



Kenton Nelson, "Why Not", Oil on canvas, 60" x 48"

Kenton Nelson: This Side of Paradise

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by Carol Caldwell



Anyone who has ever fallen for Southern California ticks off a list of similar lusts: it's the mountains and the valleys and the Pacific ends of the earth. It's the jacaranda, bougainvillea, and the sexy, sunlit palm fronds, the seductive weather, and, yes, it's the beautiful people. But cut to the chase: it's the light. If it hadn't been for the luscious gold light that lies all over the sinuous landscape like lay lady lay, there wouldn't have been the movies.

Kenton Nelson, Pasadena painter and mosaics maker, loves the light, the skies, his beautiful life, his place in time, the people he paints, and the cinema.

"Just this morning, I was thinking how much under the influence of film I am—dramatic lighting, setting the stage. I really want a posed figure, and I am aware they are somewhat wooden and posed. That is my bent. I art-directed fashion photography for a while. One of my favorite photographers was Louise Dahl-Wolfe. I was greatly influenced by ads of the 1950s also.

utterly under the influence of that. My mother loved Fred Astaire, the old black-and-white movies. Those '50s Doris Day Technicolor pictures. These have informed my viewpoint."

Pasadena, though, as you Californiaphiles must know, is not El Lay. Pasadena is old money and old blood and pretty nigh onto perfection. Kenton Nelson's viewpoint reflects this. "They say paint what you know. I'm painting in a vernacular from my youth. My lifetime

and my vision—where I prefer to be." His figures live in a perfect world, utopian, past and future perfect, only something so . . . oddly eerie shadows their immaculate perfection. There are strange things going on just off to the side, and you can't help but guess it. "Perfection is disturbing," the artist says.

"My early influences were writers like John Cheever. He takes us away from where we are to Shady Hill. The cocktail parties I grew up with—Mom would come out looking like a million bucks—so glamorous. We can't help but appreciate things that have to do with our lifetime. F. Scott Fitzgerald—he breaks my heart. A contemporary writer I love is Raymond Carver. His stories leave you on the edge of the precipice. He makes a suggestion and lets you go on with it. That's what I want to do in my work. Hitchcock was one of my favorite moviemakers because of the way he suggests things.

"There is something about the viewer, or the voyeur. I like the idea of there being an audience, the observer participating in a painting. A writer friend and I were sitting around one day, and he said, 'I've come to realize that I am only 50 percent of the equation.' I thought, cool! The viewer has to be



Such a SIGHT, Oil on canvas, 48" x 48"



Mending, Oil on canvas, 40" x 30"

Mexican flamenco dancer.

“Diego Rivera and Frida Kahlo were married in my uncle’s garden. I spent a lot of time as a child in Mexico City. Yes.

You can’t get around the fact that my paintings and mosaics are influenced by my uncle and Rivera, Siqueiros, Murillo, and Orozco, plus American muralists of the WPA period. The thing about murals is they are there for everyone, and they last pretty much forever.”

Pretty much. Barring a rift on

part of the experience.” Kenton Nelson’s paintings are big. “This is harkening to billboards. Walking through a square in Salzburg years ago, I saw big ads stuck in the center of the square. Those huge blowups at the street level—there’s an aspect of that that’s unsettling. The scale. I started out smaller, and there’s an intimacy to that. But now . . . my paintings are a real workout. On YouTube there’s one of my huge paintings. They are very specifically Southern California. How unique and beautiful our light is. What I’m doing is my ideal, which is not everyone’s ideal.”

Nelson’s uncle was the Mexican muralist Roberto Montenegro. He has taken of late to producing murals on buildings in Pasadena in mosaic. His grandfather was Norwegian, like Nelson appears to be, and his grandmother was a



Diligence, Oil on canvas, 48" x 60"

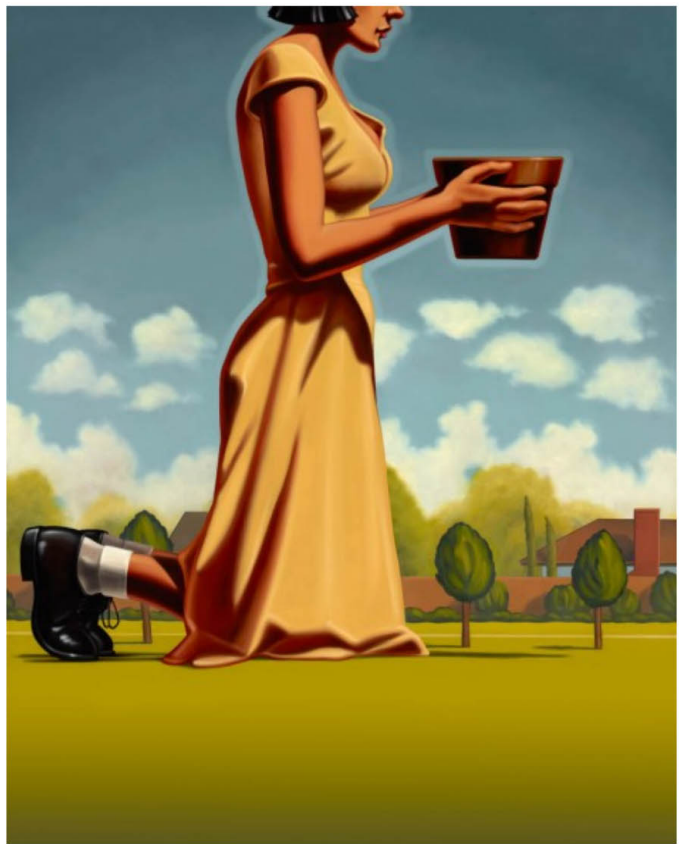


the San Andreas Fault, that is, and what happens if we slide off the edge of the picture into the other side of paradise.

Big Shoe, photo: Courtesy of Artist.



Curbside, Oil on canvas, 72" x 36"



Sown, Oil on canvas, 36" x 36"



After the Blue Sirocco, Oil on canvas, 48" x 72"

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