Cultural Daily

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If Velvet Paintings Could Talk, This is the Tale They'd Tell

Carl Baldwin · Wednesday, July 9th, 2014

One hundred years ago, Black Hander Gavrilo Princip plugged the foppish befeathered Archduke Ferdinand and his wife in Sarajevo, starting the war to end all wars. When the feathers hit the deck, gone were the last vestiges of royalty. Welcome to the 20th Century.

My grandfather Carl Baldwin and his brother, my uncle Charlie, were minding their own business down on the farm in Kansas. Carl soon found himself in a scratchy doughboy uniform, gun in hand, off to France. He dreamed of visiting Paris to see the buildings his great-grandfather had designed for Napoleon. He took mustard gas in the battle of Maine. Gassed, war left him a changed man. Uncle Charlie told my brother Jimmy and me about his wild adventures. Charlie lost an eye one July 4th (his birthday) playing with explosives. He and his friends used to put pieces of metal on the train tracks to make scissors. We never knew our grandpa Carl except through his brothers' stories. The ravages of war killed him in his 40's in 1945. Charlie's boyhood accident helped get him out of WWI.

Charlie Baldwin was a fortune hunter, adventuring across the Middle East searching for oil. He had a photo of himself with cutthroats he had met at the Khyber Pass. He had another picture of himself standing at the end of Balancing Rock at Glacier Point in Yosemite. His wife, Aunt Ina, regaled us with stories about Persia, Singapore, Pago Pago, Rangoon, Papeete, Jakarta and Paris. In the 1930's in Burma, Charlie was with the British blowing up the oil fields before the Japanese invasion. From their backyard in Fullerton, Ina and Charlie opened our eyes to the world. The house was like a museum filled with treasures from all over. There were Native American baskets, swords, ivory busts and much more.

In a secret passageway between closets Charlie kept his artwork. It was then that my brother Jimmy and I spied our first naked lady. A beautiful island girl on black velvet from Papeete. We were scolded pretty hard. Never to venture into that closet again. We went in that hallway as boys and came out men.

"Tahitia" by Edward Leetag

But we hadn't figured it all out yet. Surf was up in the summer of 1966. We lived at the peninsula in Balboa, California near the fun zone. We hung out at a head shop called Nirvana. This place had blacklight posters and a velvet glowing devil painting pointing at us to join in the fun. We did. Our next door neighbor, a slender, statuesque Spanish man, had claimed to be a matador.

Over his davenport was a six-foot-long velvet painting with a matador and a very nasty looking bull.

From Tijuana to Juarez, velvet exploded. In the 60's, it was mass-produced in factories. These velvet paintings were sold across the nation on street corners, in swap meets and even door to door. The Elvises, banditos, matadors; the young, dead and famous. People like JFK, Marilyn, Hendrix, and Jesus were portrayed. Political messages from MLK, Malcolm X, and the Black Panthers shouted from these paintings.

Going to TJ was a series of fun experiences. Get diarrhea from the food, deathly ill from the mickey they slipped you at Club Bambi, where you also got a lifelong dose of the clap. After that, some fist fighting in the alley, a trip to the medic or maybe the morgue. A night in jail if you are lucky. Remembering it all when you get back home toasting that black velvet bandito that you rode out of Mexico with.

There's a vacation!

Velvet goes back to the silkworm. Weavers in China and Persia made beautiful tapestries. Velvet is made when two pieces of fabric are woven together and then cut in the middle creating the nap of the fabric. That is where the magic lies. When paint is applied to this luscious fabric the luminescent glow gives off a 3D effect and light dances off the fabric. The subject comes to life, unlike on canvas. There is no other effect like this in art. Therein lies the allure. That makes it the greatest art in the world.

Edgar Leeteg, a short, round German American from St. Louis, Missouri, was born in 1904. He had a domineering mother who wore him down his whole life. He had an eye for the ladies and a virtuoso art talent. He had been impressed as a boy by a velvet painting he saw in a church.

As a young man he worked in Sacramento for Foster and Kleiser doing the work of three men. During the Depression he took a three-week vacation to the South Seas. He went from Hawaii to Tahiti and eventually settled in Tahiti where he built his island paradise, Villa Velour. With a small inheritance from his father, he moved his mother and himself down to Tahiti.

