

CONTAMINATENYC

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An Interview with Peter Gerakaris

July 1, 2010 by [Caroline von Kuhn](#)



"How High the Moon (Detail)" by Peter Gerakaris. 84"x84". Oil on canvas. ©2009 (Private Collection, NYC)

Interview and Introduction by [Caroline Von Kuhn](#)

"Oh, I love the traces of Raphael." "The palette hints of French impressionist influence." "The figures are very Ruben." As artists and viewers, we can't help but look at those that came before us. Forever relying on our limited vocabulary of references to understand what we see and to develop what we create. We use all we encounter, the greater artists mastering influences (conscious and sub-conscious) outside of the traditional realm.

The talented artist Peter Gerakaris, generously invited me into his studio in Long Island City last week, where I got to experience the vibrant large-scale paintings and view closely the intricate detail of his sketches. His paintings result from a fascinating mix of influences, culminating in breath-taking, vivid works. This is the first of two installments of an interview with the artist, where he discusses the evolution of his art and how New York has 'contaminated' him. Next week, be sure to return here to read Peter's advise on becoming an artist.

CVK – Your designs are really beautiful – from the large-scale paintings to the intricacy of design in your paper sketches. Can you speak about some of your influences? And how your work has evolved?

“Beautiful?” – OK, thanks. Since you have opened that can of worms, I must confess Keats’ line in “Ode to a Grecian Urn” is still one of my favorites:

“Beauty is Truth, Truth Beauty,” – that is all,
Ye know on earth, and all ye need to know.



"How High the Moon" by Peter Gerakaris. 84"x84". Oil on canvas. ©2009 (Private Collection, NYC)

It is interesting you have chosen to describe my imagery as “designs”. While I think I know what you mean, I do not like conflating “design” with visual art that has a “graphic quality”, if the latter is what you meant.

So yes, I have an interest in exploiting and synthesizing graphic devices from popular visual lexicons with more personalized form, pattern and imagery, etc. Therefore, I might consider myself an “image” person. When I say “popular” visual language, it is not necessarily limited to

this country right now. For me, it includes everything from 18th Century Utagawa School Prints, to the graphic on a beach towel my parents had when I was 5, to some psychedelic poster designs and American kitsch, or even the Persian carpets upon which I grew up. The overlap between the pop and personal organic aesthetic might also come from having watched too many PBS nature shows as a child, with all the macro and slow-mo imagery. Plus, there was still no MTV for those of us who were raised in the Northern New England countryside, so we had to use our imaginations for the special effects.

I suppose my work toys with that slippery space between vernacular “visual culture”, my personal reverence for the forms of Nature and specific languages in painting (Chinese landscapes, Italian Renaissance and Baroque, Modernist Op-art abstractions). Lately, this has resulted in apparition-like human forms set amidst “graphic-botanic” environments, such as “How High the Moon”; a large painting I just exhibited in the three-person exhibition, “Like a Rolling Stone” at Ana Cristea Gallery in Chelsea. You might consider my process like a giant kaleidoscope through which I filter both conscious and subconscious impulses—these impulses come from art history, music, film, literature, emotions, life experience, science, travel, dreams, a conversation I just had—in short, “life”. The “filter” metaphor is really a device that allows me to recontextualize vernacular visual languages, internalize them and then make them my own—in a sense, everything from the gallery context to the way I paint provides an additional layer of remove, or new “lens” through which the audience can interpret. Leaving space for the viewer to complete this “feedback loop” in art is crucial.

Tangentially, I think there is an irony: I have found myself increasingly wanting to reduce the visual load of my work the more experiences I accumulate. And it could also be an antidote to the maelstrom of New York City life.



“Gateway Triptych (Center Detail)” by Peter Gerakaris. 144” x 24”. Oil on acrylic, polymer and canvas.
©2008 (Private Collection, NYC)

It is also necessary that I filter these elements through my own cosmology (giving them a specificity), which has undoubtedly been influenced by having grown up as a child in the woods with an artist-craftsman father and a mother who loves nature photography. For me, images must go through a physical transformation from virtual “vision” to handmade “art object”. That which is handmade in contemporary life seems to carry all that much more currency and “aura”, at least to me—call me a romantic, but I think this is testament to why people still crave paintings painted by the human hand. It is safe to say, painting is here to stay. It is both heady and humbling to be part of a continuum that goes back millennia to the caves of Lascaux, etc.

Oh, and I meant to add: I believe there is some physical finality in a hand-painted object that a pure “design” does not have—a “design”, at least to me, implies a scheme for something yet to be made. I guess that is why I took far too long to answer the first part of your question.

As for evolution, I would like to think my work is in constant flux, but hopefully gaining clarity. For instance, some of my first drawings as a child depicted people in imaginary landscapes—little people climbing “Heart Mountain” with green-heart pickaxes (that is what growing up as an only-child in the woods does to a formative psyche). As I mentioned, my parents are both artists, so I think they made sure I knew how to hold a pencil before I could walk.

