

At Lux, Shelley Reed's art for the ages

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Shelley Reed is in residence through Oct. 6 at the Lux Art Institute in Encinitas. Her show is on exhibit through Nov. 4. (Photo by Ernesto Gonzalez)

Artist Shelley Reed draws from the past to create new stories for creatures and objects first painted hundreds of years ago. She combines flora, fauna and still-life objects from old masters to create vivid, detailed paintings in stark black and white.

“The issues they were dealing with are still relevant today,” Reed said. “Although we have made strides, there’s still the pull of the instinctual and violent.”

Four of her works are on display at Lux Art Institute, where Boston-based Reed is a resident artist through Oct. 6. While there, she will be working on a fifth painting. These pieces, which are measured in feet, spring to life in their full size.

“I’m interested in creating almost an installment where people think they can enter the landscape,” she said.

The largest piece, “In Dubious Battle,” is 7 feet high and 47 feet long and is gleaned from 23 artists dating from the 16th through the 18th centuries. People can immediately relate to Reed’s artwork because there are so many familiar objects and styles, said Reese Shaw, the founding director of Lux. “It celebrates art’s lineage,” she said.

“In Dubious Battle” starts out peacefully on one end with a menagerie of hunting dogs, exotic birds and a monkey playing violin amid baskets of fruit and other luxury items of the past. The painting, based on extensive research of art history, progresses past neoclassical architecture and a horse on what looks like a chess board and ends with a battle between lions, a tiger, a leopard and hunting dogs — punctuated by a bunny looking on.

“When I added the bunny, it totally changed the narrative,” Reed said. That narrative, which can be everything from human power struggles to man’s shortcomings, is up to the viewer. “I try to make an open-ended story. I set up the situation, and viewers can create their own story. Sometimes it’s about the moment.”



Reed’s painting “White Horse (after Grant and Stubbs)” is on view at Lux Art Institute in Encinitas. (Stewart Clements)

It’s Reed’s attention to detail on the 11 canvas panels painted in oil that draws the viewer in. Her skill with gradients and shading and the play of light against dark create a world that seems out the past, yet fully alive.

“I love color, but color can be very seductive,” she said. “You could appreciate a painting just for the color. I like things that are toned down so you can see certain relationships more clearly.”

Her other three paintings on display, which range from 7.5 to 10 feet high and up to 11 feet wide, are created with oil on paper. Individual sheets of paper are arranged in grids to create one artwork. Reed said she hangs the paper and sketches her drawing. Then she removes each section to paint it individually. The titles include the names of her sources of inspiration.

“Tiger (after Janssen and Landseer)” poses a tiger next to a tree. The tiger was re-created from a work by 19th-century English painter Edwin Landseer. Originally, the tiger was in a cage with a lion tamer holding a whip among cowering big cats denoting man’s domination over the wild.

“I took the tiger out of the cage and placed him in a landscape where the story is ambiguous. He could look scared and vulnerable or aggressive and about to attack,” Reed said.

The other two paintings — “Bird (after Oudry)” and “White Horse (after Grant and Stubbs)” — are also open-ended. Is the horse sad? Is the upside-down bird dead or alive?

Reed said she got her inspiration living in London after graduating from Boston’s School of the Museum of Fine Arts in 1984. “I was struggling to come up with a subject that was meaningful, and at the same time looking at these fabulous paintings,” she said. The idea came after drawing a detail of a painting she had seen.

During her stay at Lux, she will be working on a grid painting. “The piece is going to be about a sense of space. It will have a landscape with interesting, dangerous occupants,” she said.

“It’s really a unique view,” Shaw said.