



Complexity begets complexity. Margaret Curtis's unusual upbringing is on full display in her work.

The Distance In Between

Painter's Narratives Push Realism to the Margins

By Bridget Conn
Portrait by Matt Rose

"Grownups are so strange."

This was the constant mindset of a young Margaret Curtis. She describes the world of her youth as bewildering, the antithesis of "woman-friendly."

After 15 years spent in the midst of New York City's art scene, reviewed by the *New York Times* and *Artforum*, Curtis' second evolution as a painter is here in Western North Carolina, harnessing her peculiar upbringing into complex psychological narratives on canvas. (She grew up in her mother's native Tennessee, where her Bermuda-born British father's vestiges of

Victorian culture influenced daily life. "I was served wine with dinner from a very young age," Curtis reveals. "Here it was the freewheeling '70s, but [at my house] women were excused from the table so the men could talk about 'important things.' I was taught to curtsy to the queen. The things I learned had nothing to do with the real world around me.")

Viewers can sample "strange" in her most recent painting, "Salon." Curtis paints herself into the six-foot-wide canvas, sitting in one of two seats in a beauty salon. But who is the older man in the other seat, grimacing in her direction? Are the headphones she wears an attempt to ignore the man? And why is she only wearing underclothes?

Such is the power in Curtis' work. Her level of technical skill draws viewers in — but the longer one examines the scene, the odder it appears.

"The craft is merely the starting point," states the painter. For her, being lumped into the genre of Realism implies that there's nothing more to the work than capturing a scene in a naturalistic way — thus she shuns the term. Hers are carefully constructed compositions, not simple painted replicas of photographs. Her handling of paint is equally as important as the skill of portrayal.

"I have not seen paintings like these before," says Dawn Hunter, associate professor of art at the University of South Carolina, where Curtis had a solo exhibit at the McMaster Gallery earlier this year. "There is an ease and fluidness to the work, and a totally unexpected surface treatment to all of the works. The reproductions just do not do the work justice."

Curtis affirms this: "If the paint itself doesn't look right on the canvas, it doesn't matter if the face looks accurate. I'll sand the canvas and start over."

This symbolizes the artistic challenges Curtis has set up for herself over the years, choosing to buck the system both in subject and technique. After earning her BFA in Painting at Atlanta College of Art, and completing a rigorous summer program at Yale at Norfolk, Curtis moved to New York, promptly avoiding most instruction school had given her. "I think nothing animates me more than being told I can't do something," she says. So she began to paint in a decorative manner, employing cake-decorating tools, treating the paint "almost like clay." The subject matter might

include flowers or innocuous fluffy bluebirds, which art critic Jerry Saltz referred to as "frivolously beautiful."

It was the birth of her first son

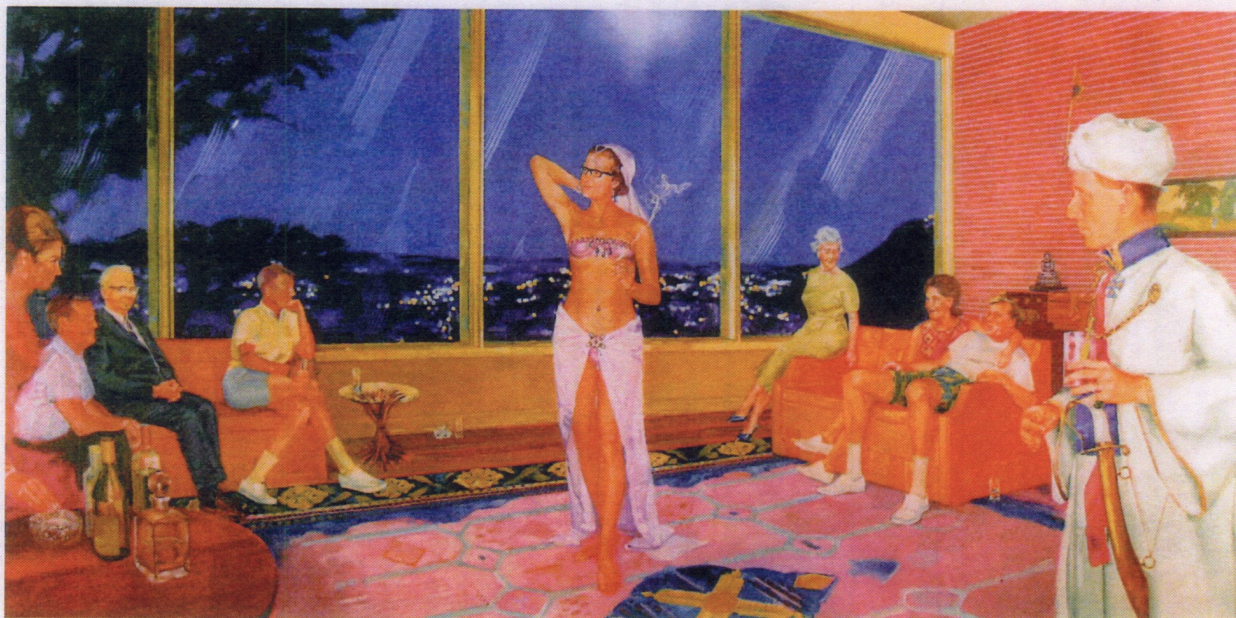
that put her painting career on hold for five years, but it was her pregnancy with her second son that propelled her back in the studio. "Having children enabled me to change painting styles," says Curtis, who settled in Tryon with her family in 2009. No longer concerned with fanciful, semi-abstract iconic objects, Curtis moved into narrative, into compositions that leave purposeful, calculated amounts of space between the figures. This new wave of work continues to address the female experience, some in subtle ways, while others, like "Loaded," are more direct.