Tuesdays were spent drinking in Papeete. His once-a-week forays into town had become legendary, along with his paintings on velvet that "captured the beauty of the Polynesian race." He was disregarded by critics, but he dismissed them, saying, "they couldn't produce what was on the end of a stable boy's shovel." The world loved his art. Even Picasso was an admirer. Bob Brooks from Hollywood bought his paintings to his bar, creating the TIki craze. Wayne Decker, a jeweler from Salt Lake City, had over 200 of his works. Alas, the party ended for Leeteg when he fell off a motorcycle after a night of debauchery in 1953. Others took up the brush. Burke Tyree, Charles McPhee, Bill Erwin, Earl Frysinger, Louis Behan, and Cecelia Rodriguez. McPhee and Erwin were even students of Leeteg in Tahiti.

CeCe Rodriguez was born in 1921. Her father, W. R. Schmitt, worked with Tod Browning and Lewis Milestone on the Academy Award-winning film *All Quiet on the Western Front.* CeCe, too, left California for Hawaii and saw velvet paintings in the 60's. She said, "I can do that." She taught herself to paint on velvet but it didn't pay the rent. So she went to cake decorating school. A passerby spied one of her velvets in her window and inquired if it was for sale. She said, "Yes," and the man asked if she had anymore and she told him, no, she was going to culinary school. He told her to keep painting and he would buy everything she painted. His name was Dr. Loren Kitch.

Dr. Kitch did buy many paintings and, she said, “he kept me in money.” CeCe had many other fans of her work and ended up touring Australia and China with her art. She had paintings in galleries in Hawaii and painted under the famous Banyan tree in Maui. The 60’s to the early 70’s was the heyday of the finest paintings on velvet.

Dr. Kitch was a well-to-do oral surgeon in Pasadena and he kept all his velvets in his office in a place he called “The Exotic Back Room.” He was a world traveler and quite a character. He was also a ladies’ man. He had marble statues around his pool. Meanwhile, life took its course and I ran into Caren Anderson from high school. We met up in the Old Pueblo, Tucson, Arizona. Took a drive to Tombstone, home of the OK Corral. While knocking down a few at the bar Big Nose Kate’s we decided to head down to the border. We ended up in Bisbee, Arizona, where we laid eyes on her. A woman with a big blue Afro on velvet. We wondered out loud, “What ever happened to these things?”

Then in another corner of the store was a velvet of JFK, his eyes following you wherever you went. We left JFK’s wandering eyes there and with our lady we took our first steps on the Velvet Trail.

After that we went on a jag of buying every velvet we could find from 10 bucks to 100. We got about 40 paintings and hung them up tastefully all over the house and had a party for Caren’s co-workers at the hospital where she worked. The guests were laughing and talking and seemed to like the paintings without the aid of drugs or alcohol. This could make a cool museum, we thought.

We found a basement storefront in Portland, Or. and opened up and charged $3.

Within 6 months we had Anthony Bourdain from the Travel Channel, Tonight Show, HGTV, a Sunday feature in the Oregonian, AM Northwest–it was a media blitz! We were flabbergasted.

Carl Baldwin at the Musée Du Quai Branly (Paris) in front of Edgar Leeteg’s “Tahitia,” on loan from the Velveteria collection.

One hot July day in 2006, a woman named Wendy called. “I have a collection of velvet paintings, 200 plus, I am down here in the desert in California. Nobody wants them, do you want to see them?” A week later I was sitting on a tree stump next to some marble statues that surrounded the Dodge Caravan that was home to Dr. Kitch, CeCe Rodriguez’s patron. The stench from the Suk Mai Kok chicken coop filled my nostrils and gut. There were carpet remnants on the ground to keep the fine silt from blowing through everything. Wendy and I went through the storage shed with some flashlight in stifling desert heat. I called Caren and she told me to buy the collection. We were about to go to the bank when Kitch walked over to a knothole in a tree and pulled out some cash, a few scraggly bills. It was all he had. I could see the California rot; Dickensonian, if you will. I looked into his 88-year-old eyes and said, “How did you end up like this?” He said it was the women, they took it all, everything. Looking around at this Grapes of Wrath lifestyle, I felt bad for him. “The women, goddamned women,” I said. He looked up at me with a glint in his eyes and with a shit-eating grin, said, “Yeah, but it was worth it.”

He had fallen and I wasn’t going to insult him by haggling. We spent our nest egg on Kitch’s velvets. He married Wendy, 40 years his junior, and went to Acapulco, then honeymooned on a cruise through the Panama Canal. Then after a few more years of his high life he died with that grin. The one thing that the women never wanted had paid off. In the end, the beautiful velvet *wahine* made his last years a paradise.

Velveteria, the museum of velvet paintings, is operated by Carl Baldwin and Caren Anderson. It has more than 3,000 paintings from every corner of the world in its collection. Velveteria is located at 711 New High St., Chinatown, Los Angeles, CA 90012.Open 11am-6pm Weds-Mon; closed Tues.

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