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RENAISSANCE WOMAN

At her Tuscan-inspired studio, **CARIN GERARD** paints sensual still lifes that combine classic realism and the essence of Italy

by **HOLLY RICHMOND** photographs by **HEIDI BASSETT BLAIR**

A full-page photograph of a woman with blonde hair, wearing a black long-sleeved shirt and blue jeans, holding a small white dog. She is standing in the doorway of an art studio. In the background, a large painting of a still life with fruit is visible on an easel. The studio has wooden floors and various art supplies.

"I don't know any other place in America where you feel like you are in Europe. With Santa Barbara's climate and the cypresses and olive trees, you could be in Italy," says Gerard, holding Baci, at the entry to her studio. OPPOSITE: The painter's 2001 work *Basket with Limes*.



A view of the studio from the home's front courtyard. OPPOSITE: Gerard uses pears as props for her painting. "I need the real thing in front of me. I always start from life," she says.

The notion that artist Carin Gerard doubts even one drop of paint on her canvases is hard to believe. Her still life paintings—which blend the classic realism of the Renaissance era with the spirit and spontaneity of contemporary art—have an unmistakable aura of certitude softened with a feminine touch. Yet, this accomplished fine art painter concedes that, like many artists, she sometimes questions her purpose. "In those moments, I've learned to channel my courage. When I'm brave enough to create simply for the sake of creating—because it is something I am compelled to do—the process is remarkable," says Gerard, standing in her light-filled, Tuscan-style studio in Montecito.

For inspiration, Gerard takes to heart the words of Vincent van Gogh, who once remarked, "If you hear a voice within you saying, 'You are not a painter,' then by all means paint...and

that voice will be silenced." For Gerard, creating art is a daily practice—essential, she says, "to feel right in my skin." She explains, "The days that I go into my studio and feel pain and joy and lose awareness of time and hunger are the days when I know I am doing what I am meant to do."

Gerard has built her career on this quest for creative authenticity. Born in Santa Monica, she grew up watching her mother, Beverly Gerard, paint masterful portraits, and often posed for her or painted alongside her too. After Gerard's parents divorced when she was five, her mother moved the family around a lot, supporting Gerard and her brother and sister by teaching art in public schools and selling paintings at weekend art fairs. "I guess you could call her a bohemian artist searching for a place to settle, though we never did. I went to more than



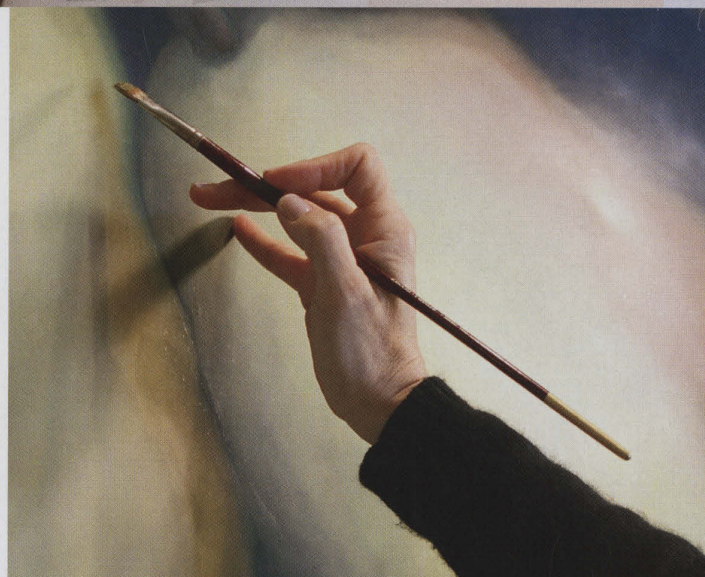


Gerard works on a study inspired by a portrait of schoolchildren taken during a trip to China. OPPOSITE: "The pears become like parts of a woman's body with belly buttons and bottoms," she says of her 2004 *Pair of Pears*.





TOOLS OF THE TRADE Key elements of the artist's studio include Italian sketchbooks filled with drawings, still life props such as handblown French glass vases draped with costume pearls, a small antique grain barrel used to hold her many brushes and jars of pigment powders purchased at the Zecchi art store in Florence.



