

Mining with a paintbrush

Aunt Bobby thinks that Unsolved Mysteries is real.

—Alika Cooper, *Christmas Lights*

In *The Hundred Dresses*, a children's book published in 1944, a girl living in a small American town is teased daily by her classmates for having blurted out that she has a hundred dresses lined up in her closet. A Polish immigrant, the kid is so poor that she wears the same faded blue garment every day, so no one believes her. As it turns out, what Wanda Petronski has is one hundred *drawings* of beautiful, glamorous gowns. But by the time the others realize their mistake, she and her father have moved away to the city, leaving her marvelous pictures behind. She can always make more.

This story is mostly intended to teach how wrong it is to make fun of others, but staring at Alika Cooper's enigmatic images has led me to think of it more as a prequel to something very different: the Horatio Algeresque tale in which a young American, by sheer force of will and talent, rises from a hardscrabble childhood to wealth, fame and success. I like to imagine Wanda P's grasp of glamour helping her to succeed as an artist or a clothes designer. I see her in my mind, bent over a picture on a kitchen table, drawing her way out of town.

This is only one of many possible narratives that have passed through my mind while trying to parse Cooper's intimately-scaled gouache paintings. These compelling works fall into two categories, generally speaking: female film/media stars of the past, and sere, dusty landscapes featuring mobile homes, empty roads, sparse vegetation, and abject objects like the dry ghosts of Christmas trees. The connection between these seemingly disparate subjects, of course, is Cooper herself. The bleak Western landscapes she pictures are inspired by snapshots, taken either on trips to Oklahoma (where her mother grew up), or in Taft, a tiny town on the southern edge of California's Central Valley, located between—and because of—two immense oil fields. Cooper's roots are there as well: her mother took the train to Taft at fifteen, fleeing Oklahoma. Cooper's father is her mom's high school sweetheart. The place is in her blood.

Though Cooper actually grew up south of LA, these other locations are for her what the madeleine was for Proust—the place where memory ignites creativity and intuition, and inspiration begins leapfrogging from one thing to the next. Her many different versions of derelict Christmas trees, for instance, began originally with a snapshot she took of an out-of-season tree lot in Taft. That image—and the painting that resulted from it (*Tree Lot*, 2007), with its unspoken air of expectation and disappointment, led her to search for others online.



The Internet was also one of Cooper's first sources (she sometimes used old picture books) for head shots of glamorous gamines: the beautiful, sometimes boyish, tough-and-tender women she paints, in a process that she has described as "developing a relationship... sometimes it gets me closer to the subject, and sometimes I stay detached." These iconic figures include Twiggy, Audrey Hepburn, Greta Garbo, Bo Derek, Cybil Shepherd, Princess Diana, Raquel Welch (as a cave woman), Janet Leigh and Farrah Fawcett, among others. The relatively unmediated, nonstandard looks of these women (as compared with contemporary stars) is part of what appeals to Cooper. They are individuals, not Barbie dolls. That, and a kind of innocence that is no longer possible.

More recently, these portraits have been based on homemade 'stills,' created by freezing a particular moment in the DVD of an old movie. But whatever Cooper uses, whether it be snapshots, downloads, or film captures, her paintings begin with something made by a camera. She reads these source materials as if they were gnostic texts, translating cheekbones, big eyes and trademark hairdos into shapes brushed with gouache onto tinted paper. Cooper likes the way this water-based paint can range from opaque, when spread with an almost dry brush, to fluid and transparent: more a stain than a defined color. Using tinted paper means that, like classic black and white photographs, all of her images are composed through careful choices of light and dark contrasts against an overall intermediate tone.

Cooper's strategies—looking through the camera's eye, often at pop culture goddesses-- make her part of an essential thread in the fabric of post-war, post-modern art. Her ancestors and fellow-travelers include the group of artists featured in "The Painting of Modern Life" at London's Hayward Gallery in 2007. This exhibition's investigation of five decades of the use (and translation) of photographic imagery ranged from 60s works by Warhol, Richter and Celmins to paintings by artists *born* in the 60s, such as Elizabeth Peyton.

Pondering the faces and places in Cooper's pictures can bring other names to mind as well: Wilhelm Sasnal, Karen Kilimnick, Peter Doig. But what she has in common with these artists, especially Doig, is not so much the use of photographs, but what happens during the journey from the initial prompt provided by such images to the completion of the resulting work. There is a great deal that viewers can never see—and a lot the artist can hardly explain, when asked how she got from point A to point B.

But maybe figuring this out is *our* responsibility. As we experience these paintings with the part of our brains that doesn't require traveling in a straight line, we create our own relationships with these women who wear their famous faces like masks, or try to sense the narrative implied by the intersection of two dirt roads, a solitary pond. I think about these things, and find myself imagining a hundred Twiggys, in a stack on a table, each one different from the next.

-Maria Porges, Oakland, 2009