

A Studio Visit with Shannon Cannings



Artist and writer Hannah Dean spoke with artist and professor Shannon Cannings in Canning's studio in Lubbock on March 4th, 2018. An exhibition of Cannings' work opens Thursday, March 8 at the McCormick Gallery, Midland College in the Allison Fine Arts Building, Midland, Texas. It runs through April 13, 2018.

Hannah Dean: How long have you lived in Lubbock?

Shannon Cannings: 17 1/2 years.

HD: What progression has your work taken in that time?

SC: Just since Lubbock?

HD: Well, since grad school. Are you still painting the same subject matter?

SC: I think I made a really big change when I moved to Lubbock. I've always been interested in sort of suburban information. So, when I was adjuncting at Syracuse University and Casanovia College in New York, and living in Marathon, which was about a 42-mile commute from both schools... I was really paying attention to what the properties were doing, and on the days that I had to go between the two schools, I took a path that had an insane number of fences. So, I started painting this series of "private property." It was very much about fences. So, that's what I was thinking about, and then I moved to Texas and everyone has a fence. So, it's like, "alright," it's a totally different thing here because it's so

flat, and gridded, you protect your square with a security fence, or you give your eye a place to stop. So I started doing all these things with the backyard, or the culture of the backyard.

I also sort of freaked about because it's very brown and flat, and I'm from Pennsylvania and New York, it's hilly and green. I had to get used to my new environment. When I was mid-flipping out, I started painting these pools and beach balls — this plastic, intense-color, shiny... with a sort of nostalgia for me. When I was doing that I happened upon squirt guns because it was in the same aisle; I had a season when I could get materials. When I found the squirt guns I had a little moment where I had to stop and think about what I was feeling about these things. They look like Jolly Ranchers in the package, and they look so beautiful, and the colors are geared towards happiness... but this is also a gun. So then I had to come to terms with that. Remembering my upbringing, we were never allowed to have anything shaped like a gun in the house. All of our squirt guns were shaped like fish or like other objects — we weren't allowed to have anything weaponry related in the house. So, as an adult, I bought myself some damn squirt guns, and I didn't tell my mother for like three months; I couldn't sleep.

HD: You, of all people — it's funny to imagine.

SC: Who is the person whose opinion matters most? It's your mom! So I fessed up. I had to have a conversation with myself about why I was painting these, all these conflicting feelings of not being allowed to have something, and now I am. Why are people attracted to these? Why do they buy them for their children, and why is this a representation of modern gun culture?

HD: Can you elaborate on why you weren't allowed to have weaponry-type toys?

SC: I was raised by hippies — we were going to peace rallies when I was growing up. They thought they should protect us. And then I moved to Texas and now I have a case full of toy guns. It's not where I thought I would be or what I thought I would be doing. I am very happy I ended up here.

HD: There's a progression [in the paintings] from the plasticine, brightly colored toys to what is now more futuristic, or where the only indicator that it might be a squirt gun is that orange cap.

SC: I only paint toys, I don't paint real ones. Because I'm not necessarily telling people how to feel about guns. I never want my work to appear like I am preaching to anybody, but I want them to be questioning what they think and how they interpret gun culture. I feel like my opinion has changed over the years anyway and become a bit more complicated. I want the audience to have room to have an opinion, or maybe find a new one. To have conversations with each other. I super enjoy it when people get into fights in my gallery when they are explaining what they feel or what they think I feel.

HD: Your gallery is in Houston...

SC: Anya Tish Gallery in Houston, Cris Worley Fine Arts in Dallas, and Charles Adams Gallery here in Lubbock.

HD: Your work also deals with childhood and maybe gendered imagery. Is that on purpose or circumstantial?

SC: Yes, and no. In the exploration of this I can sort of peel out a topic that's similar. There are definitely little elements of the gun that are more feminine and masculine. This one [pulls out gun in package], because it's pink, is definitely for girls. Then some are more subtle, where it's roundy and more cutesified, whereas for boys it's maybe sharper and darker. Sometimes I do mess with gender, but it's an aside to the main topic.

