

Belle Isle Viewing Room

PRESENTS

Early Works
CARLO VITALE
April 22 - June 3

Belle Isle Viewing Room is pleased to announce an exhibition of works by Carlo Vitale from 1978-1989, accompanied by a survey catalogue and essay, providing a glimpse into the artist's nearly 40 year career.

Carlo Vitale recalls a formative, vivid memory from his childhood: half-told from the viewpoint of his mother, who witnessed the incident from the front porch of the home he grew up in. The porch was covered from above by an over-hanging second story, providing a perfectly dry place to watch the electrical storms that frequented Detroit's summer skies in the 1960s, often striking what few gigantic Dutch Elm trees were left in the city, after most were declared diseased and cut down the decade prior. Carlo's mother watched as his father turned their Dodge Rambler, with a grade-school aged Carlo in the passenger seat, onto their block. Just as the car approached their driveway, a looming Dutch Elm in their yard was struck by lightning, delivering a current to the car's underbelly and shocking it straight up into the air, its brand new rubber tires bouncing on the pavement. Time and space were suspended in this moment for Carlo: "What I saw was, there was no color, the most brilliant light-color that could ever be imagined. What was dark in color was the most dark color that could be imagined. [The experience was] like a negative of a photograph. I felt something in this moment, which was really only a second, or two seconds. I could feel it." A proclaimed believer in pre-destiny, this event is the self-mythologized origin story of Carlo Vitale's paintings.

Carlo was educated in various Catholic and public schools in Detroit, and spent most summers on family's farmland near Imlay City - "God's world," he calls it. His mother's German side of his family lived simply in this rural landscape, and still had the handicraft connection to the old world - the women quilted, crocheted, and made rugs. Carlo watched as his female family members spread out projects in the farmhouse, working slowly and meticulously on patterns with fabrics and fibers, reiterating traditions from European generations. Back home in the city, he was exposed to historically significant art at the Detroit Institute of Arts. Familiar with both commercial and craft applications of art, Carlo had the desire to participate; "I want to leave something behind in this world."

Formally trained at Wayne State University, Vitale studied and flourished under his instructor Tom Parrish in both undergraduate and graduate studies (though decades apart). During a brief stint under John Egner, a modernist painter, Carlo was exposed to the work of Joseph Albers. He described Albers' images as having "bouncing color," yet didn't realize how that sense of visual vibration could be related to the lightning incident - until Parrish, a surrealist,

came along. Carlo then spent his junior and senior year of college studying Delacroix, Monet, Seurat and Pollock. Feeling a kinship with Seurat (of whom he says “really knew something about lightning!), Carlo adopted a similarly tedious manner of working with paint. “I’m going to burn out my eyes painting all these little dots,” he thought, but pressed on with this work.

Tom Parrish noted from the “very start” that Carlo’s “abstractions are aerial views of land formations; they look very romantic.” “Talk about nail on the head -” says Carlo, “that Parrish could tell that these abstractions, and how intense the colors were, would go back to something like a Delacroix.” A self-described “punk” in undergrad, Carlo made the bold assertion to a visiting artist that his six-by-five-foot self portrait was kinetic and metaphysical. By building up the canvas with several layers of gesso before he applied the image layer, Carlo “created a space in the room, like Seurat.” While its image might be the thing the painting is *most about*, the physical build-up of material underneath the image creates a space that also makes the painting *about itself*, metaphysically. The tiny dots are applied to broad brushstrokes, and create an image that is simply *on the surface* of the ever expanding *identity* of painting discourse. This is not to say Carlo understood or was comfortable with his philosophical project from the start: “When I discovered that the work was kinetic and metaphysical, I was in such shock from it, that I was ill about it senior year of college. I was close to not being able to handle it. It was too much for me.”

Unlike Hilma af Klint or Agnes Pelton, artists known for embracing their role as mystics and conduits of transcendental imagery, Carlo was resistant towards this sort of spiritualism. His younger years had been tormented by familial tales of unfortunate events: divorce, tragic deaths during childbirth, a fatal lumber accident involving his great-grandfather, a hunting incident in which an uncle accidentally shot and killed their grandfather, his best friend dying during grade school, his own near-death bout with pneumonia. Many generations on his father’s Italian side of the family claimed to have “visitations in ghost-like form” and communicated with spirits. When Carlo was seven years old he experienced a “translucent image” he possibly identified as his father’s first wife. This “freaked him out,” as he wanted “a normal life.”

Spending the summers in the “thumb” region of Michigan on his family’s farm, physical outdoor work was commonplace. After graduating from Wayne State in 1978, Carlo held a few odd jobs at a lumberyard and a heating and cooling business before settling into a tenure with the United States Postal Service as a mail carrier (with a brief stint as a model-maker for General Motors in 1988). His regular mail delivery route became just as much a daily practice as his painting.

Twenty years later he went back to Wayne State for his masters degree, which he obtained in 2000. During these years he familiarized himself with the modern works of Barnett Newman, Mark Rothko, Al Held, Ron Gorchov and Frank Stella, but denied the trend of this era’s painting, as he also had with minimalism. To hear Carlo discuss these artists, with such familiarity of their individual practices and attitudes, one would assume they were all peers. Perhaps this is a trait the Detroit artist (and a true punk) - making up for existing outside of the mainstream contemporary art world with extensive research and practice, and the ability to tell a captivating tale.

It's impossible to look at Carlo Vitale's paintings and not think of Georges Seurat, the father of Pointillism, just as it's impossible to look at these paintings and not recall the story of Carlo and his father being in a car struck by lightning. Seurat died at the age of 31, and while he left behind a groundbreaking legacy, one can only imagine what his oeuvre would include had he made mature paintings for longer than seven years. Perhaps this is where pre-destiny comes in - perhaps it is Carlo who will continue Seurat's benefaction. "I got this gift, it's a strange gift," Carlo says when discussing the psychic spirituality associated with his family's past and imbued in his paintings; "now I take it as a cup of tea."



*Unfolding
Strawberry*

1982
60 x 53.5 in
Acrylic on Canvas
CV0004



*Mountains and
Fields*

1979-1993
41.25 x 72 in
Oil on Canvas
CV0012



Purple Heart Wood

1978-1989
51.5 x 72 in
Oil on Canvas
CV0008



Untitled

1978-2022
51.25 x 72 in
Oil on Canvas
CV0013



Meditation

1982
48 x 59.5 in
Acrylic on Canvas
CV0010



Cherry Hill Park

1980-1991
51.5 x 71.5 in
Oil on Canvas
CV0014