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FEATURES

Acts of Reverence

The Bakersfield Museum of Art showcases the breathtaking still lifes of California artist Pamela Carroll.

By John O'Hern

Pamela Carroll and her late husband, Chris, raised their son, Dustin, in a charming cottage in Carmel-by-the-Sea, California. Filled with light, their home overlooked the surrounding landscape of the Monterey Peninsula and the dome of the Carmel Mission Basilica. The cottage had been designed and constructed in 1940 by Julia Morgan, the first woman architect licensed in California after having been the first woman admitted to the architecture program at the École des Beaux-Arts in Paris.

Pomegranates in a Basket, 2022, oil on panel, 28 x 22 in.

Morgan walked the five miles from her home and studio in Monterey to oversee construction of the cottage in Carmel. At the same time, she was designing and overseeing the building, furnishing and decoration of William Randolph Hearst's Castle, Cuesta Encantada (Enchanted Hill), in San Simeon, California, a project she began in 1919 and worked on for 28 years.

Carroll and I first met in 2012 when I gave a talk at the International Guild of Realism's annual exhibition and conference in Carmel. Her portraits and still lifes—primarily colorful old toys and the objects of everyday life—stood out with their simplicity and finely-rendered detail. Her most recent work will be shown in the exhibition *Pamela Carroll: The Beauty Inherent* at the Bakersfield Museum of Art in Bakersfield, California, through September 6. The exhibition has been coordinated by the museum's curator of exhibitions and collections, Victor Gonzales.

Onions in Green Compote, 2024, oil on panel, 16 x 20 in.

Carroll is self-taught, drawing dogs and houses as a girl, always striving to "make things look real." Her circle of influences and mentors is broad, from the masters of Dutch and Spanish painting to contemporary realists. She worked at various artistic endeavors including drawing portraits at Lion Country Safari before devoting herself to her home and family for 16 years, allowing time for painting two weeks out of the month.

When Dustin was in high school, Carroll got back into painting more seriously, learning how to use oils and pursuing her interest in photorealism, without using photos. "I learned to paint from life," she explains. "Painting from a photograph, the work is already done. The eye sees differently from a camera. There are so many nuances painting from life. Things change. If I'm painting pears and one of them begins to go down, I have pears in the refrigerator. I use every trick I can to make the objects as real to me as possible. I want people to feel a connection with everyday things."

Cotton Branch, oil on panel, 12 x 24 in.

It can take a long time for her to set up her still lifes, adjusting and readjusting to make relationships and the overall composition just right. She then spends time—maybe an hour or a full day—observing and absorbing before she begins to paint. She draws her composition on a white gessoed panel sanded extremely smooth so she can apply her glazes with fan brushes to obtain the paintings' life-like quality. She explains, "I use a glazing technique where I continue to add color and highlights until I've reached the quality of realism I desire."

In *Onions in Green Compote,* for instance, she painted the overall shape, color and texture of the onions and bowl before going in and picking out details such as the nicks in the rim of the bowl and the subtleties of the peeling onion skins.

Peaches with Bowl and Yellow Pitcher, 2024, oil on panel, 11 x 14 in. Courtesy of Winfield Gallery, Carmel, CA.

Along the way, Carroll has chalked up some real accomplishments. She has taught young people at the Youth Arts Collective, an after-school art studio and mentorship program for high school and college artists in Monterey, and has illustrated seven children's books. In 2006, she was selected to paint a series of Christmas paintings used to illustrate the White House Christmas brochure. At the press preview, Barbara Bush remarked, "You did a beautiful job, Pam."

Beauty is the operative word for Carroll, the inherent beauty in all things. She says, "As I look, I see more nuances that can make the piece more lush."

Along with studying the Dutch and Spanish masters, she has studied the work of the 19th century American trompe l'oeil artist William Harnett and the Chilean hyperrealist Claudio Bravo. "He was a phenomenal painter," she says. "I take my backgrounds from him. Backgrounds

are hard." She admires the simple compositions of the Italian still life painter Giorgio Morandi and her contemporaries Bob Bartlett, Alan Magee and Daniel Sprick.

Orchid and Lemons, 2015, oil on panel, 31¼ x 23¼ in. Courtesy of the artist.

She also credits the people who promote her paintings and support her in her work—Chris Winfield at Winfield Gallery in Carmel, the Carmel Art Association, and Clint Mansell at Principle Gallery in Alexandria, Virginia.

Closer to home, her friends and mentors David Ligare and his husband Gary Smith have provided pivotal advice as she prepared her paintings for the exhibition. Smith is director of the Hartnell College Gallery in nearby Salinas. He and Carroll will discuss her work in *An Evening with the Artist: Pamela Carroll* at the museum on August 23.

Lemons in Spongeware Bowl, 2023, oil on panel, 20 x 28 in. Courtesy of Winfield Gallery, Carmel, CA.

Ligare is a renowned painter of figures, landscapes and still lifes. He has written, "The representational artist looks at something and recreates it in an attempt to get to a kind of truth...a kind of wholeness. He presents the integrity of the thing itself, seen for its own sake, rather than a vehicle of the artist's self expression...Looking carefully at something, analyzing why it looks the way it does and then recreating it is an act of reverence towards nature and encourages the practice of analytical thought."

Heirloom Tomatoes, 2022, oil on panel, 9 x 12 in. Courtesy of Amy and Zane Smith.

Carroll's reverence towards nature began in her childhood and continues today in her careful observation and representation of the beauty, sometimes marred, of the objects she paints. She paints for a brief time each day and, in the afternoon, walks to the home of Dustin and his wife Shandy who live only a few doors down from her. There, she babysits her granddaughter Molly. She also comments, "I love nature and taking walks to enjoy the beauty that is at our doorsteps right here on the Monterey Peninsula."

Blueberries, oil on panel, 7 x 9 in. Private Collection of Mary and John Ricksen.

I've admired her paintings and enjoyed our friendship since we first met. Her exhibition at the Bakersfield Museum is not simply a display of her powers of observation and her painterly skill—it's a revelation of her extraordinary growth in observation and skill since I've known her.

The subtle translucency of the onion skin on the table of *Onions in Green Bowl,* the ethereal quality of the cotton balls and the exquisite detail of the crinkled leaves in *Cotton Branch* and the Dutch Master realism of *Basket of Pomegranates* are breathtaking.

"I don't take myself seriously," she says. "But I take my art seriously. it's a reason to get up in the morning...I'm never, ever, satisfied. I'm always reaching. When I'm not painting, I'm usually knitting a sweater or making some kind of craft. I love working with my hands in a variety of ways." —

Cauliflower and Eggplant, 2021, oil on panel, 14 x 18 in. Courtesy of Winfield Gallery, Carmel, CA.

Pamela Carroll: The Beauty Inherent
Through September 6, 2025

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