



Pedro Bermeo

Artist makes big mark with political murals

By Charles Desmarais

The muralist Mona Caron works out of the living room of her small apartment in the Castro. It's a perfectly lovely one-bedroom but an unlikely headquarters for an international career that would be the envy of many who live in more lavish digs. How that came about is a story that still amazes her.

It often surprises people to learn that there is a wide range of artistic communities in the Bay Area that overlap only haphazardly. Caron is

known to many in the Bay Area as an illustrator and social activist. Yet she is virtually invisible among curators and dealers in museums and galleries.

Meanwhile, she has been commis-

sioned by a city in Taiwan to paint what is said to be the largest mural in Asia, a healing image of medicinal plants from around the world — metaphorical immigrants — prepared to revitalize the urban jungle. She worked with women of six Amazonian and three Andean indigenous territories to create a 164-foot-high tribute to “Women Protectors of Our Endangered Habitat.” She was brought in to paint a six-story portrait of “a tiny *Amsinckia Menziesii*,” the first wildflower she



Courtesy Mona Caron

Above and top: Mona Caron of San Francisco works with her collaborator Raul Ayala on a mural in Quito, Ecuador, last year.

found sprouting after reclamation of a polluted site used for affordable housing in Union City.

In a parallel practice of what she calls “artivism,” Caron also creates “art for mass street actions,” creating banners, posters and street art “used to amplify the visual impact of rallies, while adding the experience of art making and the language of theater to the actions and struggles.”

An excellent photographer, she then makes pictures that show people at the events waving her painted banners. “I use my connections with ... journalists on climate issues,” she says, “and I pass them photos of all

of the actions. Because I know all the material we made and I know what we want to have in the shot.” The pictures have even ended up in such mainstream publications as *Newsweek*.

If her career has taken her around the world, however, she had her start on the streets of San Francisco, outside the view of art officialdom. For a street-level piece called “Windows Into the Tenderloin,” still viewable at Jones Street and Golden Gate Avenue, she worked for months with neighbors to decide details. Roughly 300 “mini-portraits” in the mural are

Caron continues on E2

Illustrator, activist Mona Caron of S.F. paints major statements in cities around the world

DATEBOOK



Mona Caron's "Taking Root" mural in Union City commemorates the first wildflower she found on the site.

Mona Caron

Caron's murals reach great heights

Caron from page E1

based on people who watched the work and wanted to be included.

"I designed my very first mural in San Francisco, which is the 'Duboce Bikeway Mural,' behind Safeway there," she says. Seated in her home studio, she speaks with just a hint of an accent from her native Switzerland.

"It came about really by chance. I was just barely out of art school at all. At the time, I wanted to be an illustrator of books and magazines — that's kind of what I was imagining for myself — and I got recruited by someone at the San Francisco Bicycle Coalition. I turned it down, saying, like, 'Well that's great. I don't know how to do that. I learned how to do watercolors, printmaking. I don't know how to do something big.'

"And they said, 'Well, figure it out. Learn it! Just do what you do small, we love it, make it big!' That was my learning wall — I made every mistake on that wall because I just tried all the techniques."

One San Franciscan who took note was the author Rebecca Solnit. "I met her through osmosis in the bicycling and protesting community as she was working on her first mural," Solnit said. "Mona is a magician who makes the tiny enormous — flowers grow up the walls of high-rise buildings — and the huge tiny, who has found a way to weave local history into murals around the world, notably in Latin America, and who has her own style that stands out as a different strand in the political mural tradition."

The two worked together, Solnit as author, Caron as illustrator, on "A California Bestiary," published in 2010 by

Heyday Books. That year, UC Press published Solnit's "Infinite City: A San Francisco Atlas." The author named one of the book's streets Mona Caron Boulevard, she said, "when I noticed that from her Safeway mural at Market and Church through her Church at 15th Street mural to the big botanical mural on the crest of Church Street to her farmers' market mural on 24th she nearly had a straight lineup of four murals."

Caron is aware of precedents for her work. She also has strong opinions about her art. "Selling these? But this is not good art," she says. "This is propaganda."

"I guess my complex is that (my work) is not formally that interesting," she continues. "It has a function. I want to talk."

Caron talks about a recent project, a collaboration with the Spanish street artist Ligen. It's a new direction, and yet, "I'm still 'doing flowers.'"

"The cool thing about plants is the transformation from down under to rising above ... utilizing the scale of 'the canvas,' say, to really play with the oppressive enormity of the problems we face, and the threats we face. And then state that these small actions by individuals done here will actually cause these healing plants to grow beyond the enormity of our challenges and get to a better place in the future."

Does she have this actual hope, or is this a fantasy?

"I don't think there is a choice," she says. "If we lose hope, we're done for."

Charles Desmarais is The San Francisco Chronicle's art critic. Email: cdesmarais@sfgchronicle.com. Free weekly newsletter: <http://bit.ly/ArtguyReviews>.



Lea Suzuki / The Chronicle

The artist stands on Church Street in the Mission District next to one of her murals.



Mona Caron

"Duboce Bikeway Mural," Caron's first, was celebrated on the 20th anniversary of its unveiling.