

Timothy Cummings

Luxetigers

INTERNATIONAL FASHION, DESIGN & BETTER LIVING MAGAZINE

CLOVERLEAF by TIMOTHY CUMMINGS

SF

248 Utah Street
SF, CA 94103
+ 415 399 1439

NY

313 W 14th Street 2F
New York, NY
By appointment only

WEB

www.cclarkgallery.com

By Victor Vargas Article posted: Wednesday, August 13th, 2014

Artist Timothy Cummings has spent his entire life immersed in art. As a child, his mother recognized his affinity for the arts and proceeded to indulge the young Timothy in his self-expression from the start. This resulted in a unique colorful childhood and adolescence that has shaped the artist's style and continues to resonate in Cummings's work to this day. This remarkable self-taught artist's world is a fantastic environment populated by androgynous men and women who often poses childish characteristics and tackle complex subject matters. In this spirit, the artist renders his characters in beautiful and sometimes grotesque surroundings referencing the Spanish Catholic and Native American culture that he grew up with in Albuquerque, New Mexico.

Cummings spent twenty years living in San Francisco and has become known for his intimate and detailed paintings that blur the lines between fantasy and reality, while addressing the themes of adolescence, identity and gender. In town for the opening of his latest show, [Cloverleaf at CATHARINE CLARK GALLERY](#), Cummings and I sat down to talk about his artistic journey, his move back home to Albuquerque, and his upcoming new projects.



Victor Vargas: Tell us about the title of your show:

Timothy Cummings: Cloverleaf is beyond conjuring, like four leaf clovers and greeneries, which is also part of my work with the flowering and everything. It is also a term used for passageways and new travel, kind of like a freeway when it loops around, it's called a cloverleaf; and it's also referencing a new highway or a different turn. I thought it was appropriate since I just spent the last twenty years here in San Francisco and I have relocated back to New Mexico, my birthplace and had to find a place, and a studio, and set up a whole new life, and at the same moment, I was trying to put this show together ...

Victor Vargas: A new direction...

Timothy Cummings: And redirection too ...

Victor Vargas: You grew up in Albuquerque, lived in San Francisco for many years and recently spent one year in Brazil. What inspired you to return to Albuquerque after spending so much time in cities?

Timothy Cummings: First off, I had been in the same apartment here for twenty years and of course, with all the changes going on in San Francisco, I had to leave that apartment. There was no place else to really go, so for one thing, the pricing, I'm priced out of San Francisco.

Victor Vargas: As an artist, you need a big space!

Timothy Cummings: I needed more space. I was renting an apartment and then I found a fairly nice studio space that was great too but I was now paying two rents. Then I left my rent-controlled apartment so everything kind of tripled, that was an impossibility, and I was over the struggling that became San Francisco in the last two years. I have always loved New Mexico; I've always been going back and forth and I knew I would end up there — just not as soon. After the struggle of running around and trying to make things happen here in San Francisco, I am ready now for a smaller place where I can have my own [larger] space to produce work. There is lovely inspiration out there, in different forms than there is here. There was also a bit of a cultural suffocation in some areas, San Francisco has changed so much for me — the things that were accessible and exciting have changed forms — it's a different place for me. By the way, I love being back here right now; I love San Francisco but a lot has changed drastically. It's not the same place.

Victor Vargas: You know it's funny to hear you say that — when I first started going out in San Francisco, even though I didn't live here, I always went out in San Francisco. My friends and I used to go to a nightclub at the End Up called "Uranus" and there was an artist that would perform there — the late [JEROME CAJA](#) ...

Timothy Cummings: My first crazy inspiration! One of the first artist shows that I saw here as a young person. Seeing his work was like "Oh! Everything is going to be OK". That was like the GO flag to do anything and everything.

Victor Vargas: Yeah, so you're talking about that time period! It has changed drastically because San Francisco was much more colorful and the people who lived here were more exotic. More artists could afford to live here and express themselves in these very creative ways. Unfortunately that has also happened in New York — it happens everywhere and I guess now, it's our turn.

Timothy Cummings: Yes, it's our turn.

Victor Vargas: Getting back to your show, historically, you have kept your paintings on the smaller scale but in "Cloverleaf" you've included some rather large paintings. Do you have a newfound love for these larger pieces?

Timothy Cummings: I have been wanting to do large-scale work forever. I did a show here, at Catharine Clark, five or six years ago, maybe more. I had a ten-foot panel that had like twelve characters in it. Really elaborate and I managed to do that in my apartment in Hayes Valley — a very small space and so I had to have it chopped in half into two sections and painted it one at a time. I did do that but the space was not conducive to making that happen. Now that I have a huge wall in my space in New Mexico, I'm looking forward to actually having the chance to finally spread out and make these larger pieces happen.

