

Coloratura: Call and Response

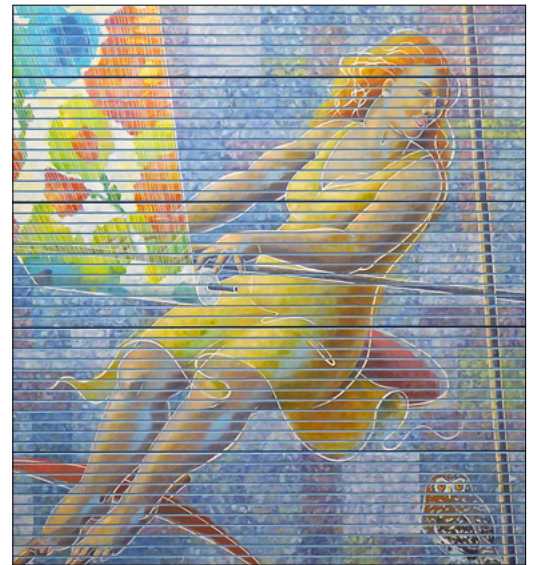
by Jennifer Debell

On the occasion of Coloratura's 35-year retrospective exhibition at the Branch Museum of Architecture and Design in Richmond, Virginia.

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A PIVOTAL MOMENT in my reading and writing life happened when I read James Baldwin's collection of essays, *Notes of a Native Son*. Somewhere among the pages it occurred to me to listen, as I was reading, to the jazz permeating Baldwin's work. Cannonball Adderley, Duke Ellington, Brita Borg singing "Chez Inez" were revelatory as it dawned on me that all art is built from the multitude of influences that an artist absorbs from every direction, every moment of the day, throughout a lifetime. History matters. Narrative matters. The shifting light on a late February afternoon may produce some essential, previously elusive color, and that matters very much indeed. This concept is at the core of every piece by Catherine Roseberry and Rob Womack, the two painters behind the name *Coloratura*. A scholarly-level curiosity is where their work intersects—there, as well as in the skill and patience it takes to explore an idea for as long as it takes. Period. And then their roads diverge wildly, so that in the resulting pieces we are treated to each artist's far-reaching and beautifully actualized work.



Clockwise from top left: *Bel Canto* (detail) (Rob Womack); *Ariacne* (detail) (Catherine Roseberry); *Les Epoux* (detail) (CR); *Phrenology* (RW).

Rob Womack



The earliest notion of *Coloratura* took shape with the contemplation of a single color: Chinese red—that alluring creature, in the guise of oil-based enamel. This luscious hue applied in a loose crazy quilt pattern on a folk art chair gave Womack the idea of marrying two-dimensional design to interesting pieces of furniture. Womack did his undergraduate work in painting, and before that he worked closely with a furniture restorer, so the marriage of color and form was a natural step. To this day he might spend a full day mixing a single color; weeks researching an idea, and months pass in the transformation of a piece of furniture with promise. Womack's ability with paint and color combined with his interest in music, culture, flea markets, contemporary art and art history, and antiques have produced a stream of intriguing intellectual and creative opportunities. His approach is to first disassemble and then painstakingly rebuild each piece of furniture. With a formalist approach prescribed by each piece—and incredibly fastidious brushwork—he then applies a brand new story in paint—because storytelling is at work here. And wit!

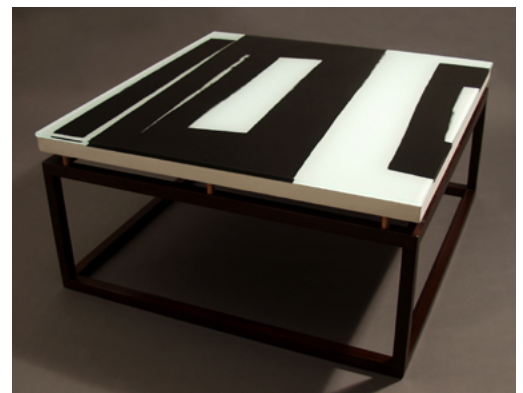
And joy! The lines of any given piece dovetail with the painted images themselves. *Dream Cars*, for example, is painted on a chrome-handled cabinet and is described by Womack (as only a car lover could) as “low, long, and sleek.” It showcases the razor-sharp lines of 1950s automotive prototypes—some, Womack's own designs. *Now's the Time*, a reverse-painted glass coffee table in the style of Franz Kline, is another astonishing piece that has the viewer desperate to know, “how did he *do* that?” The answer is that like a method actor, Womack takes the spark of an idea and applies everything he's made of into developing the full expression of that idea. His description of *Coloratura*'s early days as “an ivory tower sweatshop” is a lighthearted way of saying that a creative glimmer, combined with experimentation, is mixed with blood, sweat, and tears to produce work that is very much more than the sum of its parts. Look closely at Womack's work. Linger there. And then return for another look only to find something entirely new to consider. ■



