yourself tell us about your personal politics?

C: The gothic subculture is sadly apolitical. I became interested in goth as a subculture as a teenager, especially as a means of representing a specific identity that I was allowed to choose (I couldn't choose being female or Asian for instance) and as a way of making myself unattractive to mainstream America. It was my way of rejecting people before they could reject me, by looking unusual. I also just like to dress up fancy, put it down to personal weirdness.

K: What interested you in linguistics enough to get your Bachelor's degree in the subject? Do you plan to go on to graduate school?

C: Linguistics interested me because I find language and communication rather mind-boggling. In studying linguistics I realized that my initial impressions were correct. I occasionally flirt with the idea of going to graduate school.

K: In Germany you started belly dancing. Presently you attend a belly dancing class twice a week. Do you do it just for the exercise?

C: I've been belly dancing since 1998. I've got a touch of Middle Eastern blood, so that's why I was interested in the first place. It's strange that Middle Eastern dance is tingled with a kind of naughty exoticness in the so-called West. These dances evolved out of folk dances women did together and have to do with strengthening women's bodies for giving birth.

I enjoy dance and took three years of Graham technique at UC Berkeley, also performing in student choreography. My dancing has always been about connecting to my body and having a sense of the body in space. So it is for health, but not health in the conventional sense of fitness.

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Charlise Tiee (l) with one of her models, Miriam Gurba.

K: How would you describe the rooms in the Charlisean brain? Can you give me a tour?

C: It's just one big messy room with lots of things on the floor that keep tripping me. There are a lot of pictures and not very many words.

K: And, last but not least, did you bring Potato to dinner with us?

C: Potato, sadly, does not like to go out of the house. He lives in Los Angeles, so we don't meet up very much.

(To find out who Potato is, go to <http://www.charlise.com/potato/index.html>.)

For more information on Miriam Gruba, please visit
<http://www.geocities.com/tomcollins66/>.

Kat Avila has an M.A. in Communication from University of California, San Diego, and is of Japanese and Mexican-Indian ethnicity. She has a website devoted to Chicano/Latino theater and Asian-American theater at <http://www.geocities.com/buscandocalifornia/>. Feel free to drop her a line at buscandocalifornia@yahoo.com.

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