Victor Vargas: How exciting! I personally love large-scale works. Of course, you need a huge space or home to display them but I find them beautiful. It's arresting! You walk in and you see this beautiful piece of art and it just commands so much more attention ...

Timothy Cummings: With that said, I have always been super drawn to the more intimate, there has also been a big inspiration growing up for tableaus and that kind of form. Right from New Mexico, these kind of intimate personal objects where people put all their blood, sweat and tears into painting these small things. I'm also a total freak for miniature paintings so, there is a part of that but I'm super excited about the challenge of switching things over to the larger scale and the impact that has. Now that I have the space, it will give me a chance to explore that.

Victor Vargas: I also think there is a relationship between the new economy and large-scale works of art, as opposed to the recent past. Because when we talk about an artist like Jerome Caja, he did some tiny, tiny works of art but it

can be said that his immediate clientele were buying this small pieces and not looking for large-scale works. I think now there is a lot more interest in bigger ...

Timothy Cummings: Yeah, bigger, better ...

Victor Vargas: More showy ... so you can show-off on Instagram and Face Book ... (laughs)

Timothy Cummings: Yeah, in a way part of me is like “is that just a monetary fashion that wants large-scale showy things?” but at the same time it’s also a challenge for me. I do like walking up to a huge painting that someone has done sometimes – being able to dive into it.

Victor Vargas: I think it’s a social fashion too because once you see them in museums or galleries ... they’re not just for the people who are buying them, many of those people just invest in them and then they store them – because how many of these large-scale works can you have? – Even in a large home or estate you cannot display them all. I think people just enjoy them. It’s a financially influenced social fashion.

Timothy Cummings: I love it when people tell me that they feel like they’re not looking at my work. My favorite thing that people have said is that they feel like they’re looking out from the work. That they’re actually inside the painting looking out. I fantasize, “ooh, that would be great to make a whole world that is so huge that they could be inside of it” and the larger scale, to see how mind-blowing that could be!

Victor Vargas: In particular with your work, because your work comes across as personal and autobiographical. When I first saw you I thought, “he’s definitely in his work” which leads me to this next question: It has been said that you had very supportive parents who noticed your artistic tendencies at an early age. How did that impact the building of your identity?

Timothy Cummings: It meant everything. Being exposed to art at an early age.

Victor Vargas: Where your parents also artists?

Timothy Cummings: My mom likes to draw. She really enjoys it because she doesn’t pursue it but I think it was a ploy to keep us busy because there were four of us kids so, she tried to keep us busy. First it was just that but I also kind of took to crayons and pencils. She took us to museums, the movies and the theater and it meant everything to me because that was the only thing I had. With everything else I felt isolated, insecure and a bit alien to. The brothers and the neighborhood bullies wanted to play cops and robbers or sports and everything that I couldn’t relate to so, I built up my whole world around imaginary sets – this was my lifeline to the world. I got a chance to see the idea of creating, making something out of nothing, magic, and how that could engulf my whole day and I couldn’t get enough of it.

Victor Vargas: I also read that you liked to dress up ...

Timothy Cummings: Yes, oh yes! I couldn’t relate to the neighborhood kids because I was always bringing the big box of costumes and sequined dresses out into the yard and was like “ooh, let’s play dress up!” which I did and some of the kids got into it but I think it was also like an odd moment for ... the neighborhood (laughs). Yeah, that was a big part too – theatrics, costumes – and again, my mother allowed this to happen.

Victor Vargas: (laughing) That’s wonderful!

Timothy Cummings: That was liberating but at the same time, at an early age I came upon “oh, this is something that is looked at as strange”. One of my favorite things was dressing up but I also was extremely different and maybe that made me a bit more isolated.

Victor Vargas: Is this when you started to realize that you were gay?

Timothy Cummings: Again my mother was so on top of things. I never really felt like I had to be in the closet. I didn’t know what gay was but my parents never shunned any of those aspects.

Victor Vargas: Your behavior was not restrained.

Timothy Cummings: Yeah, my mom encouraged whatever I felt comfortable with. She said she knew that I was different/gay at the very beginning so, she knew before I did. There was a point where I had to fess-up but it wasn’t to tell her or the family, it was to tell myself. Luckily having her as a mother made that okay.

Victor Vargas: At what age did that happen?

Timothy Cummings: Going into school, wearing a dress to school – not that I was wearing a dress to elementary but quite close to it. I had necklaces and dolls and little doll rings ...

Victor Vargas: In elementary? So very early on ... (smiling and laughing)

Timothy Cummings: Yeah, very early on (smiling). So then, socializing at school was where I realized that dolls and jewelry wearing to school wasn't acceptable.

Victor Vargas: You dropped out of high school, came back to finish it and attended art school for only 12 days before you left school all together. Why?

Timothy Cummings: They had this big meeting to get me back [to high school] which was nice of them and they finally listened. I had learning disabilities and I never liked school and I just never found a space for myself.