Flash forward to the “Toxiganic” series I showed at the Bronx Museum in ‘06, where I painted quasi-abstract-rotschach-silhouette “afterimages” of plants such as the Ricinus, which are beautiful but also toxic—these bear seemingly little resemblance to my childhood pursuits. Transitioning out of that series, I retained the acidic, vibratory palette, “energy field” filigree and then began scaling many of these botanical and insect forms into large “amalgam” paintings. Some of these canvases are 6ft x 12ft, which really occupy a good swath of one’s visual field. In hindsight, I suppose the large plants had become surrogate figures. However, having withheld or sublimated the human form in my art for nearly 4 years, I am back at it. My very first childhood drawings were essentially representations of humans in enigmatic environments and I guess I am back on that kick now. Evolution in art is typically not very linear. I synthesize past vocabulary and steal from myself all the time.

In my latest series of paintings, I am stripping the visual elements down from busy amalgamations into what I hope are much more focused and distilled pictures. For instance: in “How High the Moon”, a female figure poses contrapposto in a “virtual” cibachrome forest—frozen like an apparition, plus there is an umbrella involved. I suppose the mood and sense of place are more specific than the older works. I hope.

My latest series takes a similar figure, places her in a new theatrical setting and then manipulates slight variations in the pose from one static environment to the next. And I have another long-term painting / installation project in mind: it will use a Nathaniel Hawthorne short story, with all its allegory and luminous imagery, as a springboard. Where it will lead, I do not entirely know, but I am hyped.

CVK – It was such fun to visit your studio in Long Island City – the space itself and the neighborhood. Can you talk a little about the new artist community – LIC, Brooklyn, etc? How is this landscape changing and how have you enjoyed the move out to LIC? How has NY influenced your art?

PG – Well, thanks. It was fun having you and observing your response.

I figured out a while ago that if I am not happy in my studio environment, it is only to the detriment of my work and productivity. The happier you are in a space, the more productive you can be. It is a simple fact. I was fortunate to recently find the studio space in Long Island City, less than two blocks from PS1—it was worth holding out for. I knew I wanted the space the minute I walked in, that it just “felt right”.

Interestingly, the floor of the warehouse where my studio is was founded and renovated by a group of artists who had been forced out of their previous studios at PS1 over 30 years ago (yes, they were there long before MoMA). Artists like them are the pioneers responsible for tipping a neighborhood from industrial to mixed-use. Then there is the inevitable consequence of gentrification—some good (safe neighborhood and amenities), some bad (rising costs and hideous condominiums). It is a classic cycle in NYC—look at Chelsea and Soho and now what has happened in DUMBO, Gowanus, Williamsburg, Bushwick, etc.

I think Long Island City is unique because it never became (hopefully never will) a theme park like Williamsburg. It has an odd, but symbiotic mixture of artists, light industry (taxi and auto body repairs shops), small restaurants, families and the Midtown commuting crowd. Overall, there is a sense of community in the area that often makes me forget I am even in the city. And I know artists in the area, so it is easy to exchange studio visits, plus our studios are one subway stop from Manhattan.

Inevitably, NYC influences most of its artists—any environment in which I make art certainly impacts the work. The obvious benefits of NYC are all the other artists, curators and collectors you meet, not to mention the cultural venues (museums, galleries, events, etc). That all goes without saying.

But in my case, this frenetic, gothic grid set off an interesting binary opposition: the more time I spent in the post-industrial areas of New York working, the more I found myself compelled to reflect on the sinuous, organic forms of my back-to-the-land upbringing. It is kind of poignant to reflect upon the romance of that 70s movement from the distance of another city and era. For better or worse, our world is more urban today than ever, so young artists really need the vitality of a metropolis to survive.

I doubt I would have ended up incorporating so many organic motifs, such as plants and insects into my work had I continued living in the country. In the woods, you can easily take seeing the Milky Way every other night for granted—but when is the last time you were able to see it from city (maybe the late 19th century)? You might say I have suffered from N.D.D. (aka Nature Deficit Disorder). Fortunately, I make a point to get out of the City frequently for my “Nature Fix”.

You can visit Peter's website at <http://www.petergerakaris.com/>

Part II of Interview continues on next page...

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Interview "Part 2" Published July, 2010: <http://www.contaminatenyc.com/?p=2557>

Interview with Peter Gerakaris, Part Two

July 8, 2010 by **Caroline von Kuhn**



Left: "Gateway Triptych (Corner Installation View)." 24 x 107 inches (Corner installation dimensions. Each canvas = 24 x 48 inches). Oil on acrylic polymer and canvas. ©2008. Peter D. Gerakaris [Private Collection, NYC]

Bottom Left: Peter D. Gerakaris' Studio. Long Island City, NYC (2010)

Bottom Right: "Etudes: Home at Last (Series of 1-4)". Each work: 15 x 7.5 inches. Ink, gouache and acrylic on paper. ©2010. Peter D. Gerakaris [Private Collection, NYC]



It's so many of our stories. Move to New York from our relevant home towns and pursue our art. In theory a beautiful dream – in reality a bumpy road – full of service industry supplementary jobs, failed shows, interviews or auditions leading to new ideas but not necessarily new work and the rent check barely paid in time each month. The choice is brave, heroic and often difficult.