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Rob Womack (clockwise from top left): *Coloratura* #1; *Conjurer Revealed* (detail); *Important Information Inside* (detail); *Now's the Time*; *Cubist Tabletop*; *Dream Cars*.

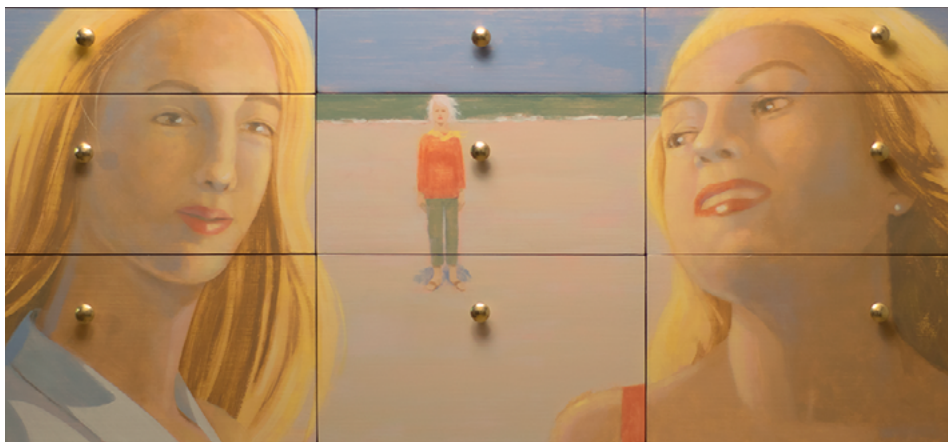
Catherine Roseberry

Catherine Roseberry tells an intimate story within her work, producing, in a sense, memoir with paint as the medium. She completed a degree in art education at Virginia Commonwealth University before founding Coloratura alongside Rob Womack, who she married in 1983. Roseberry's work most often focuses on where she herself has struggled, and like so many professional women, this is often at the intersection of self-expression and family. Her voluptuous renderings center on the nature of women's lives and bring to mind a kind of magical realism-by-brush in which the liquid weight of this artist's emotion is poignantly, heartbreakingly rendered. Art history is her muse and her guide.

Artists' interpretations of mother and child were the catalyst for Roseberry's *Elusive Joy*, which tells the story of the couple's longing for a child. She describes her influences in a later study of family, *Balancing Act*, as a mash-up of Picasso's *Rose Period Family of Saltimbanques* and Michelangelo's *Doni Tondo*.

In this and other pieces Roseberry uses color metaphorically: sea-colored longing, violet-hued seduction, rose-red memory. Her characters fill a given space, and are often compressed within it. Forms are softly rounded with sexuality here, maternal warmth there, and the furniture itself is sometimes suggestively curved—unless it is not: *Promenade*, a bold 1940s cabinet, depicts a mating dance; the viewer is voyeur through drawer pulls that double as partly opened venetian blinds. *A Cautionary Tale* is a vanity painted as an allegorical warning against...vanity. Roseberry's humor is sharp and sly and ever-present, even in her harshest commentary. *Selfie*, a satirical look at perceptions of beauty, examines women and aging by way of the arrogance of youth. Wariness, stoic perseverance—difficult emotions are as unapologetically explored as sexiness is celebrated. We read a manifesto in Roseberry's candid work and we know—the future is female. ■

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Catherine Roseberry (clockwise from top): *A Cautionary Tale*; *Selfie* (detail); *Annunciation*; *Promenade*.

BACK PAGE (clockwise from top left): *Ofrenda del Mar* (RW and CR); *Balancing Act* (CR); *All Sound* (RW); *Scandinavian Chest* (RW); *Rob Womack and Catherine Roseberry, 1995, with Conjuror Revealed at the Landmark Theatre; Rockefeller Center* (RW); *Resurgam* (CR).



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