



Should the descriptor *Citizen of the World* seem too hyperbolic for Santa Fe-based artist Erin Currier, it is not. Since the mid-1990s, Currier (b. 1975) has traveled to more than 50 countries, mostly with her poet/artist/critic partner Anthony Hassett (1958-2017). Whether in Egypt or Argentina, Italy or Cuba, South Africa or Iran, these social and political activists, with incisiveness, lived, worked, conversed, made art and cooked with the people they met and the artists they sought. Her work clearly reflects this. A sophisticated colorist, Currier's mixed media paintings are stylistically representational and their bold, narratives make her an heir to the Mexican Muralists. In mid-August I interviewed Currier by telephone, and emailed her questions to answer. She is thoughtful and articulate, a communicator and a facilitator, and an artist whose work echoes her compassion for humanity and passion for social justice. "My work is about human dignity and the human spirit," she states. "I seek to show our similarities and not our differences."

**Mason Riddell:** Your work requires a complex and layered process, and unique materials. Please explain your practice?

**Erin Currier:** My art-making concerns and process are three-fold: first, I am a "travelling ontographer." Through drawing, I document the people, animals, birds, plants, objects, and environments that I encounter abroad. Secondly, I collect discarded ephemera from the streets of the world. Lastly, I incorporate the above findings—the treasures and the trash—into portraits that celebrate both historic and contemporary figures who resist or defy (or defy through resistance) authority, as well as people who, whether by choice or circumstance or both, exist outside societies' conventions. My work is comprised of discarded trash and packaging materials I find on my travels, as well

# WE THE PEOPLE

Erin Currier

By Mason Riddell

as acrylic paint and glaze. The discarded waste is re-transfigured into, hopefully, something of beauty. This parallels how the cast off, discarded human beings, who are often the subject of my portraits, are re-contextualized through the privileged status of portraiture that has been, historically, relegated to the powerful. My use of trash is a poetic incantation, a chant of the multitude of people and of things from below and outside who resist any unified empire. My work is a call to prayer and a call to arms for a counter power rooted in the imagination.

**MR.** What are the sources for the content of your work, and can you identify cultural influences?

**EC.** Since the early 2000s, the underlying theme of all of my work is that which I find to be true wherever I have traveled—be it Latin America, Africa, the Middle East, Asia, or Europe. Our commonalities as human beings far outweigh our differences. Although many of the individuals I have portrayed are people who I deeply admire—civil rights activists *Angela Davis*, *Frederika Newton*, *Septima Clark*; writers *Jean Genet*, and *William S. Burroughs*; musician *Lila Downs*; boxer *Johnny Tapia*; martial artist *Holly Holm*; master butler *Arthur Lopez*; and Saints *Josephine Bakhita* and *Teresita Urrea*, my work is as much about celebrating the above individuals as it is about paying homage to the many people working within the fields that these individuals represent. Many of my works are group portraits: the Punkabestia, Black Panthers,

**Black Panthers**  
acrylic & mixed media on panel, 48 x 36 in.



## Personal, enigmatic, charged with narrative – Show's portraits of shoes have the capacity to haunt one like Mona Lisa's smile.

American Women (dismantling the border) Temple Cleaners of Cambodia, Egyptian Women, and Zapatistas. The human capacity for courage, compassion, and dignity, is what most inspires my work. The overwhelming majority of people around the world are kind, decent human beings whose needs and desires are simple and universal. Divisions are often either superficial or artificially created based on racial, economic, and national ideologies. Where we are similar is of a more profound metaphysical caliber, such as the bond between brothers, the love between mother and child, the kinships shared through creative

endeavors; these run like threads in the great fabric of generations.

**MR.** What artists do you admire, whether or not they have directly influenced you?

**ER.** Diego Rivera and Frida Kahlo! [Who else is there?] No, seriously: Tibetan Thangka painters, Mexican Muralists, Kara Walker, Vik Muniz, Shirin Neshat, Ai-Wei Wei, and Hiroshi Sugimoto. New Mexico has long inspired me, perhaps more than any other place in the world because of its incomparable artists—trained in Native and Hispanic traditional techniques—who comment on

sociopolitical issues within the framework of these traditions in masterful works that are unique to the world. Such artists include Arthur Lopez, Luis and Sergio Tapia, Tony Abeyta, Virgil Ortiz, Nicholas Herrera, Cara Romero, Diego Romero, Cynthia Cook, and Jim Vogel, and the New Mexico transplants Larry Bell, Ken Price, and Joel-Peter Witkin. As an arts community, New Mexico reveals its heart through its actions. The art scene here is more accessible and inclusive than what one might find in the world's big urban centers, because much of New Mexico's best work is deeply rooted in centuries-

