

The Cook, The Thief, The Wife, And Her Loves

By Sue Spaid

Geometric Desire

Before even beginning to think about what I might write here, I spent some time exploring Casey's blog *Geometric Desire* (caseycookart.blogspot.com). Because her blog is mostly a wordless scroll of photographs posted over the past two years, I thought it might acclimatize me to her newest work. If you're wondering why I've tweaked Peter Greenaway's 1989 film title for use here, consider that on August 11, 2014, Casey sandwiched her painting *Belly* between a bejeweled flirty flamingo, a tied-up blue jean wad and a crocheted doll giving birth! *Belly's* title literally references either the womb or stomach, yet it also evokes a toothy grin, "vagina dentata," ship portal or cell window. My essay title thus reflects the impossibility of ignoring her current art's numerous sex and food references, such as her transferring a grocery list found in her sketchbook onto a sculpture. Last April, dizzying spirals and all things optical reigned, which connects to her use of nested rectangles and concentric ellipses. Only the week before, Casey had posted military stencils whose gammas surface here. Last January, she plugged in a "Neuro-Fuzzy" rice cooker. Last November, she uploaded images of *Marcel Mural*, her parking lot painting, whose dangling kitchen knives bracket this rendering of her cardboard tree sculpture *Quarrelling with Normal* and its shadow à la Marcel Duchamp's *Tu M'* (1918).

Casey's blog reads as a visual version of the 1959 song "My Favorite Things," cataloging compelling geometries availed by quotidian photos, whether found/constructed, mashed-up/stripped-down, basic/far-fetched or casual/precise. Some consider photographs to reduce their subjects to their most basic 2-D shape, yet they sometimes also carve shapes from otherwise formless vistas. If her blog didn't provide space for anonymous nibblers to sample her little loves, these images might be homeless, lost on the world as formless matter. Like curated exhibitions, her novel associations prompt shapeshifting, enabling visual imagery to extend far beyond rudimentary triangles, circles, and squares. Not to be outdone by mere appearance, her playful associations goad the mind's eye. Although I could devote an entire text to her blog's diverse, provocative content, I rather distinguish the cook as the impulsive creator who prepares memorable meals, from the thief who claims others' recipes as his/her own, from the wife whose delicious dishes acknowledge gastronomic influences, inviting every nibbler to multiply her love.¹

The Cook

When I finally received her photos, I was astonished by how much her energetic geometric paintings recall Stuart Davis' jazz-inspired cityscapes from nearly seventy years earlier. Perhaps this link reflects the fact that Casey's art practice is currently enveloped by the music that she and her band Midnight Plus One regularly perform. Regarding Davis' style, an anonymous essayist wrote: "Just as a jazz musician riffs on snippets borrowed from popular music or explores all the permutations of single phrase, so Davis drew from a personal well of reference points, remaking them into new images."² Unlike jazz riffs, songs performed by Casey and her band offer idiosyncratic, personal reflections on current topics such as the way the camera traps its subjects. Crossovers abound when painting titles like *Voodoo Medicine* double as song titles.

What has Casey been cooking up? Unlike Davis who appropriated concrete imagery from nature and popular culture, her recent paintings and sculptures riff on abstract shapes such as nested rectangles and ellipses, wave forms, kidney shapes, vertical bars bisecting circles, and numerous floating gammas.³ By publicizing some of her source material on her blog, she demystifies her studio practice, something that would never occur to thieves like Picasso, who famously said, "good artists copy, geniuses steal." Exercises in primary colors, her current palette spans orangey-reds, sky blues, basic whites, and kelly greens.

Whoa Nell!', a wavy, white cardboard sculpture that resembles brass knuckles and was once sited outdoors, reappears in *Between Two Blues* and *Wild Child*. The hourglass form comprising her giant white cardboard sculpture *Measurement of Time*, *Tools of Hunger*, resurfaces in paintings such as *Les Deux Filles*, *Hunger Pang*, *Saturday Candy Part 2*, and large-scale cardboard sculptures such as *Wherever She Goes She Stands With Star Light* and *Webbs of Balance for Unfinished Decisions*. The cut-out tear-drop hourglass image recurs in paintings such as *Saturday Candy Part 2* and *Hunger Pang*, while its positive shape appears in *Raining Inside*. *Remains* and the print *How Long Can Someone Survive Without*. While I'm reluctant to treat either her motifs as symbols or her paintings as signs, it's difficult not to view the hourglass as feminine iconography, whose reference thus spans the autobiographical to the universal.

If *Armored Arms* has flag-like aspirations, *Throbbing* suggests a flag mounted at the bottom of the sea, as if some deep-sea diver got there first. One male viewer considers *Throbbing*'s nested rectangles to be sniffing a flower. Two works titled *Spitting Streams* also evoke flying flags. Since one is a cardboard sculpture and the other is a cardboard collage, I imagine the former posing for the latter. Flower imagery regularly appears on her blog, so it's hardly surprising to find blossoms bobbing in *Between Two Blues*, *Hey Hey My My*, *Let's Tumble*, or *Throbbing*. Since these four titles convey courtship dramas, I hazard to guess where this is leading... I leave it to the wife (certainly not the madcap cook) to sort through these pressing messes, hunger pangs, and unrequited yearnings, whether for motherhood, another lover, or something else altogether.