Curtis says she wanted to address the subject of women's reproductive burden, their heavier responsibilities in continuing the species, summarizing philosopher Simone de Beauvoir's stance in her seminal work *The Second Sex*. She painted her petite frame into the canvas as the operator of a rickshaw, pulling a man in a suit who drunkenly points to his next site of attraction. The focal point of the canvas is Curtis' bulging, exposed pregnant belly, accented by details of her bridal veil and bare feet.

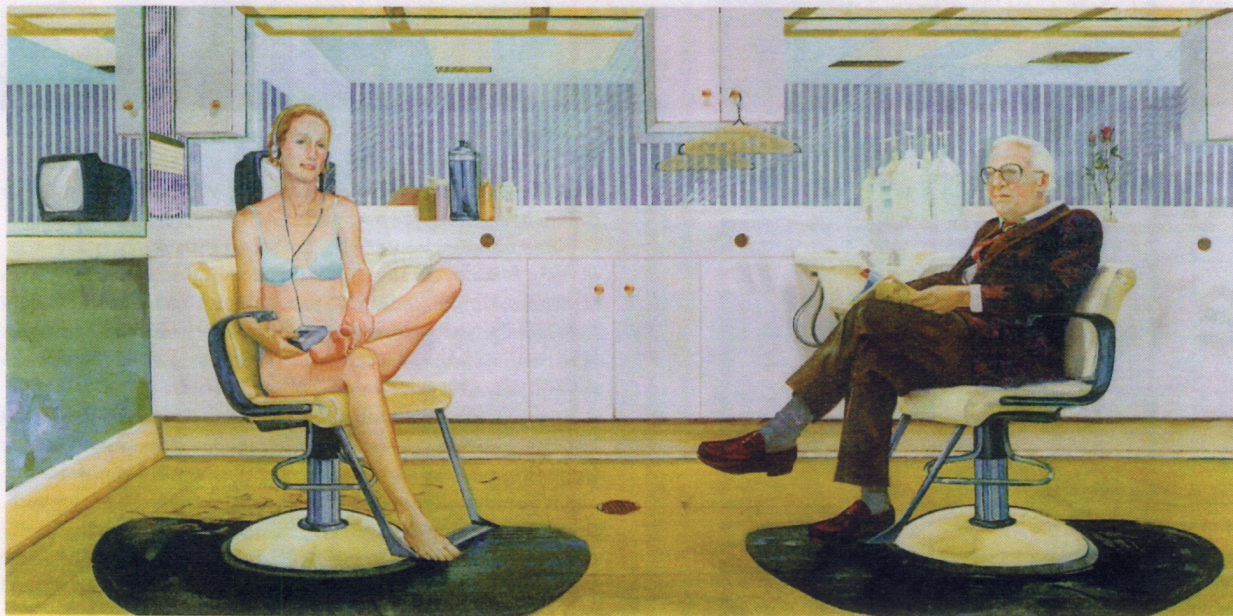
The fictional scene is built upon real-life details: the recalled difficulty of her own first pregnancy, the heightened debate centered on women's health issues surrounding the re-election of President Obama.

Though fulfilled and active in Tryon and Asheville, Curtis hopes for more

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"Proof"



"Salon"

regional venues willing to show art that makes social commentary. She says she is more grateful than ever to be a painter and less concerned with what she doesn't have (i.e., the wider career opportunities that come with living in a big city).

But she nearly didn't bring "Nantahala: Family Scene with Girls" to her 2013 solo exhibit at Flood Gallery in Asheville. A difficult painting for Curtis both in composition and content, it deals with stages of sexualization of girls and women via the depiction of a family picnicking in a North Carolina forest. She was convinced by her husband Harold to reconsider and show the new painting, despite her concerns. It sold on opening night.

As a studio assistant to a male painter in her college years, Curtis was consistently discouraged from becoming an artist, repeatedly handed advice on "what a woman like you should do." It made her even more determined to become an artist, leading to the latest accomplishment in her successful career: a solo exhibit at the Hickory Museum of Art from July to November 2014. She continues to find joy in wrestling with her medium — "paint is not necessarily sympathetic to what you want to do with it" — and addressing the personal through the political.

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