

# THE STREET ARTISTS

CALEDONIA CURRY AKA SWOON TALKS ABOUT HER INSPIRATIONS AND PROCESS WHILE JENNIFER CAVIOLA AKA CAKE SHARES HER ANGST WITH THE ART WORLD



Swoon "Recovery Diaspora", 2014 Houston Street, New York City

“ONE OF MY PHILOSOPHIES OF ART is that the closer you make things to who you truly are in the time and place that you truly occupy, the more universal they will become. That means to me really embracing what it means to be a woman in this moment, right now, making art. I do think that being able to sit more comfortably with my gender and express that in my work has become more important.” In the traditionally male-dominated medium of street art, Swoon has singlehandedly redefined a once-intractable status quo in becoming the first woman to reach the same level of fame as her male counterparts. The physical and logistical perils of street art has often precluded participation by many female artists. Yet Swoon has managed to circumvent the obstacles of her profession’s illegality by way of her rapid ascension to fame and subsequent decision to work exclusively on commission. Her reach expands from decaying warehouses to the permanent collections at prestigious museums to collective third-world art projects rooted in activism. Her ambitious body of work has been exhibited at the Museum of Modern Art, the Brooklyn Museum of Art, and the Tate Modern, among many others.

Swoon, aka Caledonia Dance Curry, was born in New London, Connecticut, and raised in Daytona Beach, Florida. Though substance abuse and mental illness run in her family, she never succumbed to either, crediting art as her savior. “I have never been through substance addictions myself and...I think that probably more than anything is because I started painting when I was ten.” Nine years later, she moved to New York to study painting

at the Pratt Institute. “I wanted to make something that was unconventional and was contemporary and was part of the city. I moved to New York and I was obsessed with it.”

While attending Pratt, she began taking her art to the street, canvassing decaying buildings with wheat pasted portraits. She fantasized about creating art from linoleum blocks, but instead,

settled on a medium that better fit her budget. “I just started looking at what I can afford, which was just a sheet of paper and a knife.” Early in her career, not only did she not tag her work, but she also kept her gender under wraps. “I think that this thing happens with young women where there’s almost a feeling that if your gender becomes a focus, then you’ll become pigeonholed...I think that in really subtle ways, patriarchy has continued to vilify feminism, and so it’s natural when you’re young to not want to necessarily identify with [it].”

In 2009, Swoon executed her visionary performance art project *Swimming Cities of Serenissima* — a massive “floating metropolis” that she constructed out of found materials and foraged junk which she then transformed into a series of seven rafts, and on which she and thirty of her friends floated into the Venice Biennale, figuratively and literally “crashing” the city’s esteemed annual art festival. “When I first started working on the raft so much of what I was thinking about with those images of these floating cities,

She recently returned from Philadelphia, where she was invited to be a part of the City of Philadelphia Mural Arts Programs’ newest and most ambitious exhibit in its history, *Open Source: Engaging Audiences in Public Space*. For it, she joined thirteen other renowned street artists to create temporary works that envelop the entire city (the exhibit runs through fall 2015). Each individual project aims — per the objectives of the organization — to address issues ranging from criminal justice and behavioral health to immigration and recycling, by engaging with various at-risk communities in Philadelphia. For Swoon, this meant working hands-on with recovering substance abuse patients as well as maximum-security prison detainees. “Just talking to [these] people about early life trauma and how that relates to where they are...it definitely is the first time that I’m working completely from personal experience.” While it may be her first project that hits so close to home, the integration of emotional rehabilitation into her work is part of what defines it.



Swoon, “Murmuration” 2012, Black Rat Projects, London

was rising seas and climate change, and instability of cities built along the coast. At the time that I made them people weren’t as open in mainstream media about climate change.” The rafts later found their home as part of her groundbreaking solo exhibition, *Submerged Motherlands* at Brooklyn Museum of Art from April 11 – August 24, 2014. Swoon made history with the project, becoming the first living street artist ever to be exhibited at the Brooklyn Museum.

*Submerged Motherlands* became as a whole, an emotionally cathartic process for Swoon who in the midst of its construction underwent a life-changing event. “At the time when I was making this whole installation my mom also became sick with cancer and passed away...I ended up finding a narrative that had to do with me losing my mother and losing that kind of space that you’re born from.” Her mother’s death was a time of reflection and self-discovery that, along with inspiring a stronger feminine thread in her work, would compel her to face darker memories from her past. Swoon has found herself gravitating more and more toward work that integrates art therapy and that encompasses social dialogue.

She recently launched the Heliotope Foundation, a non-profit designed to support three long-term projects she’s been working on in three different countries. “Each of these three projects is on the ground...We’re working with the communities in a long-term way, and there’s a lot of different elements involved, but the central aim is to create space within these communities that are struggling.” The first of the community art trinity takes place in Braddock, Pennsylvania. “We’re working with the community on a formerly abandoned church, to restore it in a really creative way. And we hope eventually to create an arts and learning center by and for that people there.” She launched the second project of the series in Haiti after the devastating 2010 earthquake, connecting with the small village of Cormier, located on the north coast of the island. The foundation has already built a community center and several homes, which they’ve constructed with assistance from local farmers (one of the homes, underway currently, is fashioned entirely from bamboo). “One is just another long-term relationship with the community that started around rebuilding after this disaster, and that developed into a relationship with this



*Swoon street art, Brooklyn, New York*

place where we're working with the kids, we're working with the adults, we're building structures, and also, we're building relationships." The third project is in New Orleans and began after Katrina. "It's much more based around wonder and beauty and experimentation. We started with this house that was collapsing and we were making this musical sculpture with it, and then it fell down. Then, we took the pieces and rebuilt it into these small musical structures. The community embraced it so hugely that we have continued it."

