

# ART

## Lady soul

Jill Culver doesn't read people's souls—she just paints them...

BY SAMANTHA CAMPOS

She knows it sounds crazy. But she will assure you, she is not one of those “hippie Marin artist chicks.” She didn't necessarily even want to do it. This “painting portraits of people's souls” is something that chose her.

Jill Culver, one of this month's Marin Open Studios featured artists, didn't grow up doing anything artistic as a hobby, nor did she earn her living doing something creative. She held an administrative job for 30 years. She lived in Connecticut. She did marry a graphic designer, but that's neither here nor there. The point is, for most of her adult life Culver wasn't an artist.

But things change. A very small voice in the back of her head was saying that she needed to shift her priorities. And in 1995, at age 39, she packed up everything she owned and moved to California “to paint and wear hats.”

She heard about “The Painting Experience”—an arts support group based in the Bay Area—and took a class in Sausalito. It was a turning point in her process, she said. “I was so intimidated that I would just do a bunch of circles and squares.” So she joined a studio of women, mentors, who helped her learn how to paint from intuition, once a week, for two years.

In the meantime, 9/11 happened. Culver lost a cool \$1 million from the dot-com crash. And her mom died. The voice in the back of her head grew louder. She thought about her father, and how he never did anything with the music she knew was in him. And she didn't want to die in her rocking chair, wondering,

regretting...

She knew she had to paint more. She couldn't care less about landscapes, so she started with people, letting all sorts of otherworldly images pour out of her. At first, she was scared to death to show the portraits to them. She didn't know if she could handle the criticism, or be taken seriously. But then she discovered her intuited interpretations seemed to deeply affect her subjects. “This validates everything I know about myself,” said one.

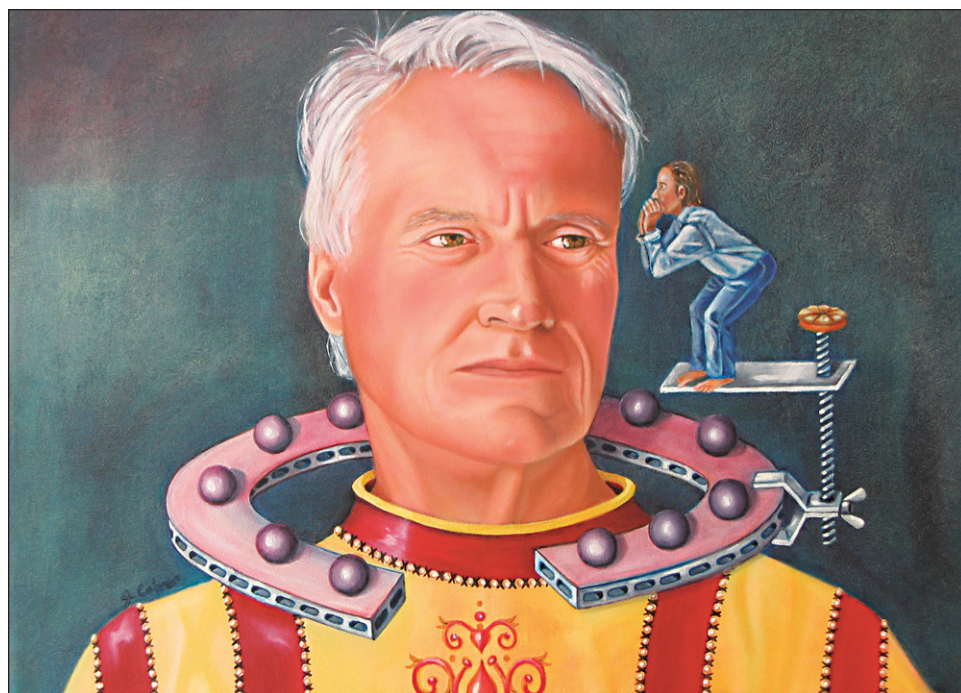
“I have never felt so seen or so known,” said another.

“And I said, ‘OK, I guess that's what I'm here to do,’” said Culver. “To me, this is really sacred work. It would be a gift, and I can't deny it.”