old traditions—in Santos, Bultos, Retablos, Pottery, Weaving, Folk Art. In general, New Mexican objet d'art serve a higher spiritual purpose and/or a functional tangible one that pre-date the Post Modern, conceptual work found in cosmopolitan cities. New Mexican art *means something*—and its meaning can be appreciated universally because it comes from the heart. Living in New Mexico has been advantageous to my creative process, for the above reasons, and for the spirit of camaraderie in the art community. New Mexico artists are supportive and encourage one another. The struggle at Standing Rock is a familiar one around these parts: it is the story of colonization—of the breaking of treaties, the exploitation of sacred ancestral lands. Not surprisingly, many of my New Mexican friends and colleagues, both Native and non-Native, were among the first to venture North to stand in solidarity with the Sioux against the Dakota Access Pipeline.

**MR.** How has your travel to more than 50 countries influenced your work? Do current events impact your practice?

**ER.** My works all share a direct or symbolic representation of those engaged in the international struggle for social justice—be it of individuals such as Teresita Urrea, Saint Philomena, Kwame Toure, Bobby Seale, Lila Downs, or be it groups of people: Indigenous women from both sides of the US Mexico border, Greek schoolboys, Egyptian schoolgirls. Beauty is inherent in the strength and courage that are necessary attributes of those engaged in struggle, resistance, and defiance, against the catastrophic onslaught of globalization, capitalism, fascism, and ecological devastation. I see our reality as a state of becoming. My painting's subjects are a few among many people working with the skills at hand—be it planting seeds, penning words, educating, organizing—in a limiting present reality that is, nonetheless, a historical reality susceptible to transformation. Through reflection



and action, human beings can truly transform reality... as I've depicted in works such as *Atica Schoolboys*, *The Event of Literature*, and *American Women (dismantling the border)*.

**MR.** Will you please discuss your new work in your Blue Rain Gallery show, *Las Meninas* (September 14-30) ([www.blueraingallery.com](http://www.blueraingallery.com))

**ER.** My new series pays homage to Classical and Modernist masterpieces while addressing contemporary issues that have long compelled my work:

Johnny Tapia  
acrylic & mixed  
media on panel,  
48 x 36 in.

(far right) Lila  
Downs  
acrylic & mixed  
media collage on  
panel, 24 x 18 in.



Punkabestia  
acrylic & mixed media on panel,  
72 x 60 in., 2013



**American Women Dismantling the Border**  
acrylic & mixed media on panel, 48 x 72 in., 2016

immigrant rights, worker's rights, women's rights, civil rights, in short: human dignity. For example, Eugene Delacroix's epic and controversial revolutionary painting, [hidden for many years by the French monarchy so as not to risk inciting further rebellions], *Liberty Leading the People*, provides the composition, palette, and overall "weather", for my painting titled *American Women [dismantling the border] III*. Here, Indigenous women on both sides of the Mexico/US Border are dismantling it. In my rendition, as is the era in which we find ourselves-- an era that has seen a resurgence of Native Resistance movements-- the vanguard of feminine strength and grace in action is in the form of an Indigenous woman. (Rather serendipitously, *Liberty Leading the People* had already spawned an immigrant rights-related *Honkadori\** over a century ago in the form of Freder Augustus Bartholdi's *Liberty Enlightening the World*: otherwise known as *The Statue of Liberty*!)

Like Velazquez's *Las Meninas* and Delacroix' *Liberty*, my new series of work is grounded in a feminine focal point. United Farm Workers cofounder and longtime organizer and activist Dolores Huerta, for example, replaces the male gardener in an homage to Vincent van Gogh's *The Gardener*. In this way, the English translation of *Las Meninas*, 'Ladies in Waiting', is especially relevant to the works and to today-- alluding to the fact that women the world over feel that they have long been waiting in full preparedness-- for the appropriate moment to step

into the foreground, not as passive subjects, but as fully engaged and active participants. That emancipatory moment is now. As an artist, the moment is now to honor those who came before me through *Honkadadi*, by approaching significant works with the same courage with which they were originally rendered, but within a wholly new and radical context relevant to the 21st Century.

\* In Japanese poetry, *honkadori* (本歌取り) is an allusion within a poem to an older poem which would be generally recognized by its potential readers.

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Currier's work can be seen at ChimMaya Gallery in East Los Angeles; <http://chimmayart.com> and at Blue Rain Gallery's booth in the annual LA Art Show at the Los Angeles Convention Center. [www.laartshow.com/](http://www.laartshow.com/)

Four books featuring Currier's work are available through CSF Publishing, Amazon, Barnes and Nobles, Powells, and are distributed internationally through Ingram's.