HD: Does teaching foundational drawing and design [at Texas Tech University] contribute to what you do?

SC: I think a lot. As a teacher, you hear your voice all the damn time. I'm reteaching myself and reinforcing those ideas as I teach students. I find little mantras that are super important to me. I always wear these bracelets [gestures to arm], like one says "general to specific" which is the most important thing about Drawing I. This one is the most important thing about color, "hue, value, and intensity," which is how you identify a color. The third one, by the way, is that fake Latin from *The Handmaid's Tale*: "Don't let the bastards get you down." I added that one this year — weird [laughs]. I find myself doing the rosary with them while I'm talking with my students. Here [in the studio] it's important, too — not to get ahead of myself. I always am yelling, well, not yelling... suggesting to my students not to ice the cake before you bake it. It's a good reminder to slow down and get it right from the bones.

HD: Your work is getting smaller, where you can fit in more of these noodly details. I think that was a leading question about design — thinking about John Berger and [his 1972 book] *Ways of Seeing*. The visual signals are getting heavier — and is this foil?

SC: So, that's Mylar, like a balloon. Mirrored Mylar. A friend rented a house to a photographer and when they left, they left a roll of this stuff in the house. So, she said, "Who do I know who is an artist," and gave it me. I've had it for years and had forgotten about it. I went on a girls' weekend to Meow Wolf, which is visual overload. I walked around with my face open the whole time. I passed a thing, the first year that I went... a little hallway that was dark, and they had little tufted mylar, and the folds created the sort of stripes of light. Later when we were drinking in the hot tub, as one does on girls' trips, I was staring into space, and they were like, "where's Shannon?" I had the best idea. When I got home I cut up the mylar and made a swing [points to ceiling]. So this is my hammock that I made [for the Mylar] and hang and put a gun in it, so when you press down... see how it does this funky thing? It starts to make all these crazy reflections, and then you hit it with a light source, and it goes insane. It's so delicious I can't stand it.

HD: Finish fetish.

SC: Yeah, it's all finish fetish. So, that's how that happened. When it came to the reality of it, I just wanted to see what I could do. It makes all these weird little abstract things. Somehow this photorealist became an abstract painter by accident. I really, really like that it has both of those in there. I name all sorts of funny things in here — this looks like fish, or a piece of garlic — that's totally Edvard Munch *The Scream* right there.

HD: If you're doing something in paint, it has to be a painting.

SC: Some of it is the fetish of painting with paint. The smell and the feel of it, how deep you can get with it. I also do drawings, they have a tendency to be a little bit quieter. I'm interested in the surface of them, but it's not the same as paint. I don't try to make it be paint.

[Gestures to painting] this is just balls-to-the-walls bright intensity that you don't get with anything but that, so I feel it has its own language.



HD: Do you paint from life or from photos?

SC: Especially with the Mylar, I paint almost exclusively from photos, but I almost always have the real gun sitting here, because no photograph does everything I want it to do. So, I can soften things, or brighten them — “*What the hell was that thing?*” — and I can go back and do little things to make it look “real.” A little editing happens. I mess with all of the outlines of things: edges are sharp or soft, manipulating where I want you to look and when.

HD: I'm excited by these paintings, seeing them after being a fangirl when I was 17 at the First Friday Art Trail [in Lubbock] and seeing the maybe original water gun paintings. This is a great transition to witness — the [visual] distortion. Has your concept evolved with this visual progression?

SC: Definitely. The others — the background was a lot quieter. Simple, a sort of translucent object and maybe more formal concerns, and I let it be. Then, I started looking at them in their packaging, the blister pack and the words around it was all this visual noise that I thought was different and louder and more chaotic. It was from that plastic covering; it would send these shooting stripes of white and color — I like that noise.

