

LAGUNA ART I

TYLER STALLINGS

His Parallel Universe



By AIMEE GREENBERG

Photos by JAY RUBIN

"Art falls flat for me if it's just about making something pretty or just about an idea in a didactic way. It's the combination of beauty and ideas that makes the most interesting art to me."

—Tyler Stallings

T Tyler Stallings is a deft magician. Moving effortlessly between the parallel worlds of curator, artist and writer, the enigmatic Stallings challenges the popular schism of specialist versus generalist. Stallings sees creating, organizing and writing about art as one in the same project. "I see art as a point of view of life; a metaphor for the multiple layers one doesn't talk about."

His own art has transitioned from the conceptual installations of his early career to painting. "As chief curator of the Laguna Art Museum, I do a lot of planning. At home, I need more magic, more spontaneity. Paint is a fluid medium that has the ability to transform," he says. "My paintings come from a more spiritual place. I'm not making art to make a commentary."

His paintings are both intensely personal and formally distant. Surreal characters dominate the oil scapes, such as *Filtering and Welcome*. They invite the spectator to fall into their large endless eyes, with a stare that forces the viewer to gaze inward. For Stallings, "The eyes are innocent and infantile, like those of the children in Margaret Keene's work and in Japanese animation. Juxtaposed with big lips, this grotesque element makes one rethink the body." The animals depicted in works including *Checkpoint* and *Crisp* have more pensive stares than the humans, which suggest that the humans are becoming nocturnal animals. Similarly, Stallings paintings of interiors and

doorways depict a state of transformation, where the viewer, according to the artist, is "between spaces." Inspired by the constant construction of homes in Laguna, Stallings' paintings of interiors are based on photographs where time and space is ambiguous. "In these works, one is uncertain if the homes are in a state of construction or destruction; occupied or abandoned. You can't see around the doorways to know whether you are entering or exiting the world," he says.

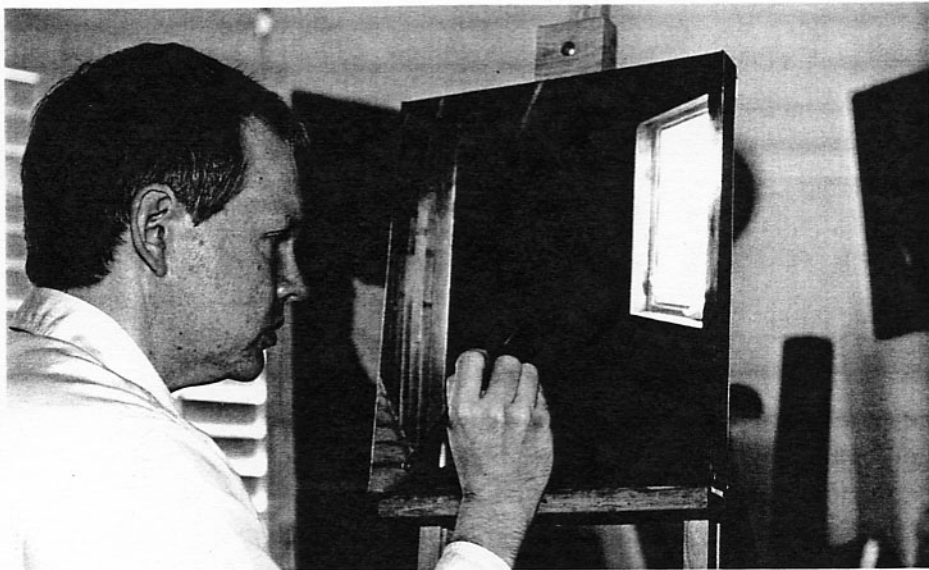
In a 2004 solo exhibition of his work, "New Paintings," at Laguna's Peter Blake Gallery, "the general public favored the less confrontational interiors, while most artists preferred the grotesque beauty of the portraits." Stallings, who is represented by Los Angeles' Newspace Gallery, is at work on a new body of paintings based on close-up photographs that are folded and torn.