In the second installment of an interview with artist Peter Gerakaris, he talks a bit more about his art and gives some invaluable advise to those of us pursuing a career in art.

CvK – Can you talk a little about your murals? How does the space where they went up influence the mural you create?

PG – When I did the solo show / installation "Spectrumorphosis" at Wave Hill, I created translucent site-specific paintings on glass that filtered exterior light into the gallery. It generated an interplay between the plants, viewers, transmitted color and overall space. However, there

was a 14-foot windowless wall which was very anti-climactic, so I had to transform it somehow. I had two or three days left during the install and decided with curators Jennifer McGregor and Erica Strongin do a giant “Helianthus Rorschach” mural. I think it did bring that half of the gallery to life and seemed fitting since they this particular was called the “Sun Room”.

I also have a detailed, “hypothetical” mural proposal on file that would cover the entire north wall of the National Academy Museum on 89th Street and 5th Ave. It was part of a mural fellowship (The Abbey Mural Fellowship) and show I recently took part in at the National Academy. The imagery strives to unite iconography from Central Park with Museum Mile in an attempt to reinvigorate interest in the National Academy by turning the large wall into a beacon. Although I am not holding my breath that it will ever happen, you never know.

CvK – When did you decide to be an artist professionally?

PG – I fantasized about being a Major League Baseball pitcher for years, but threw out my arm in high school so I naturally fell back on art.

I was then too naive to know any better when I moved to New York at age 21 to pursue art after graduating from Cornell. From day one out of undergraduate, I always managed to avoid a day job, despite sometimes wondering what it would be like to get a steady paycheck. But it was a simple deduction: I either spend all my time pouring creative energy into someone else’s project and unhappily wish I were painting, or put that energy into my own pursuits, so the latter is what I did. I also asked myself, “can I really call myself an artist if I am not making art”? Given my disposition, I had no choice, but I wouldn’t wish it on anyone else.

CvK – It’s phenomenal how your career has taken off. How have you found the transition from grad school into the professional art world in NY?

PG – Well, it feels great to be treated like a professional adult again, not a student. Of course if you had asked me two months ago when I was still trying to find a comfortable painting studio (which is not easy these days in NYC), I may have answered differently. New York is as challenging as ever for artists trying to eek out a life, but the opportunities can often outweigh the challenges.

As for grad school, it’s important to remember that an MFA is a terminal degree and that people go back to school at a variety of stages in life. I at least had a few years of “real world” experience between Cornell and Hunter, so I had professional momentum coming into the program. It probably would not have been appropriate to attend an MFA program had I been a lot younger or waited any longer, but luckily the timing turned out to be really perfect.

I will add that where I did my MFA (CUNY Hunter College) fortunately allows students to balance having one foot in the “real world” and the other in academics—it’s a tasty cocktail of “practice” and “theory”. Plus, it is in the middle of NYC and people are there to take advantage of the pluralistic art scene, so Hunter tends to be less afflicted by the “bubble” or “vacuum” syndromes than some of the other competitive MFA programs. By the end of grad school, you have become so hyper-conscious of yourself as an artist that it is only healthy to take a step back. So all good things must come to an end, including student days. When you come to the realization that you no longer need anyone to orchestrate your learning process and that being labeled a “student artist” by the outside world imposes a ceiling, it means it is time to graduate

CvK – What advise would you give to an artist at the start of their career?

PG – Well, when I first moved to NYC I met an elderly Russian painter who gave me his business card, which read: “if you meet an artist, kill him.”

Aside from that advice, I would say make the best possible work you can and stay true to your

own personal vision—be genuine. If you let other people or trends dictate what you should or should not make, you will not be making your own work, you won't have fun making it, and it will probably not be very good.

No one every said being an artist is easy. It is a tough job because you must be very sensitive to feedback and aware of external stimuli. Simultaneously, you also need a thick skin because you cannot take all the advice or criticism you receive to heart. To paraphrase Herbie Hancock, who was recently asked in an interview if he is "...making music for any particular audience or critic", he responded by saying "no"—basically, that his biggest responsibility is making music with which *he* is happy. In a sense, I think that is far more genuine and challenging than pretending to make art under the misguided premise of pleasing others. It is like Kenny G versus Herbie Hancock. But I think Herbie's response incidentally touches upon the great notion of how specificity can lead to universality: that when you successfully hone in on the specific in art—ie you and your completely unique perspective of the world—you paradoxically arrive at something more universal.

You can visit Peter's website at <http://www.petergerakaris.com/>