

# Small Worlds | Carolyn Cárdenas

DRAWINGS AND PAINTINGS





## About the Exhibition

Looking at a work by Carolín Cárdenas, you are looking at time. Behind her paintings stretch centuries of tradition she has learned from and draws on, but each piece is also invested with the more intimate time of the labor required to produce it. In each artwork you can feel the artist, working, diligently recording her own time, place, and the issues that preoccupy her and all of us — issues of gender, age, violence, and beauty.

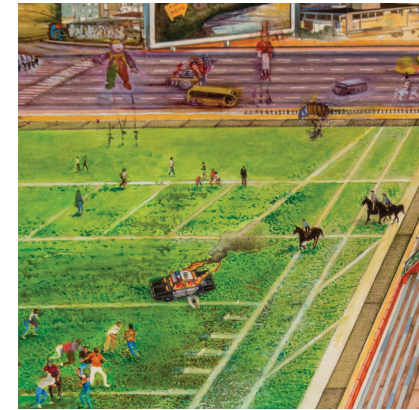
Cárdenas practices a technique of egg/oil tempera innovated by 15th century Northern Renaissance masters of realism. Each piece begins with an underpainting in pure egg tempera, a mixture of only egg yolk and pigment. With tiny sable brushes and delicate cross-hatching, Cárdenas creates a drawing of the entire painting in just black and gray, which is to say that she must have an image of the endpoint of her painting from the very beginning. Once this foundation is laid, Cárdenas shifts to egg/oil tempera, grinding her own mixtures of oil, egg yolk, water, and pigment, in order to later gradually add color. She uses a whole egg tempera to “heighten with white.” Finally, the layering of transparent color over color (as many as 20 layers) creates an almost magically luminous surface — magic produced by slow, precise industry.

As a child, Cárdenas encountered

the works of Northern Renaissance painters like Jan van Eyck and Rogier van der Weyden in art magazines her father brought home. Caught by the unbelievable realism, she thought they must have been created by aliens — they were too perfect. These painstaking techniques were developed in a radically different time and place, however, and to practice them now requires a heightened level of dedication. “You have to be crazy to want to do it,” Cárdenas acknowledges. To be a working artist in egg/oil tempera now, far from the age of wealthy patrons and ateliers full of apprentices, has required the imposition of certain formal restraints; most notably, size constraints. Cárdenas paints most often on a very small scale, at least in part because of the time it takes for her to finish even a tiny piece. Painting small has allowed her to regularly produce enough material to fill a gallery, to sell, to make a living. As you’re getting lost in one of these small worlds, then, take the time to consider the time it took to bring it into view.

Because this exhibition contains works from throughout Cárdenas’ career, we can see ideas and images to which she returns habitually. Often it is the idea of home that is in question. Sometimes

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Cover: *West of Eden*, egg/oil tempera on 3 cradled wooden panels, 1990-current. 27¾ x 68 x 4 inches. Left: Details.



danger seems to lurk just outside of it, as in *The Evening Was Compromised by Wanting Air*. Elsewhere, as in *HideOut*, violence springs from inside. Likewise, behind the exotic visual displays of *Facing East* and *Facing South* lingers the everyday domestic space of the kitchen sink — the work of washing dishes juxtaposed with the work of creating art.

Recently, Cárdenas has returned to using oil on canvas, reimmersing herself in the media and techniques through which she first learned her craft and the application of her drawing skills. Pieces like *Shooting Gallery* and *Members Only*, though distinct from the egg tempera works in that their visible brush strokes show the hand of the artist more overtly, still teem with alternately menacing and whimsical detail and require months to complete. As in *HideOut*, Cárdenas reflects in these pieces on the painfully timely topic of gun violence and endangered children, showing us her vision of the private physical and psychological worlds of those who might one day go into the world to become “active shooters.”

*West of Eden*, however, is the piece that condenses Cárdenas’ characteristic moves all in one place. One painting in three panels, its arrangement and carnivalesque profusion of weird things happening — simultaneously apocalyptic and celebratory — evokes Hieronymus Bosch’s *Garden of Earthly Delights*. Though bigger than any of her other pieces, it is worked on the same small scale. Begun more than thirty years ago, *West of Eden* is a work in progress, and will remain one for as long as Carolyn Cárdenas continues to make art. “I wanted to make a piece that was bigger than me,” she says, and she keeps on putting the world into it, bit by bit. There is plenty of space yet to fill in its urban, pastoral, and domestic landscapes. “It’ll only be done when I’m dead,” Cárdenas states. This is a masterwork, and such a work takes time.

#### ARIEL J. ROSS

Ariel J. Ross has a PhD. Comparative Literature, Emory University, Visiting Assistant Professor, Department of English, Oklahoma State University.



Above: *The Evening Was Compromised by Wanting Air*, egg/oil tempera on panel, 1985. 14 x 11½ inches. Right: Details.





*Facing East*, collage and mixed-media on paper, 1995. 10 1/4 x 10 1/4 inches.



*Facing South*, collage and mixed-media on paper, 1995. 10 1/4 x 10 1/4 inches.