In both subtle and obvious ways, Stallings is influenced by the work of Francis Bacon, the painter whose work focused on the architecture of body and spirit, particularly in relationship to death and dying. "If I had millions of dollars, and could spend it only on art, I'd buy the paintings of artist Francis Bacon," says Stallings.

Born in Louisiana in 1969, Tyler pays homage to his uncle, Fairleigh Brooks, as the first person who introduced him to the concept of "otherness." "He took me to avant-garde movies and taught me to question everything," says Stallings. "I never knew there was any other way!" Following the 1977 release of the first *Star Wars*, Stallings began writing poetry and making super-8 films. At the University of the South, in Seawee, Tenn., under the tutelage of mentor Ron Jones, Stallings began to synthesize the relationship between philosophy and art. The two disciplines continued to inform his work at both The Atlanta College of Art and California Institute of the Arts, where he received his master's degree in fine arts in 1992. His first full-time curatorial position was at the Huntington Beach Art Center, where he was hired in 1995 by former director Naida Osline. Their professional relationship became personal; the two were married in 2002. Osline, a photo-based artist, continues to work full-time as a public events director for Huntington Beach.

Curator as commentator

As a contemporary art curator, Stallings explores sub-cultures through popular culture. During his five-year tenure as curator for the Huntington Beach Art Center, Stallings' fascination played out in "Dead on the Wall: The Graphics and Culture of Deadheads" and the UFO show, "Are We Touched? Identities



Artist Tyler Stallings at work in his home studio.

Stallings shrugs off criticism over the glorification of iconic objects in the popular culture, citing its lynchpin, artist Marcel Duchamp, whose canvases of everyday objects strongly influenced what would be considered avant-garde, 20th-century art. "All that's left to question is intention," he says. "The artist only has to create a metaphor, whereby its metaphorical context can be contained and viewed by others."

The big picture

Stallings' curatorial style also invites dialogue on topical issues. Two of his group shows support this premise a 2001 exhibition that explored the intersection of art and technology and another in 2003 that investigated the meaning, image and ideological power of whiteness in the American public imagination and in contemporary art. "Tyler has an excellent track record of doing thematic exhibitions, which are both conceptually and financially, the most difficult," says Carol Eitel, a curator of the Los Angeles Contemporary Museum of Art. "He has a synthetic mind, which allows him to assemble the small pieces to fit the big picture."

In addition to being an advocate for artists, Bolton Colburn, the Laguna Art Museum's executive director, credits Stallings with laying the groundwork for strengthening the museum's relationship with individual collectors, an increasingly important base of financial support. That rapport developed, in part by co-curating with the museum's historical curator, Janet Blake, a recent exhibition that focused on collectors and their collections in Laguna Beach and vicinity.

The exhibition included works from diverse genres and eras juxtaposed in unusual and interesting ways. For Stallings, "the exhibition provided an opportunity for the museum to show its appreciation to the

from Outer Space." These signature shows included painting, sculpture, installation, photography and objects d'Art. Like British filmmaker-curator Peter Greenaway, Stallings is very skilled at elevating ordinary objects into artifacts. A memorable example from Greenaway's 1993 Vienna exhibition was the display of hundreds of suitcases, all sizes, styles and colors, with an adjacent essay on travel as a multi-faceted metaphor.

Similarly, an unforgettable object from Stallings' "Dead on the Wall" exhibit is the pair of worn-out shoes that welcomed each visitor at the gallery's entrance. The shoes, riddled with holes, were a symbol of the many miles traveled by the dead heads.

The Laguna Art Museum's current "Surf Culture Redux" exhibition is a re-configuration of iconic work from the most well attended show in its history, "Surf Culture - The Art History of Surfing," which was presented in summer 2002. The work in "Surf Culture Redux," similar to "Dead on the Wall," is presented in a salon-style installation in order to overwhelm viewers, as if one were riding a wave of information and then wiping out from an overload of visual stimuli. Past, present, and future links between surfing and art are explored through works of art by surfers and artists influenced by surfing.