The Thief

Nearly a half-century before Casey began painting, Davis remarked, "I can work from Nature, from old studies and paintings of my own, from photographs, and from other works of art. In each case the process consists of transpositions of the spirit of the form of the subject into a coherent objective color-space continuum, which evokes a direct sensate response to structure."⁴ While I truly doubt that Davis' paintings are Casey's actual inspiration, some sort of artistic connection feels apt. Davis called his works synthetic, not abstract. The "Synthetic form is not Abstract. It is Concrete. It is a *new creation* [emphasis mine] in Nature. Just as Chemistry has made thousands of new and useful combinations of chemical elements that had no previous existence in nature, so the artist can combine the three-dimensional elements of painting into new planal relations which have a new Content."⁵ Casey's synthetic artworks are also new creations. One might even call them "coherent color-space continuums." But unlike Davis, her blog registers source material, reminding viewers that her scenes draw inspiration from everywhere.

These days, Casey's work mostly forgoes recognizable imagery such as elevation studies, web sites, naked bodies, stiletto heels, animals, and sex acts. She's replaced such alluring diminutive details with extremely paired down shapes, a kind of animated minimalism. Fourteen years ago, New York Times art critic Roberta Smith noted how "At a time when many younger painters seem to be trying to combine abstraction with intimations of either architecture, sex or computerization, Casey Cook, a Los Angeles artist who is having her first New York gallery show, achieves a *triple crown* [emphasis mine] of sorts. Her hard-edged, color-coordinated, quasi-abstract paintings combine all three, achieving a vaguely sinister, implicitly corporate stylishness that is initially titillating and ultimately a bit inert."⁶ Although the sex is still in full swing, "porn-noir" markers – like computer screens, desks, and heels – exited her tableaux long ago.

The Wife

In my view, the wife plays the most interesting role here. While Casey is neither married nor a mother, her paintings effectively address such roles, which have also been on my mind of late. As a type, the wife eschews definition, since there are as many different *kinds* of wives as there are people. Many wives are devoted to their husbands (or wives), most are focused on their children, some are dedicated homemakers, while others still dote on their guests. But in all cases, the wife's primary goal, unlike that of the cook, is to ensure that others are happy, even if it means compromising some of his/her personal desires. Of course, this characterization is as sexist as it is honest in its attempt to characterize a role model, whose ultimate generosity I typically attribute to great artists. One could say that great artists begin as cooks, but eventually become great wives, a view that runs counter to the notion of artists as brilliant chefs, whose goal is to convince others to love what they do.

I would argue that we love what artists do because they know how to be great wives (Duchamp epitomizes the master-wife). They care how viewers respond, not because they are narcissists or are insecure, but because they acknowledge the spectator's role in completing the work.

People who end up hurt are often those who actually try to make others happy, but don't succeed as they had hoped. Several of Casey's recent paintings, especially *Between Two Blues*, *Raining Inside*, *Hunger Pang*, *Les Deux Filles*, and *Saturday Candy Part 2*, seem to straddle disappointment, as if she is exploring a pain born of generosity, which I associate with trying to make others happy. Another more obvious point concerns female genitalia, which her nested rectangles and concentric ellipses surely convey. In my mind, her sexiest paintings are *Let's Tumble*, *Neon Roots*, and *Squirt*.

Her Loves

Over the years, Casey has collected scores of ceramic objects produced by her "imaginary children." Stumped by the abundance of abandoned children's creations, Casey asks, "How could a parent donate these treasures?" to thrift stores or charity shops.⁷ It's no wonder that she's inscribed "For Mommy" across the upper half of her painting *Unlearn Everything*, which is also the title of her band's most recent album. As the mother of so many imaginary children, she also serves as the wife who takes a special pride in nurturing her offspring's gifts and talents. Even her diptych *Mama Bear, Baby Bear* features an upright bear with a pulsating groin. On the topic of children, her large-scale sculpture *Toy Toy* resembles a jack-o'-lantern face.

If fashion designers are looking backwards to the minimal 1990s, it figures that today's painters would also be revisiting that era's "minimalism with a message" that two decades of figuration eclipsed.⁸ But of course, Casey participated in that era's geometric explosion, so her paintings are hardly "retro."⁹ The style she explores here is very much part of her past, though it's far looser and gestural than earlier hard-edge paintings and more paired-down than more recent loopy, cartoony paintings. As time unfolds, each new body of work twists in aspects of recent experiences.