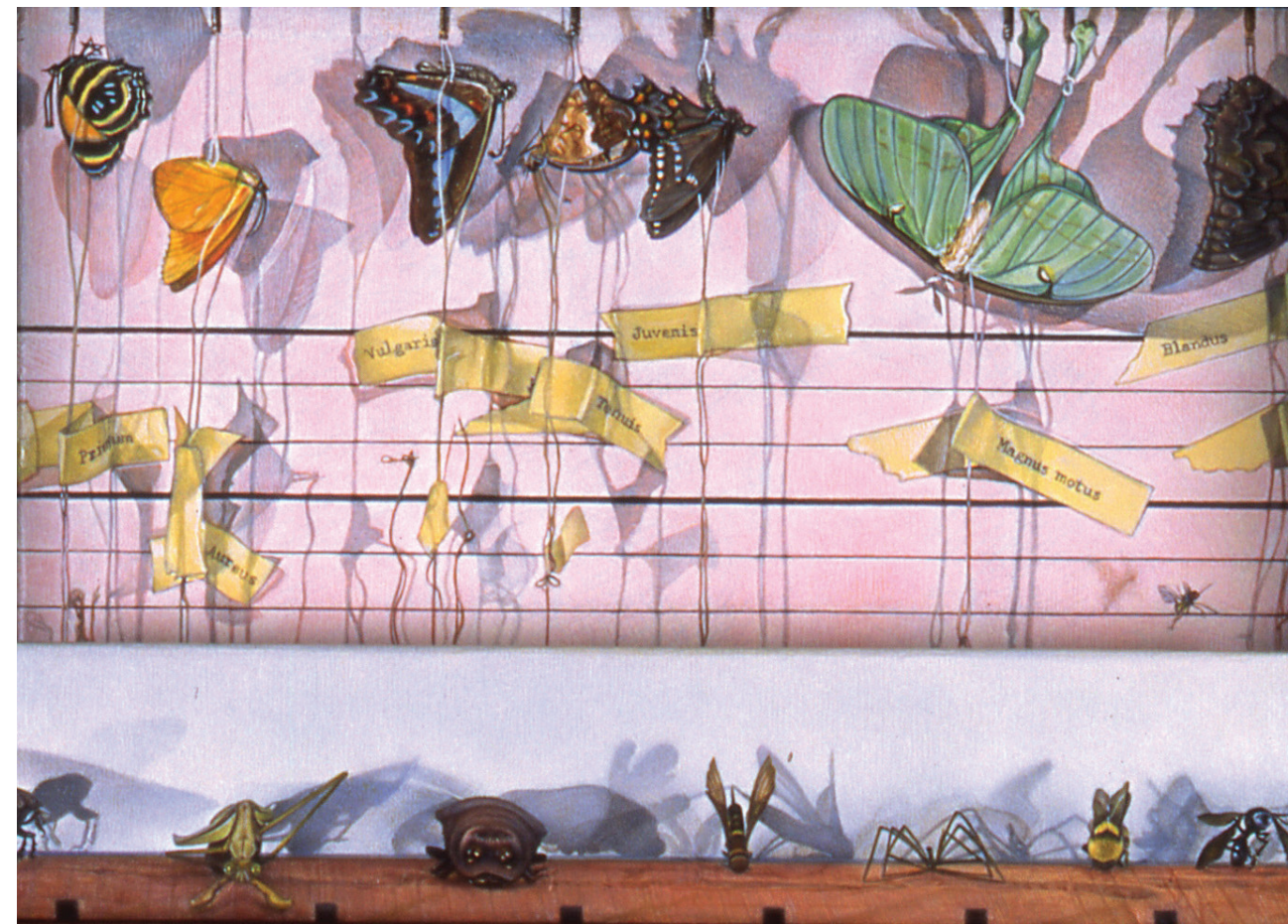




*House Arrest*, egg/oil tempera on 3 panels with mixed-media, 2022. 17 x 13 x 2 1/2 inches.



*HideOut*, egg/oil tempera on 13 panels with mixed-media, 2000. 9 1/4 x 9 1/2 x 7 3/4 inches.



*Line-Up*, egg/oil tempera on 2 panels with mixed-media, 2002, 15 x 18 1/4 x 3 1/2 inches.

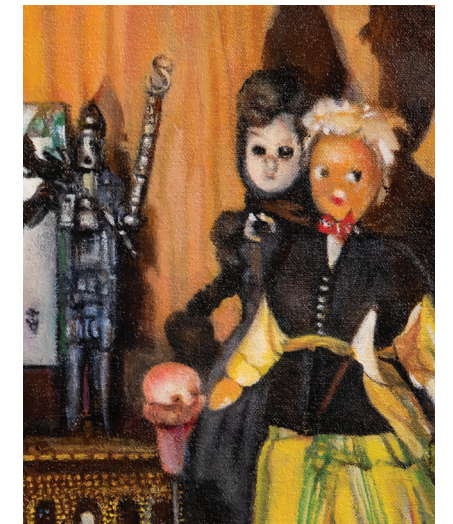
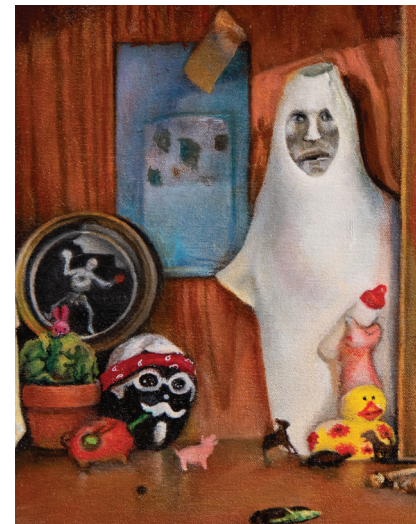




Above: *Shooting Gallery*, oil on canvas, 2020, 10 x 18 ¾ inches. Below: Details.



Above: *Members Only*, oil on canvas, 2021, 18 ¼" x 29 ¼ inches. Below: Details.







720 S. Husband Street / Stillwater, OK, 74074  
405.744.2780 / [museum.okstate.edu](http://museum.okstate.edu)



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