

Sharon Ryan: A postcard doodler crisscrosses L.A.



Sharon Ryan: Grauman's Chinese Theatre, Hollywood, California, 2008. Ink on postcard.
Photo Credit: Joshua White, Courtesy of Kim Light/LightBox

By -- Mindy.Farabee @latimes.com

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IT WAS, at one point, a photograph of Hollywood Boulevard, a fact still hinted at by the small "Capitol Records" sign in its upper left. What this darkly embellished postcard has become under the pen of Sharon Ryan is one stop on a moody tour of the artist's Los Angeles in "Wish You Were Here" at Culver City's Kim Light/LightBox gallery.

An obsessive doodler from an early age ("My mother would say, 'That's an important bill that needs to be paid. Stop drawing on it.'"), Ryan started noodling around with postcards about 10 years ago. She says she never intended to exhibit her souvenirs, largely culled from the junk stores and roadside stands visited on her many long-haul road trips.

"It was just a way for me to stay productive when I was away from my studio," she says. But friends routinely admired them, until Ryan was persuaded to at least run them by her dealer, Kim Light, who snatched them up immediately. "I showed them to Kim, and she said let's show them in May."

From these troves, "Wish" presents exclusively touristy L.A. locales, marquee spots such as Grauman's Chinese Theatre, the Getty, Disney Hall and vintage images of Hancock Park. All these works hail from the last two years, and Ryan completed most in one sitting, while under the influence of very loud music.

"I always think of my drawing like a guitar solo," she says. "It goes on and on and then it just ends. My work's like this, it flows from an intuitive nature."

When it comes to art and the human subconscious, few straight lines can be drawn. But Ryan's signature squiggles, the free-flowing forms she's layered for years onto paper, Polaroids and now postcards, must also claim some roots in the family tree. "I was raised pretty pro-Ireland, pretty traditional," says Ryan, sitting in her south downtown L.A. arts colony studio, sipping milky black tea out of a mug garlanded in shamrocks.

Almost the youngest of seven (edged out by one last brother) and almost a lifelong Angeleno, she was one of the few Ryans born in Canada, she says, after her IRA-affiliated father was forced out of the Emerald Isle.

When he came down with tuberculosis, the family re-relocated to the hot, dry Inland Empire in her early adolescence, where still "we followed all the Irish traditions," she says. Surrounded by parents and siblings who speak Irish, steeped in Latin masses, cathedral stained glass and the storytelling gene firmly embedded in the Celtic character, she knowingly folds such elements into her works, though rarely literally.

Take her postcards. Infused with a narrative quality, she says, they are reflexively informed by their base imagery, such as the quasi-Asian quality she adopted for the swooping lines scurrying around Grauman's and the organically loopy swirls twirled over a shot of the Venice canals.

Take also their oblique references to the vibrantly mazy, densely ornamented Book of Kells, Ireland's celebrated 9th century illuminated manuscript. "What I love about it is the beautifully intricate mark making," she says. That and its distinct style of visual storytelling, rich with detail. "It's kind of obsessively decorative."

"I'm known for my line work," she continues. Like the Kells miniatures, her postcards "are small, and the more you look, the more you see."

KIM LIGHT

2656 S. LA CIENEGA BLVD
LOS ANGELES, CA 90034
T 310.559.1111 F 310.559.2911
info@kimlightgallery.com
www.kimlightgallery.com

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