20 different schools before the sixth grade." It was during this time that Gerard realized the depth of her mother's devotion to art, because no matter how turbulent things got, she would set up her easel and paint every night. "Art was the one stable thing in our lives. I knew I could always rely on my mom pulling out her canvasses and brushes." Her mother's death, when Gerard was 11, instilled in her a sense of solitary fortitude and fueled her desire to be a skilled artist. "Painting gives me a connection to my mother and to my greatest strength, which is my artistic ability. How could I waste such a gift?" she asserts.

Like her mother, Gerard felt driven to make art her profession. After graduating magna cum laude in 1980 from Bowling Green State University in Ohio with a fine arts degree, she moved to Los Angeles for a job creating a line of hand-painted linens. In 1988 she took what ended up being a life-changing trip to Europe. "The world opened up and so did the potential for my art," explains Gerard, who became obsessed with the classic still life paintings of such masters as Chardin, Velázquez, Caravaggio and Melendéz. "I like the idea of taking something ordinary, like fruit or pottery, and creating something extraordinary. Still life paintings give viewers a sense of assurance because they are familiar with the objects. The hard thing is to try not to imitate life. If you do that, in a sense, you could just take a photograph," she believes.

In 1995 she went to Italy for two years to study fine art painting at the acclaimed Charles H. Cecil Studios in Florence. In 2003, returning to study at the Florence Academy of Art, Gerard lived in the Chianti region of Tuscany, just south of Florence, renting the guest quarters (located in a *fiemile*, or little barn) of a 19th-century farmhouse. Inspired by the picturesque countryside and villages of Italy, she developed the artistic technique that resonates throughout her paintings today. Grinding powdered pigments to mix her palette of colors and always painting by natural light, Gerard holds fast to her Italian aca-

demic training, sometimes using a mirror to reverse images and perfect her right-brain/left-brain perception of the composition.

A true Italophile, she beams as she proclaims, "Italy is huge in my work!" Not only does Gerard buy her paints and brushes from the art store Zecchi in Florence, but she listens to Italian music (the pop blues singer Pino Daniele is a favorite), drinks Illy Italian coffee, takes a weekly Italian language class and still travels to Italy at least once a year.

But no matter how much she loves *la dolce vita*, she is even more passionate about the rich life she has created here. While she once rented studio spaces at the Carpinteria artists' lofts and downtown at El Paseo, she decided a few years ago that she would be happier—and more productive—if her studio was within steps of her home, allowing her to cocoon herself with art. In 2003, her guesthouse officially became her studio *del-l'arte*. To transform it into a creatively stimulating space, Gerard painted the exterior walls a custom shade of yellow ochre, inspired by the small house she once rented abroad. Inside, the uncluttered space mimics the sparse *Continued on page 228*



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conditions in which she learned to paint in Italy. However, her prop closet is filled with objects, hunted for on weekend mornings at the Lucca and Arrezzo flea markets near Florence and later used in her still lifes. The collection of handblown glass vases, ceramics, patina bowls, copper pots and grain barrels is bursting with Italian soul. In this European-imbued private world, Gerard can cherish the stability, beauty and peacefulness that Montecito offers. "I can step away from social obligations and the frenetic pace of a city and hide out in my studio, losing myself to work," she remarks.

In 1997, Gerard met her husband, Tony Wilson, cofounder of Wilson's Leather, in Los Angeles on a blind date arranged by a mutual friend. It was, as they say, love at first sight. She and Tony, who has lived in Santa Barbara for 20 years, married in 1999 and have recently added two bichon frise puppies, Zucca and Baci, to their happy home.

Between her husband, friends and two siblings who live in Los

Angeles, Gerard finds her personal life extraordinarily full. Currently, she is also busy preparing for two upcoming group exhibits: a June show at Southern California Art Projects and Exhibitions (SCAPE) in Corona del Mar and an August show at the John Pence Gallery in San Francisco. Next year, she will be one of the select artists representing the United States at the 2007 Florence Biennale. Sue Grafton and Steve Humphrey, Bui and Herb Simon, and Gene and Arlene Montesano are local owners of Gerard's work, while celebrity patrons include Dolly Parton, Nicollette Sheridan and Kenny Chesney.

Gerard believes her art is thriving because the instability she experienced as a child has disappeared in this supportive,

quiet environment. She knows her passion for Italy and the harmony she's found in Montecito are each essential to her success, but exploring her creative purpose continues to be her biggest inspiration. "If I paint something I believe in," she says, "someone else will believe in it too. My passion is genuine, and that makes all the difference." ■



Sketches from Gerard's journal.

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