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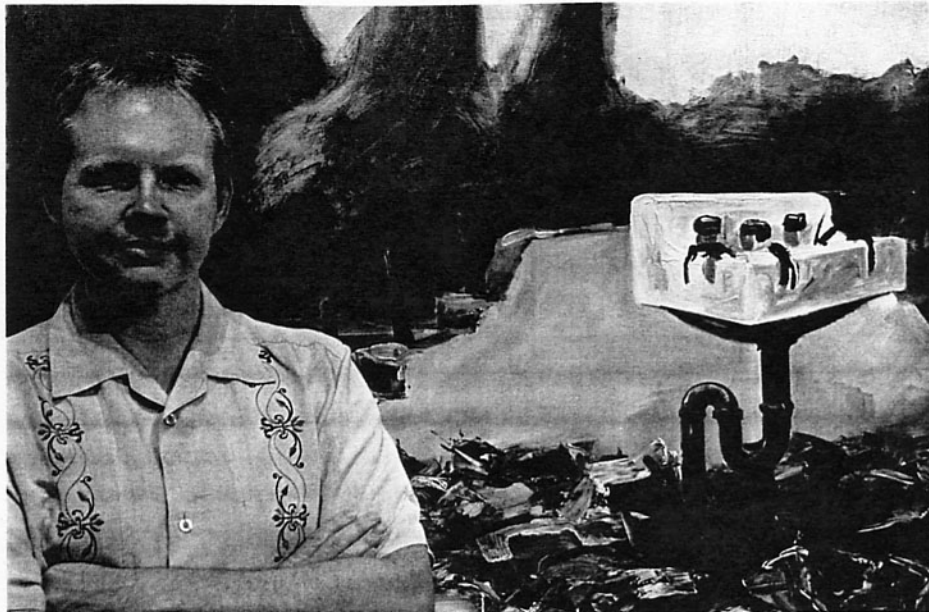
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Museum curator Tyler Stallings and a work by Tomory Dodge, among his picks for an exhibition from private collections.

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collectors and to recognize the collecting strength of this small, but art loving community of 24,000 residents. Such a high concentration of serious collections from which the museum can draw upon in its own backyard is like having an extension to its permanent collection."

Stallings also championed the first survey exhibition in 20 years of contemporary art in Orange County. Last year's "OsCene" exhibit represented nine artists and designers from Laguna Beach. A reprise "OsCene" is planned for 2007, revealing new works of Orange County residents.

Curating in a Pressure Cooker

It has become increasingly difficult for museums to raise money. Some are resorting to extraordinary measures, such as Boston's

Museum of Fine Art renting its impressionism collection to a Las Vegas gallery. Another consequence of fiscal austerity is that curators are more involved in solidifying financial support for exhibits.

"Contemporary art proves the most difficult because it is less accessible or more confusing to the general public and there isn't any Rembrandt or Picasso for investors to hang their hat on," says LACMA's Eilel. Stallings agrees. "Now more than ever, one must foster personal contacts and convince them of your project's merit and or appeal to their tastes."

For Wesley Jessup, curator of the Pasadena Museum of California Art, timing is everything. "To be successful today, a curator needs to be sensitive to what people are interested in," says Jessup. "Tyler has a real talent for conceiving and executing timely exhibitions. One measure of success is a full house," adds Jessup. "What if nobody attends your exhibit? What would the board think? A curator needs to be certain that he/she can raise the money or the exhibit can pay for itself in attendance."

And... next...

At present, Stallings is pondering ideas for his next thematic show. "I'm having a dialogue with myself, as curator and artist, and I believe I'm in a transition," he says. He's intrigued by how the art world and artists have embraced capitalism. "I'm interested in to what degree these artists have been able to maintain their intentions," says Stallings.

Nevertheless, for now the curator/artist insists that he, like the living and non-living elements of his paintings, is also "between spaces."

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