The noise is starting to take over the paintings. Now, the background takes so much longer than the damn gun. It's crazy. I'm now to the point where I have to take breaks because my eyes cross — what am I doing? It's a weird journey, but I think conceptually it has changed from quiet questioning to chaotic noise. It's mirroring our culture. So in these screaming fits about fake news and these high school kids shooting each other — it's getting very loud and there are a lot of voices that are overlapping. That's how I'm hearing the news right now and it's really hard to find truth in that, because everybody has an agenda — it's getting really hard to find. So, if [the paintings] give me a little bit of a migraine while I'm working on them, I think I deserve it. It's much more realistic that way.

The day that the Sandy Hook shooting happened... what was it, twenty... first graders lost their lives. I closed the door to my studio and walked away because I was painting little kids with guns. And I had to go down to the elementary school and pick up my first grader [voice breaking, silence]... I mean, it's really hard to pick up your kid, and somebody else doesn't get to. It's awful. I'm sorry.

It's really hard to separate all these facts about guns and what we can actually do and what is a good solution to this problem. When all the noise is happening at the same time and you know there is so much money behind all of this that you're not hearing the truth... sorry.

HD: It's okay.

SC: How many times have I thought about this, and I still cry when I think about it. It's getting to a fevered pitch. Last semester I had the show at Anya Tish, and the week before I had to go down to do a gallery talk and have a show, the kid at Texas Tech shot a police officer and there was the bank robbery. My kids are watching the police race down the street, and I'm on Facebook trying to find out what happened.

HD: Is your relationship with Facebook and social media a source of “the noise?”

SC: Some of it. I'm always super careful about the news sources that I'm quoting, because there is a lot out there, but I always try to find the truth out there. I'm also aware of all of that. I think I need to be aware of it. Like the local news here. When you read the comments on the local news sites... . People always ask “why do you do that?” I want to hear that voice. I don't necessarily get that from the people I hang out with or my news sources. I think: “How did we get here?” I need to know that voice, too.

So, I went and shot guns with some friends who are serious gun fanatics. I felt like I needed to experience that. It was wild. I tried to be neutral and not bring my baggage — I'm sure I did. I tried to understand their enthusiasm. I had a hard time. It was an interesting tool, it was fun to judge your marksmanship, it was neat to use this mechanical device and see how it works. That was really interesting and I enjoyed it from a textbook perspective, but I didn't get all excited about shooting guns. After my initial response to it, I wasn't scared of it, either; I could understand the draw to be better at it. I didn't catch that fever.

HD: It's a loaded symbol you're using. Horrible pun. It's got Texan mythology, Americana. When you sell work in Houston and Dallas, do you think about who is buying the work?

SC: So this one time, my gallery had me rush some work... I was like, no one needs it on a Thursday — but apparently they did. I asked later if the work had arrived on time, and what the rush was. The work was for display in a house for a fundraising event for the Obama campaign. My work could have been in a basement or bathroom, who knows, but I wonder if he [Obama] saw it and what his thoughts would be. I thought that was kind of cool. I think the buyers are all over the place. I've had openings where people come up and talk about the one [toy gun] they had as a kid, and all of a sudden this fifty-year-old man is eight years old. Then you get others who say, "Oh, my real [gun] looks like that." And then others that come to me and it's "How dare you do this," and, "Why do you perpetuate this culture?" Or, "How dare you; I've shot guns since I was four and I'M FINE!" I literally had someone scream at me that they were fine. Maybe they're a little on edge about this.

So, there's a range.

HD: Most good work is confusing. For me, this discussion has rounded out your thinking but also the empathy you have for people [who don't think like you].

SC: We have people who are fearful of the "other," whether that is an immigrant, or another religion, or female... this idea that they must protect this tradition or property — there is something there. I don't know enough about it to make a grandiose statement, but I think it's related to this patriarchal, white culture of men who want guns to protect their family — from what? In a lot of the cases, it's from him. That's sort of the problem. Most all of these school shootings have been white dudes, but white dudes are the most fierce advocates for the NRA. But, also, white men are the highest [demographic] that commit suicide, or this murder-suicide thing where they shoot their ex-wife and then themselves. It's crazy, but it's all part of that gun culture. There is something we have to figure out that is bigger than just this little object.

— Hannah Dean