One hundred years ago, abstract painting arose in connection with two nineteenth century movements, American Transcendentalism and European Theosophy. During 2012, I was starting to notice another mystical tide sweeping across the art world, which in my mind Massimiliano Gioni's "*Il Palazzo Enciclopedico* (The Encyclopedic Palace)" (2013) confirmed. Although Gioni denies any mystical propensities in his catalog essay, I found his inclusion of Rudolf Steiner drawings, Carl Jung's Red Book, numerous visionary artists' mostly abstract paintings, Roger Caillois' rock collection and tantric paintings as evidence to the contrary. Replete with desire, energy, and passion, Casey's curious new artworks contribute greatly to our era's resurgence in mysticism.

¹ Although this essay's sections riff on the title of Peter Greenaway's 1989 film "The Cook, The Thief, The Wife, And Her Lover," [there is no reference] to its actual characters, whose personalities escape my memory.

² "Stuart Davis Biography," www.holisticagart.com

³ I want to be clear that I don't consider Casey's shapes to be symbols, whose assemblies proffer rebuses to be deciphered like puzzles and signs. I imagine her intuitively assembling shapes guided more by compositional decisions than matters of signification. On this level, no shape operates as a symbol on one canvas within her practice. She is thus heir to symbol breakers like Adolph Gottlieb, Joan Miro, or Antoni Tàpies, who used shapes outside of language, appealing instead to the unconscious.

⁴ Karen Wilkin, p. 197.

⁵ Karen Wilkin, Stuart Davis (New York City: Abbeville Press, 1987), p. 16.

⁶ Roberta Smith, "Casey Cook," *The New York Times*, April 7, 2000.

⁷ Casey Cook, email to Sue Spaid, August 23, 2014.

⁸ I termed abstract painting of the early 1990s, "minimalism with a message," since its palettes, energy and shapes struck me as quite meaningful, in contrast to earlier strands allied with Formalism. In 2004, Michelle Grabner invited me to the Art Institute to present "Visual Pleasure and Women Painters," so the numerous female abstract painters in her 2014 Whitney Biennial seemed fitting.

⁹ As an aside, the exhibition *Sublime Geometries* (1990) opened Sue Spaid Fine Art, where Casey's paintings debuted in *Sourpail* (1994), an exhibition focused on palette-origing abstract paintings. "In the "Farming Mysticism" section of *Green Acres: Artists Farming Fields, Greenhouses and Abandoned Lots*, I discuss the influence of 19th Century spiritual movements on first-generation abstract painters like Wassily Kandinsky, Piet Mondrian and Hilla af Klint, as well as the influence of mystical and occult movements on early Surrealists like Paul Klee, Joan Miro, Jean Croth and Hans Arp. *Green Acres: Artists Farming Fields, Greenhouses and Abandoned Lots* (Cincinnati: Contemporary Arts Center, 2012), pp.175-176. Casey's *Marcel Murat* references Duchamp's *Tu M'*, whose pointing hand was supposedly painted by a sign painter named A. Kiang. In *Green Acres*, I contend however that *Tu M's* A. Kiang rather references Kandinsky's "Kiang," his term for the way nature stimulates "soul vibrations." Duchamp translated Kandinsky's *On the Spiritual in Art* from German to French, so he knew "Kiang" well. *Green Acres*, p. 191.

BANANNA
LEMON
GARLIC
HONEY
BLUEBERRY
CHIPS
AUGUST 2014

Page from Artist Sketchbook, 2014

Belgian-based philosopher **Sue Spaid, Ph. D.**, has been active in the artworld as a collector, curator, art writer, university lecturer, and museum director since 1984. Her traveling exhibition *Green Acres: Artists Farming Fields, Greenhouses, and Abandoned Lots*, which was funded by an Emily Hall Tremaine Exhibition Award, finished its tour last fall in two D.C. area museums. *Green Acres* was accompanied by a 244-page book that documents this movement's fifty-year history. While Executive Director at the Contemporary Museum, Baltimore, Maryland, Spaid wrote *A Field Guide to Patricia Johanson's Works: Proposed, Built, Published and Collected* to accompany a fifty-year survey of her work. A former member of the artUS Contributors Board, she wrote regularly for this Los Angeles art publication and its predecessor *ArtText* between 1997 and 2010. While Curator at the Contemporary Arts Center, Cincinnati, Ohio (1999-2002), she authored the book *Ecovention: Current Art to Transform Ecologies* that accompanied the 2002 exhibition she co-curated with Amy Lipton. As an independent curator, she has organized well over 50 exhibitions for artist-run spaces, university galleries, commercial galleries and museums such as Bellevue Art Museum, Mississippi Museum of Art, Santa Monica Museum of Art, Army Center for the Arts, SPACES and the Abington Art Center. During her "Yes Brainer Tour" (2005-2006), she traveled via car to 38 states presenting "The Gist of Isness" along the way. From 1990-1995, she directed Sue Spaid Fine Art, the scrappy Los Angeles gallery that launched dozens of artists careers.