Victor Vargas: So you weren't very social in high school?

Timothy Cummings: I was very shy actually and I did want to make friends but school was just hard and confusing to me and I felt that I lacked whatever everybody else seemed to be getting along with.

Victor Vargas: So it was uncomfortable ...

Timothy Cummings: It was exceedingly uncomfortable. It was torture sometimes but they did make it easier in my last year. They had my art teacher give me first period alone learning from an art history book for history, which was great. I did stay. They shamed me and my mother at the meeting – to bring me back. At this point, I was already showing in galleries doing art, I was already bringing stuff around to art fairs and I knew from day one that this was my thing. I was ready to fly. They brought me back and my mom said, "you know, Timothy is having a tough time and he wants to be an artist, this is his thing..." They were all shocked and shamed her and responded "how can you be saying this, this is your child – he needs to finish school!" That was a hideous embarrassing moment too. They roped us in to doing the right thing – supposedly – and I went back and got the scholarship.

Victor Vargas: You graduated.

Timothy Cummings: Yes but then when I got to college, I thought that I would now be able to concentrate on art but since my levels were so low, I was once again taking math classes and science classes. To compensate for that, I was overextending myself with a bunch of art classes and juggling that. It was just as bad as the situation I had in high school.

Victor Vargas: It sounds like it was a nightmare!

Timothy Cummings: I did enjoy the drawing classes and some of the classes I had but it couldn't compensate for the hideousness that I was going through in the other areas. Still having headaches, still feeling insecure that I couldn't figure things out. I always knew that my strength lay in the visual.

Victor Vargas: I think it's great that an artist like you still exists today. I am sure in the past it was much more common for artists to begin their careers the way you have. By contrast, today people go to school for everything and sometimes you see that in the works. You notice they're formulaic, restrained, etc.

Timothy Cummings: It wasn't until I got to San Francisco that I met friends who were in art school here and for some people, I think it's great. I also was surprised to meet a bunch of friends who were really talented but were extremely shell shocked because they went in enjoying art – it was something they had to do because it was a passion – and then it became something that they read too much jargon about or studied too much. Instead of something that naturally comes from you that is enjoyable and enjoyable to everybody else that comes across it, when you have too much jargon thrown in the mix, it somehow stifles everybody and makes him or her insecure again. Whether they're making edgy enough work or hip enough work... in a way for me, yes, I do think it was the best for me just to do my own thing.

Victor Vargas: Going back to the autobiographical aspect of your work, tell us about the androgynous characters that populate your paintings.

Timothy Cummings: There are so many aspects of males and females that I am drawn to that it's hard to pinpoint or just concentrate on one portrait. Over time, all my favorite qualities tend to meld together into one character. It's part of my personal experience so they look like me but there are also other qualities of youth, and the male, and the female, and the somewhat disfigured, with the beauty and all of that.

Victor Vargas: It's your vocabulary as an artist.

Timothy Cummings: Yes, that's a good way to put it.

Victor Vargas: You definitely have your own vocabulary and it's a signature that is in every one of your paintings. Once you see a Timothy Cummings painting, you know a Timothy Cummings painting.

Timothy Cummings: Even though, I will admit that like any artist, I've taken elements from everybody not just males and females but also the painters that were my obsessions early on. Flemish painting to pop art, I just take all my favorite parts and meld them together to build some strange language.

Victor Vargas: There are several twins or couples in your paintings – are you exploring different facets of your personality?

Timothy Cummings: It has been a spontaneous theme that developed over time. I don't really know how the twins started, it was just something that I was drawn to and I look back at my work and see there are a lot of the twins going on. In recent years I have thought about it; and it seems to be two parts of my personality. They're both the same person but with these two separate sides that I have a lot of. It's a bit the personal schizophrenia or two halves of the same person. I also think I'm drawn to the freakish and this oddity of two twins being born; I am also fascinated by that aspect.

Victor Vargas: You're not a twin, are you?

Timothy Cummings: No, they removed a cyst from my head when I was a child and the ongoing joke is that it was my undeveloped twin (laughs).

Victor Vargas: What are your upcoming projects?

Timothy Cummings: I am working on my next show for the Nancy Hoffman Gallery in New York, which will take place in the fall of 2015. I am making work for Catharine Clark and Nancy Hoffman galleries for Art Basel Miami Beach. I am also talking with Rufus Wainwright about a project that we have been discussing for years. He has a house outside of Montreal that his grandfather built and he has a room that he wants painted into fantasy murals of his family history, so I will go work on that during the holidays. That's going to be fun!

TIMOTHY CUMMINGS – CLOVERLEAF

July 26th – September 6th 2014 at [CATHARINE CLARK GALLERY](#), San Francisco Tel. (415) 399.1439