When Culver does portraits, she doesn't do any interviewing beforehand. She said she's very dedicated to being true to what she gets intuitively from the person, instead of painting what she knows about them. And she finds that there's a counseling element involved, and often some healing occurs, when discussing what the images mean later.

Three years ago, Charles Roppel decided to sit for a portrait, as a gift to himself for his 65th birthday. He had no idea what to expect.

“I went in, sat for 20 minutes, she took sketches and some Polaroids,” he said. “Then I came back a month later, and she had used the colors of the Vatican—I used to be a Catholic priest. And there's a collar breaking loose. Somehow she had captured the ground of my being. I look at it, see this strong person and I believe



Charles Roppel hadn't told Culver that he was once a Catholic priest when she depicted him in Vatican colors with a collar breaking loose from his neck.

that's what I am. But it's also whimsical, there's nothing too serious about it. It provided me with an opportunity to get a sense of how others perceive me. It continues to be a tool for self-revelation.”

Another portrait subject, Gail Perry, agreed.

“I went to her home. I sat in a big antique chair like a throne, there was music, she offered me something to eat and drink. I sat for three hours, staring at the fringe on a velvety curtain. I was afraid it was gonna be a weird, funky thing I wouldn't hang on my wall, like, ‘Oh, I hope I don't have a snake coming out of my eyes!’ It's hanging in my bedroom now, I get guidance from it—it allows me to connect with myself. It shows who I've been, who I am, who I'm becoming, what to resolve or grow into. It's an unending fun thing to have and an ongoing experi-

ence, an unfolding journey.”

“People see their bigness,” Culver said. “They see who they are. It's remarkable. I feel completely and totally privileged to do this. Talk about satisfying work.”

Still, Culver admits there are days of uncertainty, times when she doubts her abilities or “over-thinks” things.

“I have a hard time labeling this,” she said. “I don't wanna be too airy-fairy and I don't really profess to be reading people's souls—that's pretty arrogant. But it's not about me. There's a level that's operating here far beyond that—I'm not that clever. I've always had a good sense of people and can often see things they can't. But I don't consider myself highly intuitive. I've always been really practical, grounded. But I believe there is more beyond this world to offer. And I don't have to understand it [for it] to be true.” \*



Culver doesn't interview her subjects before painting them, she just tries to get a sense of them and to see things that they can't.

Happy entrails to you...

Until she'd discovered intestinal swine membrane, Carol Durham was just another artist...

No, it's not papier-mache, she will tell you with a glint in her eye. Touch it, smell it...that's right. Look closer.

That striking sculpture made to look like a pair of heeled slippers—the beaded ones that appear so dainty and pretty? They're made from hog guts.

Before she got into stretching intestinal swine membrane over shoe molds, Carol Durham was a printmaker. She'd also previously worked in oils, watercolors and ceramics. But after the Oakland native took a sculpture class at the College of Marin and discovered that three-dimensional art could be made using pork casings, she was hooked.

So she went to her neighborhood grocery store, Scotty's Market in San Rafael, and convinced them to donate a big, smelly, liquefied container of the throwaway entrails to her class. She was excited to share such a unique medium with her fellow art students.

Nobody took to it.

She likes the challenge of using such a slick, organic material. She says it's a surprisingly strong fiber yet quite flexible, and that the possibilities are endless. But she also especially



Talk about making a silk purse out of a sow's ear...

enjoys the reaction she gets from people when they discover what's underneath all the elaborate metallic paint and sequins.

Durham, who's taking part in this month's Marin Open Studios, uses various molds of footwear as the foundation for her art, as a sort of metaphor for the various “shoes” in which we step through life. It also suitably provides some whimsy and delicacy to the more rustic medium.

But perhaps more significantly, Durham says the hog guts have changed her perspective.

“Gut has such a beautiful look to it,” she says. “This stuff has a lot of potential, it has a memory of its own and you can do a lot with it. I like the humor of it—it's made me looser. Ceramics never did this to me! It allows me to just go out there, to be freer, more creative-thinking. Plus, it's just so weird.”

—Samantha Campos