



Not Starbucks

HOLLY MYERS | JANUARY 31, 2007 | 12:00PM

In the decade following her emergence from CalArts in 1994, Monique Prieto led what can only be called a charmed career. The summer after graduation, she was one of two students recommended by CalArts for a free ride to the Skowhegan School of Painting and Sculpture's prestigious summer program in Maine. (Laura Owens was the other.) That fall, Robert Gunderman and Randy Sommer offered her the second show at what would become one of the most respected galleries in Los Angeles, ACME. She made large, sleek, exceedingly pretty abstract paintings and had 16 more solo shows over the next 10 years, in Los Angeles, New York, London and Venice. She was reviewed widely, consistently and enthusiastically, and the work sold extremely well. One of several young, local painters to pursue what was, at the time, a broadly discouraged mode of practice, she was hailed as a key player in the long-awaited redemption of L.A. abstraction.

In 2003, however – at the top of this lucrative game – she jumped ship, went into hiding for two years and emerged with something altogether different: a series of text paintings that were as heavy, awkward and enigmatic as her previous work

was clean, elegant and affable. It was a startling transition. There is a brand of shape-shifting that one takes for granted in this era of artistic dilettantism, with so many artists trying their hands at so many different things simply because they can, but this was something different: less strategic, more complete, and more resolute.

Over the course of our conversation in the spacious, sky-lit studio behind Prieto's hilltop Echo Park home it became clear that it was a shift driven as much by moral concerns as aesthetic ones – that, indeed, Prieto drew little distinction between the two. It was also clear that it sprang from a place of uncommon integrity. Back in the mid-'90s, Prieto's prospects were blossoming on another level as well: Recently married to longtime partner and fellow CalArts grad Michael Webster, a composer, she gave birth to their first child, Guillermo, in January 1995. A second son, Emmet, followed two years later, and a daughter, Rose, two years after that. From the moment she stepped into the game, in other words, the affairs of the art world were far from her primary concern.

“It was great,” she says of the early success, “it was a great experience. But the really great fortune is that I was already doing the love and the baby thing, and that was really important – that was very *clearly* important – so that what I could have very easily gotten caught up in, the ‘ooh, you’re so special, you make nice art, come to our party and be seen!’ – that was not at all enticing.”

Prieto came to the text paintings, she says, “in a roundabout kind of way that took me a while to understand,” but that stemmed largely from a growing dissatisfaction with the category in which she'd found herself situated and a desire to understand her place in the big picture. She was traveling with her family and some friends through Europe, communing with the likes of Goya and Velázquez – “It was all so moving and prescient,” she says of Goya, “and so much on the surface, like he was just *there*” – when the Iraq war broke out and she came home knowing she had to make a change. To make sense of who she was in the world, she says.

“When I started doing that first work, right after I got out of school, it was a very different time with a very different set of givens. It was a different time in the country, it was a different time in the art world, and for me that was break-out work because I was fighting against a different kind of current. It was lively for me

at the time. But you do get to a point and things change around and the context changes and you realize that there are things that art can do that it doesn't always try to do anymore, especially recently, and I felt like I wasn't being responsible in that way. I had the kids and we were all out there in the streets with the protests, and I thought, I'm doing this on this level, there should be some relationship in the studio to the whole activity too. It's easier to relate to abstract painting – I mean it's easier to accept it and not question it.”

She pauses and then speaks slowly, careful with her words. “Abstract painting *can* be readily absorbed. Even if there's content in it, there are those who will happily ignore it and just see the forms. And you know, you can accept that for only so long before it just starts to get on your nerves. I don't go out much to see all the shows because I just find it a little hard on my psyche –” she laughs “– but you go out on one of those days and you see everything out there and you see your company and at some point I just felt *bad* about it.”

After returning to the States, Prieto gave herself two years to make the transition: no shows, no expectations, no obligation to share the work with anyone. “I worked a long time without getting anywhere in particular,” she says. “And then, almost at the end of the two years, I was practically in despair and I thought, ‘Well, I did this, I gave myself the time, I haven't ended up anywhere in particular’ – and then it suddenly all fell into place. It was a very L.A. kind of moment: I was on the freeway, stuck in traffic, and there's some graffiti on the side of the road and it's compelling me to read it and I can't read it. I'm stuck in traffic – can't read it, can't read it. And finally traffic moves. I come back a few days later and it's gone – it disappeared. But it engaged me for that moment very intensely. It was something very blockish and heavy looking. It wasn't colored, it was just black and white. It wasn't like a bomb that's done very lovely and baroque. Anyway, that inspired me to come home and just make some drawings with words.”

She knew from the beginning that she didn't want to be responsible for the content of the text because she wanted to avoid the impression of a confessional narrative. The source, as it happened, fell into her lap within a week of the graffiti sighting, and with the same sense of providence: the nine-volume diary of 17th-century Englishman Samuel Pepys, discovered in its entirety at a local used-book store.

“It's personal on a level that transcends the centuries and the genders and the class

It's personal on a level that transcends the centuries and the genders and the class issues and all those things," Prieto says. "It's just someone's personal account of their day-to-day life. It's completely banal. It's about where he shat that day, what he ate, who he screwed, what play he saw, what's on his mind, what's going on politically. You know, he's remodeling his house, it's driving him crazy – there's no news! It could be anybody. Except that he has access to the king, which at that moment I wish I had!" She laughs. "I don't change word order, I just take out-of-context bits of his life. What I'm looking for, I see in retrospect, are words that conjure images that are hard to picture. In that way, they're abstract. I mean, language is the ultimate abstraction, so they're very much like the old paintings in that way, in that there's something being pictured, but it's not clear what. It's very subjective."

The words themselves, conveyed in a font of Prieto's own devising, are thick, awkward and pointedly difficult to read. "It just doesn't seem appropriate at the time for me personally to be making readily accessible pictures," she says, "when everything is the way it is. So they're difficult. The paintings are difficult. They ask you to do a little more than you normally do with a painting, but they give you something in return if you're willing to decipher. It's letting language do the things I wish it were doing on a bigger scale. It's kind of opening up our daily experience for ourselves, having pictures of things beyond the new car you want, the toothpaste you want to buy. It's some other kind of question. I think that on some level our experiences are so streamlined, you know, and part of the use of text is just kind of taking language back from the people who say that *they* know what liberty means and then opening it up in a way that does something new. Not Starbucks."

And has it been gratifying? "*Exceedingly* gratifying. It doesn't always pay the bills," she says, laughing, "but it's what I wanted to do. There are some things – you just do them and there's just no choice in the matter, there's no way you could have done them differently."

Prieto's next exhibition of text paintings opens at ACME on March 17.

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