

In the Shadow of '71

by Jesse Ashlock

I was listening to the Flying Burrito Brothers when I drove over to Erik den Breejen's studio in Bushwick the other day to talk about the bright, sly word portraits in his show "There's a Riot Goin' On." My wife and I had had breakfast that morning with another couple, also in the home stretch of their 30s. She makes jewelry inspired by classic early '70s album covers like the Grateful Dead's "American Beauty" and Gene Clark's "No Other"; he used to play in a band called the Court and Spark, also the title of a 1974 Joni Mitchell album.

So I happened already to be thinking about what draws people of our vintage—kids born in the second half of the '70s, the Carter and Ford babies—so inexorably to the culture of the first half of that decade. Of course, I don't mean to suggest that the culture of that era is some sort of secret. But try interrupting one of those blandly optimistic millennials born in about 1986 who are always talking game-changing apps to discuss Gene Clark or the Burritos—or Nilsson or Nick Drake or Roxy Music or the Carpenters or Joan Didion or Thomas Pynchon or Bob Rafelson or Peter Bogdanovich or Richard Pryor, or even Neil Young—and the conversation won't go anywhere. It's not like your youthful interlocutor will be unfamiliar with those names. It's just that those names won't be freighted with meaning the way they are for us.

A theory, for your consideration: That era—in which the '60s were officially pronounced dead, eulogized, and buried six feet under—looms large as the time just before we arrived in much the same way that World War II does for the first Boomers. Except they were born into an America that had just fought a war with Evil and had won. We were born into an America that had just fought a war with itself and had lost.

This, it turns out, is the world Erik has been inhabiting these last few years. On the walls of his studio were paintings of some of the era's most seminal cultural figures—Marvin Gaye, Pryor, Liza Minnelli, Karen Carpenter, Allen Ginsberg. There were others, not on display, of Dylan, Nilsson, Lou Reed. The method of construction was the words these people sang or spoke or wrote, rendered in Lego-like bricks in a harmonious color palette, almost pointillist in technique. The effect is to give the portraits an almost graphic pop, like Jim Fitzpatrick's iconic poster of Che Guevara, imbuing these figures with the aura of folk heroes. And the words that comprise the canvases—"What's Going On" and "We've Only Just Begun," Ginsberg's poetry and Pryor's comedy—assume an almost Talmudic significance. Imagine Erik as a sort of religious scholar, endlessly parsing holy texts as he labors over these energy-intensive canvases up in his aerie in industrial Brooklyn as the modern world spins by outside his door.

Why this group? Erik says he began by thinking about the year 1971. "I feel like the early '70s is when things started getting really gritty," he explains. He's been painting canvases with words he's plucked from the cultural slipstream for the better part of a decade now. But they were purely abstract until a few years ago, when he began experimenting with using Beach Boys lyrics to create

representational imagery. In a way, the darkness that lurked beneath the sunshine in the case of “Smile”-era Brian Wilson anticipated what was going to happen to Wilson’s entire generation after the ’60s were over. “Here was this troubled soul trying to present the image of a normal guy to the world, singing about sports,” Erik tells me. “But doing it so beautifully.” By 1971, “Good Vibrations” had given way to Altamont, the Beatles were done, the Manson murders had put the lie to hippie utopianism, Vietnam was an endless quagmire, and Richard Nixon was running things. Everyone’s soul was troubled.

And in one way or another that trouble bubbles up in the remarkable, endlessly resonant cultural documents that Erik’s latest work meditates upon and transforms and honors: Karen Carpenter’s anguish, like Brian Wilson’s, under the wholesomeness of the melodies and the look. Richard Pryor’s profane riffs on racism. Gaye’s self-reinvention from Motown hitmaker to protest singer. And as you contemplate the words and visages of these three, it’s hard not to think about the bad ends all three would ultimately meet. Not that everyone Erik paints is a tragic figure. But, as he observes, there is a recurring duality to the work, a sense of “things not being what they seem,” that manifests itself in various ways. That instability speaks to the psychic mood of the era, at least from the point of view of those of us born right after it ended.

A sense of instability is also baked into the canvases through their very technique. On the one hand, they’re carefully planned, fastidiously produced works. On the other, they’re slippery; the more time you spend looking at them, the more they change. They operate both as mosaic portraits and collections of words, but both of those mechanisms of signification can break down under your gaze. Let your eye meander across the canvas and suddenly the composition becomes an abstract Rothko-esque color field. Accidental scraps of found poetry jump out like William Burroughs cut-ups. The optical play mirrors the uncertainty of the subject matter. Things are never what they seem.

That’s kind of the modern condition, right? “I was supposed to have a script, and had mislaid it,” Didion wrote in “The White Album,” her seminal essay about the psychic fallout of the ’60s. “I was supposed to hear cues, and no longer did. I was meant to know the plot, but all I knew was what I saw: flash pictures in variable sequence, images with no ‘meaning’ beyond their temporary arrangement, not a movie but a cutting-room experience.” The mental and emotional fragmentation she describes could easily be applied to the experience of looking at Erik’s paintings, and to the way things still feel today. We’re still looking for the plot, aren’t we? The optimism that animated the ’60s has been repackaged in the form of car commercials and the banal techno-utopianism of Silicon Valley. The environmental degradation and urban poverty that Marvin Gaye cried out against in “Mercy, Mercy Me” and “Inner City Blues (Make Me Want Holler)” are still dogging us. In some ways, we’re more disconnected from ourselves than ever, and part of the appeal of the early ’70s for us today is that even though things had begun to get dark back then, people were trying to peer through the darkness. But that search party was called off a long time ago.

Still, I also don’t mean to suggest that everything is completely dire, because we’ve still got the music. Music was central to my teenage friendship

with Erik two decades ago, driving around North Oakland in his old family station wagon with the crappy speakers blasting the Cure and the Lemonheads and Pink Floyd and Julian Cope. And Erik's love for music, and all its artifacts and ephemera—the album covers, the liner notes—is where this series started. He says he thinks in musical terms as he composes the paintings, about the harmonics of Karen Carpenter and the key of Richard Pryor. Sink into one of them, and the interplay of compositional elements can give you the vibration of a great song. To quote a line that appears in one of the pieces in the show: "Despite all the amputation / You could just dance to a rock 'n' roll station." That fine-fine music really can save your life.