Fostering community is something that comes organically to Swoon and thus is increasingly becoming an extension of her creative process. "How do I make something not just for people who feel they are invited into a museum space? Because not everybody feels that way...I think in a lot of ways I didn't feel that way...it felt really natural for me to make something that was going to be more accessible to more people." Forging her identity as a female artist has also become increasingly natural for her as she evolves creatively. "[*Submerged Motherlands*] brought me in

touch with who I am as a woman and with my desire to just show up really personally in my work. So I think in that way when your own story becomes very central, then who you are as a woman becomes very central...the project that I'm working on right now, where I just came from in Philadelphia, it very, very, very much came out of the work that started around the time of my mother's death."

Swoon is currently in talks with MASS MoCa about a future installation. Sidled with so many projects, she's looking forward to taking a breather and finding artistic respite away from the frenetic energy of NYC. "I'm leaving for two months just to draw, to not be in New York City, and to just be drawing." The drawings will be largely inspired by the time she spent recently in Philadelphia. "It's so necessary that we talk about addiction and trauma and incarceration. [And I was] reminded not forget the other pieces that make the conversation...We need to have elements of beauty and we need to have elements of joy and wonderment. That has to be part of the conversation for our own sanity. You know?"



“WHEAT PASTERS ARE LIKE THE ART SCHOOL KIDS. I’m totally jealous of hardcore graffiti artists. I wish I was that hardcore. I’m not. I’m a wheat paster. I know what I am, you know.” Jennifer Caviola also known as “Cake” is a street artist on the rise in New York City. Though she came up within the same cohort as Swoon at the Pratt Institute, she has faced and still faces a number of significant hurdles as she seeks to achieve recognition for her work — hurdles that include figuring out how to monetize her artwork – much of which is presented in the public sphere and at her own expense. Not to mention the challenges of trying to scale an industry that is dominated by men. “I think that when I’m out there with other street artists or just other artists...I can look at some of the work that comes out of the male artists and I’m just as good, if not better than them and I don’t understand why I’m not where they are. I really don’t...I know I’m a good painter. I work hard and I feel it in my bones. I put everything that I have into it.”

To be fair, Cake is more than a good painter; she’s a phenomenal and prolific painter. Over the past ten years she has made a name for herself as one of the most prominent female street artists, using public space as a “platform to express her support of women through a voice of solidarity.” She has had installations in New York City, Berlin, Chicago, Miami, Iran, and many more around the US, including a public commission for The Gateway Project’s Mural in Newark Penn Station titled “Cast the Burden and the Light Will Impress”. Her recognizable style, which features figurative portraits of women, has been widely documented and exhibited also in galleries gaining her praise from art critics and fans alike. Despite her numerous installations, exhibits and press in publications such as *Vogue Italia*, *Complex Magazine*, *Paper Magazine*, and *The Huffington Post*, she still has a hard time translating her artwork into a viable career. “Often that’s my first go to, like ‘you guys won’t believe the press I get!’” While the starving artist look is often cast as romantic, it doesn’t pay the rent. “My problem is that I can’t even pay my bills right now, I really can’t.” Although more than 50% of art school graduates are women, few are able to make their mark in the art scene, with contemporary galleries and museums today still presenting a vast majority of works by male artists. Statistically the number of female artists with gallery representation is also significantly lower, thus impacting their ability to acquire serious collectors.

Cake’s grandmother, an artist who specialized in Chinese brushwork and watercolors, taught her to paint from the age of nine. She started exhibiting her work at the age of sixteen, and

received a BFA from Pratt in painting, as well as an MFA from Parsons. “I went to Pratt with Swoon and Polina Soloveichik. Polina was my best friend and she was doing street art, and so I was a witness to all of it...” Shortly after leaving school the allure of street art finally took hold of her. “When I graduated Parsons I literally started obsessing over graffiti. I loved how it looked, I loved the grimy feel to it, and I loved the pops of color on a decaying building, I couldn’t get enough of it.” Indeed, soon enough her work began to appear throughout the streets of New York City. “The Bowery Wall, those three girls were wheat pasted. I did those in my studio in Red Hook and installed them in two days...I thought they would be gone in a week. They were up for a year and not one of those corners peeled.”

Her dark, romantic nature would influence the style she has become known for: beautifully haunting, feminine portraits. “I like the expression in the face. I like the eyes. I like to mix this kind of like stoic, disconnected look, but bring forth some sort of emotion like sadness.” In addition to Cake’s street art, her acrylic on wood paintings display a maturity as an artist, with not only a consistent and relevant style, but a visual language of femininity that evokes strength juxtaposed with vulnerability. “These women, they have stories and these stories are available to those who care to listen. Each painting is its own allegory.”

Cake’s art work will be featured in *The Untitled Magazine’s* #GirlPower exhibit this fall at The Untitled Space gallery as part of our ongoing “Women in Art” series supporting female artists.